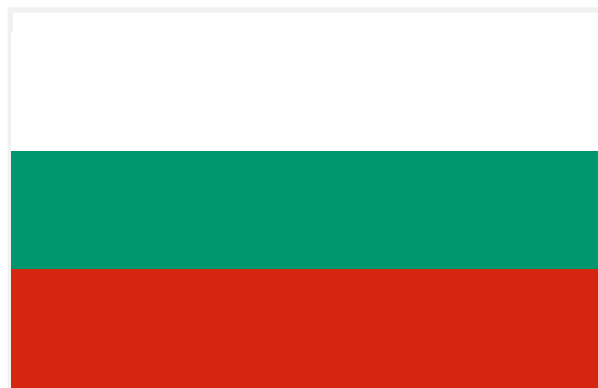




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Bulgaria

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Introduction

This collection of country reports is part of the research on Digital Skills, Accommodation and Technological Assistance for Employment, conducted by the European Disability Forum (EDF) with the support of Google.org.

The aim of the study is to explore the situation of persons with disabilities in the open labour market, focusing in particular on the potential of digital skills training and the use of accessible and assistive technologies to foster inclusion in the workplace.

National experts from each EU Member State (with the exception of Luxembourg) and the UK analysed their respective national contexts. They outline policies and programmes to support reasonable accommodation as a Human Resources (HR) procedure, map trends in the use of accessible and assistive technologies in the workplace, and explain the main limitations experienced by employees with disabilities in acquiring accessible or assistive technology that meets their needs. They also analysed the barriers faced by persons with disabilities related to digital skills and highlight some good practices at national level.

The national reports cover the following countries: the UK, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden. Luxembourg is the only EU Member State that is not part of the study due to not finding a suitable national expert on the topic.

Glossary

Assistive devices: external devices that are designed, made, or adapted to assist a person to perform a particular task. Many people with disabilities depend on assistive devices to enable them to carry out daily activities and participate actively and productively in community or professional life.

Assistive technology: any item, piece of equipment, service or product system including software that is used to increase, maintain, substitute or improve functional capabilities of persons with disabilities or for, alleviation and compensation of impairments, activity limitations or participation restrictions.

Disability allowance: payments that persons with disabilities can receive from the State to cover basic living costs and services.

Discrimination: any distinction, exclusion or restriction on the basis of one or several grounds (sex, race, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, etc.) that damages or nullifies the recognition, enjoyment or exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field, on an equal basis with others.

European Union (EU): a unique economic and political union between 27 European countries, as it stands at the time of publication of this report.

EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC): a regular cross-sectional and longitudinal sample survey by Eurostat that provides data on income, poverty, social exclusion and living conditions in the European Union.

General Comment: a General Comment is a treaty body's interpretation of human rights treaty provisions, thematic issues or its methods of work. General Comments often seek to clarify the reporting duties of State Parties with respect to certain treaty provisions and suggest approaches to implementing those provisions.

Member State(s) (of the EU): the EU currently consists of 27 countries, also called "Member States". Each Member State is party to the founding treaties of the European Union and is therefore subject to the privileges and obligations of membership. Unlike members of most international organisations, the Member States of the EU are subject to binding laws in exchange for their representation within the common legislative and judicial institutions.

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Number of observations (n): indicates the number of employers each national expert managed to interview.

Open labour market: this refers to work in a mainstream or “regular” employment setting, as opposed to a setting that has been created specifically to employ a specific group of employees, such as persons with disabilities.

Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPD): represent the interests of their members with disabilities and have the mandate to advocate for the realisation of their human rights and lobby for the consideration of their interests.

Percentage points: this term expresses the arithmetic difference of two percentages, whereas percent (%) refers to the rate of change. For example, if Country A has an employment rate of 30% and Country B has an employment rate of 60%, Country B’s employment rate is 30 percentage points higher than Country A’s but is also higher by 100%.

Persons with disabilities: individuals who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.

Reasonable accommodation: the necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments, where needed in a particular case, to ensure to persons with disabilities the enjoyment or exercise on an equal basis with others of all human rights and fundamental freedoms. To be “reasonable”, the accommodation cannot impose a disproportionate or undue burden. Denial of reasonable accommodation is a form of discrimination.

The Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI): an index that the European Commission reports between 2014-2022, monitoring Europe’s overall digital performance and tracks the progress of EU countries in their digital competitiveness.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD): an international human rights treaty that reaffirms that all persons with disabilities must enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms. The CRPD clarifies that all persons with disabilities have the right to participate in the civil, political, economic, social and cultural life of the community in the same way as anyone else.

National Overview

According to the National Statistical Institute (2022), there are 654,547 persons with established disabilities in Bulgaria¹. According to Eurostat, the disability employment gap in Bulgaria was 29.5% in 2022, which is above the EU27 average of 21.4%.

The average monthly number of registered unemployed persons with disabilities for 2021 was 11,996 persons and a total of 9,095 persons have been employed during the year². The relative share of the total structure of unemployment reported an increase of 1.5 percentage points compared to 2020, set at 6.6%³. In 2021, those aged over 50 represented 64.8% of unemployed persons with disabilities; 58.7% had secondary education (and most of them had acquired secondary vocational education), 42.4% were without any qualifications or specialty, 33.5% had acquired a working profession and 24.1% were specialists. The long-term unemployment rate for persons with disabilities in 2021, on average per month, was 26.2%⁴. In 2021, 549 employers sought the assistance of the Employment Agency to find suitable candidates with disabilities to fulfil their quota obligations. They advertised 1807 job vacancies, to which the Employment Departments referred 321 persons, of whom only 44 persons with disabilities were hired. According to the Employment Agency, the large share of people with permanent disabilities among the long-term unemployed in 2021 shows that businesses in the open labour market are still not flexible enough to attract persons with disabilities to fill the gap in such sectors as administrative services, information creation and dissemination, and telecommunications – despite the relatively good educational and qualification characteristics of a large proportion of registered persons with disabilities⁵.

There is a reliance on EU funded projects for the vocational training and employment of persons with disabilities. National policies fail to support effective measures in the open labour market. There is significant public spending on outdated sheltered employment, a lack of progress regarding accessibility / universal design and digital skills, and a lack of vocational training for persons with disabilities matching the needs of the labour market. New data on the implementation of the mandatory hiring quotas shows that employers meet their obligations to announce job vacancies, but the rate of persons hired is very low. Recent data from Eurostat indicates the relative risk of poverty for the working age disabled population falling in 2021 to 18.8%, and for the older age group to 40.8%⁶. The in-work poverty rate for persons with disabilities in the age range 18-64 was 5.9% (falling to 3.9% in 2021). Prejudice and discrimination towards

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persons with disabilities, lack of universal design in public, office and private buildings, lack of adapted workplaces, employers' unwillingness to make use of government subsidies due to bureaucratic and ineffective procedures, as well as lack of education, motivation and digital skills among persons with disabilities are also present in Bulgaria.

Little data is published about the number of children with disabilities enrolled in mainstream schools (primary and secondary schools) and in centres for special educational support, or about those who are not involved in any form of education. Quality inclusive education is still a challenge as functional assessment of the children is still not routinely applied and human and financial resources are still inadequate. Digitalisation of education for children with disabilities (online sessions and teaching materials) started only in 2021, with EU funding and at a slow speed, and is performed with active participation of the parents.

Digital Skills

In Bulgaria, national data on educational and training levels specifically of persons with disabilities, on digital skills, or national research on barriers related to digital skills have not been identified. The only recent data on the digital skills needs in employment for the general population was found in a 2023 joint project of the Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria, called "Ready for Digital Transformation"⁷. Its needs analysis showed that only 19% of employees meet the required level of digital competence for their key position, 53% of employers are looking for employees with an advanced level of basic digital competences, and 14% require a highly specialised level. Against this background, 38% of those employed in the studied economic sectors possess only basic digital competence – minimal digital skills related to the use of Windows, Word, Excel, PowerPoint, working with Outlook, working on the Internet, working with digital platforms for communication, etc.

