



COVID-19 and people with disabilities

Assessing the impact of the crisis and informing disability-inclusive next steps

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Table of contents

1	Executive summary	5
2	Disability-inclusive disaster and recovery planning	7
	2.1 Commitments to disability in disaster management and recovery strategies	7
	2.2 Involvement of people with disabilities in disaster management and recovery strategies	7
	2.3 Disability impact assessments and research to inform disaster management and recovery planning.....	7
	2.4 Use of disaster management and recovery planning funds	7
3	Mortality connected to COVID-19 among people with disabilities	9
	3.1 Are official statistics available concerning the overall mortality rate of people with disabilities?	9
	3.2 Are official statistics available concerning the mortality rate of people with disabilities who have died from complications connected to COVID-19? ..	9
4	Access to health.....	11
	4.1 Emergency measures.....	11
	4.2 Access to hospital treatment for COVID-19	14
	4.3 Treatment for COVID-19 in congregate settings.....	14
	4.4 Public health promotion and testing during the pandemic	15
	4.5 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis on access to health services for general or pre-existing physical and mental health conditions.....	16
	4.6 Vaccination programmes	16
5	Income and access to food and essential items.....	19
	5.1 Emergency measures.....	19
	5.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis	20
6	Access to transportation and the public spaces	21
	6.1 Emergency measures.....	21
	6.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis	23
7	Involuntary detention or treatment.....	24
	7.1 Emergency measures.....	24
	7.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis	25
8	Violence, exploitation or abuse	26
	8.1 Emergency measures.....	26
	8.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis	26
9	Independent living	27
	9.1 Emergency measures.....	27
	9.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis	27
10	Access to habilitation and rehabilitation	29
	10.1 Emergency measures.....	29
	10.2 Impact of COVID-19 and/or emergency measures adopted	29
11	Access to justice	30
	11.1 Emergency measures.....	30
	11.2 Impact of COVID-19 crisis	31
12	Access to education	32
	12.1 Emergency measures.....	32
	12.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis	34
13	Working and employment	36
	13.1 Emergency measures.....	36
	13.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis	37

14	Good practices and recommendations.....	38
14.1	Examples of good practice	38
14.2	Recommendations.....	39
14.3	Other relevant evidence.....	40
Annex	41

1 Executive summary

Disability inclusivity of disaster and recovery planning

The research had not identified any plans of disaster and recovery planning addressing the rights of people with disabilities elaborated before COVID-19 in Bulgaria. General emergency measures do not mention people with disabilities and no measures specific to them were adopted.

Impact of the virus on mortality among people with disabilities

Official statistics concerning the overall mortality rate of people with disabilities are not available in Bulgaria neither before nor during COVID-19 crisis. The only information related to mortality among people with disabilities during 2020 came from media reports about concrete cases of COVID-19 in social care institutions or residential community-based services for people with disabilities and elderly. Mass targeted testing of residents and staff in residential social institutions and services across the country was done at the beginning of May 2020, after an increase of positive cases was registered. Official statistics on the number of tested and ill persons were not publicly released.

According to data from the mayors of 200 municipalities (out of total of 264 in the country) who participated in the online survey conducted by the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (NGO), in the period of the state of emergency and the extraordinary anti-epidemic measures, from 13 March 2020 until 30 May 2020, 88 cases of COVID-19 infection were registered (44 users and 44 employees) in the residential services for children and adults with disabilities on the territories of their municipalities. The BHC received data about 6 deaths of users in residential care. During the first wave of the pandemic, residential services in 16 municipalities were affected.

There were several outbreaks of the COVID-19 infection in institutions for older people and people with disabilities during the summer and autumn of 2020. At the end of December 2020, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC) completed the second stage of its online survey, for the period 1 September 2020 – 31 December 2020. Responses were received from 202 municipalities. The data clearly indicated that residential institutions for older people and people with disabilities in Bulgaria are becoming incubators of infection. There has been a jump of tens of times compared to the data from the first wave of the epidemic. A total of 2 226 cases of infection were registered in the residential care centres for children and adults, of which 1 439 among users and 787 among employees. The BHC also received data on 25 times more deaths - 148 deaths (143 among users and 5 among employees) in residential services and in specialized institutions. During the second wave of the pandemic, institutions and services in 106 municipalities were affected, out of the 202 municipalities that provided information. The total number of tests performed was 96 967 (PCR tests and antigen tests). The majority of the users received treatment within the residential service/institution.

Outline of key concerns about a disproportionately negative impact of the COVID-19 crisis on people with disabilities

The key concerns about a disproportionately negative impact of the COVID-19 crisis on people with disabilities in Bulgaria are: hindered access to healthcare for other conditions different from COVID-19 (see section Access to Health), hindered access to social services and isolation, especially with regard to people with disabilities living in institutions and residential services (see section Access to Health), and hindered access to education for children with special educational needs (see section on Education).

Examples of good practice

The examples of good practice in Bulgaria are:

- the separate section for people with disabilities in the uniform information web portal during the state of emergency;¹
- the hotline for psychological support to older people and persons with disabilities managed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy;²
- the expansion of the mobile municipal services for delivering food, medicines and other essential goods to older people and persons with disabilities affected by the anti-epidemic measures with additional BGN 45 million (approximately EUR 22.5 million);³
- the special measures for persons with disabilities that facilitate their everyday life and access to administrative services;⁴
- the helplines for psychological support to teachers, students and parents opened in April 2020 at some of the Regional Centres for Supporting the Process of Inclusive Education (RCSPIE).⁵

Recommendations and opportunities for change

Recovery planning should include:

- measures for accessible education for children with special educational needs;
- measures for the provision of social protection and social services for people with disabilities at risk of poverty or living under the poverty threshold;
- measures for the provision of accessible healthcare and rehabilitation for people with disabilities.

¹ Special section with information for people with disabilities during COVID-19 crisis is available at: <https://coronavirus.bg/bg/az-sum/litse-uvrejdania>.

² Dnevnik.bg, 'The hotline 0800 88 001 will also provide psychological support, 23 March 2020, available at: https://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2020/03/23/404464_edinniat_nomer_0800_88_001_shte_predost_avia_i.

³ Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (2020), 'The patronage care for older people and people with disabilities will be expanded by BGN 45 million from the Development of Human Resources Operational Programme', press release, 26 April 2020, available in Bulgarian at: <https://www.mlsp.government.bg/s-45-mln-ly>.

⁴ For the full set of socio-economic measures, which continued to apply after the end of the state of emergency, see the [section for persons with disabilities](#) of the COVID-19 Uniform Information Portal.

⁵ Ministry of Education and Science (2020), 'Psychologists will provide psychological support to students, teachers and parents' (['Психолози ще оказват психологическа подкрепа на ученици, учители и родители'](#)), press release, 28 April 2020.

2 Disability-inclusive disaster and recovery planning

[Article 11 – Situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies & Article 4\(3\) – involvement of persons with disabilities](#)

2.1 Commitments to disability in disaster management and recovery strategies

No plans and strategies pertaining to general management of disaster have been identified to reference people with disabilities in Bulgaria. Guidelines for people with disabilities had been issued by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy⁶ in late March 2020, to be applied during the emergency situation.

2.2 Involvement of people with disabilities in disaster management and recovery strategies

No evidence of any involvement of persons with disabilities in disaster planning and in recovery planning have been identified in Bulgaria.

2.3 Disability impact assessments and research to inform disaster management and recovery planning

No evidence of impact assessment or commissioning of research concerning the situation of persons with disabilities to inform disaster and recovery planning have been identified.

According to the official web portal about COVID-19 measures in Bulgaria, the average of 400 people daily has called the call centre at the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy with questions related to the pandemic situation. The majority of the calls were related to social protection, social integration and care and support for persons with disabilities.⁷ This leads to the conclusion that most probably persons with disabilities, their families and carers were less informed and more anxious than the non-disabled persons during the first months of the state of emergency in the country.

The guidelines for people with disabilities issued by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy⁸ in late March 2020 advise them: to stay at home, to apply the recommended rules for personal and home hygiene, to call municipal and social services if they need assistance in provision of food, medicines and essential items and to contact administrative and other services only via e-mail or phone.

2.4 Use of disaster management and recovery planning funds

Evidence of funds associated with disaster management and recovery planning allocated for disability-related purposes is presented in section 5 of the report, on *Income and access to food and essential items*. They are related to mobile services providing food and medicines at home, and “patronage” services (patronage services

⁶ Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Useful information and advice for people with disabilities until the end of the state of emergency, available in Bulgarian at: <https://coronavirus.bg/bg/67>.

⁷ Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, *Data about the use of the call centre at the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy*, available in Bulgarian at: <https://coronavirus.bg/bg/60>.

⁸ Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Useful information and advice for people with disabilities until the end of the state of emergency, available in Bulgarian at: <https://coronavirus.bg/bg/67>.

consist of delivering packages of food, medicines and other essential goods, delivering of warm cooked food, providing support with household bills payment and assistance with urgent administrative services, visiting by a nurse and performing activities like: blood pressure measuring or disinfection of a wound/decubitus).

3 Mortality connected to COVID-19 among people with disabilities

[Article 10 – The right to life](#)

3.1 Are official statistics available concerning the overall mortality rate of people with disabilities?

No. Official statistics concerning the overall mortality rate of people with disabilities are not available in Bulgaria. Unofficial statistics about mortality rate of people with disabilities in residential services have been collected twice in 2020 by the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee through on-line survey and paper letters to all municipalities in the country. According to data from the mayors of 200 municipalities (out of total of 264 in the country) who participated in the online survey conducted by the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC), in the period of the state of emergency and the extraordinary anti-epidemic measures, from 13 March 2020 until 30 May 2020, 88 cases of COVID-19 infection were registered (44 users and 44 employees) in the residential services for children and adults on the territories of their municipalities. The BHC received data about 6 deaths of users in residential care. During the first wave of the infection, residential services in 16 municipalities were affected.

According to data from the National Operational Headquarters from 04 June 2020, out of nearly 20 000 users and staff of social institutions and residential services in the country, 91 cases COVID-19 virus infection have been identified - 54 users and 37 staff. 14 of the users in social institutions in Oreshets and Kula died.

At the end of December 2020, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC) has completed the second stage of its online survey, for the period 01 September 2020 – 31 December 2020. Responses were received from 202 municipalities. The data clearly indicated that social institutions for the elderly in Bulgaria are becoming incubators of infection. There has been a jump of tens of times compared to the data from the first wave of the epidemic. The total of 2 226 cases of infection (25 times more) were registered in the residential care centres for children and adults, of which 1 439 (33 times more) users and 787 (18 times more) employees. The BHC also received data on 25 times more deaths - 148 deaths (143 of users and 5 of employees) in social residential services and in specialized institutions. During the second wave of the infection, institutions and services in 106 municipalities were affected, out of the 202 municipalities that provided information. The total number of tests performed was 96 967 (PCR tests and antigen tests). The majority of the users received treatment in the residential service/institution.

3.2 Are official statistics available concerning the mortality rate of people with disabilities who have died from complications connected to COVID-19?

No. Official statistics concerning the mortality rate of people with disabilities who died from complications connected to COVID-19 are not available.

See Annex 1 at the end of this report, which lists non-exhaustively media reports concerning the spread of the COVID-19 in residential institutions and community-based services for elderly and people with disabilities, including the number of the ill persons and the number of the diseased persons of COVID-19.

See section on *Access to health* for information about residential institutions and services for elderly and people with disabilities.

