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# European Semester 2021-2022 country fiche on disability equality

With comparative data Annex provided by EDE

## Bulgaria

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European Disability Expertise (EDE) provides independent scientific support to the Commission's policy Unit responsible for disability issues. It aims to mainstream disability equality in EU policy processes, including implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

This country report has been prepared as input for the European Semester in 2022.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For an introduction to the Semester process, see <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/european-semester/how-european-semester-works/>.

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## **1 Executive summary and recommendations**

### **1.1 Key points and main challenges for Bulgaria in 2022**

#### **Disability and the labour market**

The employment rate of people with disabilities in Bulgaria is 15 points lower than the EU average, they are half as likely to be employed than other persons and this trend is stable during the last 10 years. There is a reliance on EU funded projects for vocational training and employment, but at minimum wages. 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 There is significant public spending on outdated sheltered employment, a lack of progress regarding accessibility/universal design and digital skills and a lack of vocational training for persons with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 implementation of the mandatory hiring quotas showed that employers implement their obligations.

#### **Disability, social policies and healthcare**

Every second person with disability in Bulgaria is at risk of poverty. Almost 1/3 (29.7 % as at 2019) of people of working age but with disabilities live in material deprivation, which is almost three times higher than the EU average (10.6 %). Personal assistance mechanism included around 26 000 people with disabilities in 2020 but training of the assistants and quality assessment of the service are lacking. Financial support for persons with disabilities is still very low but at least it was linked to poverty threshold (which would be updated annually) and provided mainly to persons with severe disabilities to meet their survival needs, not for integration/compensation purposes. Deinstitutionalisation of children has turned into re-institutionalisation in new family-type accommodation centres because adequate community-based social and health services supporting family care are lacking; staffing in the new services is insufficient in number and qualification, and is extremely underpaid, unsupported and unsupervised. Deinstitutionalisation of adults follows the same model as the deinstitutionalisation of children and would further (2021-2024) continue to develop residential services rather than support for independent living. Ambitious e-healthcare, new technologies, diagnostics methods, service development projects are planned in the draft National Recovery and Resilience Plan which still is not approved by the Parliament and not submitted to the European Commission.

#### **Disability, education and skills**

Little data about the number of children enrolled in mainstream schools (primary and high schools), in the centres for special educational support, or about those who are not involved in any education, is published. 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 not sufficient. Digitalisation of education for children with disabilities is lacking.

#### **Investment priorities for inclusion and accessibility**

EU funded projects related to people with disabilities are actually the biggest investment in their support. The draft National Recovery and Resilience Plan earmarks funding only for residential and counseling services, personal mobility, new technologies and diagnostic methods for early prevention and intervention of disability.

## 1.2 Recommendations for Bulgaria

These recommendations are based on the evidence and analysis presented in the following chapters of our report.

**Recommendation:** Design active labour market policies targeted to include persons with disabilities. Improve access to distance working and promote digital skills.

**Rationale:** Currently few measures are implemented or planned and persons with disabilities are not provided flexible employment opportunities and training. The employment rate of people with disabilities in Bulgaria is 15 points lower than the average for EU. Persons with disabilities are half as likely to be employed compared to persons without disabilities and this trend is stable during the last 10 years.

**Recommendation:** Ensure adequate social protection for persons with disabilities.

**Rationale:** Every second person with disability in Bulgaria is at risk of poverty. Financial support is extremely low, provided only to a limited number of people. Social services supporting independent living are not well developed.

**Recommendation:** Speed up e-healthcare and introduction of functional assessment of disabilities. Introduce new technologies and diagnostic methods in treatment of persons with disabilities.

**Rationale:** People with disabilities have difficult access to healthcare due to social isolation, stigma, poverty, inaccessible architectural environment, especially in small towns. Other challenges are also timely diagnosis, primary and secondary prevention of disabilities, due to insufficient number of medical professionals.

**Recommendation:** Ensure sufficient human, expert and financial resources as well as options for digitalization for inclusive education of children with disabilities

**Rationale:** Data about inclusive education is limited, scarce reports announce the need to support it. Early school leaving rate among young persons with disabilities (18-29) in Bulgaria is 32.4 % while the rate of school leavers without disabilities is 20.6 %. Only 6.4 % of the persons with disabilities at the age 30-34 have completed tertiary education (the share of persons without disabilities is 32.5 %).

**Recommendation:** Deinstitutionalisation of babies and toddlers should be speeded up, carried out transparently and in cooperation with other social services supporting early child development. Deinstitutionalisation of adults with disabilities should be focused on development of mobile independent living services and provision of social housing and services for those in need

**Rationale:** Ministry of Healthcare in charge of the entrance to child institutions, significantly delayed deinstitutionalisation of babies and does not publish adequate information about its plans. Currently deinstitutionalisation of adults is mainly focused on setting up residential family-type centres which violates the right to independent living of the people placed in them.

**Recommendation:** Mobile and flexible services supporting education, training, employment and social inclusion of persons with disabilities should be the main focus of future investments, as well as wider accessibility of public infrastructure.

**Rationale:** So far, investments in buildings and offices meant to serve persons with disabilities led to further social exclusion.

## 2 Mainstreaming disability equality in the Semester documents

Country Reports and Country Specific Recommendation of direct relevance to disability policy were not published in this exceptional policy cycle. For a commentary on the last published documents please see our country fiche for the previous Semester 2020-21.

### 2.1 [Recovery and Resilience Plan](#) for Bulgaria (RRP)

The following key points highlight where the situation of persons with disabilities or disability policies was considered in these plans. We address the most relevant of these and other issues arising from the RRP/NRP in the next chapters.

The draft *National Recovery and Resilience Plan* (July 2021 version) declared that the measures earmarked in it are in compliance with the 2019 and 2020 Specific Recommendations and mentions people with disabilities in the following chapters:

- Green component - the plan envisages ongoing support for the deinstitutionalisation of care for the elderly and people with disabilities and the increase of the energy efficiency of social infrastructure for the provision of social services delegated by the state.<sup>2</sup>
- Access to justice component earmarks an analysis, proposal and adoption of amendments to the legislation aimed at expanding the scope of beneficiaries of legal aid and harmonizing the rules on legal aid and the rules on exemption from court fees. Persons with permanent disabilities, entitled to monthly financial support under the People with Disabilities Act, as well as persons for whom their placement under guardianship is requested should be added to this group.<sup>3</sup>
- Digital connectivity component - a draft law amending the Electronic Communications Act will achieve, among other outcomes, the improvement of protection for the interests of citizens and the rights of end users, including people with disabilities.
- Social inclusion section includes:<sup>4</sup>
  - improvement of the overall system for social assistance by adopting a Code for Social Support and secondary legislation;
  - continuation the reform of the system of long-term care social services, which started in 2014, with approximately 60 % of the specialized institutions for persons with disabilities envisaged to be closed, and all existing institutions for the elderly to be reformed in compliance with the new quality criteria;<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Council of Ministers, *draft National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria* (version 1.3 as of 20.07.2021), p. 27, available in Bulgarian at: <https://www.nextgeneration.bg/14>.

<sup>3</sup> Council of Ministers, *draft National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria*, p. 191.

<sup>4</sup> Council of Ministers, *draft National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria*, p. 221

<sup>5</sup> Council of Ministers, *draft National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria*, p. 234.



- construction and equipment of new social and integrated health and social services for residential care and accompanying specialized and consultative social services for people with disabilities;<sup>6</sup>
- provision of personal mobility and accessibility for people with permanent disability (technical aids, specialised software programmes, electronic technical tools to compensate for sensory deficit, adapted motor vehicles, technical and medical devices and other similar means and devices will be provided according to specific needs);<sup>7</sup>
- development of regional administrative capacity for modernising the enterprises in the social and solidarity economy and introducing individualised solutions (the project envisages a survey of at least 200 social enterprises for the opportunity to digitize their work processes and support the implementation of the recommendations in at least 100 of them, as well as training for their employees in connection with the implemented digital solutions);<sup>8</sup>
- modernisation of the buildings of the Social Assistance Departments and Employment Departments which is expected to increase their accessibility for persons with disabilities also;<sup>9</sup>
- modernisation and development of psychiatric care.<sup>10</sup>

Persons with disabilities are not mentioned anywhere in the chapter of the Plan devoted to education and the Plan does not contain specific chapter on employment.

## 2.2 Semester links to CRPD and national disability action plans

Relevant recommendations and issues arising from participation in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) are highlighted in each chapter.

It is also important that Semester plans align with national disability strategy too. In Bulgaria, this refers to the National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2021-2030). The previous National Strategy for People with Disabilities 2016-2020 was aligned with the European Strategy 2010-2020. A new strategy for 2021-2030 was adopted by the Council of Ministers in December 2020.

The *National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2021-2030)*<sup>11</sup> identifies challenges and earmarks broad measures for overcoming the challenges in the fields of accessibility, employment, social protection, healthcare and education of persons with

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<sup>6</sup> Council of Ministers, *draft National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria*, p. 227.

<sup>7</sup> Council of Ministers, *draft National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria*, p. 228.

<sup>8</sup> Council of Ministers, *draft National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria*, p. 230.

<sup>9</sup> Council of Ministers, *draft National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria*, p. 231.

<sup>10</sup> Council of Ministers, *draft National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria*, p. 249.

<sup>11</sup> Council of Ministers, *National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2021-2030)*, adopted on 23.12.2020, available in Bulgarian at: <https://www.strategy.bg/StrategicDocuments/View.aspx?lang=bg-BG&Id=1342>.

disabilities. It is aligned with the UNCPRD. However, the enlisted measures are too broad, vague and lack concrete figures, budget and measurable indicators for implementation. Action Plan for its implementation has not been identified. The challenges and measures are mentioned in the relevant chapters in this report.

### 3 Disability and the labour market - analysis of the situation and the effectiveness of policies

In 2018, the UN CRPD Committee made the following recommendations to Bulgaria:

[Article 27 UN CRPD](#) addresses Work and Employment.

'58. The Committee recommends that the State party:

- (a) Adopt a policy framework and a strategy to promote employment for persons with disabilities in the open labour market, including by increasing resources for it, with the aim to facilitate transition from sheltered employment to the open labour market;
- (b) Recognize in its legal and policy framework the right of persons with disabilities to reasonable accommodation at the workplace;
- (c) Raise awareness among public and private companies about reasonable accommodation at work;
- (d) Strengthen training programmes for persons with disabilities on skills that are required in the open labour market and skills in entrepreneurship and collect disaggregated and targeted data about the participation of women and men with disabilities in programmes and the outcome of training for them.'

The next CRPD state report is due in 2026.

#### 3.1 Summary of the labour market situation of persons with disabilities

Data from EU-SILC indicate an employment rate for persons with disabilities in Bulgaria of 40.2 % in 2019, compared to 76.6 % for other persons against a national employment target of 76 % and approximately -11.1 points below the EU27 average. This results in an estimated disability employment gap of approximately 36 percentage points (EU27 average gap 24.2, see Tables 2-4) or an employment chances ratio of 0.5.

The same data indicate unemployment rates of 16.2 % and 11.8 %, respectively in 2019 (see Tables 5-7) and the economic activity rate for persons with disabilities in Bulgaria was 48.0 %, compared to 86.9 % for other persons (see Tables 8-10). These indications are broken down by gender and age in the respective tables in annex.

