

BULGARIAN NA INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY STRATEGY (2021 – 2027)

Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning.

European Pillar of Social Rights

Introduction and Background

The current strategy is a response to the new trends and outlines the direction in which the organizational, informational and educational activities of the Bulgarian NA for the Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps Programs – Human Recourse Development Centre – develops and implements in the period 2021 – 2027. As well this strategy describes the way in which the National Agency works to prepare Bulgarian citizens for the new and constantly updated opportunities provided by the Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps Programs, as well as their accompanying European programs and initiatives.

A key objective of the Commission's initiative towards a European Education Area, the EU Youth Strategy and the European Youth Goals, the successful inclusion of people facing access barriers or having fewer opportunities in education is the most powerful tool national governments dispose of to ensure the maximization of the potential of every one of their citizens.

The European Union (EU) programmes – including the Erasmus+ Programme and European Solidarity Corps – provide opportunities accessible for all. However, some people cannot benefit equally from these opportunities because they face various barriers. Inclusion of people facing access barriers or having fewer opportunities in education, training and youth work is a key objective of several policy initiatives. Whereas the EU educational, youth and sport programmes have focused on inclusion in the past, evaluation of and research point to a need for further widening access and inclusiveness.

The need is already recognized in Bulgaria which is one of the countries in the EU where the socio-economic status of the population correlates most strongly with education outcomes. The

percentage of early school leavers has been fairly stable since 2010 and, at 12.8%, presents a significant challenge to employability and financial independence of young people in the country. To prevent human capital losses and equip its population with the competences that address local needs and development priorities, Bulgaria needs to strengthen diversity and inclusion and promote active participation in the European programmes for all groups as part of the overall development strategy for society.

			Bulgaria		EU-27	
			2010	2020	2010	2020
EU-level targets			2030 target			
Participation in early childhood education (from age 3 to starting age of compulsory primary education)		≥ 96%	83.8% ¹³	79.9% ¹⁹	91.8% ¹³	92.8% ¹⁹
Low achieving eighth-graders in digital skills		< 15%	:	:	:	:
	Reading	< 15%	41.0% ^{09,b}	47.1% ¹⁸	19.7% ^{09,b}	22.5% ¹⁸
Low achieving 15-year-olds in:	Maths	< 15%	47.1% ⁰⁹	44.4% ¹⁸	22.7% ⁰⁹	22.9% ¹⁸
	Science	< 15%	38.8% ⁰⁹	46.5% ¹⁸	17.8% ⁰⁹	22.3% ¹⁸
Early leavers from education and training (age 18-24)		< 9%	12.6% ^b	12.8%	13.8%	9.9%

The present ID strategy outlines the ways in which the National Agency will contribute to the improvement of diversity and inclusion in Bulgaria. It is a part of the *ERASMUS+ AND EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CORPS National Agency* multi-annual work programme 2021-2027. The document contains further details on the ways in which the Agency will develop diversity and inclusion while contributing to wider efforts at the national and European level.

Synergies with Strategic documents in Bulgaria and the EU

At the national level, we have primarily drawn on the provisions of the National Development Program 2030 (Priority 1 "Education and skills"), Strategic Framework for Development of Education, Training and Learning in Bulgaria (2021-2030), Strategy for Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021-2030), National Strategy of Bulgaria for Equality, Inclusion and Participation of the Roma (2021-2030); National Youth

At the European level, we have followed the *Implementation guidelines - Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Inclusion and Diversity Strategy; The Council Resolution 14080/18 of 15 November 2018 setting out an EU Youth Strategy for the period 2019-2027*. We have operated with respect with the European Council's view that "education and culture are key to building inclusive and cohesive societies" and have been working with a view to "stepping up mobility and exchanges, including through a substantially strengthened, inclusive and extended" programmes.