4 Access to health

[Article 25 – Health](#)

4.1 Emergency measures

The first group of measures related to restrictions of access to general healthcare for the general population were imposed on 6 March 2020 by an order of the Minister of Health⁹ and included suspension of prophylactic visits to general practitioners, immunisations, planned surgical procedures and access of visitors to medical establishments. On 7 April 2020, the Parliament extended by one month the state of emergency declared on 13 March 2020.¹⁰ The new end date of the state of emergency was set to 13 May 2020.

In May 2020, the Minister of Health issued an order stipulating that all persons aged 60+, who had tested positive for COVID-19, were subject to mandatory hospital isolation and/or treatment, depending on the clinical course of the disease, unless they refused hospitalisation explicitly and in writing. According to the order, after testing negative (with a PCR test), those persons were discharged from hospital and placed under mandatory home isolation (quarantine) for a period of 28 days. At the end of the quarantine period, they had to be tested again and, if the result was positive, the quarantine period had to be extended until they tested negative. According to the order, the rules applied to all persons aged 60+, including those residing in care homes for elderly.¹¹

Apart from that, there are no publicly available national guidelines or protocols on patient triage that apply age as the main and decisive criterion. The algorithm of steps to be followed by medical establishments in case of identification of patients with suspected COVID-19, recommended by the Ministry of Health (MH), does not include age as criterion for patient triage.¹² Other relevant documents such as the guidelines for prevention and treatment of COVID-19¹³ and the protocol for treatment of confirmed cases of COVID-19¹⁴ do not refer to age as a criterion for prioritising between patients either.

At the end of April, the Social Assistance Agency (SAA) issued a set of guidelines on the prevention of and response to COVID-19 infections in residential care institutions

⁹ Ministry for Health, *Order No РД-01-114/05.03.2020*, 5 March 2020, available in Bulgarian at: https://www.mh.government.bg/media/filer_public/2020/03/05/rd-01-114.pdf.

¹⁰ National Assembly, *Decision to extend the declared state of emergency*, 7 April 2020, available in Bulgarian at: <https://dv.parliament.bg/DVWeb/showMaterialDV.jsp?idMat=147369>.

¹¹ Ministry of Health, *Order No РД-01-129 on the persons subject to hospital treatment, home treatment and quarantine*, 19 May 2020, available in Bulgarian at: https://www.mh.government.bg/media/filer_public/2020/05/19/doc018.pdf.

¹² Ministry of Health, *Basic steps and behaviour in identifying patients with suspected COVID-19*, 25 March 2020, available in Bulgarian at: https://www.mh.government.bg/media/filer_public/2020/03/25/covid19instruction-1_dobavjane_za_med_sp.pdf.

¹³ Ministry of Health, *Brief guide to the prevention and treatment of COVID-19*, available in Bulgarian at: http://healthedu.eu/sites/healthedu.eu/files/1588685738_rukovodstvo_covid_19.pdf.

¹⁴ Ministry of Health, *Protocol for treatment of confirmed cases of COVID-19 (Протокол за лечение на потвърдени случаи на COVID-19)*.

for elderly and persons with disabilities.¹⁵ Recommended preventive measures included: designation of infection prevention and control contact persons (лице за контакт по превенция и контрол на инфекциите) responsible for instructing the other employees and the residents on how to comply with the anti-epidemic measures and for ensuring the availability and regular use of disinfectants; rules on physical distancing within the building; restricted access for visitors; measures for early identification of infected persons; and cleaning and disinfection rules. Recommended response measures included: isolation of infected persons (including, where necessary, their transfer to another location – other municipal building or a hotel in the area); provision of information to family members; and use of protective equipment by employees taking care of infected residents.

On 29 April 2020, the Chief Health Inspector d-r Angel Kunchev obliged the directors of the Regional Inspectorates of the Ministry of Health to test the staff of institutions and community-based services for children and adults with disabilities for COVID-19 and to inform the Ministry of Health about the results. He also recommended that in the regions where COVID cases are already detected, personal visits should be limited. Instead, phone- and video calls and plastic fences at the places for visits should be used.¹⁶ All visitors were supposed to be screened for COVID symptoms and if such are detected - to be not allowed in the visit spaces. Those who do not show these symptoms were allowed for such visits only if the person whom they visit is seriously ill and the visitors are in position to emotionally support him/her.

Mass targeted testing of residents and staff in residential social institutions and services across the country was done in the beginning of May 2020, after an increase of positive cases was registered in several care institutions for elderly and persons with disabilities. Official statistics on the number of tested persons were not publicly released, but in a media interview, the Minister of Labour and Social Policy announced that the government was planning to do 'more than 17 000 tests' in residential services for children, older people and persons with disabilities and 'priority was to be given to the staff working in these services – about 2 500 persons.'¹⁷

Official data at national level on the results of the targeted testing of residential institutions and services for older people and people with disabilities were not published. In a media interview, the Minister of Labour and Social Policy announced that, as of 15 May 2020, a total of 55 residents and 44 employees of the staff of residential services for children, elderly and people with disabilities tested positive for COVID-19. These figures were compared to the total number of users (16 750) and staff (10 850) of such institutions and services, but the number of tested persons was not announced. Official data on testing are available at local level, but it is difficult to

¹⁵ Social Assistance Agency, Guidelines №08-00-5443 of 30.04.2020, on taking measures and actions by municipalities in identifying users with coronavirus infection in social services ([Указания №08-00-5443 от 30.04.2020 г., относно предприемане на мерки и действия от общините при установяване на потребители с коронавирус инфекция в социалните услуги](#)), 30 April 2020.

¹⁶ Social Assistance Agency, Guidelines №08-00-5443 of 30.04.2020, 30 April 2020.

¹⁷ bTV News (2020), 'Denitsa Sacheva: We are starting mass testing for COVID-19 in the homes for elderly', 4 May 2020, available at: <https://btvnovinite.bg/predavanja/lice-v-lice/denica-sacheva-zapochvame-masovo-testvane-za-covid-19-v-domovete-za-stari-hora.html>.

summarise the information as it covers different time periods and is scattered on the websites of the district health inspectorates.¹⁸

The ban on visits to residential care services for elderly and people with disabilities, introduced in March 2020, was extended to 14 June 2020. The ban was unconditional and applied to all visitors, including family members and relatives.¹⁹ Since then, the visits were allowed only as an exception and with the permission of the directors of the institutions/services during the period between August and the present time.²⁰

In the beginning of May, prosecutors' offices across the country organised inspections in the residential care institutions for elderly with identified COVID-19 cases to check the measures taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 infections. Inspections were carried out in the residential care institutions for elderly in Radomir,²¹ Gara Oreshets²² and Kula.²³ At national level, the Supreme Administrative Prosecutor's Office (SAPO) requested information from the Minister of Health and the Minister of Labour and Social Policy about the anti-epidemic measures implemented in all specialised institutions providing social services in the country.²⁴

¹⁸ For example, see Bulgaria, Regional Health Inspectorate – Montana (*Регионална здравна инспекция - Монтана*) (2020), 'COVID-19 Update' ('Актуално COVID-19'), Press release, 19 May 2020. According to the information, in the period between 1 May and 18 May 2020 a total of 313 employees of 15 social services and 130 residents of three specialised institutions in the district of Montana were tested, of whom one person tested positive for COVID-19.

¹⁹ Ministry of Health, *Order No РД-01-277 on introduction of temporary anti-epidemic measures (Заповед № РД-01-277 за въвеждане на временни противоепидемични мерки)*, 26 May 2020. Hospital Index (*Индекс на болниците*) (2020), '15% with a problem accessing a doctor during a pandemic' ('15 % с проблем с достъпа до лекар по време на пандемията'), press release, 1 June 2020.

²⁰ Ministry of Health, *Order РД-01-489 on introduction of temporary anti-epidemic measures*, 31 August 2020, available in Bulgarian at: https://www.mh.government.bg/media/filer_public/2020/08/31/rd-01-489.pdf, *Order No РД-01-611 on introduction of temporary anti-epidemic measures*, 22 October 2020, available in Bulgarian at: https://www.mh.government.bg/media/filer_public/2020/10/22/zapoved_merki_izvanredna_epidemi_4na_obstanovka_22_10_20.pdf.

²¹ Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Bulgaria (2020), 'Regional Prosecutor's Office - Pernik ordered an inspection of the home for older persons "St. Ivan Rilski" in the town of Radomir, after a signal for employees with positive tests for COVID-19' (*Районна прокуратура – Перник разпореди проверка на дома за стари хора „Св. Иван Рилски“ в град Радомир, след сигнал за служители с положителни проби за COVID19*), Press release, 5 May 2020.

²² Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Bulgaria (2020), 'Vidin District Prosecutor's Office carried out an inspection in RHI-Vidin regarding compliance with the measures against the spread of COVID-19 in the specialised institutions for providing social services' (*Окръжна прокуратура-Видин е извършила проверка в РЗИ-Видин по отношение спазване на мерките срещу разпространението на COVID-19 в специализираните институции за предоставяне на социални услуги*), Press release, 5 May 2020.

²³ Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Bulgaria (2020), 'Vidin District Prosecutor's Office carried out an inspection in RHI-Vidin regarding compliance with the measures against the spread of COVID-19 in the specialised institutions for providing social services' (*Окръжна прокуратура-Видин е извършила проверка в РЗИ-Видин по отношение спазване на мерките срещу разпространението на COVID-19 в специализираните институции за предоставяне на социални услуги*), Press release, 5 May 2020.

²⁴ Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Bulgaria, 'The SAPO requests information about the measures taken and their compliance in connection with the distribution of COVID-19 in specialised institutions for the provision of social services' (*ВАП изиска информация за предприетите мерки и тяхното спазване във връзка с разпространението на COVID-19 в специализираните институции за предоставяне на социални услуги*), Press release, 5 May 2020.

On 9 November 2020, the government earmarked an additional amount of BGN 81 million for health settings; out of this, BGN 50 million for the hospitals with over 50 % COVID beds, BGN 15 million for antigen speedy tests, BGN 10 million for general practitioners (EUR 500 additional remuneration for each GP) and BGN 6 million for opening of speedy COVID test areas in the medical establishments for outpatient care.²⁵

4.2 Access to hospital treatment for COVID-19

Data on the total number of people with disabilities who have been hospitalised because of COVID-19 symptoms is not available. There is no publicly available summarised information on the number and the type of affected institutions for older people or people with disabilities either. Information is publicly released in media reports only when a resident or employee of such an institution has been tested positive for COVID-19.

4.3 Treatment for COVID-19 in congregate settings

At the end of April 2020, elderly and persons with disabilities in care homes (institutions and residential community-based services) were identified as a particularly vulnerable group after several care homes in the district of Vidin (one of the most affected districts) reported first COVID-19 positive persons among their staff and residents. The first one was the care home for older persons in the village of Gara Oreshets, which accommodated 25 persons, 12 of whom tested positive and two passed away.²⁶ Those who tested positive were initially isolated on a separate floor, but after the local mayor publicly disagreed with this decision, they were transferred to medical establishments.²⁷ As a consequence of this case,²⁷ the authorities announced that testing in social services for older persons will be prioritised due to the higher vulnerability risk of this group.²⁸ Meanwhile, two more social services located in the same region reported cases of COVID-19. The home for elderly in the village of Kula reported three cases (two persons from the staff and one user)²⁹ and the centre for children and young persons with disabilities in the city of Vidin reported 12 cases (four persons from the staff and eight users).³⁰ As of the end of April 2020, the increased testing of users of social services for elderly and persons with disabilities was still ongoing.

According to data from the mayors of 200 municipalities (out of total of 264 in the country) who participated in the online survey conducted by the Bulgarian Helsinki

²⁵ Bulgarian Industrial Association, *The Council of Ministers allocated BGN 81 million for two of the measures related to COVID-19*, 9 November 2020, available at: <https://www.bia.bg.com/news/view/27828/>.