The average monthly number of registered unemployed people with disabilities in 2020 was 12 428. Compared to 2019, this number has increased with 0.5 %. The relative share in the total number of the unemployed persons has decreased with 1.3 points compared to 2019, reaching 5.1 %.<sup>12</sup>

#### 3.2 Analysis of labour market policies relevant to the Semester

For reference, see also the 2021 [Recovery and Resilience Plan](#) for Bulgaria and the National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2021-2030). The Convergence Programme also mentions disability in relation to increased expenditure on social

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<sup>12</sup> Employment Agency, *2020 Annual Report*, p.9, available in Bulgarian at: <https://www.az.government.bg/pages/otchet-za-deinostta-na-az/>.

benefits for persons with disabilities, increased tax relief for children with disabilities and pay for personal assistants, and refers to the policy for people with disabilities.<sup>13</sup>

Specific employment promotion measures for persons with disabilities are provided for in the Employment Promotion Act and two national programmes. However, they do not seem to be effective and popular both among persons with disabilities and employers. But for several years now the Employment Agency has not been analysing this and only reports about their implementation quantitatively. The biggest efforts for adequate training and employment of persons with disabilities seem to be put in the implementation of the two EU funded projects Strengthening of the training programmes for persons with disabilities on skills that are required in the open labour market and skills in entrepreneurship is supposed to be achieved by two EU funded projects: Project № BGO5M90PO01-1.005 – ‘*Training and Employment for Young People*’ and Project № BG05M90P001-1.010 ‘*Training and Employment.*’ (see these are summarised later in chapter 6.1).

The *National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2021-2030)* identifies employment of persons with disabilities as the biggest challenge. It enlists the following measures for overcoming it:

- improving the legislation in the field of employment of people with disabilities;
- implementation of a system of the working capacity assessment, based on an integrated approach;
- creating conditions for motivating people with disabilities for active behavior on the labor market;
- implementation of standardized packages of employment services for people with disabilities;
- providing employment opportunities for people with disabilities to overcome their social isolation and inclusion in the labor market, incl. by carrying out active mediation for the creation of jobs suitable for them;
- encouraging and supporting employers to employ people with disabilities, incl. to provide an accessible and supportive work environment for people with disabilities;
- stimulating the employment of people with disabilities in a specialized, supported and protected work environment through investments and incentives, including to ensure access to the workplace and its adaptation;
- stimulating the economic activity of people with disabilities and promoting their entrepreneurial skills;
- promoting social entrepreneurship in support of the employment of people with disabilities;
- creating conditions for improving the competitiveness of specialized enterprises and cooperatives, incl. development of the institute of sheltered employment;
- providing opportunities for providing specialized training for people with disabilities, aimed at acquiring key competencies, incl. digital skills needed in the labor market, as well as opportunities to increase the productivity of working people with disabilities and their employability;

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<sup>13</sup> Bulgaria - Convergence Programme 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/2021-bulgaria-convergence-programme\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/2021-bulgaria-convergence-programme_en.pdf).

- creating conditions for inclusion in flexible forms of employment for people with disabilities;
- supporting the process of rehabilitation and social integration of people with disabilities in the work environment;
- improving the opportunities for vocational guidance and career counseling for people with disabilities;
- providing opportunities for the integrity of employment and social services;
- developing programs for the creation of sheltered jobs within which contracting authorities are entitled to retain contracts (based on Directive 2009/81/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 July 2009; Directive 2014/24/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 February 2014; Directive 2014/25/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 February 2014);
- developing programs for the creation of sheltered jobs for people with disabilities through reserved concessions (based on Directive 2014/23/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 February 2014 on the award of concession contracts);
- encouraging employers to take measures to improve and ensure healthy and safe working conditions;
- expanding existing information and communication opportunities to ensure that people with disabilities receive real-time information on job vacancies and training opportunities;
- carrying out campaigns to change the attitudes of employers regarding the employment of people with disabilities;
- providing opportunities to increase the level of awareness of employers about the potentials of people with disabilities in the work process.<sup>14</sup>

*The Action Plan for Implementation of the Concluding Observations of the UNCRPD about Bulgaria (2021-2026)* earmarks the following more adequate measures to be implemented until 2026:

- increasing the number of electronic services for jobseekers;
- providing specialized labor mediation for people with disabilities, incl. remote;
- development of the new services of the Employment Agency: 'Consultation and mentoring after starting work' and 'Family labor consultant';
- expanding the scope of application of the Standardized package of services for people with permanent disabilities;
- modernization of the adult education system through the development and introduction of new forms of education, incl. for people with disabilities;
- expanding the scope of application of the Personal Profile by using the resources of 'My Competence'.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Open labour market***

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<sup>14</sup> Council of Ministers, *National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2021-2030)*, p.28.

<sup>15</sup> Council of Ministers, *Action Plan for Implementation of the Concluding Observations of the UNCRPD about Bulgaria (2021-2026)*, adopted on 12.02.2021, p. 42, available in Bulgarian at: <https://mlsp.government.bg/konventsija-za-pravata-na-khorata-s-uvrezhdaniya-na-oon>.

A slow progress in provision of employment assistance on behalf of Employment Departments is reported in 2020 when the new Persons with Disabilities Act started operating in practice. As of 31 December 2020, the total of 16 095 unemployed persons with disabilities had been registered. In 2020, a total of 8 683 people with disabilities received employment assistance from labour intermediaries in the Employment Departments, of which 6 274 unemployed people with disabilities were employed for jobs advertised on the open labour market, 1 102 were involved in employment programmes, 408 were involved in Employment Promotion Act measures, and 899 were involved in EU funded employment projects.<sup>16</sup>

In 2020, the total of 574 employers have sought the assistance of the Employment Agency for finding suitable employees while they announced 1 778 job vacancies designated for persons with disabilities. The total of 349 persons with disabilities have been referred for them and 45 persons have been hired.<sup>17</sup>

Another positive development is that the 'General Labour Inspectorate' Executive Agency has started collecting data on the implementation of the mandatory hiring quotas of people with disabilities. In 2020, it performed 2 297 inspections in enterprises with more than 50 employees. The visited enterprises had covered or were in the process of fulfilling the mandatory quotas for hiring people with permanent disabilities. The employers that could not or were not willing to implement their obligations under the mandatory quotas are obliged to pay compensatory contributions amounting to 30 percent of the minimal salary for the country for each unoccupied job place designated to be occupied by a person with a permanent disability. For 2020, 238 employers have paid compensation contributions in the amount of approximately BGN 552 000 (EUR 276 000).<sup>18</sup>

In 2020, 52 workplaces were adapted and equipped for persons with permanent disabilities at the cost of BGN 225 700 (EUR 112 850).<sup>19</sup>

In 2020, 7 projects for rehabilitation and integration of people with disabilities were funded for the purpose of training and acquisition of skills for independent living, adaptation, labor and social integration and reintegration, covering 1 000 people. The total value of the used financial resources amounts to BGN 95 317 (EUR 47 660).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Council of Ministers, *Report about the Implementation of the 2019-2020 Action Plan for Implementation of the National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2016-2020)*, p. 35, available in Bulgarian at: <https://www.strategy.bg/StrategicDocuments/View.aspx?lang=bg-BG&Id=1048> and 2020 Annual report of the Employment Agency, p. 18.

<sup>17</sup> Employment Agency, *2020 Annual report*, p. 18.

<sup>18</sup> Council of Ministers, *Report about the Implementation of the 2019-2020 Action Plan for Implementation of the National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2016-2020)*, p. 36.

<sup>19</sup> Council of Ministers, *Report about the Implementation n of the 2019-2020 Action Plan for Implementation of the National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2016-2020)*, p. 37.

<sup>20</sup> Council of Ministers, *Report about the Implementation of the 2019-2020 Action Plan forImplementation of the National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2016-2020)*, p. 35.



### **Sheltered employment**

In order to create conditions for competitiveness of the specialized enterprises and cooperatives of people with disabilities, in 2019, the Agency for People with Disabilities financed the technological renovation of 13 specialized enterprises and cooperatives of people with disabilities, at the total amount of BGN 867 980 (EUR 433 990). In 2020, the number of these enterprises was 14 and the financial resources amount to BGN 872 810 (EUR 436 405).<sup>21</sup>

In 2020, a total of 1 632 unemployed persons with disabilities were included in employment under the *National Program for Employment and Training of Persons with Permanent Disabilities*, of which 567 were newly included. The total of BGN 9 029 664 (EUR 4.5 million) was spent from the State budget.<sup>22</sup>

Under the state aid scheme, in the implementation of Article 51, para. 2 of the Employment Promotion Act (EPA), employers are encouraged to hire unemployed persons with permanent disabilities. The subsidies for the employer are for an open job position/vacancy where a person with disabilities is employed, in the amount of 75 % of the eligible costs for the subsidy period which is 3 to 12 months. In 2020, 439 people with permanent disabilities were included in employment, of which 276 were newcomers. The funds spent by the State budget amount to BGN 1 187 970 (EUR 593 985).<sup>23</sup>

The measure to encourage employers to open jobs for the employment of unemployed persons with permanent disabilities (Article 52 of the EPA) supports the employment of full-time or part-time unemployed persons with permanent disabilities. During 2020, labour costs for a period of up to 6 months were financed by employers who created jobs and provided employment to persons from this target group. In 2020, the employment of a total of 133 people was provided, of which 84 newcomers. The funds spent by the State budget amount to BGN 249 859 (EUR 124 929).<sup>24</sup>

Under the measures to encourage employers to hire unemployed people up to 29 years of age with permanent disabilities (Art. 36, para. 1 of the EPA), as well as young people from social institutions who have completed their education (Art. 36, para. 2 of the EPA) and to encourage employers to hire unemployed persons up to 29 years of age part-time (Art. 36a of the EPA), employment was provided to a total 294 young people, out of whom 182 were newcomers. The funds spent by the State budget was BGN 556 553 (EUR 278 276).<sup>25</sup>

As in previous years the efforts of the state policy are invested in sheltered employment of persons with disabilities and not in development of support and flexible forms of employment in the open labour market. However, such forms are planned at least in the strategic documents (see at the end of this section).

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<sup>21</sup> Council of Ministers, *Report about the Implementation of the 2019-2020 Action Plan for Implementation of the National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2016-2020)*, p. 37.

<sup>22</sup> Council of Ministers, *Report about the Implementation of the 2019-2020 Action Plan for Implementation of the National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2016-2020)*, p. 38.

<sup>23</sup> Employment Agency, *2020 Annual Report*, p. 20.

<sup>24</sup> Employment Agency, *2020 Annual Report*, p. 21.

<sup>25</sup> Employment Agency, *2020 Annual Report*, p. 33.

#### **4 Disability, social policies and healthcare – analysis of the situation and the effectiveness of policies**

In 2018, the UN CRPD Committee made the following recommendations to Bulgaria:

[Article 28 UN CRPD](#) addresses Adequate standard of living and social protection.

'60. The Committee recommends that the State party revise the criteria for assessing the degree of impairment, incorporate the human rights model of disability in the assessment process, and ensure that persons with disabilities continue to enjoy an adequate standard of living. It also calls upon the State party to intensify its efforts to ensure that all persons with disabilities can meet the additional costs of disability, including by increasing budget allocations and resources accordingly.'

[Article 19 UN CRPD](#) addresses Living independently in the community.

'40. The Committee, in accordance with its general comment No. 5, recommends that the State party:

- (a) Accelerate the transition process to ensure that all persons with disabilities living in any form of institution, such as psychiatric hospital units or in small community-based group homes, have the right to live independently within the community with choices equal to those of other persons; in the de institutionalization process, the State party should focus on the situation of persons with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities, and children and elderly persons with disabilities;
- (b) Allocate greater resources for developing individualized support services for persons with disabilities, regardless of the type of impairment or age; such services should include peer support and personal assistance;
- (c) Adopt legislation on individualized and self-managed personal assistance and social and support services, recognizing the right to live independently and be included in the community as a subjective right for all persons with disabilities, regardless of their impairment or required level of support;
- (d) Implement a procedure to consult in a meaningful and disability-sensitive manner with organizations of persons with disabilities on all aspects of the implementation of article 19, including deinstitutionalization strategies and processes;
- (e) Allocate national financial resources and those provided by the European Union to promote the inclusion of persons with disabilities in society, and introduce efficient remedies and guidelines to avoid spending national and international funds on establishing infrastructure, housing and/or services that are not accessible or affordable to all persons with disabilities.'

[Article 25 UN CRPD](#) addresses Health.

'52. The Committee recommends that the State party raise awareness of the human rights model of disability among all health professionals, including by providing training on the right to free and informed consent, and take note of article 25 of the Convention in the implementation of target 3 of the Sustainable Development Goals. It also recommends that the State party adopt a policy framework and a time-bound strategy to provide women with disabilities with accessible sexual and reproductive health care and information, and with services appropriate to their age.