Synergies with other NA strategies

It is important to highlight that in the projects it supports, the NA is committed to seeking and promoting synergies between diversity and inclusion, environmentally responsible and digital solutions. We believe that the strongest projects are those that combine elements of all three and that it is in attempting to incorporate aspects of them that we truly respond to the three main challenges Europe is presently facing. In this context, the Bulgarian National Agency builds unity between its strategies - the Strategy for Inclusion and Diversity, the Communication Strategy of HRDC, as well as the Green Strategy of the Agency. In its work the NA follows and highlights the four main "Erasmus+" program priorities for the period 2021-2027 – these priorities represent the basis of the entire essence of the Program, as well as its main messages. All themes, activities, emphases and specific priorities of the School Education, Vocational Education and Training, Higher Education, Adult Education, Youth and Sport sectors are oriented towards achieving these four priorities and the Inclusion and Diversity priority is the first of them.

Targets, Milestones, KPIs

Special focus on Diversity and Inclusion will be placed at the following information and publicity activities the NA is planning. We plan to include messages in the framing of the events, as well as use them as opportunities for 1:1 individualized support of potential and current beneficiaries.

Ppl reached	2024 benchmark	2025	2026	2027
Tour around municipal towns (special emphasis on underrepresented regions)	Over 1000	1050	1100	1160
Fair of Achievements - an exhibition presenting successful projects and initiatives from all measures of the Erasmus + program	100	105	110	115
Beneficiary Training Event: Contract Signing and Project Management - European Solidarity Corps	Over 300	315	330	350

Intended outcomes and activities planned towards them

In the long-term, the NA will combine an expansion of the scope of existing activities with new ones, designed around the new objectives for diversity and inclusion. It aims at facilitating access for people with fewer opportunities, special needs and lower socio-economic status.

Target groups and Intended outcomes include:

1. Removing regional, socio-economic and other barriers to access to education by increasing opportunities and creating incentives for children/students/young people with fewer opportunities and/or with special educational needs;
2. Active support for the integration of people from marginalized groups incl. Roma;
3. Prevention/reduction of aggression and non-discrimination by stimulating the participation of people with fewer opportunities in mobility projects;

4. Ensuring greater access of people with fewer opportunities to lifelong learning activities by informing and stimulating their participation in adult education, thus providing them with new competencies and skills; stimulating their participation in volunteers' activities;

5. Encouraging the inclusion of people with fewer mobility opportunities in higher education by using the resources of different networks.

Leveraging the power of local partners

The NA plans to encourage greater participation of the target groups mentioned above in existing and future opportunities, however, we recognize that we need to simultaneously allocate more resources to mentoring, organizational support and info campaigns for potential beneficiaries. In order to maximize resources and allocate them where they would be both closer to the target audience and able to impact a larger number of people, we plan to target organisations working with/for people with fewer opportunities. Working locally presents a few important advantages. Established organizations working with underprivileged segments of the population know the local context, have gained the trust of their beneficiaries and are best able to guide us in leveraging opportunities where there is need and capacity for participation in them. We also plan to work closely with municipalities and local authorities who frequently know best where to look for problems and support their resolving within the community.

Documenting and sharing best practices

An important aspect of working with disadvantaged communities with regard to sustainability and ensuring long-term impact lies in the ways in which beneficiaries are able to integrate the learning from an opportunity, move forward and change their own expectations and the narrative about what they are capable of achieving and the ways in which they are able to reimagine their future role as full-fledged participants. To this end, we plan to be more deliberate in documenting the implementation of good practices at the local level and the dissemination of project results with participation of people with fewer opportunities.

The NA actions

The proven way to increase participation and promote inclusivity is to bridge the gap between opportunities and those who can't quite access them because of educational, monetary, health or disability challenges through more support. Accordingly, the National Agency plans to

take the following actions:

1. To prepare a **National Plan** for the implementation of the ID Strategy;
2. **To implement this** National Plan;
3. To do all necessary to make clear for all current and future beneficiaries all groups of people included in **the concept of "people with fewer opportunities"**; to be periodically **reminded** so as not to lose focus. The Regulations establishing the Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps programmes define “(young) people with fewer opportunities' as “(young) people who, for economic, social, cultural, geographical or health reasons, due to their migrant background, or for reasons such as disability or educational difficulties or for any other reason, including a reason that could give rise to discrimination under Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, face obstacles that prevent them from having effective access to opportunities under the Programme;”