²⁶ Mediapool, 'The cases of Covid-19 in the country have exceeded 1500, the death toll is 66' (*'Случаите на Covid19 у нас надхвърлиха 1500, починалите са 66'*), Mediapool, 30 April 2020.

²⁷ Mediapool, 'Older persons with Covid-19 from the Vidin home go to hospital, one of the first infected died' (*'Възрастните с Covid-19 от видинския старчески дом отиват в болница, един от първите заразени почина'*), Mediapool, 29 April 2020.

²⁸ Mediapool, 'The cases of Covid-19 in the country have exceeded 1500, the death toll is 66' (*'Случаите на Covid19 у нас надхвърлиха 1500, починалите са 66'*), Mediapool, 30 April 2020.

²⁹ Trud daily, 'New outbreak of coronavirus: in the home for older people in Kula' (*'Ново огнище на коронавируса: в дома за стари хора в Кула'*), Trud, 1 May 2020.

³⁰ Bulgarian National Television, 'An outbreak of coronavirus at the Center for Children with Disabilities in Vidin', 30 April 2020, available at: <https://bntnews.bg/news/ognishte-na-koronavirus-plamna-v-centar-za-deca-s-uvrezhdaniya-vav-vidin-1052103news.html>.

Committee (BHC), in the period of the state of emergency and the extraordinary anti-epidemic measures, from 13 March 2020 until 30 May 2020, 88 cases of COVID-19 infection were registered (44 users and 44 employees) in the residential services for children and adults on the territories of their municipalities. The BHC received data about 6 deaths of users in residential care. During the first wave of the infection, residential services in 16 municipalities were affected.

According to data from the National Operational Headquarters from 04 June 2020, out of nearly 20 000 users and staff of social institutions and residential services in the country, 91 cases COVID-19 virus infection have been identified - 54 users and 37 staff. 14 of the users in social institutions in Oreshets and Kula died.

On 5 August 2020, the deputy-minister of social policy Adriana Stoimenova announced that as a result of the growing number of COVID cases in the residential services in the cities of Varna and Ruse, placements and visits to residential services for elderly have been suspended, and relatives can receive information from the institutions, as well as from the municipalities that are service providers.³¹ She also stated that the ministry is working out a COVID-proof standard for strengthening the services and providing logistical support, as well as exploring the capacity of the buildings of the residential services for the elderly to set up seclusion rooms.

However, outbreaks of the COVID-19 infection appeared during the summer and the autumn of 2020. At the end of December 2020, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC) has completed the second stage of its online survey, for the period 01 September 2020 – 31 December 2020. Responses were received from 202 municipalities. The data clearly indicated that social institutions for the elderly in Bulgaria are becoming incubators of infection. There has been a jump of tens of times compared to the data from the first wave of the epidemic. The total of 2 226 cases of infection (25 times more) were registered in the residential care centres for children and adults, of which 1 439 (33 times more) users and 787 (18 times more) employees. The BHC also received data on 25 times more deaths - 148 deaths (143 of users and 5 of employees) in social residential services and in specialized institutions. During the second wave of the infection, institutions and services in 106 municipalities were affected, out of the 202 municipalities that provided information. The total number of tests performed was 96 967 (PCR tests and antigen tests). The majority of the users received treatment in the residential service/institution.

Monitoring of media reports from 2020 concerning infections and treatment of users with disabilities living in institutions or residential services has been performed for the purpose of this research. Its findings are summarised in Annex 1 at the end of this report.

4.4 Public health promotion and testing during the pandemic

A uniform web portal - <https://coronavirus.bg/> - was set up to inform the citizens about their rights and options, and to provide updated data during the pandemic period. For people with disabilities a separate section was developed to inform them about the decisions related to the terms of their disability certificates, disability pensions and

³¹ Bulgarian National Radio, *Accommodation and visits to homes for elderly have been suspended*, 5 August 2020, available at: <https://bnr.bg/horizont/post/101321214/spreni-sa-svijdaniata-v-domovete-za-vazrastni-hora>.

individual assessments, the possibilities to receive warm food at home and social benefits and to prolong their free passes for driving and parking.³² Public health announcements during the emergency situation were aired on national TV every day in the morning and the evening with interpretation in sign language for people with hearing disabilities. A 24/7 hotline at the Ministry of Health is available for calls - [+359 2 807 87 57](tel:+35928078757) related to COVID-19.³³ The National Patient Organisation provided consultations related to COVID-19 for chronically ill patients on free of charge hotline at [0800 14 515](tel:080014515).³⁴

4.5 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis on access to health services for general or pre-existing physical and mental health conditions

In Bulgaria, no specific measures were implemented to facilitate access to healthcare for older people or persons with disabilities for conditions unrelated to COVID-19. In May 2020, the Hospital Index initiative (a joint initiative of Gallup International and the specialised website clinica.bg) conducted a national representative survey on the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the access to healthcare. The survey covered a sample of 798 respondents and was conducted through personal semi-structured interviews. The results showed that 77 % of the population had experienced no difficulties (or had no reason) to seek medical help during the pandemic, 8 % found it difficult to determine whether they had experienced such problems, and 15 % had experienced problems, mostly with visiting a specialist (7 %), a general practitioner (6 %) or a dentist (4 %), and with obtaining prescription (6 %) or over-the-counter (5 %) drugs, and 28 % experienced problems with provision of medicines and other medical essential items. About 1 % had problems in connection to hospital treatment or surgery and the survey registered no difficulties in accessing emergency care. According to the study, problems with access to healthcare were mostly shared by older persons/people with disabilities, which was 'natural given that they had a greater need for medical services and prophylactics'. Concrete survey results disaggregated by age, however, were not made publicly available.³⁵

4.6 Vaccination programmes

On 7 December 2020 the Council of Ministers adopted the *National Anti-Covid-19 Vaccination Plan*³⁶ and appointed National Vaccination Headquarters.³⁷ The plan describes and prioritises the groups of people who would be vaccinated and the order/phases in which the vaccination process would be carried out. The phases related to persons with disabilities are the following: the first phase includes around 244 000 persons medical staff, the second phase – staff (8 000 persons) and users in residential institutions (15 000 persons) and teachers (89 000 persons) and the fourth phase – older people over the age of 65 (1 5 million persons) and persons with chronic

³² Special section with information for people with disabilities during COVID-19 crisis is available at: <https://coronavirus.bg/bg/az-sum/litse-uvrejdania>.

³³ <https://coronavirus.bg/bg/contacts>.

³⁴ <https://coronavirus.bg/bg/contacts>.

³⁵ Hospital Index (*Индекс на болниците*) (2020), '15% with a problem accessing a doctor during a pandemic', press release, 1 June 2020, available in Bulgarian at: <https://clinica.bg/12249-15--s-problem-s-dostypa-do-lekar-po-vreme-na-pandemiqta>.

³⁶ Council of Ministers, *National Anti-Covid 19 Vaccination Plan of Republic of Bulgaria*, December 2020, available at: <https://coronavirus.bg/bg/663>.

³⁷ Council of Ministers, Decision 896, 7 December 2020, available at: <https://coronavirus.bg/bg/663>.

diseases (around 300 000).³⁸ The vaccination takes place after the person who wishes to be vaccinated is registered in a list in advance. The lists and the organization of the vaccination itself is main responsibility of the general practitioners (GPs). The Plan was criticized as it does not contain any deadlines and details about the provision of the vaccines to the GPs, the raising awareness and the information process, the schedule of the vaccinations, etc. Guidelines regarding vaccination have been sent by the Ministry of Health to the GPs only on 18 February 2021.³⁹

The vaccination started officially on 27 December 2020. On 19 February 2021 the Prime Minister ordered the National Vaccination Headquarters and the health minister to provide a 'green corridor' for all those wishing to be vaccinated against COVID-19 in parallel with the fourth phase of the vaccination plan.⁴⁰

The Minister of Health Kostadin Angelov reported that as of 18 February 2021, a total of 25 441 persons were vaccinated with the second vaccine and a total of 90 514 were vaccinated with the first dose of the vaccine.⁴¹ He did not report on the number of people with disabilities among those already vaccinated.

On 19 February 2021, the total of 57 600 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine arrived in Bulgaria and were distributed between the 28 Regional Health Inspectorates in the country.

The next 25 740 doses of Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine arrived on 22 February 2021.⁴²

On a governmental work meeting on 22 February 2021 the Minister of Health reported that around 30 000 vaccines have been applied during the period 19-22 February. Vaccination rooms were set up in all districts throughout the country and since 22 February 2021 the GPs started applying vaccines also. The remote villages and towns would be visited by mobile teams who would apply vaccines to all residents who wish to be vaccinated.⁴³

The Executive Director of the Executive Agency of 'Medicines' Bogdan Kirilov stated that during the week 22-28 February 2021 another 180 000 doses of the three vaccines approved for use are expected to arrive in Bulgaria. Mr. Kirilov also stated that during March at least 500 000 doses are expected, which would allow the start of the fourth

³⁸ Council of Ministers, National Anti-Covid 19 Vaccination Plan of Republic of Bulgaria, p.10.

³⁹ Ministry of Health, *Ministry of Health published guidelines to the GPs about vaccination*, 18 February 2021, News, available at: https://coronavirus.bg/bg/vaccinations_news/1341.

⁴⁰ National Vaccination Headquarters, To provide a green corridor for all those wishing to be vaccinated against COVID-19 in parallel with the fourth phase of the vaccination plan, the Prime Minister ordered at a working meeting, press release, 19 February 2021, available at: <https://coronavirus.bg/bg/news/1344>.

⁴¹ National Vaccination Headquarters, To provide a green corridor for all those wishing to be vaccinated against COVID-19 in parallel with the fourth phase of the vaccination plan, the Prime Minister ordered at a working meeting, press release, 19 February 2021, available at: <https://coronavirus.bg/bg/news/1344>.

⁴² Ministry of Health, *57 600 doses of anti-COVID-19 vaccine of AstraZeneca arrived*, press release, 19 February 2021, available at: https://coronavirus.bg/bg/vaccinations_news/1350.

⁴³ National Vaccination Headquarters, The Prime Minister: There should be no difference between large, small and remote settlements for vaccination, everyone who wishes should get vaccinated, press release, 22 February 2021, available at: https://coronavirus.bg/bg/vaccinations_news/1359.

phase of the National Vaccination Plan which refers to people over the age of 65 and people with chronic diseases.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ National Vaccination Headquarters, To provide a green corridor for all those wishing to be vaccinated against COVID-19 in parallel with the fourth phase of the vaccination plan, the Prime Minister ordered at a working meeting, press release, 19 February 2021, available at: <https://coronavirus.bg/bg/news/1344>.