54. The Committee recommends that the State party ensure that persons with disabilities, in particular those with chronic, genetic and rare diseases, have access to diagnostics, health care and medical rehabilitation.'



The next CRPD state report is due in 2026.

#### **4.1 Summary of the social situation of persons with disabilities**

Data from EU-SILC 2019 indicate the poverty risk rate for working age persons with disabilities in Bulgaria was 25.6 % in 2019, compared to 17.5 % for other persons of similar age - an estimated disability poverty gap of approximately 8 percentage points (see Table 14). For people aged over 65, the disability poverty gap was 9.1 points (40.3 % for older persons with disabilities and 31.2 % for other persons of similar age). The tables in annex also indicate the respective rates of risk of poverty or social exclusion and break these down by gender as well age.

For persons with disabilities of working age in Bulgaria (age 16-64) the risk of poverty before social transfers was 51.4 % and 25.6 % after transfers. The in-work poverty rate for persons with disabilities aged under 60 was 7.0 %.

Of interest to health policy are the data on self-reported unmet needs for medical examination (too expensive or too far to travel or waiting list). Disability equality gaps are evident here too and, on this basis, the rate for persons with disabilities in Bulgaria was 3.9 %, compared to 0.9 % for other persons, which is above the EU27 average of 1.7 %.

According to the *National Strategy for People with Disabilities (2021-2030)* ensuring equal access to health services for people with disabilities is a challenge. Most of the reasons for difficult access are outside the health system and they are related to the relatively more frequent cases of social isolation, stigma, poverty and communication difficulties arising from inaccessible architectural environment and road transport connections, given the specific needs of this group of people. A factor in the health system that influences, although not specific to people with disabilities, but also applies to the entire population, is the remoteness and associated difficult access to medical care for people with disabilities living in certain areas of the country. Ensuring access to certain medical care, like the timely diagnosis, prevention of disabilities, primary and secondary prevention of disabilities, especially in small towns is a challenge that is associated with the insufficient number of medical professionals, including doctors specializing in physical and rehabilitation medicine.<sup>26</sup>

#### **4.2 Analysis of social policies relevant to the Semester**

For reference, see also the 2021 [Recovery and Resilience Plan](#) for Bulgaria and the National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2021-2030).

The positive developments regarding persons with disabilities are that: the personal assistance mechanism is operating more actively; the poverty threshold is updated annually (although at a very minimal step); some steps had been made in terms of ensuring accessibility of personal houses/homes of persons with disabilities; integrated health and social services are being developed (but no external monitoring reports about their functioning had been identified).

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<sup>26</sup> Council of Ministers, *National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2021-2030)*, p. 10.

According to the 2020 Annual report about the implementation of the new *National Program for Accessible Housing and Personal Mobility*, 49 housing buildings in over 20 towns had been made accessible for persons with disabilities at the cost of BGN 2 million (EUR 1 million).<sup>27</sup> The total of 7 personal cars had been adapted to the needs of their owners – persons with disabilities in 2020, at the cost of around EUR 15 000 under the same programme.<sup>28</sup>

At the insistence of the representatives of people with disabilities, the **poverty threshold** was determined as a basis for calculating the amount of support, which as a dynamic monetary indicator has annual indexation and this creates a guarantee for annual increase of the financial support for people with disabilities. The poverty threshold for 2021 is BGN 369 (EUR 190).<sup>29</sup>

The **personal assistance** mechanism operated more actively in 2020 – 24 137 referrals for personal assistance have been prepared. As a result, the average monthly number of users of the mechanism is 25 997.<sup>30</sup>

The *National Programme 'Provision of Home Care'* is implemented in order to provide employment to unemployed persons as domestic carers for provision of personal care in the home environment to people with 80 to 89.99 % of permanent disability, as well as people over 65 years of age unable to self-care who have not been yet assessed. During 2020, a total of 4 873 persons were included in new employment under the program, with an average of 2 627 persons employed per month.<sup>31</sup>

In the section of the draft *National Recovery and Resilience Plan* on **social inclusion** (the 'fair' pillar),<sup>32</sup> the planned reform for enhancement of the overall system for social support through codification of its objectives is targeted at overcoming the structural challenge of the low efficiency of social policy in reducing poverty and inequality. People with disabilities are one of the main target groups of the reform, representing

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<sup>27</sup> Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, *2020 Annual Report about the Implementation of the Accessible Housing Component of the National Program for Accessible Housing and Personal Mobility*, pp. 9-10, available in Bulgarian at:

<https://www.mlsp.government.bg/uploads/50/natsprogzhilishchsreda/otchet-2020-po-k1.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, *2020 Annual Report about the Implementation of the Accessible Housing Component of the National Program for Accessible Housing and Personal Mobility*, p. 2, available in Bulgarian at: <https://www.mlsp.government.bg/uploads/50/krasiva-blgariya/otchet-komponent-2.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup> Council of Ministers, Decree 265, dated 24.09.2020.

<sup>30</sup> Council of Ministers, *Report about the Implementation of the 2019-2020 Action Plan for Implementation of the National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2016-2020)*, p.46.

<sup>31</sup> Employment Agency, *2020 Annual Report*, p. 21.

<sup>32</sup> The objective of the social inclusion component is to encourage the social inclusion of the vulnerable groups (people with disabilities, elderly people and children, persons and families in a disadvantaged situation, etc.) and to improve the quality, to extend the scope of the offered social services and to introduce integrated approaches in the provision of social services alongside with the development of integrated services. Reforms and/or investments in this component are: improving the overall system for social assistance by adopting a Code for Social Support and secondary legislation; continuing the reform in the area of social services; continuing the support for deinstitutionalisation of elderly people and people with disabilities; personal mobility and accessibility for people with permanent disability; development of regional administrative capacity for modernising the enterprises in the social and solidarity economy and introducing individualised solutions, etc..

a significant part of the population which is at serious risk of poverty and social exclusion. Almost 1/3 (29.7 % as at 2019) of people of working age but with disabilities live in material deprivation, which is almost three times higher than the EU average (10.6 %). The problems regarding the quality and accessibility of social services for people with disabilities are similar to the ones which exist in the provision of services for elderly people. Fragmentation and low levels of accessibility are among the main identified challenges.<sup>33</sup>

The reform towards social inclusion envisaged in the plan includes several measures.

- Improvement of the minimal income scheme and annual review of the social benefit amounts.<sup>34</sup>
- Preparation of a Code for Social Support and the necessary documentation, and its submission to the National Assembly. A joint working group was set up, with participation from representatives of the responsible institutions with professional expertise and competences in the social sphere, with the task of developing, up to 29 December 2020, a project for codification of such matters, which shall regulate social relations in the system of social protection.<sup>35</sup> The social support shall include a range of measures connected with financial and/or material support and/or provision of high-quality social services and/or personal assistance. The Code was submitted to the National Assembly by the Minister for Labour and Social Policy.<sup>36</sup>
- Secondary legislation has also undergone a process of elaboration – i.e. the Ordinance on Social Services Planning<sup>37</sup> (which defines the criteria for determining the National Charter of Social Services for each of the social services, the criteria for determining the maximum number of users for all social services for which financing is ensured from the state budget and the social services that are planned at municipal level); the National Map of Social Services (which determines the maximum number of users of all social services, for which financing is secured from the state budget on the basis of the analysis of the municipalities regarding the needs for social services at municipal and regional level); and the Ordinance on the Quality of Social Services.

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<sup>33</sup> Council of Ministers, *draft National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria*, p. 222.

<sup>34</sup> Council of Ministers, *draft National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria*, p. 225.

<sup>35</sup> Council of Ministers, *draft National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria*, (version as of February 2021), p. 143.

<sup>36</sup> Council of Ministers, *draft National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria* (version as of February 2021), p. 144. The draft of the Code of Social Support foresees the need to update the secondary legislation on its implementation: Ordinance on the terms and conditions for the granting, payment, amendment, suspension, recovery, resumption and termination of financial assistance; Ordinance on the conditions and order for performing social services; Ordinance on social services planning; Ordinance on the Quality of Social Services; Ordinance on the Standards for payment for the labour of employees, performing activities on providing social services, which are financed by the state budget; Ordinance on the conditions and order for determining the size, the granting, disbursement, modification, renewal and termination of financial assistance for covering the costs on heating during the heating season, as well as recovery of illegally paid funds; Ordinance on the Terms and Conditions for providing Personal Assistance; Tariff for the fees for issuing and renewal of a license for provision of social services; Code of Ethics of the employees performing the activities of providing social services.

<sup>37</sup> Adopted by the Council of Ministers on 6 April 2021.

- The plan also specifies the continuation of reform in the area of social services by implementation of the recently enforced Social Services Act and the elaboration of secondary legislation, the deinstitutionalisation of institutions for persons with disabilities and the provision of personal mobility and accessibility for persons with permanent disabilities. With the implementation of the deinstitutionalisation project, 430 sites within the social infrastructure shall be supported in the process of deinstitutionalisation of the services for long-term care for elderly people and people with disabilities, as well as 1 200 social services. The total planned funding is BGN 753 million (EUR 376 million) and the period of implementation is 2021-2025.<sup>38</sup>

### ***Living independently***

The *Action Plan for Implementation of the Concluding Observations of the UNCRPD about Bulgaria (2021-2026)* clarifies that the efforts for introduction and development of individualised support will be strengthened during the elaboration and implementation of the Action Plan for the period 2022-2027 for Implementation of the National Strategy for Long-term Care.<sup>39</sup> The implementation of the Action Plan aims to implement the second stage of the process of deinstitutionalisation of care for people with disabilities and the elderly. Interventions are aimed at: ensuring equal access to services, including long-term care; improving the quality and scope of the provided social services; introducing integrated approaches to the provision of social services, and developing integrated support, health and social services.

The Personal Mobility and Accessibility project under the draft *National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria* has the objective of encouraging activities for securing personal mobility and accessibility for people with permanent disability to enable their social inclusion, taking account of their specific needs. It is envisaged that technical aids, specialised software programmes, electronic technical tools to compensate for sensory deficit, adapted motor vehicles, technical and medical devices and other similar means and devices will be provided according to specific needs, and that training will be provided for the users of the technical aids and/or specialised programmes. The total planned funding is BGN 24 million (EUR 12 million) with the period of implementation 2021-2023.<sup>40</sup>

### ***Deinstitutionalisation of children***

With a view to the finalisation of the process of deinstitutionalisation of childcare, measures will continue to be implemented with a focus on:

- closure of the remaining specialised institutions for children with a few exceptions,

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<sup>38</sup> Council of Ministers, *draft National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria* (version as of July 2021), p. 227.

<sup>39</sup> Council of Ministers, *Action Plan for Implementation of the Concluding Observations of the UNCRPD about Bulgaria (2021-2026)*, adopted on 12.02.2021, p. 36, available in Bulgarian at: <https://mlsp.government.bg/konventsia-za-pravata-na-khorata-s-uvrezhdaniya-na-oon>.

<sup>40</sup> Council of Ministers, *draft National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria*, p. 228.

- early childhood development and early intervention, prevention and reintegration;
- prevention of the reproduction of the institutional model of care;
- increasing the quality and efficiency of the network of social services to support children and their families;
- integrated support and integrated cross-sectoral services;
- strengthening the capacity of the child protection system.