The main target groups of this strategy are people with fewer opportunities in life, which put them at a disadvantaged situation compared to their peers as to participating in the programmes and/or in education and training systems. Those people may find themselves in such a disadvantaged situation because of one or more of the exclusion factors referred to in the following list:

- a) *Barriers in accessibility and outreach*
- b) *Disabilities*
- c) *Health problems*
- d) *Barriers linked to education and training systems*
- e) *Cultural differences*
- f) *Social barriers*
- g) *Economic barriers*
- h) *Barriers linked to discrimination*
- i) *Geographical barriers*

4. **Inclusion and diversity as priorities in the assessment process** – In both programmes, inclusion and diversity are part of the criteria to select applications for funding and to allocate financial support. As it is noted in the *Implementation guidelines – Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Inclusion and Diversity Strategy*: „**Quality projects that actively address inclusion and diversity and that involve participants with fewer opportunities, newcomer and grass-root organisations should be given priority in the grant awarding process**“.

4.1. To conduct ***special training of evaluators*** on the implementation of the ID Strategy and its priorities Inclusion and Diversity should be considered as priorities in the evaluation process – according to the Guidelines – "evaluators should be provided with special instructions and opportunities for specialized training" (The content of the training may be prepared on the basis of the Guidelines for the application of the ID Strategy).

4.2. Equally, active implementation of the principles of inclusion and diversity forms is ***part of the initial assessment of applications for accreditation in mobility actions, as well as part of criteria for continuous assessment of accredited beneficiaries***. In order to better identify the potential, follow and provide guidance to projects aiming to foster inclusion and diversity, dedicated guidelines and specific training opportunities could be provided to evaluators.

5. To give ***specific guidelines to organizations*** for the implementation of the priorities of the ID Strategy:

5.1. ***In the information events*** – To give advices how the potential beneficiaries should prepare their application forms in a way to encourage the participation of people with fewer opportunities;

5.2. ***In the thematic events*** – To highlight that the Guidelines for this priority should be applied even when no this type of activities is included in the already funded project;

5.3. ***In the Thematic monitoring*** – To explain to the participants how to promote *other /additional funding opportunities* to organizations – under other European programs and initiatives, such as *European Social Fund Plus, Horizon Europe, Digital Europe, Creative Europe* or the funding schemes of the European Economic Area; implementation of the guidelines.

5.4. ***In the project results dissemination events*** – To actively present *inspiring examples* and Good Practices for inclusion and diversity;

5.5. ***Support for newcomers and less advantaged target groups***, geared towards removing obstacles to full participation in the programs. Similarly, to above, we cannot always anticipate barriers to entry and participation but it's important to invest in the type of relationship which allows us to address them on an ad-hoc basis;

5.6. ***In the external evaluators' trainings*** – practical training according to the Guidelines for the application of the ID strategy (item 7.D); a preliminary guideline (task) before the training – for example to prepare a proposal of what is important to be present in the

projects of the organizations of people from vulnerable groups in order to prepare successful projects corresponding to the ID priority Guidelines; to promote projects of small organizations, of organizations without experience, organizations with members belonging to vulnerable groups; eventually, people with fewer opportunities will be included in the team of assessors), (item 7.D);

5.7. To consider, with permission from the EC, **to declare a national priority** in the call /quota/ internal priority for funding organizations of people with disabilities (For example, organizations of people with hearing impairment) /organizations of people with rare diseases/ organizations of parents of children with rare diseases).

5.8. **To send the text of the Guidelines for the implementation of the ID Strategy** developed by the Commission to the teachers, principals and youth organizations who have participated in the last 3 years in our "SEN pupils` teachers training", as well as to the *Personal Development Centres*;

5.9. Working with one **disproportionately underrepresented group, that of the Roma**. In addition to the activities detailed above, we are committed to providing further targeted support for the attraction of organizations working with Roma by:

- ✓ *Mapping partners already working in the field of Roma inclusion*, providing them with information on existing opportunities,
- ✓ *Direct outreach to potential beneficiaries* in the Roma community by working closely with counterparts from the municipalities.
- ✓ *Dissemination and exploitation of best practices* of inclusion in this specific community.