5 Income and access to food and essential items

[Article 28 – Adequate standard of living and social protection](#)

5.1 Emergency measures

The first set of socioeconomic measures to address the impact of the state of emergency were announced on 15 March 2020. They included additional funding of BGN 20 million (approximately EUR 10 million) for municipalities to expand their social services for provision of warm cooked food, medicines and essential items as well as basic medical care provided by nurses and to cover more beneficiaries (including persons with disabilities and persons under quarantine), financial support to businesses with liquidity difficulties, and payment by the state of up to 60 % of the monthly salary of employees at risk of dismissal.⁴⁵

In the area of social assistance, the Measures and Activities during the State of Emergency Declared by Decision of the National Assembly of 13 March 2020 Act temporarily suspended some of the mandatory requirements for obtaining compensations (e.g. the mandatory requirement to participate in community service or qualification courses for individuals receiving monthly social assistance allowances) and extended the period for receiving social assistance allowances for children and for accommodation in residential social services of persons with disabilities and other beneficiaries of social services.⁴⁶

At the end of March 2020, the Minister of Labour and Social Policy announced that the hotline operated by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP) started providing psychological support to older people and persons with disabilities. Consultations were provided free of charge every day from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.⁴⁷ Another measure, specifically targeting older people and persons with disabilities, was the expansion of the social patronage service. In April the government allocated BGN 45 million (approximately EUR 22.5 million) for supporting municipalities in expanding the service and hiring additional personnel to deliver food, medicine and other essential goods to older people and persons with disabilities affected by the anti-epidemic measures.⁴⁸ The estimated number of 12 000 new beneficiaries were to be included in the services, in addition to the 13 000 persons already covered by the programme. The application procedure was launched on 30 March 2020 and remained open until 28 April 2020.

⁴⁵ Bulgarian National Television (2020), 'Ministers presented a package of socioeconomic measures for the first phase of the coronavirus crisis' (*Министри представиха пакет от социалноикономически мерки за първия етап от кризата с коронавируса*), Bulgarian National Television, 15 March 2020.

⁴⁶ Parliament, *Measures and Activities during the State of Emergency Declared by Decision of the National Assembly of 13 March 2020 Act*, 24 March 2020, Article 12, available in Bulgarian at: <https://dv.parliament.bg/DVWeb/showMaterialDV.jsp?idMat=147150>.

⁴⁷ Dnevnik.bg, 'The hotline 0800 88 001 will also provide psychological support', 23 March 2020, available at: https://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2020/03/23/4044646_edinniat_nomer0800_88_001_shte_predostavia_i.

⁴⁸ Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (2020), 'The patronage care for older people and people with disabilities will be expanded by BGN 45 million from the Development of Human Resources Operational Programme', press release, 26 April 2020, available in Bulgarian at: <https://www.mlsp.government.bg/s-45-mln-ly>.

In May 2020, the special measures for persons with disabilities, introduced during the state of emergency, continued to apply after its replacement with an emergency epidemic situation. These measures included, among other things, remote performance (by telephone or e-mail) of individual needs assessment of people with disabilities, home delivery of food, medicine and essential products through the social patronage care service, home delivery of food for lunch through the 'Hot Lunch' programme, extension of the validity of disability assessment certificates (and of the payment of related social assistance allowances), ex-officio recalculation of pensions of working pensioners, purchase of medicines only by presenting a prescription book (without presenting a written prescription by a medical doctor), submission of social assistance applications by e-mail or registered mail, etc.⁴⁹

Amendments of the *Persons with Disabilities Act* relating to the emergency situation provided that persons with disabilities who already applied for individual assessment would receive financial and/or personal assistance since the date of submission of the application.⁵⁰ The certificates for disability assessment which have expired continued to be valid during the emergency situation and two months after it is ended.⁵¹ The term of the prescription documents for expensive medicines for chronically ill patients was prolonged *ex officio* by the National Health Insurance Fund during the emergency situation and two months after it is ended.⁵²

5.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

According to the government official web portal about COVID-19, over 30 000 elderly and people with disabilities in 240 municipalities had received food, medicines and assistance in accessing administrative services, and another 12 500 received social and health services at home under the 'patronage scheme' between March and December 2020.⁵³ Municipalities were invited to apply for the provision of patronage services at the beginning of the pandemic and this scheme would be continued in 2021. As of January 2021, total of 43 000 people benefited from patronage care. It includes (depending on the needs of the person): provision of warm cooked food, medicines, other essential items with the money of the beneficiary; provision of basic medical care (measuring blood pressure or disinfection of a wound); assistance in paying bills; provision of psychological support; cleaning the snow in front of the house of the user.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ For the full set of socio-economic measures, which continued to apply after the end of the state of emergency, see the [section for persons with disabilities](#) of the COVID-19 Uniform Information Portal.

⁵⁰ Parliament, *Measures and Activities during the State of Emergency Declared by Decision of the National Assembly of 13 March 2020 Act*, 24 March 2020, item 9 of the Transitional provisions, available at: <https://dv.parliament.bg/DVWeb/showMaterialDV.jsp?idMat=147150>.

⁵¹ Parliament, *Measures and Activities during the State of Emergency Declared by Decision of the National Assembly of 13 March 2020 Act* 24 March 2020, item 20 of the Transitional provisions, available in Bulgarian at: <https://dv.parliament.bg/DVWeb/showMaterialDV.jsp?idMat=147150>.

⁵² Parliament, *Measures and Activities during the State of Emergency Declared by Decision of the National Assembly of 13 March 2020 Act*, 24 March 2020, item 21 of the Transitional provisions.

⁵³ COVID-19 official web portal in Bulgaria, *Social protection measures for people with disabilities*, available at: <https://coronavirus.bg/bg/merki/socialni>.

⁵⁴ COVID-19 official web portal in Bulgaria, *Social protection measures for people with disabilities*, available at: <https://coronavirus.bg/bg/merki/socialni>.

6 Access to transportation and the public spaces

Article 9 – Accessibility

6.1 Emergency measures

A set of restrictive measures were introduced by the Minister of Health on 20 March 2020.⁵⁵ The measures included: ban on visits to public parks, gardens, and indoor and outdoor sports and children playgrounds; police checkpoints at entry points of big cities (the main city of each administrative district); restricted access through the checkpoints only to individuals who could certify, by a document, that they were either working in the city, traveling for health reasons or returning to their registered place of residence; and ban on visits to grocery stores and pharmacies for all individuals under 60 years of age during the time between 8:30 a.m. and 10:30 a.m. No measures in this field mentioning people with disabilities had been adopted. The general instruction for them was to stay at home and call institutions and close persons on the phone.

Stay at home was never applied as a general measure and was imposed only on persons placed in mandatory home isolation (quarantine). These included all persons who tested positive for COVID-19, for whom mandatory home isolation was initially applied for a period of 14 days⁵⁶ but was subsequently increased to 28 days,⁵⁷ and all persons who came from abroad or who were in close contact with an infected person, for whom the measure applied for 14 days.⁵⁸ According to official statistics, as of the end of April 2020, a total of 22 879 persons were staying home due to mandatory home isolation (quarantine).

Physical distancing when outside the house applied only to specific public places, which were allowed to operate only if applying certain anti-epidemic measures, including measures for ensuring physical distancing. Thus, for example, farmers markets were advised to apply measures ensuring a minimum distance of two meters between merchants and customers,⁵⁹ medical establishments were obliged to ensure a minimum distance of a meter and a half between patients waiting in front of doctors' offices, and families with children, which were allowed to visit city parks and public

⁵⁵ Ministry for Health, *Order No РД-01-143/20.03.2020*, 20 March 2020, available at: https://www.mh.government.bg/media/filer_public/2020/03/20/rd-01-143.pdf.

⁵⁶ Ministry of Health, *Order No РД-01-129 on mandatory isolation of persons with confirmed COVID-19 infection (Заповед № РД-01-129 за задължителна домашна изолация на потвърдени случаи на COVID-19)*, 16 March 2020.

⁵⁷ Ministry of Health, *Order No РД-01-165 amending Order No РД-01-129 on mandatory isolation of persons with confirmed COVID-19 infection (Заповед № РД-01-165 за изменение на Заповед № РД-01-129 за задължителна домашна изолация на потвърдени случаи на COVID-19)*, 27 March 2020.

⁵⁸ Ministry of Health, *Order No РД-01-183 on temporarily prohibiting the entry and quarantine of entrants to the Republic of Bulgaria and on measures for truck drivers and air crews (Заповед № РД-01-183 за временна забрана за влизане и поставяне под карантина на влизащите в РБ и за мерки за водачите на товарни автомобили и екипажите на въздухоплавателни средства)*, 6 April 2020.

⁵⁹ Ministry of Health, *Order No РД-01-179 on the operation of farmers markets (Заповед № РД-01-179 за функционирането на кооперативните и фермерски пазари)*, 6 April 2020. ¹¹ Bulgaria, Ministry of Health (*Министерство на здравеопазването*), *Order No РД-01-225 amending Order No РД-01-124 introducing anti-epidemic measures in the country (Заповед № РД-01-225 за изменение на Заповед № РД-01-124 за въвеждане на противоепидемични мерки в страната)*, 20 April 2020.

gardens, were obliged to keep a minimum distance of two and a half meters from other visiting families.⁶⁰

Some measures affected the free movement between big cities. A special traffic regime was introduced in the main city of each administrative district (27 cities, including the capital city Sofia). The measure was introduced on 20 March 2020 and as of the end of April 2020 were still valid.⁶¹ Checkpoints were placed at the main entry points to control incoming and outgoing traffic and access was granted only to persons living or working in the city, as well as to persons travelling for health reasons or for taking care of relatives. Persons wishing to pass through the checkpoints were obliged to present a written declaration indicating the purpose of their trip.

A more restrictive traffic regime was temporarily introduced in the capital Sofia during the Easter holidays to prevent the expected increased traffic from and to the city for the holidays. The measure was imposed on 17 April 2020⁶² and was lifted on 21 April 2020.⁶³ During this period, persons travelling to and from work were allowed to pass through the checkpoints only between 6:00 a.m. and 8:00 a.m. and between 6:00 p.m. and 8 p.m.¹⁶

At the end of April 2020, the Ministry of the Interior (MoI) reported that the police had checked a total of 55 000 declarations, which the persons crossing the checkpoints were obliged to present and found incorrect information in more than 3 400 of them.

Access was forbidden to all sports and children's playgrounds and facilities in open and closed public places as well as to all city parks and public gardens. The ban was introduced on 20 March 2020 and as of the end of April 2020 was still valid.⁶⁴ The ban was partly lifted on 26 April 2020, when permission to visit parks and gardens was

⁶⁰ Ministry of Health, Order No РД-01-239 amending Order No РД-01143 on the prohibition of visits to sports and children's playgrounds and facilities in open and closed public places, the organisation of checkpoints at the entry-exit roads of the district centres ([Заповед № РД-01-239 за изменение на Заповед № РД-01-143 за забрана на посещенията на спортни и детски площадки и съоръжения на открити и закрити обществени места, организиране на контролно-пропускателни пунктове на входно-изходните пътища на областните центрове](#)), 26 April 2020.

⁶¹ Ministry of Health, Order No РД-01-143 on the prohibition of visits to sports and children's playgrounds and facilities in open and closed public places, the organisation of checkpoints at the entryexit roads of the district centres ([Заповед № РД-01-143 за забрана на посещенията на спортни и детски площадки и съоръжения на открити и закрити обществени места, организиране на контролно-пропускателни пунктове на входно-изходните пътища на областните центрове](#)), 20 March 2020.

⁶² Ministry of Health, Order No РД-01-224 introducing anti-epidemic measures on the territory of the city of Sofia ([Заповед № РД-01-224 за въвеждане на противоепидемични мерки на територията на София град](#)), 16 April 2020.

⁶³ Ministry of Health, Order No РД-01-226 amending Order No РД-01224 introducing anti-epidemic measures on the territory of the city of Sofia ([Заповед № РД-01-226 за изменение на Заповед № РД-01-224 за въвеждане на противоепидемични мерки на територията на София град](#)), 21 April 2020. ¹⁶ Bulgaria, Ministry of Health, Order No РД-01-224 introducing anti-epidemic measures on the territory of the city of Sofia ([Заповед № РД-01-224 за въвеждане на противоепидемични мерки на територията на София град](#)), 16 April 2020.

