Digitalisation and digital transformation in Slovenia

Implications for persons with disabilities

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Implications for persons with disabilities

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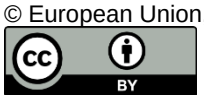

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Contents

1 Executive summary 6
2 Are government strategies and plans on digitalisation and digital transformation disability-inclusive? 10
2.1 Disability inclusion in generic strategies on digitalisation and digital transformation 10
2.2 Disability inclusion in focused or sector-specific strategies on digitalisation and digital transformation 12
3 Do disability strategies address the potential of and challenges pertaining to digitalisation and digital transformation? 15
3.1 How digitalisation and digital transformation are addressed in the national disability strategy 15
3.2 How digitalisation and digital transformation are addressed in specific disability-related strategies 16
4 Promoting disability inclusion through funding, education and training 18
4.1 How funding promotes disability-inclusive digitalisation and digital transformation 18
4.2 How disability inclusion is promoted through the education and training of digital professionals 19
4.3 How digital inclusion and accessibility is addressed in the education and training of accessibility and inclusion professionals 20
4.4 How digital inclusion is addressed via the training of people with disabilities 20
5 The opportunities and challenges presented by digitalisation and digital transformation to the rights of persons with disabilities 22
5.1 The most significant opportunities presented by digitalisation and digital transformation for persons with disabilities 22
5.2 The most significant challenges faced by persons with disabilities in relation to digitalisation and digital transformation 22
6 Conclusions and recommendations 24
6.1 Conclusions 24
6.2 Recommendations 24

1 Executive summary

In Slovenia, two laws deal with digitalisation and digital transformation in relation to accessibility for people with disabilities.[1] One is the 2005 Act on National Guidelines for Improving Accessibility of the Built Environment, Information and Communication for Persons with Disabilities[2] and the other is the 2018 Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications Act.[3]

In 2019, the overall level of digital literacy in Slovenia among people aged 16-74 was 55 %, which is slightly lower than the overall EU-27 level (56 %),[4] and there is no specific research that would address digitalisation and digital transformation in relation to people with disabilities. In a special report on the area of inclusive digital society, the national Network of Non-Governmental Organisations for an Inclusive Information Society (NVO-VID)[5] has shown that Slovenia ranks 16th in the latest data from European Commission (the Digital Economy and Society Index, published in June 2020). In the area of digital skills of the population, Slovenia is below the EU average, in 17th place. According to the Statistical Office of Slovenia, as of 2019, 28 % of 16-74 year olds in Slovenia have limited digital skills and 17 % are without digital skills.[6] There is no disability-specific data in the area of digital skills.

Among the projects funded by European structural and investment funds (the European Social Fund, the European Regional Development Fund and the Cohesion Fund) from 2014 to 2020, no projects were specifically focused on digitalisation and digital transformation, and disability, nevertheless, the projects include the principle of accessibility for people with disabilities (especially the projects related to deinstitutionalisation).[7]

The general and specific Government-led strategies on digitalisation and digital transformation are disability inclusive to a limited degree. Persons with disabilities are not specifically mentioned in all Government strategies which deal with digitalisation.

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1 In the report, the terms 'people with disabilities' and 'disabled people' are used interchangeably. The first term emphasises the 'People First!' approach, and the second emphasises a critical approach that focuses on the disabling conditions which make people 'disabled'. Sometimes the report specifies the impairment – for example, physical, sensory or intellectual impairment. The terms 'blind' and 'partially sighted' are used when the report directly translates terminology used in national documents and by disability organisations.

2 Act on national guidelines for improving the accessibility of the built environment, information and communications for people with disabilities (*Nacionalne usmeritve za izboljšanje dostopnosti grajenega okolja, informacij in komunikacij za invalide*), *Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia*, No. 113/05, http://www.pisrs.si/**Pis**.web/pregledPredpisa?id=STRA27.

3 Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications Act (*Zakon o dostopnosti spletišč in mobilnih aplikacij*), *Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia*, No. 30/2018, http://www.pisrs.si/Pis.web/pregledPredpisa?id=ZAKO7718.

4 Government Office for Development and European Cohesion Policy, *Recovery and Resilience Plan* (*Načrt za okrevanje in odpornost*), NextGeneration EU programme, April 2021, https://www.eu-skladi.si/sl/dokumenti/rrf/nacrt-za-okrevanje-in-odpornost_dokument_30-4-2021.pdf, p. 498.

5 See information in English at https://www.informacijska-druzba.org/english/.

6 NVO-VID, (2020), *Report on sustainable development goals 2020* (*Poročilo trajnosti razvojni cilji 2020*), https://www.informacijska-druzba.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Porocilo-SDGs_Digitalna_druzba.pdf .

7 A list of projects funded by the European Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2020 is available at: https://www.eu-skladi.si/sl/seznam-projektov. Ministry of Labour, family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities. Project Unit for the Implementation of DI: https://www.gov.si/zbirke/projekti-in-programi/projektna-enota-za-deinstitucionalizacijo/

From an intersectional perspective, there is no evidence on which groups of people with disabilities are most disadvantaged and how their disadvantage will be compensated. Training of digital professionals on accessibility is also not mentioned.

In the current national *Recovery and Resilience Plan (2021-2026)*, adopted by the Slovenian Government on 28 April 2021,[8] people with disabilities are mostly subsumed under the category of 'vulnerable groups'. The accessibility is mentioned in relation to persons with disabilities in the following areas: the development of the Long-Term Care Act and long-term care services; transportation, especially bus and train and digital accessibility of the railway system; architectural accessibility including for renovated buildings; accessibility of special workplaces for disabled in disability companies and employment centres; accessibility in the sense of flexibilization of work in disability companies and employment centres.

Digital accessibility is mentioned generally for enterprises, cultural goods and for the medical practitioners at the primary level. The Recovery and Resilience Plan addresses accessible digital infrastructure, e-services in business and economy, mobile applications for all people, aims at increasing the digital literacy for all including accessibility at the courts. Accessibility in these areas is addressed generally and persons with disabilities are not specifically mentioned.