5.10. The Monitoring Directorate and the "Reporting" Department in the National Agency **to maintain a sample of good practices projects evaluated** during inspection or at the Interim or Final Report stage as Good Practices, respectively by selection years; for ID/GREEN /Digital;

5.11. To prepare and **track indicators for measuring the progress achieved** in implementing the objectives of the Strategy – a requirement according to the ID Guidelines of the EC (requirement in item 7.E of the Guidelines) – which can be provided to the European Commission upon request – for example to keep the following statistics (from the NA experts responsible for the relevant activity):

- ✓ *Number of projects, already in the title* (theme) aimed at vulnerable groups - on an

annual basis;

- ✓ *Number of participants* with fewer opportunities, included in the projects and *actually participated in the projects* – respectively by sectors/Key activities/Activities – on an annual basis;
- ✓ *Number of trainings /events held by the NA*, in which specific guidelines are presented to the beneficiaries /candidate beneficiaries for application of the Guidelines of the ID strategy;
- ✓ *Number of projects targeting vulnerable groups* that received a high score in the number of points at the final report stage;
- ✓ Statistics of *good real /visible results* of the implementation of E+ and ESC projects, which can be accepted as a specific IMPACT – for example: created / changed systems, methodologies; held meetings, discussions at local or regional level; changes made; visible results achieved;
- ✓ To review *the possibilities of the PMM and the new reporting systems* for the E+ and ESC projects and, according to them, to indicate at least one more indicator.

5.12. The NA has already **appointed** an ***inclusion and diversity officer***, who will monitor the Strategy's implementation.

Activities Planned:

In the framework of this Action Plan, in order to fulfil the tasks, set in this Strategy, for the period 2021 – 2027 the National Agency of Bulgaria plans to carry out a series of different events and trainings:

1. ***Targeted information campaigns*** aimed at new organizations, including those in hard-to-reach and / or less developed areas and people with disabilities will be carried out;
2. ***National support meeting with the rectors (presidents) and Erasmus+ coordinators*** of the Bulgarian universities; ***National support meetings for specific target groups***;
3. ***National online e-safety conference*** “E-safety in a e-world” – targeted also to participants with fewer opportunities; supporting actions aiming at enhancing digital skills and competence development at all levels of society and for everyone (including students and young people with fewer opportunities, job seekers and workers);
4. ***DiscoverEU Eurodesk and Erasmus+ information campaign*** (April – December);
5. ***Discover EU Learning Cycle event*** with focus on inclusion and diversity;

6. **SEN pupils' teacher training** "With care for the SEN pupils and their teachers";
7. **Information „Erasmus+ & eTwinning” events** – “Possibilities for kindergartens, schools and VET schools under the European education Programmes and initiatives” with a special focus on Inclusion and Diversity;
8. Thematic events, dedicated to the concrete **Thematic European Year**;
9. Thematic events: **International Volunteer Day**;
10. Thematic events: **Erasmus Days**;
11. Thematic events: **International Day of Youth**;
12. National **Valorisation Conference**;
13. Presenting the **Multilingualism as a powerful symbol of the EU's aspiration to be united in diversity** and for encouraging the connection and intercultural dialogue between the young people;
14. **National training event** for the E+ Programme, “Operational Program for Education”, “Human Resources Development” Operational Programme for applications under the integrated procedure by directly providing Socio-economic integration of vulnerable groups. Integrated measures to improve access to education;
15. **Thematic TCA training courses**, with a target group of NEETs and young people with fewer opportunities, including Roma and migrants.

Scope (period of validity)

The current ID Strategy is aimed at the period of operation of the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Programs (2021 - 2027), with its annual plan being updated annually, and, if necessary, the main highlights reflecting the current state of the program activities.