The process of removing all children placed in residential care in the 12 Institutions for Medico-Social Care for Children (IMSCC) continues. New services for support of children and their families with an emphasis on children with disabilities are developed:

- opening of 25 Centers for complex services for children with disabilities and chronic diseases in each district is planned (3 centres are already in operation as of 2021);
- opening of 26 integrated health and social services for residential care for children with disabilities in need of permanent medical care and for children with high-risk behaviour is also planned.<sup>41</sup>

The *National Strategy for People with Disabilities (2021-2030)* earmarks the following measures under priority 6 – Ensuring social protection and community support:

- creating conditions to ensure adequate and sustainable social support for people with disabilities;
- optimisation of the system for individual needs assessment, incl. the possibilities for linking with assessment of the working capacity of people with disabilities;
- providing personal assistance to improve the autonomy of people with disabilities; providing sign language support to the visually impaired and the deafblind;
- providing public funding for organizations of and for people with disabilities to implement activities in support of the social inclusion of people with disabilities;
- providing accessible and integrated health and social services for people with disabilities, including home social services for people with disabilities;
- introduction of digitalisation of services, including teleassistance, various forms of electronic tools and resources;
- closure of specialised institutions for people with disabilities;
- creating standards for the quality of social services provided to people with disabilities;
- developing of health and social infrastructure and equipment for the provision of integrated health and social services for people with disabilities;
- providing opportunities for providing support measures in procedural and any procedural actions concerning the access to justice of people with disabilities;
- carrying out a comprehensive preliminary impact assessment of the draft Law on Individuals and Support Measures in order to study the relationship between the formulated goals and the expected results and find the best solution and optimal

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<sup>41</sup> Council of Ministers, *Report about the Implementation of the 2019-2020 Action Plan for Implementation of the National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2016-2020)*, p. 46.



approach for people with intellectual and psycho-social disabilities and measures for support.<sup>42</sup>

### **Health**

In 2019-2020, within the *National Program for Improving Maternal and Child Health 2014-2020*, there are 31 Health Consulting Centers for Maternal and Child Health functioning in all district cities. In them, doctors, psychologists and social workers provide counseling and logistics activities related to the organization of comprehensive medical monitoring of children with disabilities and chronic diseases, pregnant women with increased medical risk, pregnancy pathology or the presence of chronic diseases and disabilities. During 2019-2020, 16 000 medical consultations and home visits were performed.<sup>43</sup>

In 5 specialised/university hospitals ('Mother's Home'-Sofia, Hospital for children's diseases 'Prof. Iv. Mitev'-Sofia, Hospital 'St. George' - Plovdiv, Hospital 'St. Marina' - Varna and Hospital 'Prof. Dr. G. Stranski' - Pleven) 14 expert commissions were established. They perform comprehensive medical monitoring of children with chronic diseases - diabetes, congenital heart malformations, congenital facial malformations, congenital hematological diseases, premature infants. During 2019-2020, the total of 3 412 medico-social plans for such children had been elaborated.<sup>44</sup>

During 2019-2020, biochemical screening to assess the risk of giving birth to a child with a disability was performed to 40 727 pregnant women.<sup>45</sup>

For the period 2019-2020 in the three functioning centers for complex services for children with disabilities and chronic diseases the following activities took place-provision of outpatient care, diagnostics, physical therapy, medical and psycho-social rehabilitation of children with disabilities and chronic diseases, as well as hourly and mobile services for servicing children with disabilities and chronic diseases in the center or at home. Visits are made by medical specialists to provide specific care for children with disabilities and severe chronic diseases, raised in a family environment and in a residential social service, and support is provided to the families of children with disabilities and chronic diseases through training in childcare for children with disabilities and by providing daily and hourly services that include individual and/or group activities with children. 753 children and 728 parents and families were supported.<sup>46</sup>

From the second half of 2020 the functioning of an information database for all persons who have passed through medical assessment for establishing the permanently reduced working capacity/type and degree of disability, regulated by Art. 108a of the

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<sup>42</sup> Council of Ministers, *National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2021-2030)*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>43</sup> Council of Ministers, *Report about the Implementation of the 2019-2020 Action Plan for Implementation of the National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2016-2020)*, p. 29.

<sup>44</sup> Council of Ministers, *Report about the Implementation of the 2019-2020 Action Plan for Implementation of the National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2016-2020)*, p. 29.

<sup>45</sup> Council of Ministers, *Report about the Implementation of the 2019-2020 Action Plan for Implementation of the National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2016-2020)*, p. 29.

<sup>46</sup> Council of Ministers, *Report about the Implementation of the 2019-2020 Action Plan for Implementation of the National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2016-2020)*, p. 30.

Health Act had started. The aim is for all activities related to medical assessment to be carried out through this database instead of the paper one. This process is ongoing and all ongoing issues are addressed through continuous communication between stakeholders and the administrative bodies involved in this activity.<sup>47</sup>

The *Action Plan for Implementation of the Concluding Observations of the UNCRPD about Bulgaria (2021-2026)* explains that subsequent amendments in the Ordinance on medical assessment and the Regulations on the structure and organisation of work of the bodies of medical assessment would take place until 2026 in order to bring more fully in line the medical assessment with the needs of people with disabilities.<sup>48</sup>

The *National Strategy for People with Disabilities (2021-2030)* earmarks the following measures to overcome the challenges related to healthcare for persons with disabilities:

- disability prevention, primary and secondary prevention of disabilities, including in small towns;
- improving the system of medical assessment in accordance with the International Classification of Human Functionality, Disability and Health (ICF);
- improving the mechanisms for providing medical devices and technical aids, including individual prostheses and orthoses and other auxiliary devices and technologies designed for habilitation and rehabilitation of people with disabilities;
- improving access to proven effective therapies and medicines, including innovative ones;
- creating conditions for the development of a network of services for rehabilitation and long-term care for children and people with disabilities;
- increasing the capacity of medical professionals on disability issues, with an emphasis on early identification of health risks leading to disability, the need for early intervention, as well as counseling and effective communication with people with disabilities;
- developing of e-healthcare.<sup>49</sup>

In the healthcare section of the draft *National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria* people with disabilities are not explicitly mentioned, but the proposed reforms would have the greatest impact on them.

In terms of strategic framework elaboration of several new strategies related to persons with disabilities is planned until the end of 2021.<sup>50</sup> In terms of implementation

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<sup>47</sup> Council of Ministers, *Report about the Implementation of the 2019-2020 Action Plan for Implementation of the National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2016-2020)*, p. 34.

<sup>48</sup> Council of Ministers, *Action Plan for Implementation of the Concluding Observations of the UNCRPD about Bulgaria (2021-2026)*, adopted on 12.02.2021, p. 24.

<sup>49</sup> Council of Ministers, *National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2021-2030)*, p. 22.

<sup>50</sup> Council of Ministers, *draft National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria*, p. 242. Those strategies are: *National Strategy for Mental Health of the Citizens of the Republic of Bulgaria 2021-2030*; *National Map for the long-term need for health services in Bulgaria*; *National Strategy for Child and Adolescent Health and Pediatric Care in the Republic of Bulgaria 2021-2030*;

of policies the first planned measure is the complete implementation of the National Health Information System, which will lay the foundations for e-health. Phase 1 of the reform includes: an update of Ordinance 4 on the terms and conditions for prescribing and dispensing medicinal products and the Ordinance on the exercise of the right of access to medical care. The amendments envisaged to the legal framework will contribute to the development of e-health. In phase 1 of the reform, the following modules of the National Health Information System should be implemented: electronic referral for medical-diagnostic examinations; electronic prescriptions; electronic health records for citizens; national nomenclatures, national health information standards for the real-time exchange of medical data required for electronic prescriptions and electronic health records; the basic functionality of the core of the National Health Information System; a health information portal; the necessary registers for the functioning of electronic prescriptions and electronic referral.<sup>51</sup> Phase 2 of the reform includes an update of the Ordinance of the Minister of Health on the creation and maintenance of electronic health records of citizens and the conditions and procedure for keeping registers. The following modules of the National Health Information System must be implemented: addition to the electronic referral module of all other areas included in the National Framework Agreement; building a subsystem for collecting information from hospitals; building a system for monitoring and control in healthcare; the introduction of electronic administrative services and internal administrative services; and completion of all registers.<sup>52</sup> This reform would have a significant positive impact on people with disabilities, as it would appear to minimise the administrative burden of collection and verification of medical, diagnostic and treatment documents.

Another measure related to healthcare is the modernisation of the facilities and equipment, and the introduction of innovative technologies for treatment, in major state and municipal medical institutions for inpatient care.<sup>53</sup> The total planned amount is BGN 448.6 million (EUR 224.3 million) with a period of implementation 2021-2025.

A major healthcare investment related to persons with psycho-social disabilities is the project for the modernisation and development of psychiatric care. It is aimed at improving the facilities and equipment in the psychiatric care system in order to provide quality healthcare and modern opportunities for the treatment and rehabilitation of patients, as well as develop opportunities to further their inclusion in society. Eighteen out of the country's existing 12 state psychiatric hospitals, 12 mental health centres

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*National Strategy for Geriatric Care and Healthy Aging in the Republic of Bulgaria 2021-2030; National Strategy for e-health and digitalization of the health system 2021-2030; National Plan to Fight Cancer in the Republic of Bulgaria 2021-2027; National Plan for Development of Prenatal and Neonatal Screening, and Screening of Socially Significant Diseases and Establishment of a National Interdisciplinary Center for Mass Screening with Construction of a Regional Network 2021-2027; National Plan for Restructuring of Hospital Care in the Republic of Bulgaria; National Plan for Improving the Accessibility and Capacity of Primary Outpatient Medical Care and Ensuring a Balanced Territorial Distribution of Medical Care and Health Care in the Republic of Bulgaria 2021-2027; National Plan for Introduction of Modern Health Education in the Bulgarian school 2021-2027.*

<sup>51</sup> Council of Ministers, *draft National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria*, p. 243.

<sup>52</sup> Council of Ministers, *draft National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria*, p. 243.

<sup>53</sup> Council of Ministers, *draft National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria*, p. 246.



and 21 psychiatric clinics and wards at multidisciplinary hospitals, with a total bed capacity of about 4 000 beds, will be covered. The total planned budget is BGN 28.5 million (EUR 14.25 million) with an implementation period of 2021-2026.<sup>54</sup>

Another project is related to provision of quality European emergency service 112. Next generation communication centers (Next Generation 112), connected in an electronic communication network with packet switching (Packet Switching PS), providing broadband exchange of information in the network of the National System 112 (video, data, voice and text in real time) and upgrading the systems with new and modern services are planned to be established. The total amount is BGN 56 million (EUR 28 million) with a period of implementation 2021-2026.<sup>55</sup>

### ***Provision of integrated health and social services***

Medical and social counseling units for preventive and promotional activities, which will offer health and social services (integrated counseling, promotional, preventive and patronage activities) for all needy groups in their service area would be developed. These units will also provide more qualified medical care for diagnosis, follow-up and treatment support for people with chronic diseases by conducting a range of health, medical and social activities, the creation of a health and social counseling service aimed at improving the health of the population and promoting a healthy lifestyle, the prevention of socially significant diseases and supporting access to specialized medical care. The health and social service will be aimed at integrated counseling on all issues concerning the public health, vulnerable groups in our society - minorities, uninsured citizens, young people, young mothers and couples before pregnancy and during pregnancy, families with children with disabilities, chronic diseases and special needs, and the elderly at risk of social exclusion.<sup>56</sup> A National Plan for Improving the Accessibility and Capacity of Primary Outpatient Medical Care and Ensuring a Balanced Territorial Distribution of Medical Care and Health Care in the Republic of Bulgaria 2021-2027 will be developed.

Another project aims to cover digital diagnostics in all medical specialties and to create an opportunity to generate a database of digital images and its secondary processing through validated algorithms for machine self-learning, neural networks in accordance with European and national data protection legislation and relevant information and network security standards. This platform will be integrated with the National Health Information System (NHIS) and will improve the diagnosis and follow-up of Bulgarian patients.<sup>57</sup> The total planned amount is BGN 27.6 million (EUR 13.8 million) with implementation period 2021-2025.

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<sup>54</sup> Council of Ministers, *draft National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria*, p. 249.

<sup>55</sup> Council of Ministers, *draft National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria*, p. 254.

<sup>56</sup> Council of Ministers, *draft National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria*, p. 254.

<sup>57</sup> Council of Ministers, *draft National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria*, p. 252.

## 5 Disability, education and skills – analysis of the situation and the effectiveness of policies

In 2018, the UN CRPD Committee made the following recommendations to Bulgaria:

[Article 24 UN CRPD](#) addresses Education.

