



CONVENTION
ON THE RIGHTS
OF PERSONS
WITH DISABILITIES



OMBUDSMAN OF THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

MONITORING OF THE UN CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN BULGARIA SUMMARY OF REPORT 2024

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THE CONVENTION

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) is an international human rights treaty of the United Nations (UN) aimed to protect the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities. The Convention does not proclaim new human rights the main motive of the UN for adopting CRPD is the continued discrimination and isolation of people with disabilities, despite the existence of previously adopted international legal instruments.

The text was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 13 December 2006 and opened for signature on 30 March 2007.

On 23 December 2010, the Convention was also ratified by the European Union and on 26 January 2012 the National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria ratified the CRPD.

According to Article 33, para 2 and para 3 of the CRPD States Parties shall, in accordance with their legal and administrative systems, maintain, strengthen, designate or establish within the State Party, a framework, including one or more independent mechanisms, including Civil society, in particular persons with disabilities and their representative organizations, to promote, protect and monitor implementation of the CRPD.

UN CRPD IMPLEMENTATION IN BULGARIA 2024

I. APPLICATION OF THE CONVENTION BY EXECUTIVE BODIES

As in previous reports, this report also contains the findings and recommendations of the Ombudsman on the implementation of the CRPD which are based on inspections and analyses in relation to citizens' complaints, the participation of the institution in public discussions, participation in interdepartmental working groups, also reflecting the activities of government institutions which are responsible directly for the formulation and implementation of policies related to people with disabilities.



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In order to gather the necessary information about the fulfilment of the obligations under the CRPD, letters with questionnaires were sent again to the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the Ministry of Health in their capacity of policy-making and implementing bodies.

FINDINGS:

- The responsible authorities make efforts to overcome the existing problems in specific areas of the rights of people with disabilities.

- The measures taken in the area of employment of people with disabilities are not sufficient to meet the needs and capabilities of all job seekers with disabilities.

- The measures taken to amend the medical examination procedure do not yield the expected and necessary rapid results to overcome the difficulties faced by people with disabilities in examination/re-examination by medical examination authorities and the significant delays in issuing expert decisions.

- Action is taken to improve the organisation of the work of medical examination bodies but not to carry out comprehensive reforms in this area.

- Action is taken to follow up on the final recommendations of the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities regarding women with disabilities but the measures are insufficient to guarantee equality and free exercise of rights under the CRPD.

- The measures to update the lists of assistive devices and medical devices do not contribute to the inclusion of devices that meet the needs of people with disabilities.

- Not enough action is taken to overcome delays in ratifying the Optional Protocol to the CRPD.

Concepts on bringing the Bulgarian legislation in line with CRPD

In response to the need for full implementation of the CRPD, within the implementation period of the Action Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria for the implementation of CRPD (Plan 2015-2020), concepts for changes in the regulatory framework were prepared to ensure the rights of people with disabilities. Detailed information on the question raised was provided in the Ombudsman's 2021 Annual Report

The Action Plan for the implementation of the concluding recommendations to the Republic of Bulgaria by the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2021-2026) does not provide for the development of specific concepts and plans for their implementation within 2023.

In 2023, the First Report on the implemented measures and activities for the period 2021-2022 envisaged in the Action Plan for the implementation of the concluding recommendations addressed to the Republic of Bulgaria by the Committee was prepared.

For the consistent and targeted implementation of the National Disability Strategy 2021-2030, an Action Plan for the period 2023-2024 for the implementation of the Strategy was developed and adopted in 2023.



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Measures taken under the Action Plan for the implementation of the Concluding Recommendations addressed to the Republic of Bulgaria by the UN Committee

The activities to be implemented under the 2023 Action Plan are mainly related to recommendations on the implementation of Article 6 on Women with Disabilities, Article 23 on Respect for Home and Family, Article 24 on Education and Article 26 on Habilitation and Rehabilitation.