An exception is children with special needs, mentioned in the context of digitalisation of education and individualised support during education. Another exception concerns the mention of people with disabilities working in disability enterprises (as of 2020, there are 151 disability enterprises in Slovenia) and in employment centres (as of 2020, there are 66 employment centres in the country). The plan says that the main reasons why disabled people cannot get jobs in the open labour market are, first, their impairment, and secondly, their lack of digital skills. This example shows that the digital and other work skills of disabled workers are not viewed from a structural perspective, nor from a life course perspective with regard to people with disabilities who are disadvantaged from an early age.

The specific areas of digital transformation mentioned in the document that could benefit people with disabilities are: digitalisation of railway infrastructure; digitalisation of the public sector and improvement of e-services; development of modern IT and new digital technologies; and digitalisation of the health sector and training of health workers to use new digital technologies.[9] For 'vulnerable groups', the plan envisages changes in housing policy (it explicitly mentions an increase in public rental housing and more non-profit housing for vulnerable groups and disabled people); active labour policy; accessibility of the environment; and development of ICT and support in the field of digitalisation of educational processes at all levels of education and renovation of educational programmes related to digital transformation.

The Government's *Stability Programme 2021*,[10] also adopted on 28 April 2021, can be read as a promise that digital transformation will take place to improve accessibility for

[8] Government Office for Development and European Cohesion Policy, 'Vlada sprejela nacionalni Načrt za okrevanje in odpornost' (Government adopts National Recovery and Resilience Plan), 28 April 2021, https://www.gov.si/novice/2021-04-28-vlada-sprejela-nacionalni-nacrt-za-okrevanje-in-odpornost/.

[9] *Recovery and Resilience Plan*, April 2021.

[10] Government of the Republic of Slovenia, Draft *Stability Programme 2021*, 6 April 2021.

disabled people, as the document mentions some issues which are important for people with disabilities.

Neither the *National Recovery and Resilience Plan* nor the *Stability Programme* mention concrete projects with regard to how these goals will be implemented and to what extent disabled people will actually benefit from them.

Within the disability-related strategies, the *Disability Action Programme 2014-2021*[11] mentions digitalisation and digital transformation among its objectives when it talks about accessibility. Different ministries are responsible for implementation (the report describes some examples of what has been implemented by various ministries), which fragments the results and makes it difficult to get a comprehensive picture of how the *Disability Action Programme* contributes to all people with disabilities and to specific disabled people and disability groups with special needs. The most recent evaluation was carried out for 2019.

While digital access to Government websites is a positive experience, a negative point is that many public institutions have still not created digital access for people with disabilities. Due to the lack of intersectional evaluations, the author of this report has relied on personal interviews with the National Council of Disability Organisations of Slovenia; the Disability Directorate; the national Association for the Blind and Partially Sighted; and the editor-in-chief of *Rikoss*, the online newspaper for people with visual impairments.

Good practices

1. One example of good practice is the 2019 Declaration of Accessibility by the Government of Slovenia, which refers to all Government websites (gov.si) and public institutions in order to implement the Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications Act of 2018 due to EU Directive 2016/2102 of the European Parliament and European Council 26 Oct 2016[12]. The Government websites are mostly digitally advanced.

2. The digital divide was addressed in a specific way after the renovation of the Minka Skaberne Library for the Blind and Partially Sighted.[13] Before its renovation in 2014, only people with the written certificate of visual disability were allowed to use the library. After 2015, the library also accepted people with other reading impairments – for example, people with dyslexia and autism. This is rather unusual in Slovenia, because the rights to which people are entitled due to particular categories of impairments are very rigidly defined, and it is difficult to create bridges between different disability categories. In this case, it was acknowledged that the only specialised library for the visually impaired has to accept people with other reading impairments.

[11] Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, *Disability Action Programme 2014-2021* (*Akcijski program za invalide 2014-2021*), https://www.gov.si/assets/ministrstva/MDDSZ/Invalidi/API-2014-2021/API_2014_2021.pdf.

[12] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32016L2102

[13] Minka Skaberne Library for the Blind and Partially Sighted (Knjižnica za slepe in slabovidne Minka Skaberne), https://www.kss-ess.si/en.

Recommendations

The digitalisation and digital transformation national strategies and laws that were formulated in recent years have not yet been followed by evaluations regarding their impact on accessibility for people with different disabilities. Therefore, the main recommendation is to conduct an intersectional evaluation regarding the implementation of the digitalisation and digital transformation strategies. The evaluation should be conducted from a disability perspective and by people with different impairments, gender, age and social status.

2 Are government strategies and plans on digitalisation and digital transformation disability-inclusive?

2.1 Disability inclusion in generic strategies on digitalisation and digital transformation

In 2016, 14 different ministries in Slovenia produced the document *Digital Slovenia 2020:* The *Strategy to Develop Information Society by 2020*,14 which is a national strategy plan in conjunction with the EC Digital Agenda for Europe (EDA). It is an umbrella strategy plan that defines the important developmental directions in relation to the digitalisation of society. The document mentions that the digital growth in Slovenia is 'negative' compared with other EU countries.

People with disabilities are mentioned in the 'Inclusive Digital Society' section, which stresses that one of the biggest deficits is a limited knowledge within Slovenian society of how to use digital technology. Therefore, *Digital Slovenia 2020* mentions six strategic goals: a.) the improvement of digital literacy; b.) the adjustment of the educational system to the needs of digital society; c.) more digital education at all levels of the education system; d.) better e-inclusion and e-services for all societal groups, especially the less educated, older people, persons with disabilities and inactive persons; e.) better e-accessibility in line with international directions; f.) the improvement of e-competencies with the use of ICT and new digital employment (p. 40).

The same section also stresses that in order to achieve better e-accessibility in line with international directions, the Government plans an analysis of the situation in the country, new legislation and e-accessibility for the public sector in cooperation with the representative disability organisations.

Digital Slovenia 2020 mentions digital entrepreneurship and says that the EDA ascertains that with the smart use of ICT, it is easier to cope with other challenges in society and that, among other things, patients and disabled people gain a greater influence (p. 75). The document does not specify whether this means greater participation by patients and disabled people in the health and social services, and if so, in what way.