'50. The Committee recommends that the State party, in accordance with general comment No. 4 (2016) on the right to inclusive education:

- (a) Replace segregated education systems with quality inclusive education;
- (b) Raise awareness of the advantages of quality inclusive education for society, in particular for teachers and other education staff, and also for parents of children without disabilities;
- (c) Intensify its efforts to ensure quality inclusive education and the provision of reasonable accommodation for students with disabilities in mainstream schools, including by allocating sufficient human, technical and financial resources for it;
- (d) Collect data on the number of children and young people with disabilities not currently enrolled in any form of education, disaggregated by age, sex, type of impairment and place of residence, and develop a strategy to include these children in the mainstream education system.'

The next CRPD state report is due in 2026:

### 5.1 Summary of the educational situation of persons with disabilities

The EU-SILC 2019 estimates concerning educational attainment should be treated with additional caution due to relatively wide confidence intervals, but they consistently indicate disability equality gaps (an average of 2-3 years provides a more stable indication). Table 16 indicates early school leaving rates disaggregated by disability status in Bulgaria. Youth with disabilities (aged 18-24) tend to leave school significantly more than peers without disabilities of the same age groups (and this is reinforced by widening the sample size to age 18-29). Table 17 shows completion rate of tertiary education disaggregated by disability and age group. Persons with disabilities (age 30-34) are less likely to complete tertiary education than their peers (and this is reinforced in the wider age range 30-39).

The *National Strategy for People with Disabilities (2021-2030)* identifies several challenges related to inclusive education. The first one is the shortage of professionals for work with children and students with disabilities, according to the different types of special educational needs, especially in remote and small towns, as well as the provision of timely and permanent qualification and training of pedagogical professionals for work with children and students with special educational needs. Other challenges are the lack of an accessible architectural environment for children with disabilities in kindergartens, schools and service units, the insufficient teamwork and partnership with parents and institutions to provide a supportive environment in kindergartens and schools, the lack of actual individualised education plans and the low level of awareness about the rights of children with disabilities.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Council of Ministers, *National Strategy for People with Disabilities (2021-2030)*, p. 10.

## 5.2 Analysis of education policies relevant to the Semester

For reference, see also the 2021 [Recovery and Resilience Plan](#) for Bulgaria and the National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2021-2030).

Apart from the adoption of the Bulgarian Sign Language Act no new particular improvement had taken place in 2021 in the field of inclusive education.

In 2020, an interdepartmental working group at the Ministry of Education and Science, with the participation of representatives of organisations for and for people with impaired sight and hearing, prepared a draft Law on the Bulgarian Sign Language. The Law on Bulgarian Sign Language was adopted by the National Assembly and has been in force since 6 February 2021. It recognises the language status of the Bulgarian Sign Language and the respect for the right of deaf people and deafblind people who have sufficiently preserved eyesight, to expression and information through the Bulgarian sign language. The Law regulates the rights and obligations of the institutions in the system of pre-school and school education in connection with the provision of conditions for learning, mastering and using the Bulgarian sign language.

For 2020, a supportive environment is provided in the kindergartens and schools themselves or by the regional centers for support of inclusive education to a total of 20 314 children and students in the system of pre-school and school education and training, of which 15 971 in schools and 4 343 in kindergartens.<sup>59</sup>

Children and students with special educational needs who are educated in the mainstream system of pre-school and school education (excluding special schools and centers for special educational support) are supported by 4 340 pedagogical specialists employed in kindergartens and schools, including: 1 218 resource teachers, 966 psychologists, 709 speech therapists, 79 hearing and speech rehabilitators, 133 teachers for visually impaired children, 13 hearing and speech rehabilitators, 725 pedagogical advisors, 24 teachers of children with intellectual disabilities, 398 educators and 75 other pedagogues.<sup>60</sup>

The total of 7 926 children and students with special educational needs who are educated in schools and kindergartens (excluding special schools and centers for special educational support) were provided with additional support by 932 pedagogical specialists from the regional centers for support of inclusive education.<sup>61</sup>

In 2020, 6 textbooks and 6 methodological manuals for primary, lower secondary and first high school stage have been developed for students with special educational

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<sup>59</sup> Council of Ministers, *Report about the Implementation of the 2019-2020 Action Plan for Implementation of the National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2016-2020)*, p. 23.

<sup>60</sup> Council of Ministers, *Report about the Implementation of the 2019-2020 Action Plan for Implementation of the National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2016-2020)*, p. 23.

<sup>61</sup> Council of Ministers, *Report about the Implementation of the 2019-2020 Action Plan for Implementation of the National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2016-2020)*, p. 23.

needs who study in mainstream schools and for those who study in centers for special educational support.<sup>62</sup>

In 2020 in 16 schools and education centres 3 covered ramps had been constructed and installed; 4 toilets/bathrooms are built and adapted; 2 repairs of adjacent infrastructure had been done; 2 elevators had been installed; 9 platform equipments had been installed.<sup>63</sup>

The *National Strategy for People with Disabilities (2021-2030)* earmarks the following measures for improvement of inclusive education:

- ensuring the accessibility of inclusive education in terms of physical accessibility and communication types;
- early inclusion and early intervention of children with special educational needs;
- training and preparation of pedagogical specialists for work with children with special educational needs;
- providing conditions for conducting vocational counseling and guidance for students with special educational needs;
- providing conditions for providing general and additional support for personal development of children with special educational needs;
- providing conditions for inclusion of children with special educational needs in leisure activities;
- creating conditions for providing support in the education of students, postgraduates and PHD with disabilities, incl. through appropriate methods and means of communication and information in an accessible format, which will contribute to full academic growth;
- carrying out an analysis of the opportunities for appropriate educational training of people with different types of disabilities;
- preparation and introduction of appropriate training programmes;
- providing conditions in the centers for special educational support for performing diagnostic, rehabilitation, correctional and therapeutic work for children and students with special educational needs;
- ensuring equal access and opportunities for lifelong learning;
- development of a system for research and forecasting of labor demand with a certain qualification, incl. in the context of disability;
- development of a system for validation of the results of non-formal learning and independent learning, incl. in support of people with disabilities;
- identifying the types of activities that people with disabilities can perform, depending on their disability, and in this regard supporting the lifelong learning process, taking into account specific needs;
- encouraging employers to support the development of opportunities and skills of people with disabilities, incl. training of employers and employees to work with people with disabilities;

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<sup>62</sup> Council of Ministers, *Report about the Implementation of the 2019-2020 Action Plan for Implementation of the National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2016-2020)*, p. 23.

<sup>63</sup> Council of Ministers, *Report about the Implementation of the 2019-2020 Action Plan for Implementation of the National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2016-2020)*, p. 25.

- providing conditions for the introduction of functional assessment through ICHFDHCA (International Classification of Human Functioning, Disabilities and Health for Children and Adolescents).<sup>64</sup>

The *Action Plan for Implementation of the Concluding Observations of the UNCRPD about Bulgaria (2021-2026)* earmarks the following measures in the field of inclusive education:

- development of the new functions of the special schools, aimed at supporting the inclusion of children and students with sensory disabilities in the system of pre-school and school education by 2023;
- expanding the range of pedagogical professionals who have passed qualification training for competencies in inclusive education by 2022;
- implementation of the National Program 'Creating an accessible architectural environment and security at school';
- implementation of the program № 1700.01.02 'Facilitation of access to education', which aims at:
  - organising and carrying out trainings of Regional Education Departments experts, principals and pedagogical professionals, incl. psychologists, speech therapists, resource teachers, in the implementation of priority policies in inclusive education and support for personal development of children and students;
  - organising and coordinating activities for conducting trainings for principals and pedagogical professionals from special schools and centers for special educational support;
- the EU funded project 'Education for Tomorrow' for special schools for students with sensory disabilities - hearing impairment and impaired vision, provides for the provision of assistive technologies: FM systems, reading cameras, vision control systems and others until 2026;
- development of a mechanism for collecting data on the number of children and young people with special educational needs subject to compulsory pre-school and school education who are not enrolled in any form of education until 2022.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Council of Ministers, *National Strategy for People with Disabilities (2021-2030)*, p. 21.

<sup>65</sup> Council of Ministers, *The Action Plan for Implementation of the Concluding Observations of the UNCRPD about Bulgaria (2021-2026)*, pp. 40-41.

## 6 Investment priorities in relation to disability

### 6.1 Updates on use of existing EU funds (up to 2021)

EU funded projects related to people with disabilities are actually the biggest investment in their support. Those are the two ongoing projects for training and employment (see below), several projects for development of community-based social and health services for people with disabilities and renovation of social care institutions for elderly (see the chapter on disability and social inclusion and health), several projects for inclusive education for children with disabilities (see the chapter on disability and education).

#### ***EU funded Employment and Training Scheme***

Project № BG05M9OP001-1.010 *Training and Employment* - In 2020, under Component II, 496 unemployed and inactive persons with permanent disabilities over 29 years of age are included in employment and no persons are included in training. For comparison the total of 5 932 persons with permanent disabilities have been employed in 2019. The set target indicator for 2019 of 8 000 employees has been met at 74 %. Only 311 persons were included in training in 2019. The relatively small number of people involved in training (31 % of the planned 1 000 people with disabilities) was due to the fact that employers prefer to hire people who already have the necessary qualifications.<sup>66</sup>

Project № BGO5M90PO01-1.005 – *Training and employment for young people* - in 2020, 594 unemployed young people with permanent disabilities were involved in employment and none - in training.<sup>67</sup> For comparison in 2019 under the same project 224 young people with permanent disabilities were employed in 2019. The set target indicator for 2019 of 550 employees has been met at 41 %. During 2019, 4 young people with disabilities were involved in training.<sup>68</sup>

### 6.2 Priorities for future investment (after 2021)

The National Recovery and Resilience Plan does not include any new projects specifically related to education, training and employment in the open labour market of people with disabilities. The planned funding is earmarked for development of residential and counseling social and health services for children and adults with disabilities in the context of deinstitutionalisation as well as for personal mobility and new technologies and diagnostic methods for early prevention and intervention of disability.

Accessibility investment is mainly focused on Social Assistance and Employment Departments which are expected to undergo renovations in order to become accessible for persons with disabilities.

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<sup>66</sup> Employment Agency, *2019 Annual Report*, p. 43.

<sup>67</sup> Council of Ministers, *Report about the Implementation of the 2019-2020 Action Plan for Implementation of the National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2016-2020)*, p. 39.

<sup>68</sup> Employment Agency, *2019 Annual Report*, p. 42.



Future investments need to be focused on social housing in the community, flexible education and employment options, personal aid/assistance as well as accessibility of public buildings and private houses/apartments.