Application of Article 6 – women with disabilities

Pursuant to §18 of the Recommendations, point "a" on the insufficient implementation of measures to combat intersectional forms of discrimination, gender-based violence and ill-treatment of women and girls with disabilities in the country, a National Policy on Gender Equality is being implemented, which is supported by the adopted in 2016 Gender Equality Act.

The National Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality for the period 2023-2024 has been developed in accordance with the Gender Equality Act and the National Strategy for the Promotion of Gender Equality 2021-2030, adopted by Decision No. 969 of the Council of Ministers of 30 December 2020. This Action Plan follows the principles, objectives and priorities of the National Strategy and covers the two-year period 2023-2024.

Bulgaria continues to implement its commitments to promote gender equality in line with the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the European Pillar of Social Rights, etc.

On Article 23 "Respect for Home and Family"

In order to create a sustainable policy to increase the human, technical and financial resources at national and local level to provide primary support services for children with disabilities, and in response to § 46 of the Recommendations of the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, a policy to eliminate institutional care for children is being implemented in Bulgaria.

With the adoption of the National Strategy "Vision for the Deinstitutionalization of Children in the Republic of Bulgaria" in 2010, Bulgaria initiated a systematic change towards the abolition of the institutional care model for children and the closure of institutions for children, including children with disabilities.

The process of deinstitutionalization of child care is also supported by the Social Services Act adopted in 2019, which is effective from 01.07.2020.

Mobile services for children with disabilities and chronic diseases are also provided in the children's centre or in the children's home.



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The development of comprehensive policies and measures to ensure comprehensive care and protection of children and comprehensive support to families with children is also at the core of the Action Plan for the implementation of Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 on the establishment of a European Child Guarantee (2030) (adopted by Council of Ministers' Decision No. 879 of 09.11.2022).

The Ministry informs that, in addition to the state budget, the implementation of the plan is expected to receive substantial financial support from the European Social Fund+ through the Human Resources Development Programme and the Education Programme for the period 2021-2027.

Application of Article 24 – "Education"

Following the enactment of the Pre-School and School Education Act in 2016, special schools have adopted new functions that are in line with the inclusive education policy

In order to replace the practice of segregated systems with quality inclusive education; to develop the new functions of special schools aimed at supporting the inclusion of children and pupils with sensory impairments, 5 special schools for pupils with sensory impairments – hearing impaired and visually impaired – are functioning in the system of pre-school and school education in the country, with a total number of 711 children and pupils.

Under the "Education for Tomorrow" project, financed under the Operational Programme "Science and Education for Smart Growth", with the Ministry of Education as the specific beneficiary, funds in the amount of BGN 250,000 are earmarked for the special schools for hearing impaired and visually impaired pupils for the provision of assistive technologies: FM systems, reading cameras, eye-control systems, etc. By the end of 2023, special schools are to be equipped with the envisaged assistive technologies.

In 2023, the now traditional international conference on "Augmentative and Alternative Communication" was held for the fifth time by the Assistive Technology Foundation in partnership with and with support from the Ministry of Education.

Application of Article 26 – "Habilitation and Rehabilitation"

To ensure the long-term vision for the development of the health sector, the strategic goals and priorities, as well as the specific policies for their implementation, the National Health Strategy 2030 was developed and adopted. It addresses the existing challenges related to the health of Bulgarian citizens and the functioning of the Bulgarian health system in order to ensure its sustainability and create conditions for achieving economic growth and social well-being through optimal investments for better health. The overall health sector policy includes programmes set out in the Action Plan 2023-2026 for the implementation of the National Health Strategy 2030. These aim to modernize and develop the long-term care, rehabilitation and geriatric care system. This is in line with Paragraph 56 of the Committee's Recommendations.



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Application of Article 27 – "Work and Employment"

Activities related to addressing the limited employment opportunities of people with disabilities are implemented in a phased and targeted manner.

Under the National Programme for Training and Employment of Persons with Permanent Disabilities, priority is given to persons with and above 71% reduced working capacity; persons with military disabilities; persons with sensory disabilities; persons with mental disabilities. In 2023, the Programme provided employment to 1,468 persons, with 494 unemployed persons with permanent disabilities included in new employment. On average, 176 persons were employed per month. The State budget funds spent amounted to BGN 15,672,901.