None of the national strategies/programmes concerning digitalisation and digital transformation in Bulgaria (adopted between 2019 and 2021) explicitly addresses the impact of digitalisation on persons with disabilities. The strategies only mention EU funding as the main source, without including concrete figures, indicators for implementation or financial planning. According to the National Programme "Digital Bulgaria 2025", the share of people with at least basic skills in digital technologies amounts to about 29% of the Bulgarian population, while the EU average is 57%⁸. Only 11% of people have above-basic skills, which is less than a third of the EU average. Bulgaria is also well below the EU average in the implementation of digital technologies and is placed 28th in the connectivity dimension of the 2019 Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI)⁹. The National Programme "Digital transformation of Bulgaria for the period 2020-2030" (adopted in 2020¹⁰) contains an overall description and analysis of the needs and planned activities for digital transformation in 16 economic sectors¹¹. The Strategy for the Development of E-Governance of the Republic of Bulgaria 2019-2023 mentions the principle of inclusion and accessibility in e-governance (public authorities should design e-public services that are inclusive by default and meet the needs of people with disabilities). The National Disability Strategy specifies: the provision of high-quality and high-tech technical aids, including specialised software programmes and adapted technical and medical devices related to communication and mobility; the improvement of mechanisms for providing medical devices / technical aids for the habilitation and rehabilitation

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of people with disabilities; specialised training for digital skills needed in the labour market; and the introduction of digitalisation in social services, including tele-assistance. According to the strategy, the biggest challenge is ensuring opportunities for the employment of persons with disabilities and adequate support for their employers. Another challenge is the provision of accessible information and communication services¹².

In Bulgaria, teaching digital skills are part of the formal education but exact data on the students with disabilities who have access to it are lacking. Young people with disabilities (aged 18-24) tend to leave school early significantly more than their peers without a disability in the same age groups. Digital skills are still a challenge for teachers in both mainstream and special schools. OPDs shared that teaching them for children with hearing disabilities, even in special schools, is still not done in sign language and digital skills seem to be a luxury. Unfortunately, there are no programmes for the aspiring persons with hearing disabilities to be trained in new and competitive professions or to retrain them either¹³. OPDs shared the opinion that the main obstacles to improving employability in Bulgaria are the lack of adequate and quality education/training in professions suitable for persons with disabilities and the lack of attention to the actual experience of people with disabilities. On the other hand, the OPDs stated that persons with disabilities have a great desire and potential to acquire digital skills. Unfortunately, none of them was aware of any lifelong learning, national or innovative programmes, offered especially for people in residential care. In general, there seems to be little interest in creating such programmes. Vocational education programmes offered to persons with disabilities are mostly aimed at teaching professions that are not primarily related to digital skills (such as hairdresser, cook, tailor, carpenter). Certain courses in computer literacy and basic skills are offered on an irregular basis by the Employment Departments to registered unemployed persons or by some social service providers (NGOs) to their clients. However, the EDF researcher has not identified attendance of persons with disabilities at these courses.

The employers surveyed by EDF tend to value digital skills and expect potential employees to already have some experience with computer programmes before hiring them. Some 39% of respondents (mainly in telecommunication, customer service and IT sectors) stated that they develop employee training programmes on the whole working process / tasks, including on digital skills, but with no particular focus on persons with disabilities; and they had no experience with such job applicants. Some 61% of Bulgarian employers believed that the lack

of digital skills is a burden when planning on hiring persons with disabilities. Those were manufacturing and service providing employers. Both groups shared the impression that newly employed (if any) persons with disabilities do not have quality high school, general and vocational education (if they at all had access to and finished any). Two employers mentioned that they participate in the Bulgarian Diversity Charter, which does not seem to support in practice the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the open labour market¹⁴.

Assistive Technologies

The only national research on the trends in the use of digital skills and technologies in the workplace was the one mentioned in the previous section. Another 2020-2021 monitoring report of the Ministry of e-Government explores the accessibility of 241 websites and 13 mobile applications, because since 2019 administrative bodies / public service providers have been legally obliged to ensure accessibility¹⁵. The report reveals that:

- iPhone/iOS is not used by a significant number of persons with disabilities because it is not possible to install the Gergana speech synthesizer in Bulgarian and they use a Russian speech synthesizer;
- for the Android-Google operating system as a screen reader (accessibility services for Android-Google), Talkback (built-in Android screen reader) is used since it is easy to use and is supported by all mobile phones using the Android operating system;
- the monitoring of websites shows that most of them are in non-compliance with accessibility standards.