The *Digital Slovenia 2020* document also stresses that new digital workplaces will ensure 'new workplaces in the area of ICT, quick re-qualification of surplus workforce, self-employment with no investment and under the presumption of a quick re-orientation of people, among them the early start-up entrepreneurs, young people, those who are difficult to employ, disabled, persons without a job etc.' (p. 75). The document mentions disabled people in a section on e-accessibility, and says that this area is poorly developed and that some vulnerable groups are able to access only a few public sector websites. In addition, there is no standardised methodology for e-accessibility, and therefore a variety of solutions exist, which do not respond to the needs of disabled people with different impairments (p. 81).

[14] Government of the Republic of Slovenia, *Digital Slovenia 2020: The Strategy to Develop Information Society by 2020* (*Digitalna Slovenija 2020 – Strategija razvoja informacijske družbe do leta 2020*), March 2016, https://www.gov.si/assets/ministrstva/MJU/DID/Strategija-razvoja-informacijske-druzbe-2020.pdf.

Digital Slovenia 2020 emphasises that there is a lack of stakeholder participation in the design and implementation of measures to promote the development of the digital society; low digital literacy and a lack of e-skills and ICT skills among some segments of population; and geographical, age and other types of digital divide in the provision and use of communication and information services (p. 11).

So far, five years after the document was drawn up, there exists no evaluation of the situation. The Government plans to produce a new document entitled *Digital Slovenia 2027*, but people with disabilities have so far not yet been invited to take part in the planning of the strategy.[15]

In 2019, the Government of Slovenia issued a Declaration of Accessibility,[16] which refers to all Government websites (gov.si) in order to implement the Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications Act of 2018.[17] According to the Declaration of Accessibility, the adjustments that have been systemically provided are:

- responsive formatting (adjusting the layout of the screen resolution content);
- display of content for users of assistive technologies (for example: screen readers, Braille bar);
- keyboard navigation (adjustment for users who cannot use the mouse);
- appropriate colour contrasts (between text and background);;
- predictable operation of the website;
- all live broadcasts and recordings of public statements after Government sessions and on the current situation regarding COVID-19 are equipped with interpretation in Slovene sign language; for others, it is possible to provide videos with subtitles
- it is possible to equip images with alternative text;
- it is possible to use different levels of headings.

The gov.si website is only partially compliant with the Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications Act due to exceptions such as scanned documents in PDF format, programme-generated documents (e.g. annual reports) and various complex data tables.

NVO-VID[18] produced a critical evaluation in its document entitled *Sustainable Development Goals 2020 - an inclusive digital society*.[19] It stressed that the Government needs to support efforts towards accessible information and communication technologies and public digital services for all vulnerable groups, and take measures to promote non-formal learning of e-skills among the population of Slovenia. The organisation also stressed that the Government did not pay enough

[15] Ministry of Public Administration, 'Inovativen.si in Direktorat za informacijsko družbo in informatiko premikata meje na področju priprave strategije državnega pomena' (Inovativen.si and the Directorate for Information Society and Information Science move the barriers in the area of planning the governmental strategy), 2 December 2020, https://www.gov.si/novice/2020-12-02-inovativen-si-in-direktorat-za-informacijsko-druzbo-in-informatiko-premikata-meje-na-podrocju-priprave-strategije-drzavnega-pomena/.

[16] Declaration of Accessibility (*Izjava o dostopnosti*), https://www.gov.si/dostopnost/.

[17] Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications Act, *Official Gazette*, No. 30/2018.

[18] See information in English at https://www.informacijska-druzba.org/english/.

[19] NVO-VID (2020), *Sustainable Development Goals 2020 – an inclusive digital society* (*Poročilo NVO o ciljih trajnostnega razvoja 2020 – področje vključujoče digitalne družbe*), https://www.informacijska-druzba.org/2020/07/17/porocilo-nvo-cilji-trajnostni-razvoj-2020-digitalna-druzba/.

attention to digital literacy among the population of Slovenia and had failed to provide public e-services and e-content for the public during periods of physical distancing throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.[20] People with disabilities are not addressed in particular, except under the 'vulnerable groups' designation.

Another positive move is that the digital divide was addressed in a specific way after the renovation of the Minka Skaberne Library for the Blind and Partially Sighted.[21] Before its renovation in 2014, only people with the written certificate of visual disability were allowed to use the library. After 2015, the library also accepted people with other reading impairments – for example, people with dyslexia and autism. This is rather unusual in Slovenia, because the rights to which people are entitled due to particular categories of impairments are rigidly defined and it is difficult to create bridges between different disability categories. In this case, it was acknowledged that the only specialised library for visually impaired has to accept people with other visual impairments.

2.2 Disability inclusion in focused or sector-specific strategies on digitalisation and digital transformation

The 2005 Act on National Guidelines for Improving Accessibility of the Built Environment, Information and Communication for Persons with Disabilities[22] includes various measures, some of which are related to digitalisation and digital transformation. The legislation defines different deadlines for their implementation and some deadlines are very long (transportation accessibility by 2025). The three national priorities (their deadlines were exceeded in 2007 and in 2015) are:

- education: people with hearing impairments can follow information, talks in public buildings with an induction loop (portable or fixed);
- teleworking: people with visual and hearing impairments have some separate channels on national television;[23]
- political participation: the public administration has to use ICT to make its websites accessible for disabled people; when the governmental public administration renews its websites, the guidelines and the standards of the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) need to be taken into consideration.

It is important to emphasise that from an intersectional perspective, there is no evidence on which groups of people with disabilities are most disadvantaged and how their disadvantage will be compensated.

The *Digital Slovenia 2020* document (discussed in sections 1. and 2.1.), the national *Recovery and Resilience Plan (2021-2026)* and the *Stability Programme 2021* will be discussed in more detail below.

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20 *NVO-VID, '*Epidemija koronavirusa razgalila vrzeli digitalizacije Slovenije v segmentu e-veščin, e-storitev in e-vsebin' (Coronavirus epidemic reveals gaps in digitalisation of Slovenia in the segment of e-skills, e-services and e-content), 17 May 2020, https://www.informacijska-druzba.org/2020/05/17/koronavirus-vrzeli-digitalizacije-slovenije-e-vescine-e-storitve-e-vsebine/.