⁶⁴ Ministry of Health, Order No РД-01-143 on the prohibition of visits to sports and children's playgrounds and facilities in open and closed public places, the organisation of checkpoints at the entryexit roads of the district centres ([Заповед № РД-01-143 за забрана на посещенията на спортни и детски площадки и съоръжения на открити и закрити обществени места, организиране на контролно-пропускателни пунктове на входно-изходните пътища на областните центрове](#)), 20 March 2020.

given to children up to 12 years of age (between 9:30 a.m. and 6:30 p.m.) and dog owners (before 9:30 a.m. and after 6:30 p.m.). Children had to be accompanied by parents or family members (not more than two adults at a time).⁶⁵

6.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

People with disabilities' access to transportation and public realm was limited to the greatest extent compared to other citizens. All these measures affected people with disabilities disproportionately as: the environment in Bulgaria is generally not accessible for those with mobility problems and those with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities; the share of those who are employed is very low; their educational status and computer skills are also poor - in general people with disabilities live in social isolation. During the emergency situation their social contacts and communication have been limited significantly; their access to social services like day centres etc. was prohibited and after June 2020 - very limited; those of the persons with disabilities who live in residential services were not allowed to see their friends and relatives as visits were and are still prohibited. The government's guidelines also advised people with disabilities to stay at home and avoid contacts with other people in order to be safe. No evidence or analysis on the topic are publicly available.

⁶⁵ Ministry of Health, Order No РД-01-239 for amending Order No РД01-143 on the prohibition of visits to sports and children's playgrounds and facilities in open and closed public places, the organisation of checkpoints at the entry-exit roads of the district centres ([Заповед № РД-01-239 за изменение на Заповед № РД-01-143 за забрана на посещенията на спортни и детски площадки и съоръжения на открити и закрити обществени места, организиране на контролно-пропускателни пунктове на входно-изходните пътища на областните центрове](#)), 26 April 2020.

7 Involuntary detention or treatment

[Article 14 – Liberty and security of person](#)

[Article 15 – Freedom of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment](#)

[Article 16 – Freedom from exploitation, violence and abuse](#)

[Article 17 – Protecting the integrity of the person](#)

7.1 Emergency measures

Data about involuntary detention or involuntary treatment of people with disabilities during the COVID-19 crisis had not been identified.

The ban on visits to residential care services for elderly and people with disabilities, introduced in March 2020, was extended to 14 June 2020. The ban was unconditional and applied to all visitors, including family members and relatives.⁶⁶ Since then, the visits have been allowed only as an exception and with the permission of the directors of the institutions/services during the period between August 2020 and the present time.⁶⁷

The European Committee for the Prevention of Torture visited Bulgaria in August 2020. It noted that “the steps taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the psychiatric hospitals and social care institutions visited by the CPT’s delegation and acknowledges that it certainly remains a serious risk to vulnerable patients and residents. The CPT recommends that the Bulgarian authorities develop a specific and comprehensive strategy which addresses their obligations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in psychiatric hospitals and social care institutions and sets out some elements of such a strategy. Moreover, the Committee recommends that the institution of a State-funded regime of regular PCR testing of all staff (and any psychiatric patient or social care resident who enters or re-enters the establishment) should be given serious consideration.”⁶⁸

Health Inspection Departments and prosecution offices had monitored residential services to check whether anti-epidemic measures are being applied and to perform PCR and antigen testing.

⁶⁶ Ministry of Health, *Order No РД-01-277 on introduction of temporary anti-epidemic measures (Заповед № РД-01-277 за въвеждане на временни противоепидемични мерки)*, 26 May 2020.¹⁰⁰ Hospital Index (*Индекс на болниците*) (2020), ‘15% with a problem accessing a doctor during a pandemic’ (*‘15 % с проблем с достъпа до лекар по време на пандемията*), press release, 1 June 2020.

⁶⁷ Ministry of Health, *Order РД-01-489 on introduction of temporary anti-epidemic measures*, 31 August 2020, available in Bulgarian at: https://www.mh.government.bg/media/filer_public/2020/08/31/rd-01-489.pdf, *Order No РД-01-611 on introduction of temporary anti-epidemic measures*, 22 October 2020, available in Bulgarian at: https://www.mh.government.bg/media/filer_public/2020/10/22/zapoved_merki_izvanredna_epidemi_4na_obstanovka_22_10_20.pdf.

⁶⁸ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, Report to the Bulgarian Government on the visit to Bulgaria carried out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) from 10 to 21 August 2020, Executive summary, published on 2 December 2020, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/1680a090b8>.

7.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

According to the official COVID-19 information web portal, the following measures had been introduced affecting people in institutional living:

- The terms of validity of the issued orders for placement in specialized institutions and community-based residential social services, which expire after 1 March 2020, are officially extended until 31 December 2020.
- Residential social services, institutions for the elderly and people with disabilities in the country continue to be restricted to visitors and closed for new placements. They have suspended the placement of new users and only in exceptional cases is this allowed in cases of clearly proven urgency, which must be explicitly reasoned.
- Information about already accommodated users can be obtained only from the directors of the services and from the municipalities that are providers as the visits are allowed as an exception only.
- Visits to outsiders are allowed in the specialized institutions and the residential social services for children and adults as an exception and at the discretion of the director of the institution, in compliance with the introduced anti-epidemic measures and after presentation of a declaration by the visitor that he/she is not in contact with infectious patients, has no signs of acute respiratory disease and will comply with the anti-epidemic measures introduced on the territory of the institution.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ COVID-19 official web portal, *Social measures for people with disabilities*, <https://coronavirus.bg/bg/merki/socialni>.

8 Violence, exploitation or abuse

Article 16 – Freedom from violence, exploitation and abuse

8.1 Emergency measures

No such laws and policies had been identified in Bulgaria.

8.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

Evidence about domestic violence, institutional violence and the disability hate crime experienced by people with disabilities since COVID-19 has not been identified in Bulgaria. However, concerns about domestic violence against women have been raised in May 2020 by Dubravka Šimonović, the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women in her report about Bulgaria.⁷⁰ According to the Centre for the Study of Democracy (Bulgarian NGO), Bulgaria is among those countries where cases of domestic violence increased⁷¹ in the first half of 2020, compared to previous years. At the end of May, it was reported⁷² that eight women were killed by their partners since the start of the state of emergency on 13 March, whilst hotlines for reporting violence and seeking assistance received a noticeably larger number of calls. However, worryingly, the number and the capacity of shelters in the country remains small. Furthermore, Bulgaria still 'lacks a mechanism for the systematic collection of statistical data or analysis of data and cases related to violence against women, femicide or gender-related killing of women and girls'.⁷³ The little information related to violence does not mention women with disabilities as all.

⁷⁰ UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, *Visit to Bulgaria Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences* (from 14 to 21 October 2019), 19 May 2020, available at: <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/44/52/Add.1>.

⁷¹ WHO/Europe, *Bulgaria launches new national programme amid pandemic on violence against women and children*, press release, 13 May 2020, available at: <https://www.euro.who.int/en/countries/bulgaria/news2/news/2020/5/bulgaria-launches-new-national-programme-amid-pandemic-on-violence-against-women-and-children>.

⁷² Balkan Insight, *Bulgaria Charity Warns Domestic Violence Worsening in Pandemic*, 28 May 2020, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/05/28/bulgaria-charity-warns-domestic-violence-worsening-in-pandemic>.

⁷³ D-r Gergana Tzvetkova, *Domestic violence against women in Bulgaria – before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic*, 6 July 2020, available at: <https://csd.bg/blog/blogpost/2020/07/06/domestic-violence-against-women-in-bulgaria-before-during-and-after-the-covid-19-pandemic/>.

9 Independent living

Article 19 – Living independently and being included in the community

9.1 Emergency measures

In Bulgaria, the measures related to access to goods and services for older people and people with disabilities include priority access to grocery stores and pharmacies, and delivery of goods through the “patronage” service. The “patronage” service is provided by municipalities and includes delivery of food, medicines and other essential goods to older people and people with disabilities (paid with their own money), affected by the anti-epidemic measures for which the government allocated BGN 45 million (approximately EUR 22 5 million) for supporting municipalities in expanding the service and hiring additional personnel.

Priority access to grocery stores and pharmacies is granted to all persons aged 60+ and applies every day between 8:30 a.m. and 10:30 a.m.⁷⁴ During this time of the day, persons below the age of 60 were not allowed to visit grocery stores and pharmacies.

Since March 2020, the hotline operated by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy started providing psychological support to older people and persons with disabilities, affected by the anti-epidemic measures. Consultations are provided free of charge every day from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.⁷⁵

No specific measures were implemented to increase access to the use of digital tools and technologies by older people/people with disabilities. No targeted measures for people with dementia were implemented either.

9.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

The Personal Aid Act (providing for personal assistance for people with disabilities) was amended to restrict the categories of people with disabilities eligible to personal assistance and the government allocated BGN 214 million for 2021 to ensure that 80 000 children and adults with disabilities would have personal assistants. The following groups are eligible for such assistance: adults with certified permanent disabilities with 70 to 100 % degree of disability and children with 50 and over 50 % degree of disability with the right to assistance, as well as children with 90 and over 90 % degree of disability without the right to assistance. And it was earmarked when the Personal Aid Act was adopted that all persons with disabilities could have access to personal assistance. The amendments to the Personal Aid Act introduce a commitment for the mayors of municipalities to monitor the quality of personal assistance when exercising control. This will increase the autonomy of people who use such a service and strengthen the prevention of the risk of abuse.

⁷⁴ Ministry of Health, Order No РД-01-277 on introduction of temporary anti-epidemic measures (*Заповед № РД-01-277 за въвеждане на временни противоепидемични мерки*), 26 May 2020.

⁷⁵ Dnevnik.bg, ‘The hotline 0800 88 001 will also provide psychological support’, 23 March 2020, available at: https://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2020/03/23/4044646_edinniat_nomer0800_88_001_shte_predost_avia_i.

Another BGN 85 million was allocated for other types of assistants for people with disabilities under the Social Services Act.⁷⁶ These allocations have no relation to COVID-19.

⁷⁶ Bulgarian Industrial Association, *The Council of Ministers allocated BGN 81 million for two of the measures related to COVID-19*, 9 November 2020, available at: <https://www.bia-bg.com/news/view/27828/>.

10 Access to habilitation and rehabilitation

[Article 26 – Habilitation and rehabilitation](#)

10.1 Emergency measures

No specific emergency measures on access by people with disabilities to habilitation and rehabilitation support and services have been introduced. As they are part of other services, the measures listed in this report about medical establishments, educational establishments and social services applied to them also.

10.2 Impact of COVID-19 and/or emergency measures adopted

In Bulgaria, habilitation and rehabilitation services are provided by medical establishments, community-based social service providers or educational centres. Access to these types of services was very limited during most of 2020. Some people with disabilities had received rehabilitation in their homes during the state of emergency, according to unofficial information of NGOs. No disability-related data is officially available in this regard.