Below are the monitoring outcomes for the websites:

Requirement of the harmonised standard		% of monitored sites with established non-compliance
9.1.1.1 (A)	Non-text content	88%
9.1.3.1 (A)	Information and relationships	51%
9.1.4.3 (AA)	Contrast (minimum requirements)	87%
9.2.1.1 (A)	Keyboard	21%
9.2.4.2 (A)	Page title	18%
9.2.4.4 (A)	Purpose of link (in context)	81%
9.2.4.6 (AA)	Headings and labels	70%
9.3.1.1 (A)	Page language	29%
9.3.3.2 (A)	Labels or instructions	35%
9.4.1.2 (A)	Name, role, value	32%

The review found that only 12% of the monitored websites had published an accessibility statement (often not according to the required model). In a significant part of the checked statements, there is a lack of description of the inaccessible content.

Bulgaria does not have a specific legal support framework on the use of accessible and assistive technologies in employment. Currently, it is up to the employer to decide whether to introduce such technologies, and this obviously happens very rarely. Personal aid is to be acquired by the person with a disability either through healthcare services (in case of low income) or by personal purchase. The EDF employer survey showed that employers did not recall any use of assistive technologies by their employees with disabilities. Some 26% (n=6) of them stated that they were ready to purchase assistive devices/technologies for their employees with disabilities or to provide financial support to the employees to do that by themselves, but never had a person needing it applying for a job. None of them was aware of any legal framework and/or public programmes supporting the acquisition of assistive technologies for persons with disabilities.

The OPDs stated that the state leaves persons with disabilities to find and obtain personal aids, assistive devices and technologies for work themselves, which prevents many of them from obtaining them as their income is extremely low (mainly disability pension). The OPDs suggested that each person with a disability should have an individual assessment based on their personal needs to enable them to enter or return to the open labour market (such assessments are not performed in Bulgaria yet). The state also must invest in the education, qualification and retraining of people with disabilities to be able to include them in employment.

The OPDs pointed out that the most suitable technologies for persons with disabilities could be those that aim at:

- adapting the physical environment: ramps, rooms that allow working in wheelchairs, devices for controlling the environment remotely (lighting, air conditioning, closing and opening doors, starting machines, etc.), various ergonomic devices (computer mice, keyboards) and devices functioning by tracking the movement of the eyes, movements or with speech);
- facilitating communication and information sharing: using screen readers, Braille, sign language, online sign language translation platforms and technical means that perform such translation, easy-to-read formats, transforming complex technological texts into

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easy-to-read and understandable ones (using, for example, artificial intelligence), technologies for generating speech;

- adaptation of the working environment from the point of view of emotional and psychological climate and accessibility: technologies for studying the environment for possible stressogenic factors, for support in workplace adaptation, etc. Direct and easy access to such devices/ technologies should be introduced. A legal framework and a supporting policy should be created for their free use by those in need.

OPDs may be funded by the state – and then they are not critical towards the policies – or by people who are not dependent on state funding and who are highly critical, but their organisations are unsustainable. Thus, no action is being taken by either type of organization to overcome the limitations to the accessibility of jobs. However, some promising practices are used by the Horizons Foundation and the Assist Foundation, which developed software for blind people that they could work with, and the “Listen” Foundation, that has been developing recently training for deaf people in sign language, with which they can find work much more easily. Talks with representatives of technology companies in connection with innovations show that some attempts seem to have been made, such as developing robots to replace the functionality of a human hand and to be used to provide accessibility for people with disabilities. However, these topics are mostly discussed with university students and there is no interest from the business side.