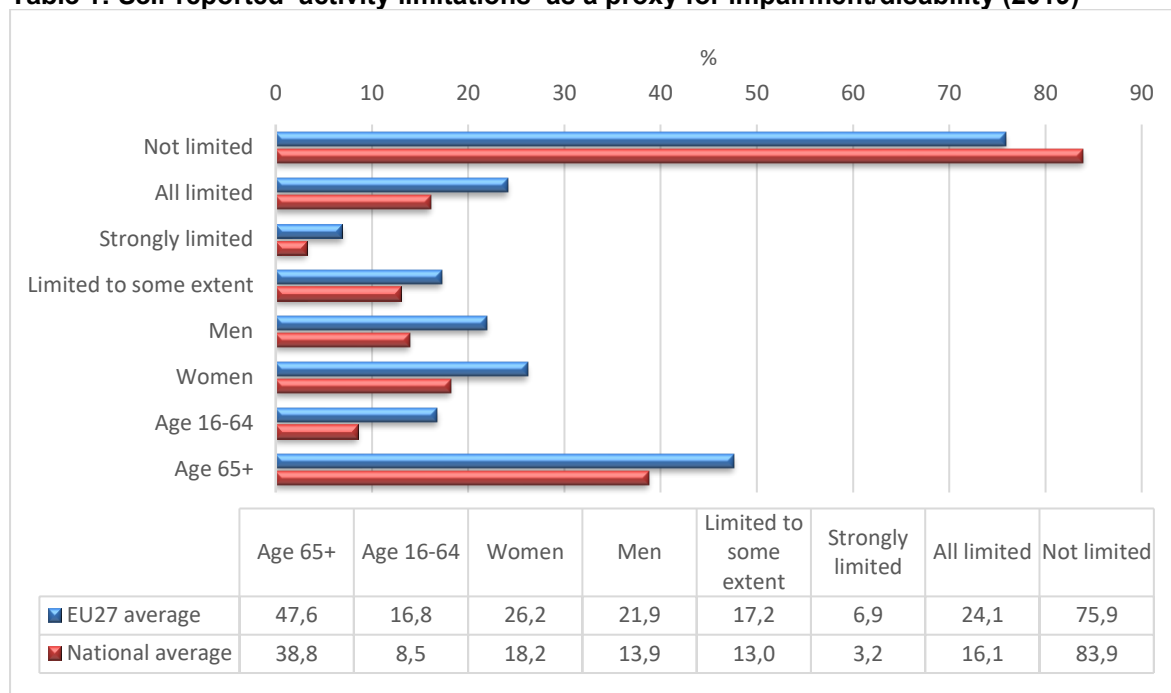
## 7 Annex: disability data relevant to the Semester

See also disability data published in the Eurostat database<sup>69</sup> and statistical reports.<sup>70</sup>

Unless specified, the summary statistics are drawn from the most recent EU-SILC data available to researchers from Eurostat. The EU-SILC sample includes people living in private households and does not include people living in institutions (congregative households). The sampling methods vary somewhat in each country.

The proxy used to identify people with disabilities (impairments) is whether ‘for at least the past 6 months’ the respondent reports that they have been ‘limited because of a health problem in activities people usually do’.<sup>71</sup>

**Table 1: Self-reported ‘activity limitations’ as a proxy for impairment/disability (2019)**



Source: EU-SILC 2019 Release 2021 version 1.

In subsequent tables, these data are used to indicate ‘disability’ equality gaps and trends relevant to the analytical chapters – for the labour market, social policies and healthcare, and education – by comparing outcomes for persons who report and do not report ‘activity limitations’.<sup>72</sup> National estimates for Bulgaria are compared with

<sup>69</sup> Eurostat health Database, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/health/data/database>.

<sup>70</sup> Eurostat (2019) *Disability Statistics* [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Disability\\_statistics](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Disability_statistics).

<sup>71</sup> The SILC survey questions are contained in the Minimum European Health Module (MEHM) [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Special:WhatLinksHere/Glossary:Minimum\\_European\\_Health\\_Module\\_\(MEHM\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Special:WhatLinksHere/Glossary:Minimum_European_Health_Module_(MEHM)).

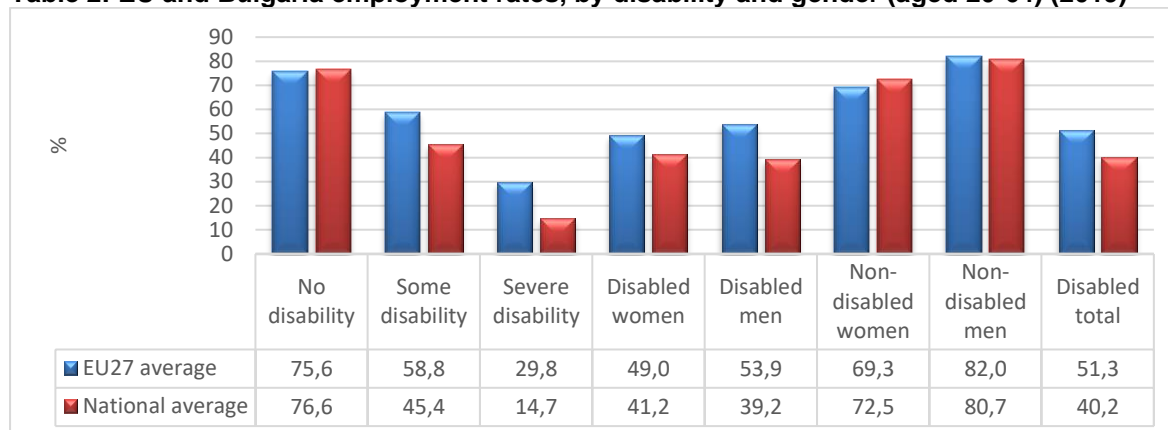
<sup>72</sup> This methodology was developed in the annual statistical reports of ANED, available at <http://www.disability-europe.net/theme/statistical-indicators>.



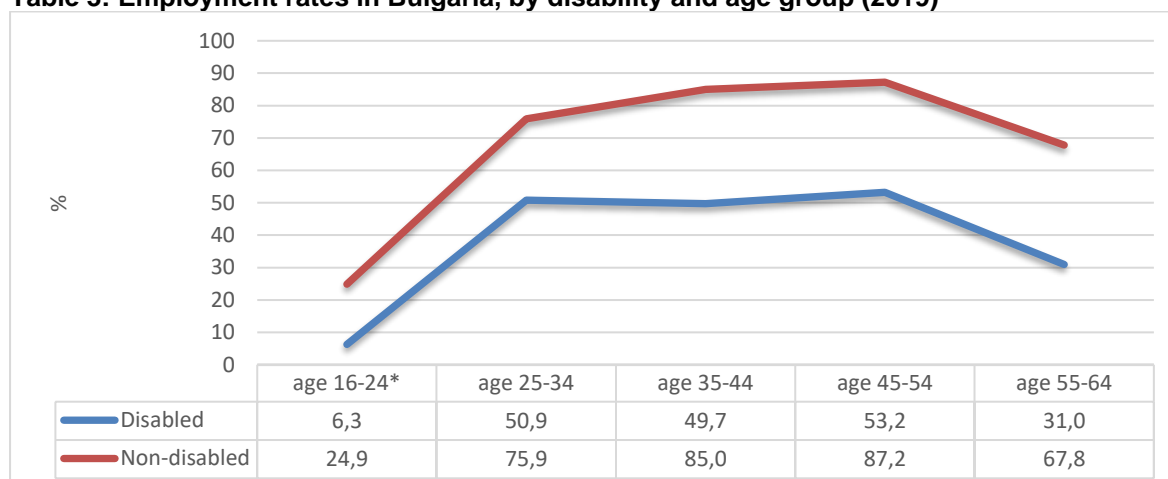
EU27 mean averages for the most recent year.<sup>73</sup> Fewer people in Bulgaria reported limitations than the EU average.

## 7.1 Data relevant to disability and the labour market

**Table 2: EU and Bulgaria employment rates, by disability and gender (aged 20-64) (2019)**

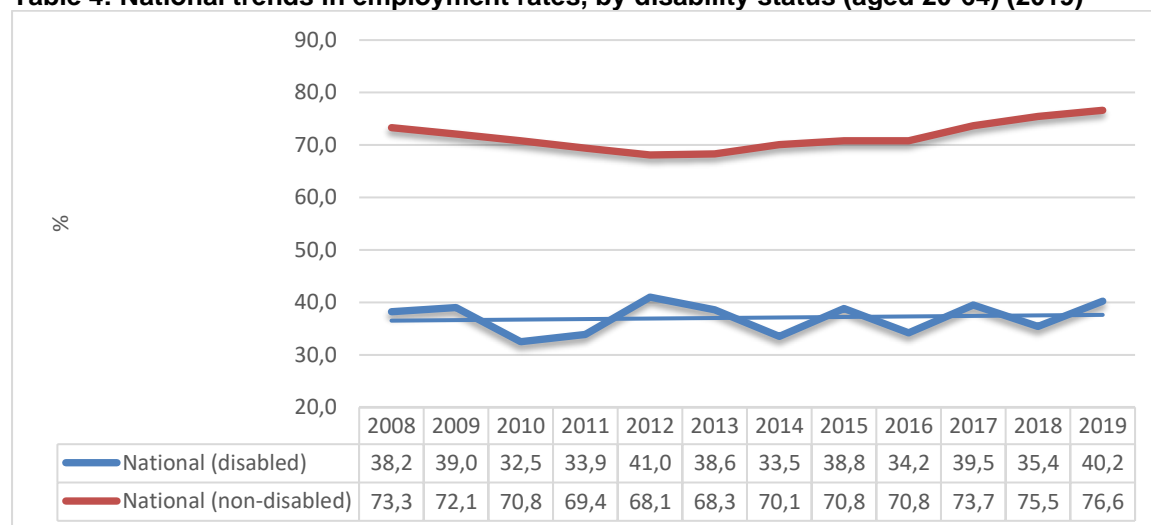


**Table 3: Employment rates in Bulgaria, by disability and age group (2019)**



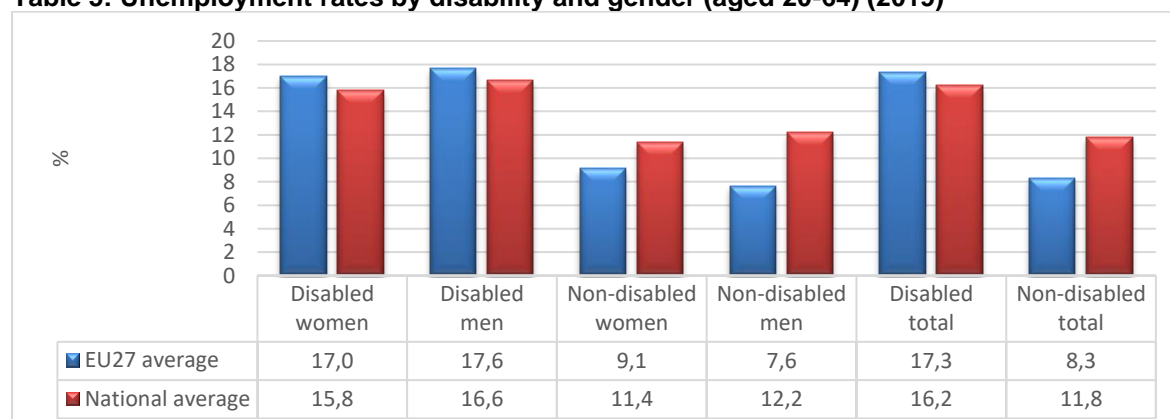
\*There were fewer than 50 observations in the youngest disability group.

<sup>73</sup> The exit of the United Kingdom from the EU changes the EU average. Averages were also affected in 2015 by a discontinuity in the German disability data due to a definitional change.