21 Minka Skaberne Library for the Blind and Partially Sighted, https://www.kss-ess.si/en.

22 Act on national guidelines for improving the accessibility of the built environment, information and communications for people with disabilities, *Official Gazette,* No. 113/05.

23 'Teleworking' is the expression used in the document; it means that some TV broadcasts take place with a sign-language interpreter.

The national *Recovery and Resilience Plan (2021-2026)* was adopted by the Slovenian Government on 28 April 2021.[24] The document is in line with the Recovery and Resilience Facility of the European Commission and the NextGenerationEU plan.[25] Slovenia has prepared the plan for EUR 1.8 billion of non-reimbursable EU funds and EUR 0.7 billion of reimbursable funds. One of the goals is digital transformation, and another one relevant to people with disabilities is the goal of health and social protection. The money planned for the digital transformation objective is EUR 330.53 million in non-reimbursable funds. The objective is to improve the digital business sector (EUR 39 million) and the public sector and public administration (EUR 274.03 million).[26] For the area of health and social protection (with the sub-areas of health, social protection and long-term care, and housing policy), EUR 244.90 million in non-repayable appropriations is planned.

In the national Recovery and Resilience Plan, people with disabilities are usually subsumed under the category of 'vulnerable groups'. An exception is children with special needs, mentioned in the context of digitisation of education and individualised support during education. Another exception concerns the mention of people with disabilities working in disability enterprises (as of 2020, there are 151 disability enterprises in Slovenia) and in employment centres (as of 2020, there are 66 employment centres in the country). The plan says that the main reasons why disabled people cannot get jobs in the open labour market are, first, their impairment, and secondly, their lack of digital skills. This example shows that the digital and other work skills of disabled workers are not viewed from a structural perspective, nor from a life course perspective with regard to people with disabilities who are disadvantaged from an early age.

The plan also calls for employers in disability businesses and employment centres to implement more flexible forms of employment. What is meant by 'flexible employment' in relation to disabled workers is not defined. The plan also mentions that the general lack of skills of employed disabled workers is an employment challenge.[27] Again, this is an individualised perspective that does not recognise the systemic barriers for disabled people and does not promise support structures for them, but only calls for new measures for employers, namely 'flexible employment'.

The specific areas of digital transformation mentioned in the document that could benefit people with disabilities are: digitalisation of railway infrastructure; digitalisation of the public sector and improvement of e-services; development of modern IT and new digital technologies; and digitalisation of the health sector and training of health workers to use new digital technologies.[28] For 'vulnerable groups', the plan envisages

[24] Government Office for Development and European Cohesion Policy, 'Vlada sprejela nacionalni Načrt za okrevanje in odpornost' (Government adopts National Recovery and Resilience Plan), 28 April 2021, https://www.gov.si/novice/2021-04-28-vlada-sprejela-nacionalni-nacrt-za-okrevanje-in-odpornost/.

[25] Regulation (EU) 2021/241 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 February 2021, EUR-Lex - 32021R0241 - EN - EUR-Lex (europa.eu).

[26] Government Office for Development and European Cohesion Policy, 'Vlada sprejela nacionalni Načrt za okrevanje in odpornost' (Government adopts National Recovery and Resilience Plan), 28 April 2021, https://www.gov.si/novice/2021-04-28-vlada-sprejela-nacionalni-nacrt-za-okrevanje-in-odpornost/; *Recommendations for the Preparation of a National Plan for Recovery and Resilience* (*Predlog priporočil v zvezi s pripravo nacionalnega Načrta za okrevanje in odpornost*), 30 April 2021, https://www.eu-skladi.si/sl/dokumenti/rrf/nacrt-za-okrevanje-in-odpornost_feb-2021.pdf.

[27] *Recovery and Resilience Plan*, April 2021, p. 293.

[28] *Recovery and Resilience Plan*, April 2021.

changes in housing policy (it explicitly mentions an increase in public rental housing and more non-profit housing for vulnerable groups and disabled people); active labour policy; accessibility of the environment; and development of ICT and support in the field of digitalisation of educational processes at all levels of education and renovation of educational programmes related to digital transformation.

The Government's *Stability Programme*,[29] also adopted on 28 April 2021, mentions that the Government has taken into account the recommendations of the European Commission for Slovenia in 2019 and 2020, which relate to health and long-term care; the pension system; the employability of low-skilled and older workers; and improving digital literacy. These are the areas on which the focus will be placed, as these are important issues for people with disabilities. Therefore, the *Stability Programme* can be read as a promise that digital transformation will take place to improve accessibility for disabled people.

Neither the national *Recovery and Resilience Plan* nor the *Stability Programme* mention concrete projects with regard to how these goals will be implemented and to what extent disabled people will actually benefit from them.

It is worth mentioning that in 2019, the overall level of digital literacy in Slovenia among people aged 16-74 was 55 %, which is slightly lower than in the EU-27 (56 %),[30] and there is no specific research that would address digitalisation and digital transformation in relation to people with disabilities. In a special report on the area of inclusive digital society, NVO-VID[31] revealed that Slovenia ranks 16th in the latest data from European Commission (the DESI, published in June 2020). In the area of digital skills of the population, Slovenia is below the EU average, in 17th place. According to the Statistical Office of Slovenia, as of 2019, 28 % of 16-74 year olds in Slovenia have limited digital skills and 17 % are without digital skills.[32] There is no disability-specific data in the area of digital skills.

[29] Draft *Stability Programme 2021*, 6 April 2021.
[30] *Recovery and Resilience Plan*, April 2021, p. 497.
[31] See information in English at https://www.informacijska-druzba.org/english/.
[32] NVO-VID (2020), *Report on sustainable development goals 2020* (*Poročilo trajnosti razvojni cilji 2020*), informacijska-druzba.org).

3 Do disability strategies address the potential of and challenges pertaining to digitalisation and digital transformation?

3.1 How digitalisation and digital transformation are addressed in the national disability strategy

The *Disability Action Programme 2014-2021*[33] has 13 goals, and goal 3 speaks about accessibility in relation to digitalisation and digital transformation. The measures for this goal are: ensuring accessibility of information and communication; adaptation of material related to decision-making at the state and local level using easy-to-read techniques; using Slovene sign language for people with speech impairments and ensuring reading of subtitles and descriptions of events on the screen for people with visual impairments, at least for daily informational, scientific and other television broadcasting; promoting e-accessibility and the use of other information and communication technologies; encouraging producers to attach Braille inscriptions to their products; and preserving relay centres for persons with sensory and communication impairments, i.e. centres which provide the transmission of information between people with a hearing impairment and people with no hearing difficulties (p.13).