Reasonable Accommodation

No national research on reasonable accommodation as an HR procedure by employers has been identified and the EDF employer survey in Bulgaria did not find any such employers either. Specific national legislation or policy on applying technologies as reasonable accommodation and support in use of technologies do not exist either. A reasonable accommodation duty for employers is laid down in several Bulgarian laws. However, there are no detailed legal instructions on the provision of this duty, nor is there any public data available about its implementation. The only support that employers in the open labour market can receive in making reasonable accommodations is funding from the Agency for Persons with Disabilities. This funding is granted for providing access to the workplace (up to €5,000), for the adaptation of individual workstations (up to €5,000 each), for equipment at the workplace (up to €5,000 each), and for qualification and training (up to €500 per employee with a permanent disability). However, the procedure for applying is very complicated, the funds are very limited, the employees (beneficiaries) need to be medically assessed as having at least a 50% degree of disability and employers are obliged to hire persons with disabilities for a period of at least three years after they have received the funding. This is why the scarce implementation data shows that very few workplaces are adapted for persons with disabilities, most posts being with state and municipal authorities. Logistical, informational, technical or organisational support for employers is not available. A 2019 research shows that employers are not even aware of the existing financial support and do not benefit from it. The EDF employer survey found that some 39% (n=9) of the employers were aware of the programme described above. They considered it ineffective and none of them had applied for it. According to the 2021 annual report of the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, only 28 employers applied for the above funding (18 project proposals were approved and 40 workplaces were adapted; 6 employers were from the open labour market).

According to the majority of the HR officials participating in the EDF survey, the persons with disabilities working in the company have not expressed any need of such specific accommodations (apart from lighter/different work tasks or flexible working hours / workplace prescribed in their medical assessment). In the very few exceptions the persons needing it were persons who had become disabled while working in the company. In one case, a route for wheelchairs was created in the office building with the company's funding. OPDs explained that a great number of persons with "invisible" disabilities diligently hide their disability,

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because of the risk of dismissal in case the disability is revealed. They feel unable to ask for reasonable accommodation under the Labour Code and the Persons with Disabilities Act, as the practice is that they would be pressured to leave “voluntarily” and there is no documentary evidence of the pressure being exercised on them by the employers. The majority of the employers explained that the nature of the work activities in their companies are not suitable for persons with disabilities. They stated that they are aware of the state support programme, but they found it inadequate and ineffective.

The interviewed OPDs (of persons with hearing impairments, persons with physical disabilities, and persons with intellectual and/or psycho-social disabilities) in Bulgaria were aware of the only available programme mentioned above. However, only a few open market employers benefit from it, as the main problem for the employers is rather the lack of education/training and work habits/motivation of people with disabilities. According to OPDs, the disability employment programme is used to hire/keep people with estimated disability who have few obstacles to exercise their work function and little need for adaptation to the environment (people suffering from diabetes or hypertension / cardiovascular disease, etc.) The OPDs suggested that in addition to employers, there should be a similar programme to support people with disabilities themselves, i.e. the money would go to them and they could personally purchase various technical means with which they can work.

OPDs deem that companies, with very few exceptions, generally do not have any interest in providing assistive technology as part of reasonable accommodations¹⁶. Usually service providing NGOs are involved, that are interested in developing social enterprises. This, unfortunately, leads to the development of specialized social enterprises, but not to the creation of suitable jobs in the open labour market. Social enterprises could play the role of “training places”, to learn work skills and to test innovations (which is not happening, again, due to lack of interest from companies). Unfortunately, this type of enterprise seems to be considered as an end point.

General, deeply rooted prejudices by open labour market employers against older people and persons with disabilities are also evident from the responses of both OPDs and employers. They are related to the beliefs that both groups are unable and/or unwilling to learn new things, unable and/or unwilling to work, inert, and unfamiliar with and/or unwilling to learn about new technologies. NGOs’ experience with people with disabilities shows exactly the opposite, but there seems to be no bridge between people with disabilities and businesses.

The OPDs were aware of the scarce cases of adaptations providing accessibility from a physical point of view, Braille and other technologies for blind people, support (mentors) for persons with intellectual and psycho-social disabilities, but mainly in a sheltered working environment. However, they suggested that a huge number of innovations are possible, including the use of artificial intelligence to generate easy-to-understand instructions for certain work tasks, to mediate communication, to create algorithms for better adaptation to the work environment depending on the disability and the life/professional experience of the individual, to create/select applications for finding suitable jobs and to connect companies with persons with disabilities. Before that, however, it is necessary to find a way for businesses to understand and become open to persons with disabilities and their potential. This cannot be done with legislative amendments (only) because ways will always be invented to circumvent the rules. Specific efforts must be put into convincing companies of the benefit of such a connection and inclusion – at the level of values, but also at the pragmatic level.