11 Access to justice

[Article 13 - Access to justice](#)

11.1 Emergency measures

The special law on the measures during the state of emergency temporarily suspended the procedural deadlines in all judicial, arbitration and enforcement proceedings with the exception of criminal proceedings, European Arrest Warrant proceedings and proceedings related to coercive measures. The amendments to the law, adopted in April 2020, defined more precisely these exceptions by adding a separate annex containing an exhaustive list of all judicial proceedings for which the suspension did not apply. The amendments also authorised the courts to hold distance hearings, including in criminal proceedings, provided that the direct virtual participation of all parties is duly ensured.⁷⁷ In practice, many courts started using Skype for holding open hearings on cases that were not suspended and could not be postponed. The practice was first introduced for hearing criminal cases but was gradually utilised in civil cases as well.⁷⁸

In Bulgaria, the operation of the courts during the state of emergency was organised according to the decision of the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) (Висш съдебен съвет, ВСС) adopted on 15 March 2020.⁷⁹ The decision suspended all court cases with the exception of those specifically listed in it, introduced mandatory submission of documentation by post or electronic means of communication, instructed the courts to provide information on pending cases only by phone or electronically, restricted the access to court buildings and obliged the courts to send subpoenas and other case related documentation only by phone or electronically. On 14 April 2020, following the amendments to the law on the measures during the state of emergency, the list of cases exempted from suspension was revised to correspond to the list of exceptions included in the newly adopted annex to law.⁸⁰ On 28 April 2020, the obligation of courts to send subpoenas and other case-related documentation only by phone or electronically was reviewed and conventional handling was permitted for cases, in which the party had not provided a phone number or an electronic address.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Parliament, Measures and Activities during the State of Emergency Declared by Decision of the National Assembly of 13 March 2020 Act, 24 March 2020, available at: <https://dv.parliament.bg/DVWeb/showMaterialDV.jsp?idMat=147150>.

⁷⁸ 24 Chasa (24 часа) (2020), 'First civil case on Skype in the Sofia Regional Court since 13 March' (*Първо гражданско дело по скайп в районния съд в София от 13 март*), 24 Chasa, 29 April 2020.

⁷⁹ Supreme Judicial Council, Brief protocol No 9 of the extraordinary session of the Judicial College of the Supreme Judicial Council held on 15 March 2020 (*Кратък протокол № 9 от извънредно заседание на съдийската колегия на Висшия съдебен съвет, проведено на 15 март 2020 г.*), 15 March 2020.

⁸⁰ Supreme Judicial Council, Brief protocol No. 13 of the distance videoconference session of the Judicial College of the Supreme Judicial Council held on 14 April 2020 (*Кратък протокол № 13 от дистанционно заседание чрез видеоконферентна връзка на съдийската колегия на Висшия съдебен съвет, проведено на 14 април 2020 г.*), 14 April 2020.

⁸¹ Supreme Judicial Council, Brief protocol No 14 of the distance videoconference session of the Judicial College of the Supreme Judicial Council held on 28 April 2020 (*Кратък протокол № 14 от дистанционно заседание чрез видеоконферентна връзка на съдийската колегия на Висшия съдебен съвет, проведено на 28 април 2020 г.*), 28 April 2020.

The suspension of all court cases was lifted on 13 May 2020, when the state of emergency ceased to apply and was replaced by an emergency epidemic situation. On 12 May 2020, the Judges' College (Съдийска колегия) of the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) adopted detailed rules on the operation of the courts during the new situation.⁸² The rules governed the physical access to court buildings, the implementation of anti-epidemic measures within the buildings (disinfection, ventilation, protective masks, protective screens), the publicity of hearings and access of journalists (including broadcasting of cases on a screen in front of the courtroom or in a separate room, online streaming or full audio and/or video recording), the scheduling of hearings (at longer intervals between), the holding of hearings online, the electronic communication (where possible) with participants in proceedings (sending and receiving documentation by e-mail, summoning participants by phone or e-mail), the physical distancing between judges and court clerks, etc. With the same rules, the Judges' College of the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) informed the Inspectorate of the Supreme Judicial Council (ISJC) that, due the temporary suspension of cases during the state of emergency and anti-epidemic measures after its end, most of the cases were moving at a slower pace and were going to be completed outside the statutory deadlines. No information is available about the impact of these measures on older people and people with disabilities. No specific emergency rules regarding access to justice of these two groups of people have been adopted.

11.2 Impact of COVID-19 crisis

No specific evidence about the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on access to justice for people with disabilities have been identified.

⁸² Supreme Judicial Council, Rules and measures for the operation of the courts during a pandemic ([Правила и мерки за работа на съдилищата в условията на пандемия](#)), 12 May 2020.

12 Access to education

[Article 24 – Education](#)

12.1 Emergency measures

In Bulgaria, educational activities were suspended on 6 March 2020 by an order of the Minister of Health.⁸³ The order introduced a mandatory suspension of educational activities in schools, recommended a suspension in universities, and increased hygienic and sanitary measures in kindergartens (mandatory medical examination at the entrance and regular cleaning and disinfection of premises).

At the end of March 2020 the Measures and Activities during the State of Emergency Declared by Decision of the National Assembly of 13 March 2020 Act introduced online education for all students in day, evening, part-time, individual, combined and dual form of education including for special schools. Teachers were obliged to deliver the classes from their homes or another appropriate place outside the school using the necessary technological equipment and school directors were obliged to manage and supervise the process, also using information and communication technologies.⁸⁴

Throughout April, all universities, schools and other educational institutions and organisations remained closed. The measure was introduced on 13 March 2020 and as of the end of April was still valid.⁸⁵ The Minister of Education and Science obliged all schools to replace in person classes with electronic distance learning to ensure continuity of education.⁸⁶ Each school was allowed to choose how to organise the distance learning considering the age of its students, the internet connectivity, the available resources and the digital skills of teachers and students. At the beginning of April 2020, the Minister of Education and Science reported that 89 % of all students were effectively included in the e-learning process, while for the remaining 11 %, as well as for students with learning difficulties, the authorities were discussing the option of holding additional in-person educational activities in June and July.⁸⁷

At the end of April 2020, helplines for providing psychological support to teachers, students and parents were opened at some of the Regional Centres for Supporting the Process of Inclusive Education (RCSPIE).⁸⁸

⁸³ Ministry for Health (2020), Order No РД-01-114/05.03.2020 ([Заповед № РД-01-114/05.03.2020](#)), 5 March 2020.

⁸⁴ Parliament, Measures and Activities during the State of Emergency Declared by Decision of the National Assembly of 13 March 2020 Act, 24 March 2020, Article 13, available at: <https://dv.parliament.bg/DVWeb/showMaterialDV.jsp?idMat=147150>.

⁸⁵ Ministry of Health, Order No РД-01-124 introducing anti-epidemic measures in the country ([Заповед № РД-01-124 за въвеждане на противоепидемични мерки в страната](#)), 13 March 2020.

⁸⁶ Ministry of Education and Science, Order No РД09-704 for distance learning in electronic environment ([Заповед РД09-704 от 31.03.2020 - за обучение в електронна среда от разстояние](#)), 31 March 2020.

⁸⁷ Ministry of Education and Science (2020), 'The Ministry of Education and Science with a proposal for new dates for the state graduation exams and the national external evaluation in the case of extended e-learning' (['МОН с проект за нови дати за ДЗИ и НВО при удължено обучение в електронна среда'](#)), press release, 2 April 2020.

⁸⁸ Ministry of Education and Science (2020), 'Psychologists will provide psychological support to students, teachers and parents' (['Психолози ще оказват психологическа подкрепа на ученици, учители и родители'](#)), press release, 28 April 2020.

In April 2020, private donors donated devices to children in disadvantaged situation to facilitate their inclusion in e-learning. The Social Assistance Agency (SAA) reported the receipt of a donation of 104 tablets, which were distributed among children accommodated in family-type residential services across the country.^{89 90} For children not in social services, the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) had received and distributed a donation of 500 tablets made by one of the national mobile service providers.

At the end of April 2020, the media published a detailed analysis of the electronic distance learning one and a half months after its introduction. It pointed out that the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) had provided 461 schools in the country with a total of 1,986 laptops, 500 of which were equipped with My-Fi devices for internet access with prepaid three-month unlimited access. According to the analysis, the major problem, which remained unsolved, was the provision of devices and internet connection to students. The Ministry of Education and Science (MES) reported that it had reached an agreement with mobile operators for providing internet connection to students at preferential prices and had changed the rules for school financing, allowing schools to cover the expenses for internet of students whose families did not have the resources to pay for internet at their homes.⁹¹

In May, the Amendment to the Health Act introduced a number of changes to rules on education, laid down in the special law governing the measures during the state of emergency.⁹² The online education of students enrolled in full-time, part-time, individual and combined form of education and in a dual system of education, as well as support for personal development was extended until the end of the second school term of the academic year 2019-2020. Education included distance learning, self-training, ongoing feedback on learning outcomes and assessment. After the end of the state of emergency on 13 May 2020, the presence of children and students in preschool institutions and schools was allowed only for carrying out urgent activities related to the completion of the current school year or the preparation of the next one, provided that it was impossible to carry out these activities remotely in an electronic environment and/or presence in school was required. In all other cases, group presence of children and students on the territory of pre-school institutions and schools was permitted only upon notification of the Minister of Education and Science. In all cases, in which the presence of children and students in the school was allowed, school directors were obliged to organise the activities in compliance with the measures prescribed by the Minister of Health, prevent the gathering of children, students or parents, and ensure that children were present with the consent of their parents.

⁸⁹ Social Assistance Agency (2020), '104 children from accommodation centres will be able to study remotely with donated tablets' (['104 деца от Центрове за настаняване ще могат да учат дистанционно с дарени таблети'](#)), press release, 16 April 2020.

⁹⁰ 24 Chasa (24 часа) (2020), 'Vivacom donates 500 tablets to MES for distance learning' (['Виваком дарява 500 таблета за дистанционно обучение на МОН'](#)), 24 Chasa, 18 March 2020.

⁹¹ Georgieva, S. (Георгиева, С.) (2020), 'For thousands of children, e-learning is on paper' (['За хиляди деца електронното обучение е на хартия'](#)), Sega, 1 May 2020.

⁹² Amendment to the Health Act ([Закон за изменение и допълнение на Закона за здравето](#)), 13 May 2020, § 12. Ministry of Health, Order No РД-01-277 on introduction of temporary anti-epidemic measures ([Заповед № РД-01-277 за въвеждане на временни протиепидемични мерки](#)), 26 May 2020.

Physical presence in universities remained suspended. Access was allowed only for carrying out urgent activities (including practical workshops and exams) related to the completion of the current academic year or the preparation of the next one, provided that it was impossible to carry out these activities remotely in an electronic environment and/or physical presence was required.⁹³ Nurseries and kindergartens were reopened on 22 May 2020.⁹⁴ The Ministry of Health (MH) issued detailed instructions on the measures that had to be implemented in nurseries and kindergartens to protect the health of staff and children, including smaller number of children in one group (maximum 20 children), physical distancing between groups, staff members and parents, re-organisation of entry to allow a minimum distance of two meters between families, organisation of more activities outdoors (depending on weather conditions), sanitary measures (ventilation, disinfection, cleaning of premises, furniture, tableware and toys, preparation and serving of food, etc.). The instructions also included a separate protocol for reaction in case of suspected or established case of COVID-19 in the kindergarten or nursery.⁹⁵

Higher education institutions had taken further measures to respond to the COVID-19 situation. Some combined auditorium lectures and practice-based courses with online learning, making use of the digital resources available online and the various digital platforms. Face to face meetings were maintained for smaller group-based learning. The Ministry of Education and Science (MES) prepared a national programme on further qualification and competences upgrading for work in digital environment to help the professionals to improve further their personal digital skills. In those higher education institutions, in which online learning was not possible, the academic year was extended, with different options offered to the students to support them in catching up with their assignments and duties.

12.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

UNICEF-Bulgaria commissioned research about the impact of COVID-19 on inclusive education of children with disabilities during the state of emergency.⁹⁶ Below are the findings from the research.

According to the research, 63 % of the education professionals (teachers, speech therapists, psychologists who work with children with special educational needs) have conducted distance learning with children with special educational needs (SEN), 16 % worked remotely, but not regularly, while 21 % have stopped working during this period. Only 38.8 % of the professionals working in the field of inclusive education have continued their work online with all children with whom they have worked before and 42.1 % worked with more than half of the children, while 19.1 % - with less than half.