Goal 8 speaks about the right to equal accessibility to cultural events for disabled people. One of the measures is to increase the amount of digitalised and online accessible content adapted to the needs of different groups of disabled people.

The most recent annual report on the implementation of the *Disability Action Programme 2014-2021*, for the year 2019,[34] (produced by the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, specifically the Directorate for the Disabled) mentions some concrete measures implemented:[35]

- in 2019, in relation to goal 3 (accessibility), state museums were given extra budget funds for accelerated digitisation of museum objects (preparation of new content on the website);
- in 2019, in relation to goal 4 (education), there were improvements in physical and digital accessibility and the provision of additional services for students with disabilities.

The Ministry of Culture (Directorate for Cultural Heritage, Sector for Museums, Archives and Libraries) mentioned some obstacles. Due to a lack of budget funds for investment in maintenance and the purchase of equipment for museums, archives and libraries, the optimal conditions for improved accessibility have not yet been achieved. There was also no budget allocated for the purchase of technical equipment for the accelerated process of digitisation, which would enable the storage and accessibility of larger amounts of data.

The Ministry of Culture (Slovenian Language Service) reported that, based on the public tender 'Language integration of the vulnerable groups of speakers in the Republic of Slovenia', it had initiated a project to raise awareness among the whole

[33] *Disability Action Programme 2014-2021.*

[34] *Report on the implementation of the Disability Action Programme 2014-2021 for the year 2019* (*Poročilo o uresničevanjuAkcijskega programa za invalide 2014–2021 v letu 2019*), July 2020, 2019-Porocilo-API.pdf (gov.si).

[35] The report on the implementation of the Disability Action Programme 2014-2021 for the year 2020 will be released in July 2021.

population of the cultural contributions of people with disabilities and to increase the amount of digitised and online access content tailored to the needs of members of different groups of people with disabilities.

The report for 2019 also mentions that the Ministry of Culture and the Archive of the Republic of Slovenia collaborated with some disability organisations to digitise a selection of photographs relating to the exhibition celebrating 100 Years of the School for the Blind and Partially Sighted in Slovenia. The Archive edited and listed 1 874 archived photos from the national archive on the Institute for Blind and Visually Impaired Youth Ljubljana and prepared descriptions of these photographs for people with visual impairments. The photos were planned to be ready and digitised in 2020. The Ministry of Culture and the Archive of Slovenia also performed a public procurement procedure for digitisation of 654 radio cassettes in 2020, and the selection of sound recordings for people with hearing impairments. They also prepared a selection of written material to be digitised in 2020 to make the material accessible to people with different impairments. The president of the Association for the Blind and Partially Sighted was not aware of whether this had actually happened.[36] In 2019, the Archive of the Republic of Slovenia set up their own digitisation system with a virtual archive and reading rooms. This is part of the project e-ARH.si ESS 2016-2020.[37]

The above activities cover all topics related to digitalisation in the implementation report for 2019. No future goals or plans are mentioned. In the second half of 2021, a new disability action programme will be created.

It is worth mentioning that among the projects funded by European structural and investment funds (the ESF, the European Regional Development Fund and the Cohesion Fund) from 2014 to 2020, there are no projects specifically focused on digitalisation and digital transformation and disability.[38]

3.2 How digitalisation and digital transformation are addressed in specific disability-related strategies

The Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications Act[39] regulates measures to ensure the accessibility of websites and mobile applications for everyone, especially people with various disabilities, and so it addresses rights relating to digitalisation and digital transformation. The accessibility of websites and mobile application cuts across different sectors: education, employment, access to information, health and care and transport. This Act transposes into the legal order of the Republic of Slovenia Directive (EU) 2016/2102 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 October 2016 on the accessibility of websites and mobile applications of public sector bodies (OJ L 327, 2. 12 .2016, p.1). This Act applies to all state bodies at the local and national level.

One of the problems with this Act is that, similarly to many other acts relating to the rights of people with disabilities, it speaks about the 'disproportionate burden' on the

[36] Personal phone communication, April 2021.

[37] Slovenian electronic archive – see Slovenski elektronski arhiv | GOV.SI, Ministry of Culture, *The Strategy and the Plan of Implementation for the Slovenian Electronic Archive 2016-2020* (*Strategija in izvedbeni načrt razvoja slovenskega elektronskega arhiva 2016 -2020*), Strategija_e-ARH_si_2016-2020_1.0.pdf (gov.si).

[38] A list of projects funded by the European Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2020 is available at: https://www.eu-skladi.si/sl/seznam-projektov.

[39] Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications Act, *Official Gazette*, No. 30/2018.

organisation which is expected to make websites and mobile applications accessible for disabled persons. Before setting up a website or mobile application or adapting an existing website or mobile application, the organisation can make an initial assessment of the extent to which meeting the requirements of the relevant article imposes a disproportionate burden on it; if the burden is too big, the organisation is exempted from the obligation (Article 6).

It is worth noting that in the area of education, detailed and specifically defined legislation relating to accessibility for persons with disabilities does not exist. During the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020, one of the major problems was to ensure that children with special needs could take part in distance schooling; several reports show that they were disadvantaged compared with other children (see the Academic Network of European Disability Experts report on COVID-19, February 2021).[40]

Nevertheless, there are some specific accessibility regulations. In the area of primary and secondary education, for example, all school competition instructions and registrations for competitions are digitalised and accessible for children and young people with visual impairments. In addition, all written documents for competitions are digitalised and accessible for young people with disabilities.[41]

[40] Tibaot, Darja, 'Children with special needs: schooling and therapies cannot take place over video-calls', *24ur.com*, 30 May 2020, https://www.24ur.com/novice/slovenija/starsi-otrok-s-posebnimi-potrebami-prepricani-da-so-bili-znova-spregledani.html.