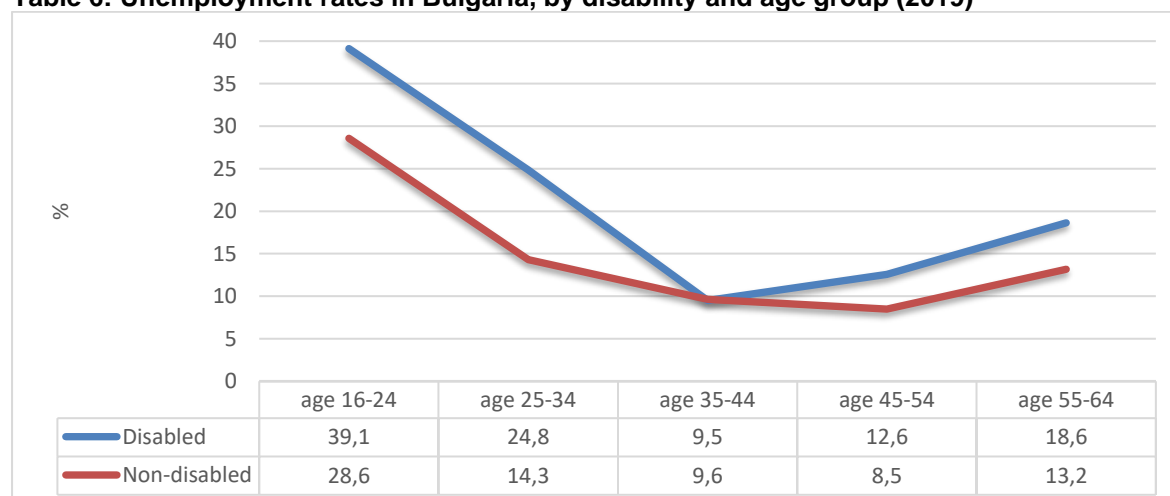
**Table 4: National trends in employment rates, by disability status (aged 20-64) (2019)**


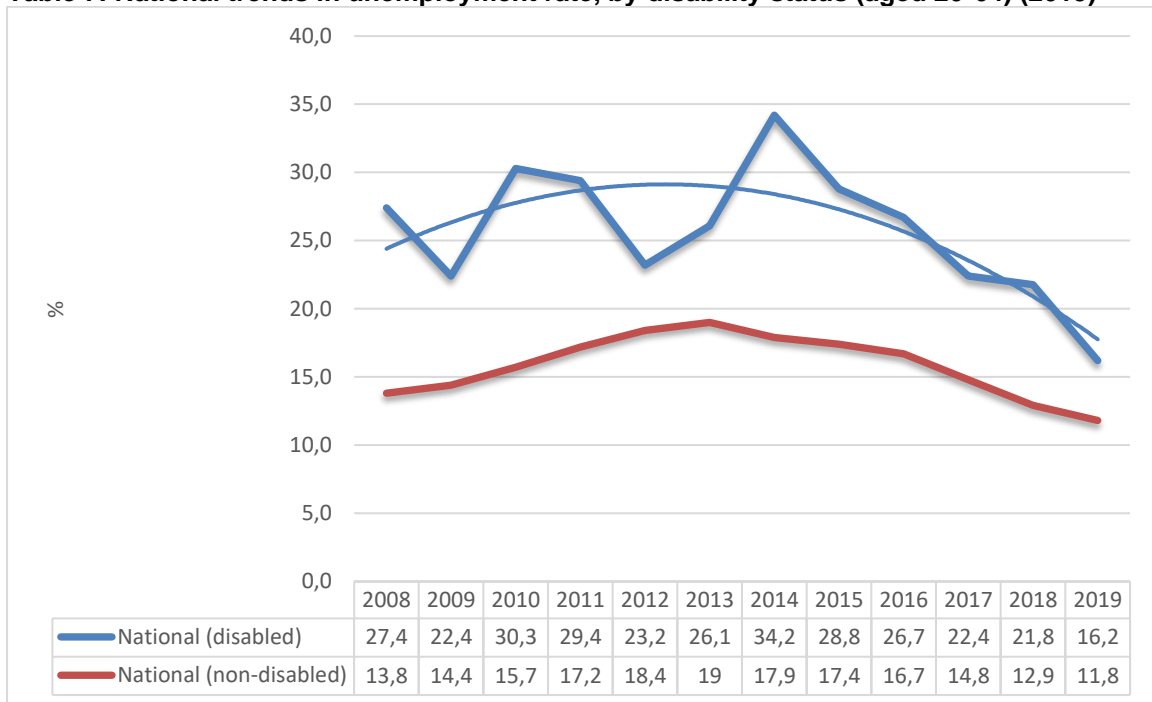
Source: EU-SILC 2019 Release 2021 version 1 (and preceding UDBs).

### 7.1.1 Unemployment

**Table 5: Unemployment rates by disability and gender (aged 20-64) (2019)**


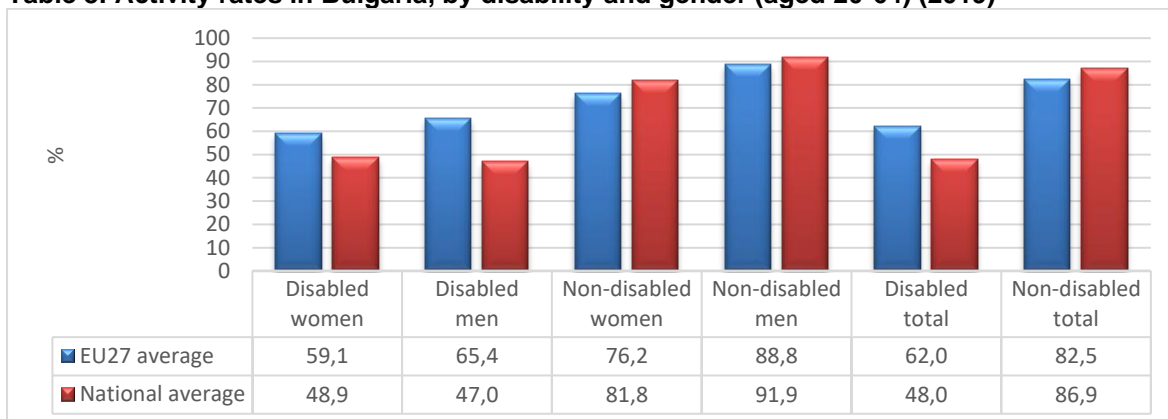
\*There were fewer than 50 observations in the youngest disability group.

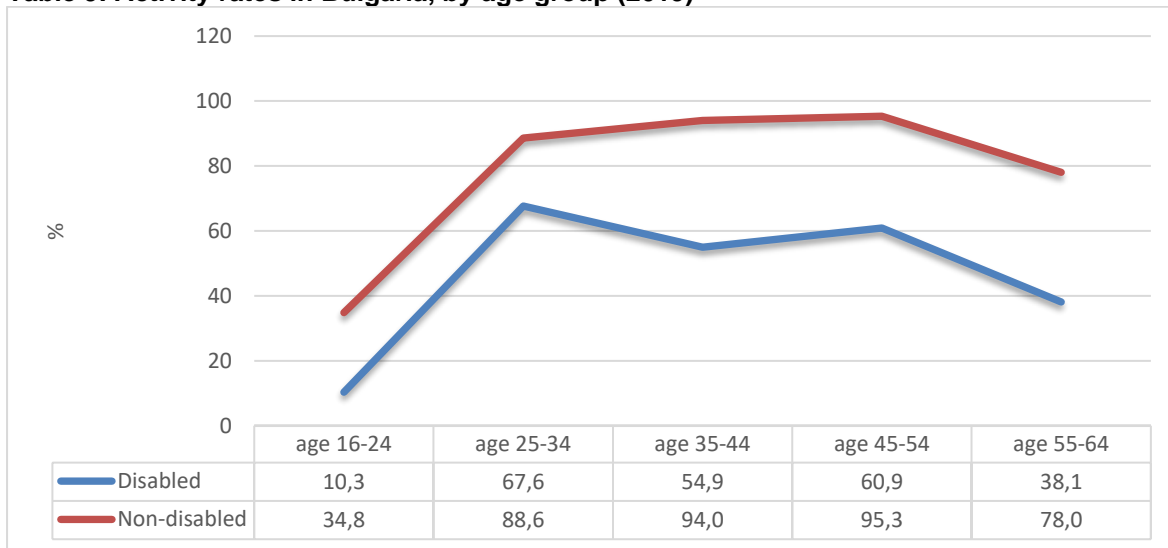
**Table 6: Unemployment rates in Bulgaria, by disability and age group (2019)**


**Table 7: National trends in unemployment rate, by disability status (aged 20-64) (2019)**


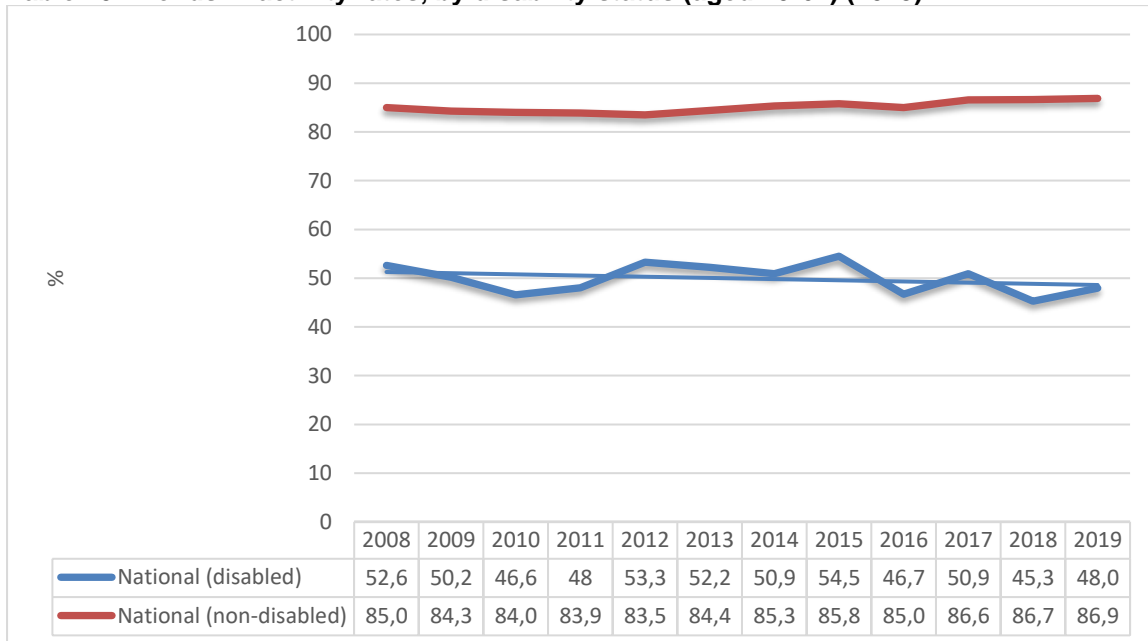
Source: EU-SILC 2019 Release 2021 version 1 (and preceding UDBs).

### 7.1.2 Economic activity

**Table 8: Activity rates in Bulgaria, by disability and gender (aged 20-64) (2019)**


**Table 9: Activity rates in Bulgaria, by age group (2019)**


\*There were fewer than 50 observations in the youngest disability group.

**Table 10: Trends in activity rates, by disability status (aged 20-64) (2019)**


Source: EU-SILC 2019 Release 2021 version 1 (and preceding UDBs).

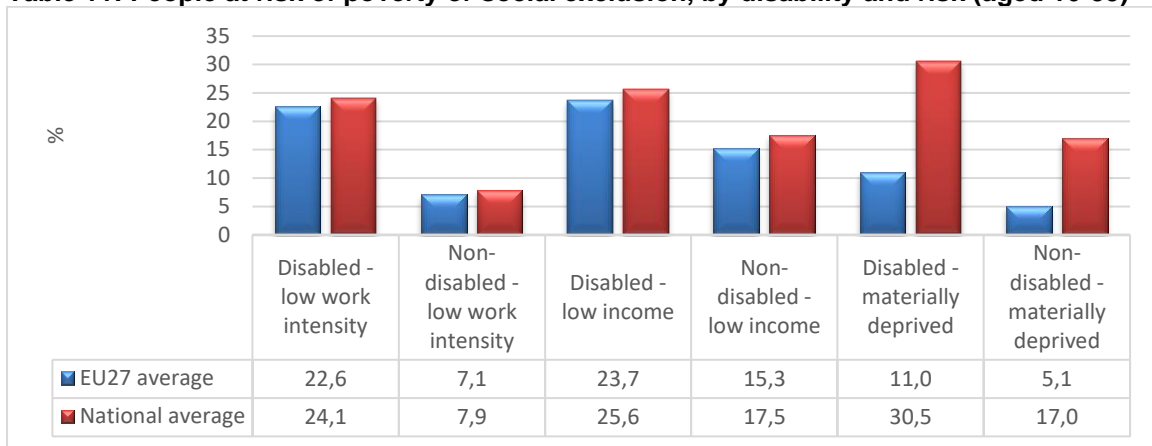
### 7.1.3 Alternative sources of labour market data in Bulgaria

Disability data is not yet available from the core European Labour Force Survey but labour market indicators for Bulgaria were disaggregated from ad modules conducted in 2001 and 2011. These can be found in the Eurostat disability database.<sup>74</sup>

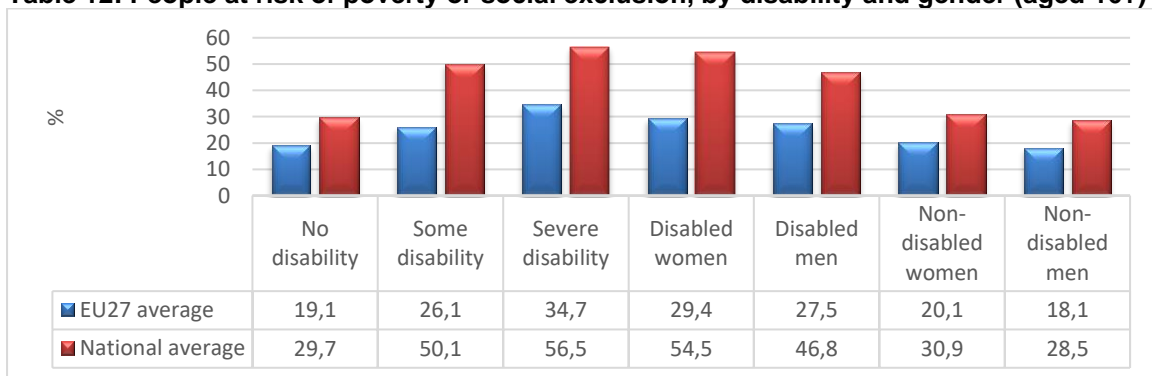
## 7.2 EU data relevant to disability, social policies and healthcare (2019)

<sup>74</sup> Eurostat Health Database: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/health/data/database>.