⁹³ Ministry of Health, Order No РД-01-277 on introduction of temporary anti-epidemic measures (*Заповед № РД-01-277 за въвеждане на временни протиепидемични мерки*), 26 May 2020.

⁹⁴ Ministry of Health, Order No РД-01-272 on introduction of temporary anti-epidemic measures (*Заповед № РД-01-272 за въвеждане на временни протиепидемични мерки*), 20 May 2020.

⁹⁵ Bulgaria, Ministry of Health, Measures for organising the activities in kindergartens and nurseries after the restoration of the admission of children (*Мерки за организиране на дейностите в детските градини и детските ясли след възстановяване на приема на деца*), 20 May 2020.

⁹⁶ Global Matrix research, ordered by UNICEF (May-June 2020): Focus on Inclusive Education, available in Bulgarian at: <https://www.unicef.org/bulgaria/media/9251/file>. The survey was conducted among groups of teachers, students, parents, representatives of local authorities, experts in Regional Educational Departments, educational mediators and specialists in inclusive education.

66.7 % of the surveyed professionals conducted telephone consultations with the parents, and 63 % worked through online meeting platforms in real time. In the villages, home visits were more frequent, and in the capital - communication was kept by e-mail with the parents. Some of the professionals did not have the necessary resources - equipment, internet and a suitable place to work in their home.

The professionals who most often had difficulties in adapting their work to distance learning are speech therapists and psychologists working with children with special educational needs (SEN). The main reason why these professionals did not continue to work remotely with the children they assist is that this form of education is not suitable for children with SEN. The other reason given is that parents of children with SEN cannot take the time to provide additional support to children in conducting online lessons. According to the experts, children with SEN often do not have the necessary digital skills to implement online activities and easily lose concentration in online work. 39.5 % of the professionals find the main shortcomings in the fact that their working methods are inapplicable in conditions of remote work. 27.8 % of the respondents believe that the main difficulty is that they find it hard to monitor the progress of the children they work with. They are of the opinion that the remote form of work has a negative impact on the social skills and the emotional development of children with SEN. Resource teachers are the most skeptical of the whole process and much more often than others say they would not continue with distance learning if they had to make the decision. The statistical distribution also shows that those working with younger children are more likely than others to think that there is nothing they like about this approach to work. Experts are of the opinion that, after the end of the state of emergency, it is most likely that there will be a need for changes in the curriculum in order to make up for the lost knowledge (45.3 %).

Half of the parents of children with SEN do not know how to be useful to their children in the learning process and fail to pay enough attention and support their children in learning. Only 20 % of the parents of children in kindergartens feel fully prepared to support their children during distance learning and 25 % of parents distrust the quality of the distance learning process. 32.3 % of the respondents indicated that according to them, the mental state of the children is somewhat worse than before, 35.5 % state that there is no such change for them, and a little over 20 % think that it is somewhat better than before.

In October, the Bulgarian Ombudsman sent an official letter to the Ministry of Education and Science calling for special measures to ensure equal participation in the e-learning process of children with special educational needs.⁹⁷

She underlined that distance learning creates difficulties for all children with special educational needs and that children, resource teachers and professionals should be provided with the necessary resources to conduct the most effective interaction in an electronic environment, which will lead to an increase in the capacity of schools to provide inclusive education of students with special educational needs.

⁹⁷ Ombudsman, The Ombudsman Diana Kovacheva asked the Ministry of Education and Science to introduce measures for the online education of children with special educational needs, 14 October 2020, available at: <https://www.ombudsman.bg/news/5399?page=4#middleWrapper>.

13 Working and employment

[Article 27 – Work and employment](#)

13.1 Emergency measures

In Bulgaria, restriction of work was never implemented as a mandatory measure and the concept of ‘essential workers’ was therefore not defined and applied in practice. Since the beginning of the state of emergency, employers were instructed to introduce, as far as possible, distance working for their employees, or, where this was not possible, to apply anti-epidemic measures in the workplace.⁹⁸ The minimum set of measures to be applied by employers was listed in an order issued by the Minister of Labour and Social Policy at the beginning of April 2020. These measures included: mandatory provision of emergency training to employees, with a focus on limiting the spread of COVID-19 and providing up-to-date information on infection risks, including providing appropriate instructions, information materials and guidance on using reliable sources of information; establishment of a security clearance and non-admission of employees, as well as visitors, with symptoms of contagious diseases, introduction of rules to minimise direct contacts both between employees and between them and visitors and, where possible, keeping a distance of not less than one to one and a half meters, compulsory cleaning and disinfection of workplaces, sanitary facilities and rest and eating places (at least twice during the working day/work shift), provision of the necessary conditions for observing the personal hygiene of the workers (running hot water, detergents, napkins and disposable towels, disinfectants); ensuring good respiratory hygiene in the workplace by regularly ventilating the premises; provision of the necessary personal and collective means of protection of workers (protective masks, gloves); disinfection and ventilation of vehicles after each service, when used for official transport, minimising the number of employees in the vehicle and providing them with protective equipment; temporary suspension from work of employees⁹⁹ with flu-like symptoms or employees not using the personal protective equipment provided to them.¹⁰⁰ At the end of April, the General Labour Inspectorate Executive Agency (GLI EA) reported more than 1 500 established violations of anti-epidemic measures, the majority of which were related to failure of employers to provide the mandatory emergency training.¹⁰¹

In Bulgaria, the majority of socioeconomic measures in the area of employment consisted of financial support provided by the state to persons whose employment was affected by the state of emergency. The main such measure was a compensation scheme for covering a share of 60 % of the remuneration of employees, who were not

⁹⁸ Ministry of Health, Order No РД-01-124 introducing anti-epidemic measures in the country ([Заповед № РД-01-124 за въвеждане на противоепидемични мерки в страната](#)), 13 March 2020.

⁹⁹ According to Article 199 of the Labour Code, employers may temporarily suspend from work employees who report to work in a condition preventing them from performing their tasks. For the period of suspension employees do not receive remuneration.

¹⁰⁰ Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Order No РД01-219 on introducing measures to prevent the risk of COVID-19 outbreak ([Заповед № РД01-219 за мерките за превенция на риска от разпространение на COVID-19](#)), 2 April 2020.

¹⁰¹ General Labour Inspectorate Executive Agency, ‘The control bodies of the Labour Inspectorate found registered unemployed persons going to work’ ([‘Контролните органи на Инспекцията по труда установиха регистрирани безработни да полагат труд’](#)), press release, 30 April 2020.

dismissed by their employers during the state of emergency. The scheme was envisaged in the special law on the measures during the state of emergency¹⁰² and the payment of the compensations was done according to a government regulation laying down the eligibility criteria and the application procedure.¹⁰³ On 22 April 2020, the government reported the first results of the implementation of the scheme: 4 445 employers had submitted applications for covering the remuneration of 61 337 employees, and 715 applications for 11 996 employees were already approved.¹⁰⁴ Another financial support measure was a one-off social assistance allowance of BGN 375 (approximately EUR 190) envisaged for parents of children up to 12 years of age, who had been on unpaid leave for at least 20 days because of their inability to work from home during the state of emergency.¹⁰⁵

13.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

The present research had not identified any evidence about the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on work and employment for people with disabilities.

¹⁰² Measures and Activities during the State of Emergency Declared by Decision of the National Assembly of 13 March 2020 Act 24 March 2020.

¹⁰³ Council of Ministers, Decree No. 55 of 30 March 2020 laying down the conditions and procedure for payment of compensation to employers in order to preserve the employment of workers and employees in a state of emergency, announced by a decision of the National Assembly of 13 March 2020, 1 April 2020, <https://dv.parliament.bg/DVWeb/showMaterialDV.jsp?idMat=147260>.

¹⁰⁴ Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (2020), 'More than 61,000 employees will retain their jobs with the measure 60/40' (*'Над 61 000 работници и служители ще запазят работните си места с мярката 60/40'*), press release, 22 April 2020.

¹⁰⁵ Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (2020), 'BGN 375 one-off allowance for parents on unpaid leave' (*'375 лева еднократна помощ за родители в неплатен отпуск'*), press release, 11 April 2020.

14 Good practices and recommendations

14.1 Examples of good practice

- For people with disabilities a separate section in a uniform information web portal was developed to inform them about the decisions related to the terms of their disability certificates, disability pensions and individual assessments, the possibilities to receive warm food at home and social benefits and to prolong their free passes for driving and parking.¹⁰⁶
- At the end of March 2020, the Minister of Labour and Social Policy announced that the hotline operated by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP) started providing psychological support to older people and persons with disabilities. Consultations were provided free of charge every day from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.¹⁰⁷
- In April the government allocated BGN 45 million (approximately EUR 22,5 million) for supporting municipalities in expanding the service and hiring additional personnel to deliver food, medicine and other essential goods to older people and persons with disabilities affected by the anti-epidemic measures.¹⁰⁸ The estimated number of 12,000 new beneficiaries were to be included in the services, in addition to the 13 000 persons already covered by the programme. The application procedure was launched on 30 March 2020 and remained open until 28 April 2020.
- In May 2020, the special measures for persons with disabilities, introduced during the state of emergency, continued to apply after its replacement with an emergency epidemic situation. These measures included, among other things, remote performance (by telephone or e-mail) of individual needs assessment of people with disabilities, home delivery of food, medicine and essential products through the social care service, home delivery of food for lunch through the 'Hot Lunch' programme, extension of the validity of disability assessment certificates (and of the payment of related social assistance allowances), ex-officio recalculation of pensions of working pensioners, purchase of medicines only by presenting a prescription book (without presenting a written prescription by a medical doctor), submission of social assistance applications by e-mail or registered mail, etc.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Special section with information for people with disabilities during COVID-19 crisis is available at: <https://coronavirus.bg/bg/az-sum/litse-uvrejdania>.

¹⁰⁷ Dnevnik.bg, 'The hotline 0800 88 001 will also provide psychological support, 23 March 2020, available at: https://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2020/03/23/4044646edinniat_nomer_0800_88_001_shte_predostavia_i.

¹⁰⁸ Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (2020), 'The patronage care for older people and people with disabilities will be expanded by BGN 45 million from the Development of Human Resources Operational Programme', press release, 26 April 2020, available in Bulgarian at: <https://www.mlsp.government.bg/s-45-mln-ly>.

¹⁰⁹ For the full set of socio-economic measures, which continued to apply after the end of the state of emergency, see the [section for persons with disabilities](#) of the COVID-19 Uniform Information Portal.

- At the end of April 2020, helplines for providing psychological support to teachers, students and parents were opened at some of the Regional Centres for Supporting the Process of Inclusive Education (RCSPIE).¹¹⁰

14.2 Recommendations

Three civil society organizations working in the field of protection of the rights of people with disabilities requested a meeting with the Minister of Health on the occasion of the introduced measures to combat the spread of COVID-19. These are the Community of Bridges, the Civic Initiative "Team Laikuchka" and the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee. In their letter to the Minister, the organizations stated that the ministry introduced anti-epidemic measures without taking into account the special situation of people with disabilities and without providing special measures for them. Due to this circumstance, the organizations emphasize, the measures are much more severe for people with disabilities and their relatives than for other people. They point out that even without restrictive measures, these people do not have access to most public spaces, sites and institutions, but the introduction of measures without special provisions for people with disabilities further exacerbates this situation.¹¹¹ According to the NGOs, in the period March-April 2020, when some restrictions on movement were imposed, many people with psycho-social disabilities have severely regressed, as their specific need for physical activity and accessible environment was not recognized and understood, as well as the objective impossibility for some of them to wear face masks. In addition to the deterioration of the objective condition of the disabled person, this also leads to an overall deterioration in the well-being of his/her family, due to the need for additional care and costs, which are often unaffordable.