Under Article 51, paragraph 2 of the Employment Promotion Act employers are encouraged to create jobs for unemployed persons with permanent disabilities.

Under Article 52 of the Employment Promotion Act to encourage employers to create full-time or part-time jobs for unemployed persons with permanent disabilities. In 2023, the employment of 45 persons with permanent disabilities was secured, with 1 person with a permanent disability newly employed.

The employability of the unemployed is improved by including them in a dual training system (training through work under Article 46a of the Employment Promotion Act).

As a result, and despite a number of challenges faced by persons from vulnerable groups on the labour market, 6,352 persons with disabilities found employment in 2023. During the year, with the active support of the labour offices, 5,105 people with disabilities started work on the primary market.

To improve the general digital skills of inactive and unemployed persons, including young people, by involving them in digital competence trainings, a "Digital Skills" operation is foreseen under HRDP 2021-2027.

Under the National Programme for Employment of Persons with Disabilities, following the call for proposals of employers/recruitment bodies, 38 projects were funded in 2023. 127 jobs for people with permanent disabilities were created, adjusted and adapted, which represents a 2.5-fold increase compared to the previous year. The total amount of funding allocated is BGN 1,700,000, which is 5 times more than in the previous year.

Under the Programme for Start-up and Development of Self-employment for People with Disabilities in 2023, two calls for projects were held. 18 projects of people with disabilities for starting and developing self-employment were financed, for a total amount of BGN 330,817.37. 18 new jobs were created.

Until February 2024, 4 projects under the Programme for the financing of projects for the establishment of sheltered employment centres are still being implemented. In 2023, 1 project was funded, worth BGN 700,724.04.



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Under the Programme for financing targeted projects of specialised enterprises and cooperatives of people with disabilities, contracts were concluded with 13 beneficiaries in 2023 for projects with a social focus, worth BGN 462,746.

The Register of Specialized Enterprises and Cooperatives of Persons with Disabilities, which is maintained by the Agency for People with Disabilities, lists 197 enterprises and cooperatives employing about 1,757 people, of whom 863 (49%) are persons with disabilities. In 2023, 6 new specialised enterprises were registered.

The Ministry informs that a new Employment Promotion Act is being developed

Establishing a State Agency for People with Disabilities

The People with Disabilities Act provides for the establishment of the State Agency for Persons with Disabilities (SAPD), a legal entity under the budget of the Council of Ministers with its seat in Sofia, to coordinate the implementation of the policy on the rights of persons with disabilities.

In implementation of a specific measure of the Programme of Governance for the period June 2023 – December 2024, an inter-ministerial working group in the MLSP is developing a Concept and proposals for normative changes to increase the effectiveness of disability rights policy (the Concept). In order to achieve efficiency as a result of the envisaged structural change for the succession of APA to a state agency, the relevant functions and powers need to be clearly defined. The need to amend the APA to regulate the status and functions of the SAPA to serve as a cross-sectoral platform for coordination in the development and implementation of policies, programmes, legislative and institutional changes pertaining to persons with disabilities is recognized.

An inter-ministerial working group was established by Order of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy to develop proposals for amendments to the People with Disabilities Act on the conversion of the AHU to the SAHU.

International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health in needs assessment

In recent years, the MoH, in collaboration with the MLSP, has taken steps to develop a new model of disability expertise, applying an approach based on the World Health Organization's (WHO) International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF), focusing on functionality, potential and social inclusion measures for people with disabilities. The activities in this direction are implemented within the project BG05M90P001-3.010 "Expertise of the working capacity", financed under the Operational Programme "Human Resources Development" 2014-2020 with the beneficiary MLSP and MoH and National Social Security Institute as partners. As a result of the project activities, Bulgaria has an official translation of the ICF and a Guide for the Implementation of the WHO Disability Assessment Schedule (WHODAS 2.0).