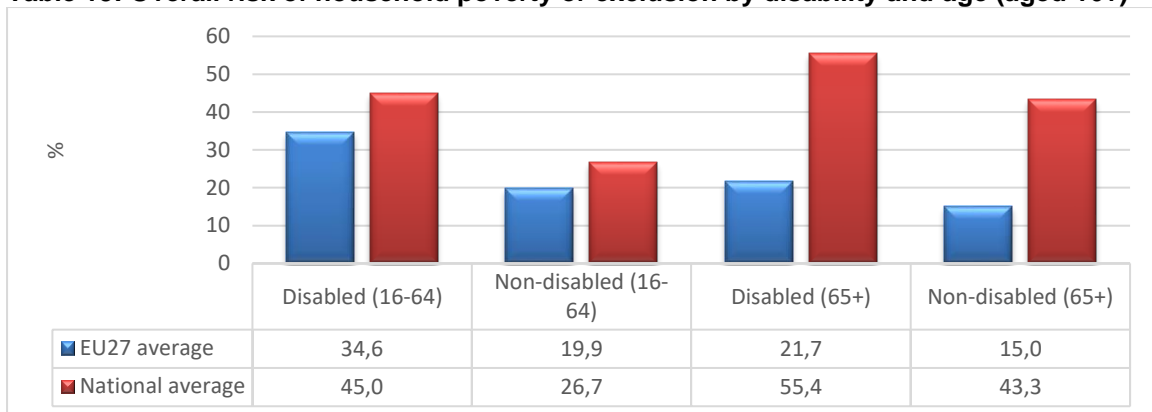
**Table 11: People at risk of poverty or social exclusion, by disability and risk (aged 16-59)**



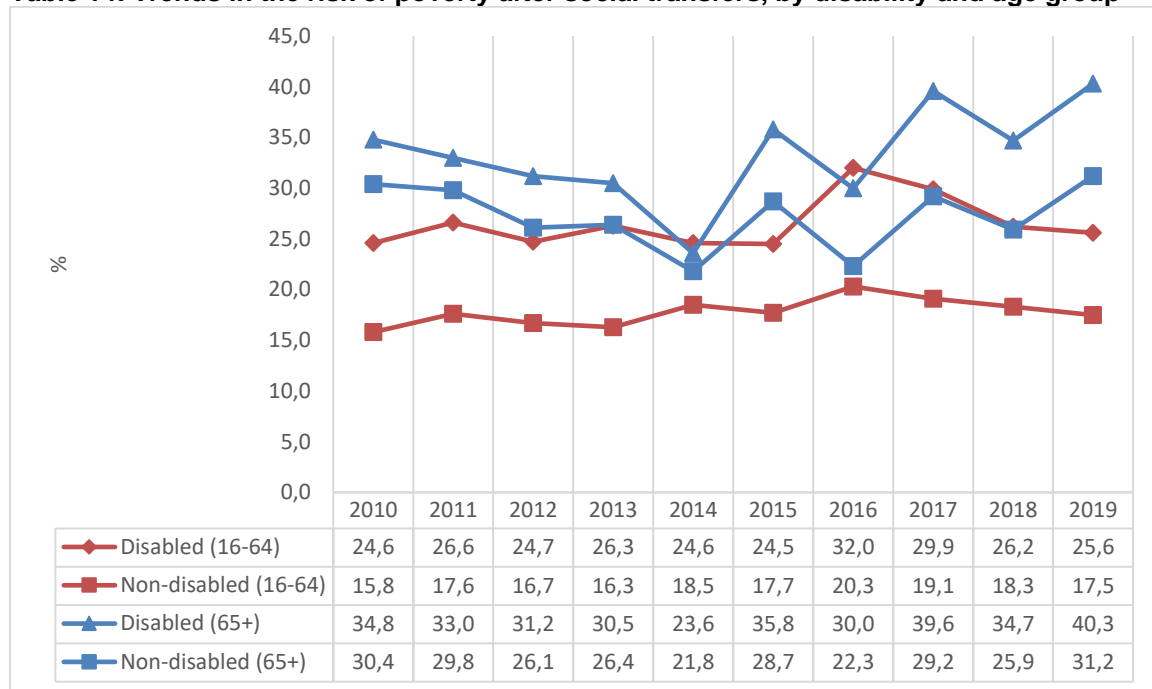
**Table 12: People at risk of poverty or social exclusion, by disability and gender (aged 16+)**



**Table 13: Overall risk of household poverty or exclusion by disability and age (aged 16+)**

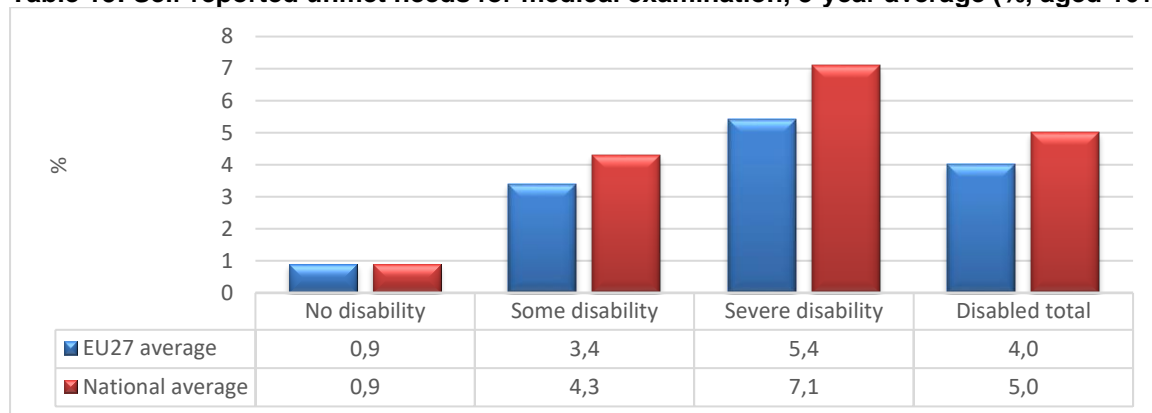


Source: EU-SILC 2019 Release 2021 version 1 (and previous UDB).

**Table 14: Trends in the risk of poverty after social transfers, by disability and age group**


Source: Eurostat Health Database [[hlth\\_dpe020](#)] - People at risk of poverty.

Note: this table shows national trends in financial poverty risk, rather than the general AROPE indicator (which is not as comparable between age groups due to the effect of paid employment); the survey does not distinguish 'activity limitation' for children under 16.

**Table 15: Self-reported unmet needs for medical examination, 3-year average (% , aged 16+)**


Source: Eurostat Health Database [[hlth\\_dh030](#)] – 'Too expensive or too far to travel or waiting list'.

Note: due to large variations an average of three years is indicated. EU mean averages are also skewed by high values in a minority of countries within disability groups but median averages for the total disability and no disability groups in 2019 are consistent with the 3-year mean values.

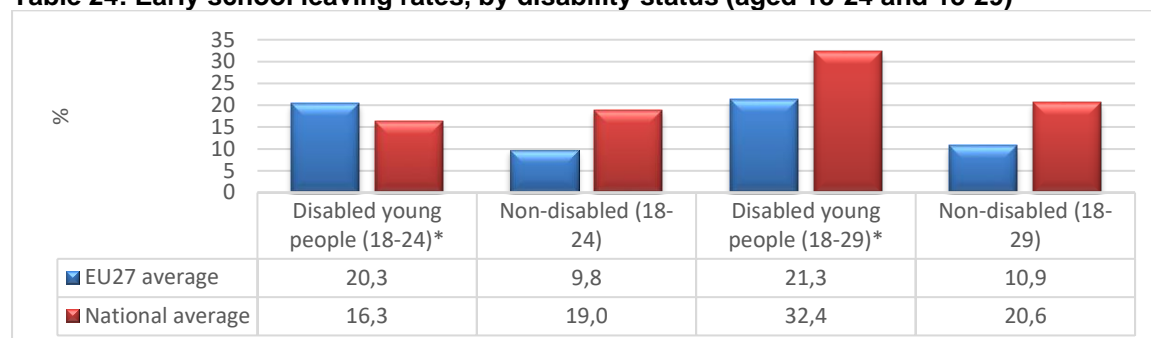
### 7.2.1 Alternative sources of poverty or health care data in Bulgaria

The EU-SILC data provides a comprehensive and reliable source concerning poverty or social exclusion rates. In addition to the summary tables presented so far, the Eurostat disability database also contains breakdowns concerning disability and poverty before and after social transfers, as well as in-work-poverty.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Eurostat Health Database, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/health/data/database>.

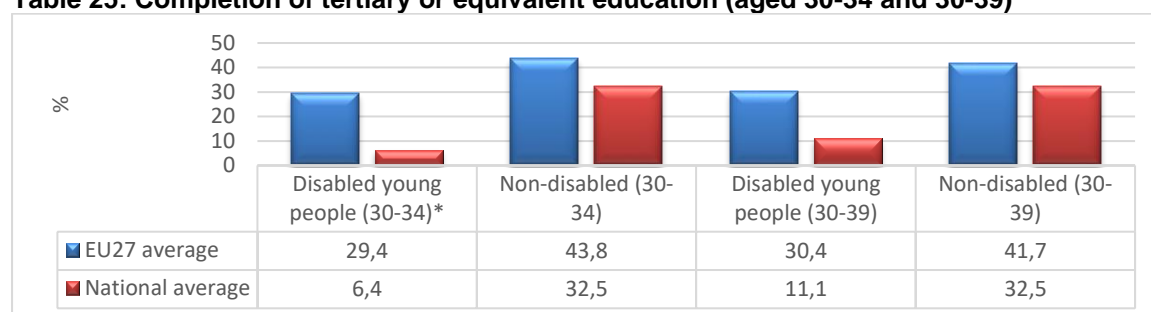
### 7.3 EU data relevant to disability and education

**Table 24: Early school leaving rates, by disability status (aged 18-24 and 18-29)<sup>76</sup>**



\*There were fewer than 50 observations in the disability groups.

**Table 25: Completion of tertiary or equivalent education (aged 30-34 and 30-39)**



Source: EU-SILC 2019 Release 2021 version 1 (and preceding UDBs).

Note: Confidence intervals for the disability group are large and reliability low (due to the small sample size in the target age group). An average of several years may be needed to establish trends or to compare breakdowns by gender.

#### 7.3.1 Alternative sources of education data in Bulgaria

The current situation is outlined in chapter 5.1.

<sup>76</sup> There was a change from ISCED 1997 to ISCED 2011 qualification definitions in 2014 although some Member States continued to use the older definition after this time.

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