[41] Nina Čelešnik Kozamernik (2019), *Textbook to Address the Hundredth Anniversary of the School for the Blind and Partially Sighted*, IRIS, Ljubljana. Zbornik_prilagojeno.pdf (arnes.si).

4 Promoting disability inclusion through funding, education and training

4.1 How funding promotes disability-inclusive digitalisation and digital transformation

It is not possible to get an evidence-based answer to this question, including on funding. There are many rapid changes in the country and some small-scale evidence says that there are some obstacles in this area.

Radio-Television of Slovenia (RTV Slovenia), which is the national public broadcasting organisation, gets Government funds, among others, for digitalisation of its content to make it accessible to people with disabilities, especially persons with visual and hearing impairments. The number of broadcasts with a sign-language interpreter and audio subtitles has been increased. In July 2020, the new Government announced cuts to the funds for RTV Slovenia. The president of the programme committee for the programme content for disabled people (*Programski odbor za problematiko programskih vsebin za invalide*) at RTV Slovenia, Tomislav Špilak, warned that this would affect the rights of disabled people.[42] He emphasised that because of the small number of people who speak the Slovenian language, private radio and television broadcasting organisations have no interest in investing in accessible broadcasting for people with different disabilities, as this area is not profitable. Therefore, it is important that the national broadcaster RTV Slovenia financially supports broadcasting for diverse groups of people. He warned that the new legislation that the Government wants to introduce in order to cut funds for RTV Slovenia would severely reduce existing levels of accessibility and prevent new development in this area. He emphasised that blind and partially sighted persons and deaf and hearing impaired persons would be most negatively affected, and that the national broadcasting organisation is obliged to take disabled people into consideration.

The National Council of Disability Organisations of Slovenia (NSIOS) got funds from the European Social Catalyst Fund for a project in the area of digitalisation and digital transformation. The project aims to develop tools for measuring the digital accessibility of governmental institutions and public bodies' websites in accordance with the 2018 Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications Act.43 The project involves different stakeholders, Government and public bodies and institutions, students of the Faculty of Electro Engineering from the University of Ljubljana, disabled people with different impairments and non-governmental experts in digital accessibility. They plan to produce yearly statistics on the Government institutions and public bodies whose websites are in accordance with the Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications Act. The methodology for measuring digital accessibility will be developed for five EU Member States, including Slovenia.

[42] Vidic, Jana, 'Someone has to develop information technology for disabled' (*Nekdo mora razvijati informacijske tehnologije za invalide*), Radio *Val2020*, 17 July 2020, https://val202.rtvslo.si/2020/07/nekdo-mora-razvijati-informacijske-tehnologije-za-invalide/.

[43] Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications Act, *Official Gazette*, No. 30/2018.

4.2 How disability inclusion is promoted through the education and training of digital professionals

According to the Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications Act[44] mentioned in section 3.2, the Ministry of Public Administration organises training programmes for employees who are responsible for developing websites and mobile applications. The training programmes are related to the creation, management and updating of websites and mobile applications. In the preparation and implementation of such programmes, the Ministry of Public Administration cooperates with representative disability organisations, as defined in the Disabled Persons Organisations Act.[45] The ministry responsible for the information society, in cooperation with the representative disability organisations, promotes greater awareness among those who create the websites and mobile applications and their users. The ministry does this with publications and presentations at conferences and other events. The Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications Act also sets out that the websites and mobile applications have to be clear and easy to manage and must have an accessible interface and navigation, and the website relating to public administration also needs to be accessible in sign language (Article 9, on training and awareness raising).

NSIOS[46] confirmed that the Ministry of Public Administration and the Academy of Public Administration performed several training sessions with lectures for those who manage the websites and mobile applications for public institutions and bodies at the local and national level. Disabled people were included in the training sessions and were consulted about good standards in accessible digitalisation.

The Ministry of Public Administration was asked whether people with disabilities were involved in the training and whether they were paid for their involvement. The responsible persons could not answer the questions. The trainers whom the Ministry involved were not persons with impairments, but they were free to ask a person with impairments to join the training and to share his or her experiences with the participants. The Ministry was not aware of whether people with disabilities who might be invited by the trainers were paid or not. Persons with disabilities were not explicitly invited by the Ministry of Public Administration to provide the training.[47]

In May and June 2021, the Academy of Public Administration is organising two training sessions of six hours each, on 'Website Accessibility for all Groups of Users',[48] for professional website developers. The aim of the training is to sensitise the professional website developers to the needs of 'vulnerable groups' and to provide information on designing websites and mobile applications that comply with the Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications Act of 2018.[49] There is no evidence of whether persons with disabilities are also included as trainers.

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44 Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications Act, *Official Gazette*, No. 30/2018.

45 Disabled Persons Organisations Act, Official Gazette, No. 108/02, 61/06-ZDru-1, http://www.pisrs.si/Pis.web/pregledPredpisa?id=ZAKO1460.

46 Conversation with Goran Kustura, secretary general of Nacionalni Svet Invalidskih Organizacij Slovenije (NSIOS), 29 April 2021, https://nsios.si/.

47 Email communications from 2 May to 5 May 2021 with Peter Novoselec, Ana Gosnar, Robi Kališnik, Ministry of Public Administration.

48 Ministry of Public Administration, Academy of Public Administration, https://ua.gov.si/aktivnosti/detajli/?ID=3132c805-faa6-e911-9c42-005056818ee6&Tag=459.

49 Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications Act, *Official Gazette*, No. 30/2018.

4.3 How digital inclusion and accessibility is addressed in the education and training of accessibility and inclusion professionals

In 2021, the first book in the Slovenian language relating to the accessibility of digital products for all was published. It was written by a professor at the Faculty of Electrical Engineering, Computer Science, and Information Technology at the University of Maribor.[50] This shows that the subject of digital development and accessibility is being addressed more than it was in the past.

As mentioned above, NSIOS got funds from the European Social Catalyst Fund for a project in the area of digitalisation and digital transformation. The project involves different stakeholders, Government and public bodies and institutions, students of the Faculty of Electro Engineering from the University of Ljubljana, disabled people with different impairments and non-governmental experts in digital accessibility. They plan to produce annual statistics on the Government institutions and public bodies whose websites are in accordance with the Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications Act.[51]

4.4 How digital inclusion is addressed via the training of people with disabilities

There is no hard evidence in this area; no official documents confirm that disabled people have the opportunity to regularly access training on digital literacy. NSIOS sees that there are some occasional training sessions, but disability organisations do not place specific emphasis on providing training on digitalisation for people with disabilities.