The methodology for carrying out an individual assessment of support needs for people with disabilities, adopted by the Council of Ministers, is based on the bio-psycho-social model in line with the ICF.



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The Concept of Work Capacity Assessment under preparation highlights the fundamental proposals for normative changes and guidelines for the subsequent development of disability policy to improve its effectiveness.

The need for changes in the People with Disabilities Act to regulate an additional component in the individual assessment to assess the person's capacity for work, according to their residual functionality, is recognised. This should lead to a change in the Individual Needs Assessment Methodology.

National Map of Social Services

The proposal for the National Map of Social Services has been developed by the APA in accordance with the Regulation on the planning of social services based on the analyses of the needs for social services prepared by the municipalities and the proposals for the planning in each municipality of the social services at municipal and regional level, which are fully or partially financed by the state budget.

The official proposal for the National Map of Social Services was sent by the APA on 19 January 2024. Once the procedure is completed, the proposal for a National Map of Social Services should be submitted to the Council of Ministers for adoption.

Ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

At present, the ratification of the Optional Protocol to the CRPD by Bulgaria is foreseen in the Action Plan for the implementation of the Concluding Observations of the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2021-2026), in relation to the defence of the first national report on the implementation of the CRPD (CRPD/C/BGR/CO/1). According to the set of possible solutions/measures for implementation, by 2025, the state authorities, nationally representative organisations of and for persons with disabilities, as well as all stakeholders, should draft the necessary additional legislative changes to regulate the implementation of the Optional Protocol to the CRPD. Once this has been implemented, it is envisaged that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will undertake the overall preparation of the ratification process of the Optional Protocol, to be completed before the submission of the next national report to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in 2026. There is currently no change in the timelines for ratification of the Optional Protocol to the CRPD.

On information from the Ministry of Health:

Medical expert examinations

In order to align the assessment of medical expertise more fully with the needs of people with disabilities, the following activities were carried out in 2023:

In the State Gazette No. 10 of 31 January 2023, Decree of the Council of Ministers No. 13 of 26 January 2023 amending and supplementing the Ordinance on medical expertise adopted by Decree No. 120 of the Council of Ministers of 2017 was promulgated.



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The most significant is the change in the Methodology for the application of reference points for the assessment of permanently reduced working capacity (type and degree of disability) in percentages. What is essential in this change is the consideration of each disability in the overall assessment, regardless of the percentages corresponding to it, and regardless of the percentage of the leading (most severe) disability.

Another inequity related to the inability to determine someone else's assistance for persons with mental illness who are determined to have less than 90% permanent impairment was eliminated.

The percentages of certain reference points for the assessment of permanently reduced capacity for work and of the type and degree of impairment were increased, which should lead to fairer assessment under these conditions.

Pursuant to the recommendations of the Ombudsman, persons who were certified or recertified in the period before the entry into force of this Decree and for whom it establishes more favourable conditions for the assessment of disability are entitled to submit an application-declaration for recertification outside the cases provided for in Regulations on the structure and organisation of the work of the medical expertise bodies and the regional medical expertise registers, and no time limit is set for such recertification.

In the period from March 2023 until the end of the year, the work and the procedure for amending the Regulations on the structure and organisation of the work of the medical expertise bodies and the regional medical expertise registers continued.

By the end of 2023, the amending act had undergone public consultation and inter-ministerial coordination, with only the opinion of the Ministry of Finance missing, as well as the approval of the financial justification to submit the package of documents to the Council of Ministers.

The procedure for the adoption of the changes continued in 2024.

So far, actions have been taken on regulatory changes in medical expertise which are more organisational in nature.

According to MoH information, there is no clear vision at the political and inter-ministerial level for the introduction of ICF in medical and work capacity expertise, and the issue has not been discussed between the MoH and the MLSP, which are the lead bodies on the issue.

