



Enhancing social inclusion of persons with disabilities in the Western Balkans*

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Introduction

The authors are postgraduate students at the Central European University (CEU), Vienna, and compiled this brief within a CEU Policy Lab in cooperation with the European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research birtha@euro.centre.org*

Persons with disabilities¹ (PwD) face barriers to full social inclusion. Beginning in the 19th century, most Western countries utilised institutionalisation as the dominant practice for ‘treating’ persons with disabilities (Holland, 2014). The Western Balkan countries of Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, and Serbia employed this practice to varying degrees, as well (Sida, 2014). However, beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, greater concern for the civil and human rights of PwD led to a policy shift towards deinstitutionalisation (Holland, 2014). Across the Western Balkan region, countries have adopted the strategy of deinstitutionalisation of PwD to improve social inclusion of PwD (European Centre, 2021). However, some challenges remain, especially when PwD transition from institutionalised care to the labour market. Low labour market participation rates and high incidences of poverty among PwD are key challenges to full social inclusion. In this policy brief, we explore these challenges and propose policy options to address them through investment in and better access to (vocational) education, public funding of personal assistance, and improved data collection for evidence-based policy making.

The Western Balkans: Background & Context

Keywords:
**Western Balkans,
deinstitutionalisation,
social inclusion, persons
with disabilities**

According to the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (2014) and UNICEF (2017), there are few reliable or up-to-date statistics on disability across the Western Balkan region. In Table 1, we provide the most recent available data concerning persons with disabilities in the Western Balkan countries.

1 In this brief, we refer to the definition of persons with disabilities (PwD) used in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as “those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (United Nations General Assembly, Article 1, 2006).

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Table 1: Percentage of persons with disabilities as a share of the total population in Western Balkan countries, latest available year

	Albania (2020)	Bosnia & Herzegovina (2020)	Kosovo (2022)	Montenegro (2011)	Republic of North Macedonia (2022)	Serbia (2014)
% of PwD	6.2%	10%	5.4%	11%	10%	8%
Total population	2,869,210	2,083,139	1,770,272	628,284	2,083,139	8,640,924

Sources: Stoevska, 2020; Miljevic, 2020; World Bank, 2023, Statistical Office of Montenegro, 2011; Shavreski & Kochoska, 2019; Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2014; Worldometer, 2023; Countrymeter, 2023.

All Western Balkan countries, with the exception of Kosovo, hold candidate status with the European Union (EU) and have been in the process of harmonising their national regulatory frameworks with the EU. Each candidate country must meet standards for social inclusion of PwD in accordance with the EU Acquis Chapter 19 on Social Policy and Employment. In the last two decades, the five candidate countries and Kosovo have adopted national strategies to update policy frameworks, which are detailed in **Annex 1**. On the international level, all countries with the exception of Kosovo have been party to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities since the late 2000s. Article 19 of the Convention stipulates the obligations for the signatories to facilitate the independent living of PwD and their communal inclusion. For this purpose, the Convention states that countries should ensure the opportunities for the PwD to choose where to live and who to live with and accessibility to community support services on an equal basis.

Gaps in Social Inclusion Following Transition from Care

Those transitioning from institutional care are confronted with a low labour market participation rate and a high incidence of poverty

Greater awareness of the needs of persons with disabilities has given rise to legislative and regulatory activity in the Western Balkans. However, challenges to full social inclusion still remain. Especially those transitioning from institutional care are confronted with a low labour market participation rate and a high incidence of poverty.

Labour Market Participation

The low labour market participation rate among persons with disabilities, which can be observed globally (Stoevska, 2020), is often due to open discrimination and the lack of support measures for employers. However, there are also

regulatory issues such as the ‘benefit trap’ – if PwD lose their social safety net, they might be hesitant to join the labour market. Traditional social benefit systems award benefits through proof of inability to work (ILO, 2018). Instead of immediately cutting off benefits when PwD acquire work, a gradualist approach that entails a transitional period where benefits continue is more beneficial (DWP, 2023). Adopting a traditional policy to raise the labour force participation rate of PwD, Kosovo and Montenegro have introduced quotas mandating the hiring of PwD. Kosovo’s government requires one person with a disability to be hired per fifty employees and Montenegrin companies must ensure 5% of the workforce is disabled if they employ fifty or more employees. The impact of these quotas has been identified as marginal and a gap continues to exist (European Centre, 2021). Apart from not being proportionate to the number of PwD in the population (see Annex 1), implementing such quotas is made difficult due to the large size of the informal labour market in Western Balkan economies. For instance, in Albania, it is estimated that half of the workforce is employed in the informal sector (International Labour Organization, 2021). As of 2017, 85% of PwD in Albania indicated they were unemployed and only 1% noted they were employed full-time (Council of Europe, 2020).