The national Association for the Blind and Partially Sighted provides training for its members who are visually impaired on how to use computer interfaces and the computer Braille bar, because only those who receive a certificate that they are able to use the Braille bar are eligible to receive financial compensation for the device from the Institute of Health Insurance of the Republic of Slovenia. The national Association for the Blind and Partially Sighted issues the certificate, which is then given to a medical doctor who writes a certificate stating that the person is eligible to claim financial compensation for the Braille bar from the Institute of Health Insurance.[52]

In order to find out whether other local organisations for blind and partially sighted persons provide training for digital literacy, the author of this report checked four websites of disability organisations which exist in larger cities in Slovenia: Ljubljana,[53] Maribor,[54] Novo mesto[55] and Celje[56]. None of the disability organisations offered any

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50 Debevc, Matjaž (2021), *Dostopnost digitalnih produktov za vse* (*Accessibility of Digital products for All*), Faculty of Electrical Engineering, Computer Science and Information, University of Maribor. Online version: https://press.um.si/index.php/ump/catalog/book/526.

51 Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications Act, *Official Gazette*, No. 30/2018.

52 Conversation with President of the National Association for the Blind and Partially Sighted, Matej Žnuderl, 30 April 2021.

53 Medobčinsko društvo slepih in slabovidnih (MDSS) Ljubljana (Ljubljana Association for the Blind) at: mdsslj.si.

54 MDSS Maribor (Maribor Association for the Blind), at: http://drustvo-mdssmb.si/.

55 Društvo slepih in slabovidnih Novo mesto (Novo mesto Association for the Blind), at: http://www.drustvo-slepih-nm.si/.

56 Medobčinsko društvo slepih in slabovidnih Celje (Celje Association for the Blind), at: Aktualno (mdss-ce.net).

training on digitalisation.[57] The local inter-municipality Organisation for the Blind and Partially Sighted of Nova Gorica has on its website a detailed description of a training programme on computer literacy in collaboration with the Employment Office and funded by the European Social Fund and local Lions Club donors, the Slovenian private company Kolektor and the Local Energy Agency of Nova Gorica.[58] Unfortunately, the event happened in 2015, but it is still published on the official website as one of two training sessions that exist.

There is some sporadic good practice. In Maribor, the Faculty of Electrical Engineering, Computer Science and Information Technology for computer engineering and a member of the inter-municipality organisation for the blind and partially sighted from Ptuj produced a training programme for website developers. Marino Kačič, editor-in-chief of *Rikoss*, the online magazine for visually disabled persons, provided data about training for 'blind young entrepreneurs' by the Chamber of Commerce of Primorska and the local inter-municipality Organisation for the Blind and Partially Sighted of Nova Gorica.[59] [60]

The website of the National Association for the Deaf and Hearing Impaired has no data about any training in respect of digital competencies, digital literacy and digital education among their members during the last six months for which information about their activities is available online.[61] No data on digital education for members are provided on the website of the National Deafblind Association of Slovenia.[62]

The president of the National Council of Disability Organisations, Borut Sever, confirmed that digital illiteracy is one of the major problems for people with disabilities and older people in Slovenia.[63]

The international private company Agiledrop offers some useful information in the Slovenian language.[64]

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57 Zveza društev slepih in slabovidnih Slovenije (ZDSSS) (Union of the blind and partially sighted of Slovenia), 'Long-term education of the blind and partially sighted', http://www.zveza-slepih.si/programi/program-8/.

58 Medobčinsko društvo slepih in slabovidnih Nova Gorica (Nova Gorica Association for the Blind and Partially Sighted), 'Računalniško opismenjevanje' (Computer literacy), https://www.mdssng.si/sl/izobrazevanje/racunalnisko-opismenjevanje/.

59 See: https://www.mdssng.si/.

60 Unfortunately, no evidence was found online. Conversation with Marino Kačič, 29 April 2021.

61 See Zveza društev gluhih in naglušnih Slovenije (National Association for the Deaf and Hearing Impaired), Tehnični pripomočki Archives - Zveza-GNS.si.

62 Združenje gluhoslepih Slovenije DLAN (National Deafblind Association of Slovenia, 'Predstavitev' (Presentation), http://www.gluhoslepi.si/sl/kdosmo/.

63 'Še vedno brez nujnih prilagoditev digitalne dostopnosti za invalide in starejše' (Still without the necessary adaptation of digital accessibility for persons with disabilities and older people), *Ptujinfo*, 26 May 2020, https://ptujinfo.com/novica/slovenija/se-vedno-brez-nujnih-prilagoditev-digitalne-dostopnosti-za-invalide-starejse.

64 Agiledrop, website accessibility blog written by Tjaša, 21 April 2020, Part I: https://www.agiledrop.si/blog/spletna-dostopnost-1-del-standardi-zakonska-ureditev, and Part II, https://www.agiledrop.si/blog/spletna-dostopnost-2-del-razvoj-dostopne-spletne-strani.

5 The opportunities and challenges presented by digitalisation and digital transformation to the rights of persons with disabilities

5.1 The most significant opportunities presented by digitalisation and digital transformation for persons with disabilities

NSIOS sees the most significant opportunities in the area of increased access to information, for example:

- The digitalisation of Government websites at the local and national level.
- The major Slovenian daily *Delo* has major articles in both print and audio format.[65]

In 2019, NSIOS started an on-going project of awareness raising among the providers of websites and mobile applications with regard to the certificate of website accessibility.[66] The website provider can apply for a certificate and get it if their website is in accordance with the legislation.