In its statement of April 2020, the Bulgarian Centre for Non-profit Law (BCNL) called on the government to introduce support measures for social enterprises during the pandemic situation, to help them overcome the further marginalization of the people with disabilities who are employed there.¹¹² The NGO describes some worrying tendencies – the activities of the social enterprises are extremely limited during the state of emergency; these enterprises offer jobs to vulnerable persons who have serious disabilities, have difficult social status and were determined as at-risk for COVID-19 while their work process could not be adapted to home office; social enterprises are not profitable and do not have reserve funding. They might be supported to provide food and produce masks and support other people in need in this way. The Centre asked for gathering of the working group dealing with social economy at the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and for elaboration of an emergency plan for economic measures.

¹¹⁰ Ministry of Education and Science (2020), 'Psychologists will provide psychological support to students, teachers and parents' (['Психолози ще оказват психологическа подкрепа на ученици, учители и родители'](#)), press release, 28 April 2020.

¹¹¹ Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, Three human rights organisations request a meeting with the Minister of Health regarding the anti-epidemic measures, 22 October 2020, available in Bulgarian at: <https://www.bghelsinki.org/bg/news/20201022-press-letter-of-people-with-disabilities>.

¹¹² Bulgarian Centre for Non-profit Law, *Statement*, 2 April 2020, <http://bcnl.org/opinions/stanovishte-s-iskane-za-podkrepa-za-sotsialnite-predpriyatiya-v-usloviyata-i-posleditsite-na-covid-19.html>.

In October, the Bulgarian Ombudsman sent an official letter to the Ministry of Education and Science calling for special measures to ensure equal participation in the e-learning process of children with special educational needs.¹¹³

She underlined that distance learning creates difficulties for all children with special educational needs and that children, resource teachers and professionals should be provided with the necessary resources to conduct the most effective interaction in an electronic environment, which will lead to an increase in the capacity of schools to provide inclusive education of students with special educational needs.

14.3 Other relevant evidence

Online monitoring¹¹⁴ of municipal authorities' measures in connection with the COVID-19 crisis showed that the most vulnerable remained the most vulnerable. The research concludes that the specialized institutions for children and adults with disabilities in Bulgaria have faced a much harsher disciplinary regime than other people in the community as users were not allowed any social contacts outside the institutions for over 11 months. Social consultative services (such as day-care and rehabilitation centres) remained closed, but no one thought about the effects this would have on the person with a disability or on family and friends.

¹¹³ Ombudsman, The Ombudsman Diana Kovacheva asked the Ministry of Education and Science to introduce measures for the online education of children with special educational needs, 14 October 2020, available at: <https://www.ombudsman.bg/news/5399?page=4#middleWrapper>.

¹¹⁴ Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, "COVID-19 - Online monitoring of local government measures for the protection of children and adults in specialized institutions and residential services". The research was conducted in two stages, in the period 13 March 2020 – 30 May 2020 and in the period 01 September 2020 – 31 December 2020. In the first stage of the survey 200 municipalities were included, in the second stage - 202 municipalities. Its findings are still not available online.

Annex

Annex 1: Non-exhaustive list of other media reports about COVID-19 cases in institutions/residential services for elderly and persons with disabilities in Bulgaria not mentioned in the report above

Institution/Residential community-based centre	Tested for COVID-19	Staff ill with COVID-19	Users ill with COVID-19	Placed for hospital treatment
Residential institution for people with disabilities – Stara Zagora ¹¹⁵	all	1 orderly 1 rehabilitator	0 users	N/A
Two residential centres for people with intellectual disabilities – Cerova Korja ¹¹⁶	Out of 30 persons staff and 57 users, 22 persons were tested with PCR tests	6 staff members	12 users	1 user, the rest of the infected users were isolated on a separate floor in the residential service building, staff was appointed to take care of them
Residential institution for people with sensory disabilities in Vulchedrum ¹¹⁷	All 24 persons staff and 41 users - with speedy tests, 7 staff members and 3 users were positive, then PCR tests were used	5 staff members with PCR	0 users	N/A

¹¹⁵ Bulgarian National Radio, *Positive cases of COVID were discovered in a residential service for people with disabilities in Stara Zagora*, 23 October 2020, available at: <https://bnr.bg/post/101361970/sluchai-na-koronavirus-v-dom-za-vazrastni-hora-s-uvrejdania-v-stara-zagora>.

¹¹⁶ Novini.bg (2020), *In two residential institutions for people with intellectual disabilities in Cerova korja village 18 persons are with COVID-19*, 24 October 2020, available at: <https://novini.bg/bylgariya/obshtestvo/625749>.

¹¹⁷ Iskra.bg, *Five persons from the staff of the Residential institution for persons with sensory disabilities in Vulchedrum are with COVID-19*, 22 October 2020, available at: <https://www.iskra.bg/covid-19-i-v-doma-za-vazrastni-hora-sas-setivni-uvrezhdania-vav-valchedram/>.

Institution/Residential community-based centre	Tested for COVID-19	Staff ill with COVID-19	Users ill with COVID-19	Placed for hospital treatment
Residential institution for people with disabilities in Kachulka ¹¹⁸	54 positive	42 staff members – orderlies and nurses	12 users – isolated in the centre	N/A
Residential institution for people with disabilities in Dzhurkovo ¹¹⁹	58 tested as of 28 August 2020, 39 users and 25 staff	1 nurse and 4 orderlies	16 users isolated in the centre's building	3 on hospital treatment in Plovdiv
Private residential Service for elderly "St. George" - Varna ¹²⁰	262 users	6 staff – the doctor, 4 nurses and one cleaner	80 users	3 deaths in the service, no hospitalization of users because of the age and the state of immobility of the users, 3 nurses and 3 doctors were placed in the service to take care of the users, the staff doctor was hospitalised
Residential institution for elderly "Vuzrazhdane"- Ruse ¹²¹	215 users	3 staff members as of 23 July	5 users as of 23 July 83 users as of 3 August	3 staff members and 5 users were hospitalized

¹¹⁸ Bulgaria on Air, *An outbreak of Covid-19 at the home for persons with disabilities in Sliven*, 12 October 2020, available at: <https://www.bgonair.bg/a/2-bulgaria/206052-ognishte-na-kovid-19-v-dom-za-litsa-s-uvrezhdaniya-v-sliven>.

¹¹⁹ Actual no., *COVID in the institution for persons with disabilities in the village of Dzhurkovo*, 28 August 2020, available at: https://www.actualno.com/plovdiv/koronavirus-v-doma-za-hora-s-uvrejdaniya-v-selo-djurkovo-news_1494504.html. Regional Prosecution Office had performed a check visit to monitor how the anti-COVID measures are applied.

¹²⁰ Dariknews, *61 new cases of Covid-19 in Varna, outbreak in a nursing home for elderly*, 3 August 2020, available at: <https://dariknews.bg/regioni/varna/61-novi-sluchai-na-covid-19-vyv-varna-ognishte-na-zarazata-v-starcheski-dom-2235543>.

¹²¹ Nova television, *Eight cases of coronavirus in a nursing home for elderly in Ruse*, 23 July 2020, available at: <https://nova.bg/news/view/2020/07/23/294588/%D0%BE%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%BC-%D1%81%D0%BB%D1%83%D1%87%D0%B0%D1%8F-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BA%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81-%D0%B2-%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%87%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8-%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%BC-%D0%B2-%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D0%B5/>; *New death from coronavirus in Vazrazhdane Home in Ruse*, 3 August 2020, available at:

Institution/Residential community-based centre	Tested for COVID-19	Staff ill with COVID-19	Users ill with COVID-19	Placed for hospital treatment
		7 staff members as of 3 August 1 orderly as of 22 August Altogether 10 staff persons were ill between July and September	3 new users as of 22 August Altogether 86 users from July to September were ill	2 users hospitalised on 22 August Altogether 10 users died. Another 8, who are asymptomatic, were isolated in Villa Lipnik in the village of Nikolovo, which belongs to the Municipality of Rousse. 18 of the residents are accommodated in the Caritas Crisis Center, and the remaining 37 on the 4th floor of the home for the elderly. Another five residents are on home leave, one person is hospitalized in the clinic of orthopedics and traumatology

<https://bntnews.bg/news/nov-smarten-sluchai-ot-koronavirus-v-dom-vazrazhdane-v-ruse-1067951news.html>;

Three new infected people in the Home for elderly in Ruse, 22 August 2020, available at:

<https://nova.bg/news/view/2020/08/22/297160/%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%BC%D0%B0-%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B8-%D0%B7%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8-%D0%B2-%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%BC%D0%B0-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B8-%D1%85%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B0-%D0%B2-%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D0%B5>;

10 are the victims of Kovid-19 in the nursing home for elderly in Ruse, 11 September 2020, available at: <https://www.bgonair.bg/a/2-bulgaria/203439-10-sa-zhertvite-na-kovid-19-v-starcheskiya-dom-v-ruse>.

Institution/Residential community-based centre	Tested for COVID-19	Staff ill with COVID-19	Users ill with COVID-19	Placed for hospital treatment
				and there is also one who left the social institution.
Family-type residential centre for people with disabilities in Dve Mogili ¹²²	15 tested	1 staff member	10 users	N/A
Residential institution for elderly "Veneta Boteva" – Veliko turnovo ¹²³	N/A	6 staff members	11 users	N/A
Residential institution for elderly - Kazanluk ¹²⁴	N/A	7 staff members	37 users	N/A
Residential institution for people with physical disabilities – Stara Zagora ¹²⁵	176 tested	N/A	17 users	No, the users were secluded in their rooms
Residential institution for elderly - Yambol ¹²⁶	170 tested	7 staff members	60 users	N/A
		97 staff	341 users	

¹²² Bulgaria on Air, *A home for the elderly in Ruse became the hearth of Kovid-19*, 8 January 2021, available at: <https://www.bgonair.bg/a/2-bulgaria/213983-dom-za-vazrastni-hora-v-ruse-stana-ognishte-na-kovid-19>.

¹²³ Nova Television, *Home for elderly in Veliko Tarnovo - outbreak of coronavirus*, 12 November 2020, available at: <https://nova.bg/news/view/2020/11/12/305341/%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%BC-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B8-%D1%85%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B0-%D0%B2%D1%8A%D0%B2-%D0%B2%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%BE-%D1%82%D1%8A%D1%80%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%BE-%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%89%D0%B5-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BA%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81/>.

¹²⁴ Vesti News, *Outbreak of coronavirus in a nursing home for elderly in Kazanlak*, 19 November 2020, available at: <https://www.vesti.bg/temi-v-razvitie/tema-koronavirus/oshte-edno-ognishte-na-covid-19-v-dom-za-vyazrastni-hora-6117834>.

¹²⁵ Divident, *New cases of K-19 have been confirmed in the homes for elderly in Kazanlak and Stara Zagora*, 19 November 2020, available at: <https://divident.eu/1553/potvurdiha-novi-sluchai-na-k-19-v-domove-za-stari-hora-v-kazanluk-i-stara-zagora/>.

¹²⁶ Vesti News, *Outbreak of coronavirus in a nursing home for elderly in Kazanlak*, 19 November 2020, available at: <https://www.vesti.bg/temi-v-razvitie/tema-koronavirus/oshte-edno-ognishte-na-covid-19-v-dom-za-vyazrastni-hora-6117834>.

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