Annex 1 – About the “Ready for Digital Transformation” project mentioned in the “Digital skills” section

Under the project, 87 standards for digital skills and competencies were developed in 16 economic sectors (including sectors from the food industry, production of timber, furniture and paper, chemicals and paints and varnishes, electrical equipment, wholesale and retail trade, catering and hospitality, and sports). The development of the competence standards was preceded by needs analyses which showed that only 19% of employees meet the required level of digital competence for their key position. Additionally, 53% of employers are looking for employees with an advanced level of basic digital competences, and 14% require a highly specialised level. Against this background, 38% of those employed in the studied economic sectors possess only basic digital competence—minimal digital skills related to the use of widely applicable unified software products and digital technologies such as Windows, Word, Excel, PowerPoint, working with Outlook, using the Internet, and working with digital communication platforms. This is an indicator of the quality and results of basic training—education and vocational training. There are significant differences in the level of digital competence (digital inequality) between different economic sectors, as well as between individual enterprises within a sector. The levels of digital competence are directly dependent on both the differences in the degree of maturity of the technologies used and the policies of the enterprises in the development of human resources.

Within the framework of the project, two electronic tools for the assessment of competences have been developed, one for self-assessment, and the other for the assessment of specific digital skills (they are to be published and made available for free use). Sectoral qualifications frameworks for digital skills development are also currently being developed to provide a common basis for collaboration between business and education in developing the digital skills of the workforce. Testing of 20 e-learning courses on specific digital skills is underway. All project outcomes have been developed following the European Digital Competence Framework DigComp 2.1. The products of the project can be found at: <https://digital.bia-bg.com/>¹⁷.

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- 11.** These are: digital infrastructure, cybersecurity, scientific research and innovation, education and training, an adapted labour market, social protection, digital economics, transport, agriculture, culture, environment and climate, energy, healthcare, digital management, regional development and finance.
- 12.** National Strategy for People with Disabilities (2021-2030). 2020, www.strategy.bg/StrategicDocuments/View.aspx?lang=bg-BG&Id=1342
- 13.** The Union of the Deaf in Bulgaria unites members with total or partial hearing impairment, to date more than 4,300 people, organized in 12 regional

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organizations. Since 1957, the Union has developed its own economic activity in 12 commercial companies (sheltered employment) "Tih Trud" Ltd.. Unfortunately, as a result of specific political processes in the country, followed by economic crises and the increase in competitiveness, the production activity in the "Tih Trud" enterprises has been reduced to a minimum, workshops are being closed, and their staff is also decreasing. In addition, due to the general aging of the nation and due to insufficient qualifications and education, businesses are employing fewer and fewer deaf members, especially young people.

14. See <https://diverse-bg.eu/>

15. The monitored sample covered 40 state administration websites, 20 regional administration websites, 40 local administration websites and 120 websites of public law bodies that do not belong to the above categories. The sampled websites provide as many services as possible in different sectors of public life, including social protection, healthcare, transport, education, employment and tax system, environmental protection, culture and recreation, housing and utility services, and public safety. Sites of mobile operators, banks, courier companies, certification service providers were also included in the sample. All 220 websites planned for the first reporting period were checked by persons with disabilities, where 184 were checked using a screen reader with speech synthesizer, 44 by a person with a motor disability, and 45 by a person with a cognitive impairment. In this way, actual issues with the accessibility and usability of websites for certain disabilities were identified.

16. The only mobile application that supports deaf people, for example, in case of an urgency is the one introduced with the single European emergency number 112, where text or video can be used by deaf people in need of emergency help. The application was created thanks to the persistence and support by the OPD for persons with hearing impairments.

17. Round table "Digital Inequality and Labour Market Divide", organized by the Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce (BCC), from <https://bia-bg.com/event/view/31794/?fbclid=IwAR1EQLUrIXeW0QFeCBw2UaNsvKMurOjEAzs5ANQCP5J3FPMjuv-5TZVIXi4>