5.2 The most significant challenges faced by persons with disabilities in relation to digitalisation and digital transformation

Except for some media reports, there is no written evidence from non-governmental actors about the most significant challenges presented by digitalisation and digital transformation to the rights of persons with disabilities. For this reason, the author of this report collected some media stories and made phone conversations to find out what the biggest challenges are. Conversations were held with the National Council of Disability Organisations (NSIOS); the national Association for the Blind and Partially Sighted; the Directorate for the Disabled at the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities; and Marino Kačič, the editor-in-chief of the online newsletter for blind people. According to those sources, the most significant challenges are to:

- provide inclusive strategic documents; this could be addressed by involving persons with disabilities, which is unfortunately not current practice;
- provide accessible online public services by making public sector websites accessible, as many websites are not currently complying with the legal requirements;
- involve persons with disabilities as trainers for the website developers; this is now happening only sometimes and on an individual, rather than a systematic, basis;
- provide systematic and continuous training for people with different impairments in respect of digitalisation and digital transformation;
- ensure the speech recognition system (speech-to-text), which currently does not exist for the Slovenian language, become available; up to now, the different ministries responsible for accessibility see the Slovenian language as 'too specific' for the speech recognition system.

Various media articles have covered the problem of the lack of equal education for children with special needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. During home schooling, children with special needs in particular were sometimes disadvantaged because they

[65] NSIOS, 'Delo po novem ponuja pretvorbo teksta v govor' (Daily newspaper Delo now offers transformation of text into speech), https://nsios.si/delo-po-novem-ponuja-pretvorbo-teksta-v-govor/.

[66] NSIOS, Certificate of website accessibility (*Certifikat spletne dostopnosti*), https://nsios-certifikat.si/.

did not have computers or had limited digital competencies.[67] The digital divide could be seen between children without disabilities and those with disabilities who come from economically vulnerable households.

[67] Lešnjak Opaka, Martina**,** 'Šolanje na daljavo in učenci s posebnimi potrebami' (Distance learning and pupils with special needs), *Delo,* 14 August 2020; Ombudsman Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 'Priporočila vladi glede izobraževanja otrok s posebnimi potrebami na daljavo v času izrednih okoliščin' (Recommendations to the government regarding the education of children with special needs at a distance during emergencies), 27 November 2020, https://www.varuh-rs.si/obravnavane-pobude/primer/priporocila-vladi-glede-izobrazevanja-otrok-s-posebnimi-potrebami-na-daljavo-v-casu-izrednih-okolisc/; A.Č., 'Zakaj nekateri šolarji med koronakrizo niso bili deležni šolanja' (Why some schoolchildren were deprived of schooling from home during the Corona crisis), *World of Capital*, 6 June 2020, https://svetkapitala.delo.si/ikonomija/med-epidemijo-so-bile-vidne-luknje-v-digitalizaciji/; 'Pomoč otrokom prihaja od posameznikov, ne z ministrstva' (Help for children comes from individuals, not from the ministry), *The World News*, 17 December 2020, https://theworldnews.net/si-news/pomoc-otrokom-prihaja-od-posameznikov-ne-z-ministrstva; L.Š., 'Šolanje na daljavo prineslo opazen primanjkljaj na področju znanja, pričakovali več vedenjskih težav' (Distance learning brought a noticeable deficit in knowledge, expected more behavioural problems), *MMC RTV*, 27 January 2021, https://www.rtvslo.si/slovenija/solanje-na-daljavo-prineslo-opazen-primanjkljaj-na-podrocju-znanja-pricakovali-vec-vedenjskih-tezav/550396.

6 Conclusions and recommendations

6.1 Conclusions

There exists some promising legislation in the area of digitalisation, but there is a significant lack of evaluations of what was done in this area. As no social policy or disability-led evaluations exist in this area, it is difficult to provide an evidence-based report on how digitalisation and digital transformation is performed in practice.

The *National Recovery and Resilience Plan* speaks about digital transformation, and money has been allocated for this aim. Mainstreaming accessibility is mentioned in the Plan in the areas mentioned in the Executive Summary (see page 4). It is important that disability organisations and NSIOS collaborate closely with the Government Office for Development and European Cohesion Policy in order to make sure that the digital transformation respects the accessibility rights of disabled people.

As with all other areas relating to people with disabilities, the area of digitalisation and digital transformation is fragmented, with hardly any coordination in relation to disability-focused priorities. The Directorate for the Disabled, as part of the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, does not deal with issues of digitalisation at all and has no responsibilities in this regard. Since this governmental body is responsible for producing a yearly report on the implementation of the *Disability Action Programme 2014-2021*, it asks various bodies to send in information annually about their activities in relation to disabled people. There is no documentation on digitalisation and digital transformation collected in one place, and no overall evaluation in this area.

6.2 Recommendations

1. Recommendation to the Government: Provide national and local assessments of how Slovenia's digitalisation and digital transformation has increased accessibility for people with various disabilities.

2. Recommendation to the Government: As different ministries are responsible for different tasks in the field of digitisation and digital transformation according to their annual priorities, remind ministries to regularly involve persons with disabilities and disability organisations when planning their work activities.

3. Recommendation to the Government, the Disability Directorate, the National Council of Disability Organisations and local disability organisations: Focus on the social performance of people with different disabilities in relation to digital competences. The *National Recovery and Resilience Plan* lists digital competences as one of the indicators of social performance. The plan states that one of the national targets is to improve the digital skills of people aged 16 to 74 from 55 % to 60 % by 2025 (p. 497). To achieve this goal, it will be important to conduct an intersectional analysis among people with different impairments in relation to this goal and to support the improvement of their social skills.

4. Recommendation to the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities of the Republic of Slovenia: This Ministry shall provide funding for disability organisations, and it should put more focus on on-going digital literacy training for its members. In addition, the Ministry could pay more attention to

digitalisation in a way that supports the employment of people with disabilities. In the Business Plan of the Employment Office of the Republic of Slovenia for 2020, digitalisation is one of the four priorities. The Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities shall ensure that the Business Plan will be implemented, and that unemployed people will receive training to gain digital skills. The Ministry shall also ensure that the Employment Office will implement the use of the 'search&match' tool in employment platforms where employers receive services directly from workers without intermediaries. The Ministry shall ensure that the Business Plan of the Employment Office of the Republic of Slovenia specifically addresses the needs of 'vulnerable groups', which includes people with disabilities, and emphasises digitalisation in more specific terms, which would benefit people with different disabilities. In the document, 'vulnerable groups' are mentioned only in the context of digital improvements to the websites of the Employment Office of the Republic of Slovenia.

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