Risk of Poverty

PwD also face a challenge to social inclusion through their increased risk of poverty rooted in the increased cost of living associated with disability

PwD also face a challenge to social inclusion through their increased risk of poverty rooted in the increased cost of living associated with disability (World Bank, 2022). Higher incidence of poverty and social exclusion is evident in North Macedonia, where 57.8% of PwD at working age (and 36.8% of those aged 65+) were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2016 (Shavreski & Kochoska, 2019). In Serbia, 36.8% of PwD are at risk of poverty or social exclusion; this number increases to 48.3% for persons with severe disabilities (Beker, 2019).

Policy Options

To address gaps in social inclusion presented by the low labour force participation rate and higher risk of poverty of PwD, we present two policy options to Western Balkan countries: investment in improving access to education, in particular to vocational education, and public funding of personal assistants.

Policy Option #1: Improved access to (vocational) education

The general situation of PwD in the Western Balkans illustrates that their integration into the education system is difficult. The most challenging barriers for education of PwD are the lack of specially trained staff, a dearth of tailored

learning materials and missing equipment for persons with special needs (European Centre, 2021). The importance of education in all programmes and degrees is undeniable as education is the basis for enabling PwD to fully participate in society.

A first step would be to focus on the vocational programmes that increase the employability of PwD. Completing vocational training significantly improves PwD's chances of getting and keeping a job (Polidano and Mavromaras, 2010). Accordingly, the policy option available to Western Balkan policymakers is to improve access to vocational education programmes with a large degree of autonomy and tailored to the personal needs of PwD.

However, to complement this option some preconditions must be achieved across all learning environments, including vocational training centres:

1. Standardising the environment, classrooms, and learning material in education centres so that equal access for all students is ensured. Physical spaces like classrooms should be designed to be accessible to all students with disabilities, and educational materials need to be available in accessible formats such as braille, audio, electronic formats, etc.
2. Training staff, social workers, and teachers to individualise the teaching-learning process for PwD and mentor them to identify skills and competencies best suited to match their abilities and interests with labour market needs.
3. Develop relationships with social welfare institutions and PwD assistance centres to raise awareness and motivate PwD to participate in vocational training courses.

To implement this option, investment in education systems is needed to remove barriers to learning and increase accessibility of mainstream education and vocational training.

Policy Option #2: Publicly funded personal assistants

Persons with disabilities, especially those transitioning from institutional care, are in need of personalised social services such as personal assistants (WHO, 2015). Personal assistants provide support to PwD “enabling them to achieve the same range of self-determination, opportunities, and activities as a non-disabled person, both at home and away, in the community” (ENIL, 2022). However, personal assistants are hard to afford and those who can afford them are often pushed into poverty as they struggle to cover the high costs (UNICEF, 2018). In the Western Balkans, benefits for PwD have been increasing but remain

low (European Centre, 2021). Low wages, high unemployment rates of PwD and low social benefits make paying for personal assistants and covering living costs nearly impossible. Allocating public funds for assistants would reduce the cost burden for PwD, preventing them from falling into poverty and improving social inclusion.

The need for personal assistants has been demonstrated in Serbia where municipalities and local authorities are responsible for funding services that improve independence and social inclusion (Djukanović, 2020). As of 2020, ten cities finance personal assistants for about 300 users (Djukanović, 2020). The town of Šabac, for example, has allocated a portion of the yearly budget to supply PwD with personal assistants (UNDP, 2021). The practice of municipalities funding personal assistants is an attractive policy option in Serbia and could be easily translated to similar policy contexts of the other Western Balkan countries. Public funding of personal assistants for PwD would greatly improve their ability to participate in society and the labour market and ultimately increase their independence. Furthermore, this policy option addresses the issue of poverty by alleviating costs of care which allows PwD to use their benefits for their basic costs of living.