It is noted that within various inter-ministerial groups this issue is commented on, but not with the necessary depth and expertise. The shortcomings of the current system of medical expertise are noted, as well as the lack of incapacity assessment bodies, which medical expertise bodies cannot be in terms of the required level of competence. Various organisations of people with disabilities have raised the issue of the need for a comprehensive reform in this area, but a concrete vision and proposals in this direction are lacking.



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The IT system for control of medical expert examinations

In 2024, the implementation of Activity 2 of the Technical Specification to the project proposal on the optimisation of existing functionalities in the Electronic System for Medical Expert Examinations started, including activities for upgrading with new functionalities and continuing the process of optimisation of existing ones in the Electronic System for Medical Expertise, such as: development of a module for expertise on temporary incapacity for work; improvement of the functionalities on appeal of the decisions of REMC and NEMC; development of the public part of the system, which is used by citizens; development of supplementary reports; processing of complaints of interested parties in relation to issued expert decisions; automated creation of documents; sending messages from the system to interested parties and authorities, access to electronic documents; provision of the possibility to retrieve data for user and statistical reports and control, etc.

Assistive devices, devices, equipment and medical devices for people with disabilities

With changes to Ordinance No. 7 of 2021, promulgated in No. 105 of the State Gazette of 2023 and entered into force on 19 December 2023, the possibility has been regulated, when it is reasonably proposed to include in the specification new groups/subgroups or individual aids, devices, equipment and medical devices beyond the funds provided for by the State Budget Act and the NHIF Budget Act for the respective calendar year, to separate them in a separate section and not to include them in the procedure for negotiating the value for the upcoming calendar year. They will be automatically included in the specification for the following calendar year if financial resources are provided by the State Budget Act and the NHIF Budget Act

A committee has been constituted by an order of the Director of the NHIF to prepare a draft specification of aids, devices, equipment and medical devices and repairs for 2024.

In the course of its work, the committee will consider how it can regulate the limits to which aids, devices, equipment and medical devices are funded and the inclusion of new groups of them in the NHIF 2024 specification.

Findings:

- The responsible authorities make efforts to overcome the existing problems in the individual areas of the rights of people with disabilities;
- Measures taken in the field of employment of people with disabilities are not sufficient to respond to all jobseekers with disabilities;
- The measures needed are not sufficient to overcome the difficulties for people with disabilities to be certified/recertified by the medical expertise bodies and the significant delays in issuing expert decisions;
- Actions are being taken to improve the organisation of the work of the medical expertise bodies, but not to carry out a comprehensive reform in the field;



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- Measures to update the lists of aids do not contribute to the inclusion of devices tailored to the needs of those in need;
- Insufficient action is being taken to overcome the delay in ratifying the Optional Protocol to the CRPD.

Main recommendations:

1. Look for additional mechanisms to support the employment of people with disabilities, in particular by increasing the resources under the National Program Employment and Training of People with Permanent Disabilities.
2. Take action to continue the reform of medical expert examinations and work capacity examinations, including through the introduction of international standards, with the active involvement of representatives of people with disabilities in broad public discussions and publicity.
3. Take action to update adequately the lists of assistive devices and medical products and improve their quality.
4. Take additional measures to guarantee the rights of girls and women with disabilities and to overcome the problems with the personal mobility of people with disabilities, including with regard to the delay in the project “Provision of assistive devices for people with permanent disabilities”.
5. Speed up the ratification process of the Optional Protocol to the CRPD.

THE OMBUDSMAN IN DEFENCE OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

In accordance with Article 12, para 4 of the Persons with Disabilities Act, throughout 2024, the Council’s activities were administered by the Ombudsman institution.

In view of the Council’s important role, the following paragraphs provide a brief overview of its activities over the past year.

1. WORK OF THE MONITORING COUNCIL IN 2024

The Monitoring Council held three meetings – on 28 March 2024, on 11 October 2024 and on 17 December 2024 – completely presided over by the Ombudsman institution.

The meetings continued the practice introduced by the Ombudsman institution to discuss current issues related to the rights of people with disabilities and their families, and to cooperate actively with representatives of organisations of and for people with disabilities and with the institutions responsible for specific issues.