Conclusion

The countries of the Western Balkans have adopted several laws and action plans to address these challenges; however, additional effort is needed to ensure full social inclusion

In conclusion, persons with disabilities in the Western Balkans face significant barriers to social inclusion such as low labour market participation rates and higher risk of poverty. The countries of the Western Balkans have adopted several laws and action plans to address these challenges; however, additional effort is needed to ensure full social inclusion. Apart from improved access to (vocational) education and the expansion of personal assistance, it is also necessary to enhance data collection as a basis for policymaking. Data on PwD in the Western Balkan countries is sparse and outdated (UNICEF, 2017; Sida, 2014), hence excluding PwD from consideration in policymaking (Jensen, 2020). Disaggregated data by disability in addition to sex, age, place of residence, etc. are needed to highlight areas in which inequalities and inequities occur (Lee et al., 2022). This information is crucial for Western Balkan policymakers to develop, implement, and monitor PwD-inclusive policies and meet the requirements of the CRPD.

To achieve complete and disaggregated data, Western Balkan governments could refer to the World Health Organisation's (WHO) *Functioning and Disability Disaggregation Tool (FDD11)* (WHO, 2022). The FDD11 is an eleven-question survey designed to disaggregate data by type of disability. The FDD11 is an

effective policy tool, because it can be incorporated into already existing data collection tools in the countries (Lee et al., 2022). The WHO provides the tool, survey manual and the implementation guideline, which help disaggregate data by disability in addition to income, age, gender, location, etc. Incorporating the FDD11 in data collection is a viable option for Western Balkan countries to achieve comprehensive and meaningful data.

Annex 1

Country	Legal Framework	Countrywide Strategies
Albania	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Law No. 10 221 on Protection Against Discrimination (Amendment No. 124/2020) • Law No. 57/2019, "On social assistance in the Republic of Albania" • Law No. 93/2014 "On Inclusion and Accessibility of Persons with Disabilities" Official Gazette no. 135 	The National Action Plan for Persons with Disabilities (NAPPWD) 2021-2025
Bosnia & Herzegovina	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Law No. 59/09 on prohibition of discrimination in Bosnia and Herzegovina • Law No. 9/10 on Professional Rehabilitation, Training and Employment of PWDs • Law on Social Protection RS (Official Gazette of the RS, No. 37/2012, 90/2016, 94/2019 and 42/2020) • Law on Professional Rehabilitation, Training and Employment of the Disabled RS (Official Gazette of the RS, no. 54/09) 	<p>Strategy for advancement of rights and status of persons with disabilities in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2016-2021)</p> <p>Republika Srpska Social Inclusion Strategy (2021-2027)</p>
Kosovo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Law No. 05/L-021 on the Protection from Discrimination • Law No. 03/L-019 on Vocational Ability, Rehabilitation and Employment of people with disabilities • Law No. 03/L-022 on Material Support for Families of Children with Permanent Disability 	The National Strategy on the Rights of People with Disabilities 2013-2023



Montenegro	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <u>The Law on Prohibition of Discrimination of Persons with Disabilities (Official Gazette of Montenegro, no. 035/15, 044/15)</u>• <u>Law on Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities, "Official Gazette of the Republic of Montenegro", No. 49/08</u>• <u>Law on Pension and Disability Insurance, "Official Gazette of the Republic of Montenegro", No. 54/03</u>	Accelerating Disability Inclusion for Children and Adults with Disabilities 2021-2023 (Implementing Partners: UNICEF and UNDP)
Republic of North Macedonia	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <u>Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, No.258/2020</u>• <u>Law No. 104/2019 on Social Protection</u>• <u>Law No. 44/2000 on Employment of Persons with Disability</u>	National Deinstitutionalisation Strategy of the Republic of Macedonia for 2018-2027
Republic of Serbia	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <u>Law on Prevention of Discrimination of Persons with Disabilities: 33/2006-3, 13/2016-3</u>• <u>The Law on Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities: 36/2009-205, 32/2013-13, 14/2022-47</u>• <u>The Law on Use of Sign Language: 38/2015-26</u>	National Strategy of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2020-2024

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