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First meeting of the Monitoring Council in 2024

The first meeting of the Monitoring Council in 2024 was held on 28 March 2024. The problems in the system identified by the Ombudsman institution and the recommendations made were supported by the members and a decision was taken to send a joint opinion of the Monitoring Council to the Minister of Labour and Social Policy and the Governor of the National Social Security Institute.

The opinion highlights the following:

- **Suspension of disability pensions by the National Social Security Institute in cases where the National Expert Medical Commission revokes and remands the expert decision of the Territorial Expert Medical Commission for a new decision**
- **In the event of an appeal, the disability pension is granted, resumed and restored but only up to the amount of the social old-age pension**
- **Period within which the National Social Security Institute resumes payments upon re-examination of persons**
- **Choice of pension that is not the most favourable one in terms of amount**
- **Restrictions on the granting of disability pensions due to a general illness under the provisions of Article 74 of the Social Security Code**

The recommendations have not been implemented.

Second meeting of the Monitoring Council in 2024

The Ombudsman institution of the Republic of Bulgaria organised a regular meeting of the Council on 11 October 2024. The meeting discussed the continuing difficulties faced by people with disabilities in obtaining the necessary aids, appliances, equipment and medical devices that were not covered by compulsory health insurance, as well as their quality and service life.

There was also a discussion of the lack of information on the provision of high-tech aids to people with disabilities under the project “Provision of assistive devices for people with permanent disabilities” where the Ombudsman institution had already referred the matter to the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. In connection with the issues discussed and in order to guarantee the rights of the citizens concerned, decisions were taken in accordance with the requirements of the Rules of Procedure and Organisation of the Monitoring Council that the Ombudsman institution, as the administrator of the activities of the Monitoring Council, would prepare and send opinions with recommendations to the heads of the responsible authorities.

In implementation of the decisions, 10 opinions and recommendations were prepared and sent.



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Third meeting of the Monitoring Council in 2024

On the occasion of 3 December, International Day of Persons with Disabilities, an expert discussion entitled “Right to Access to Education for Children with Special Educational Needs” was held on 17 December 2024 in the form of a thematic meeting of the Monitoring Council; the invitees included experts from responsible authorities, representatives of non-governmental organisations, parents of children with disabilities and schools principals. The goal was to discuss the current difficulties faced by children with special educational needs (SEN) and their families, as well as to find possible solutions. Troubling findings were highlighted during the discussion: regardless of the measures taken so far by the responsible authorities, children with SEN and their families still faced a number of challenges. Children and students with disabilities and SEN were disproportionately excluded from the education system, both in pre-school and school education. The quality of education for such children remained unsatisfactory, with a persistent lack of accessible and inclusive environment and low levels of skills acquired by them.

A decision was taken to send an opinion from the Monitoring Council to the heads of the responsible authorities, bringing together the proposals made in order to find solutions to the problems in the system.

Other activities of the Ombudsman and the Monitoring Council in 2024

The Ombudsman continued the work in the Working Group of the European Network of National Human Rights Institutions on the CRPD.

The members of the Working Group cooperate in the performance of the functions under Article 33 (2) and (3) of the CRPD in the respective countries and exchange good practices on the matter. The Working Group carries out its activities in accordance with a pre-approved Annual Program in which all members have the opportunity to participate.

In addition to the Annual Program, the members of the Working Group consider issues that have an impact on the rights and interests of people with disabilities and their families.

The Working Group continues to publish a quarterly newsletter presenting data on the initiatives of the authorities, the challenges encountered in implementing the activities, and the recommendations made.

The institution also sends information on the activities of the Monitoring Council in the performance of its functions under Article 33 (2) and (3) of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.



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At the same time, as part of the **Ombudsman's National Campaign “For the Rights of Children and Persons with Disabilities”**, Ombudsman Diana Kovacheva, together with the Minister of Education and Science, Prof. PhD Galin Tsokov, organised the discussion “Inclusive Education: Problems and Solutions”.