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Embargo: 8 October 2005

So many obstacles prevent the social inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in Bulgaria!

New OSI report monitoring access to education and employment opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities in Bulgaria presented today.

Sofia and Budapest – 8 October 2005. Over the last few years, legislation and policies aimed at promoting the social inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities (people whose learning ability is significantly lower than average) have been adopted in Bulgaria. However, segregation and social exclusion are still widespread.

A new report produced by the Open Society Institute - ***Rights of people with intellectual disabilities: access to education and employment in Bulgaria*** - highlights the fact that people with intellectual disabilities have very limited access to both education and employment, and remain dependent on State benefits and on their families. Much work remains to be done to ensure that they can be active, participating members of society.

In Bulgaria, a 2002 regulation gives parents the right to choose whether their children attend a special school or a mainstream school (i.e a school for children without disabilities), regardless of their diagnosis. However, the OSI report reveals that mainstreaming in Bulgaria exists only on an extremely small scale, and few concrete steps have been taken to translate the school choice regulation into practice. In 2004, less than 300 students with all types of disabilities were educated in mainstream schools nationwide.

Slavka Kukova, the OSI report's author, says that "there are still too many obstacles to the integration of children with intellectual disabilities into mainstream schools! In particular, programmes do not provide for the development of children's capacity to live independently and learn practical skills; there are too few adapted textbooks; teachers are not trained to work with children with intellectual disabilities; no preparation is given to families or communities to welcome these children and minimal instruction is offered to municipalities, and schools as how they should proceed with the integration process".

According to the report, most children with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities - almost 9,000 in total - remain in segregated "special" schools for children with disabilities. In these schools, even the most basic equipment (such as desks, notebooks, and chalk) is in short supply, buildings are in disrepair, and facilities such as laboratories or workshops are often abandoned for want of materials. More than 1,700 children are also confined to social care institutions and do not have access to any education at all. A report issued by the State Agency for Child Protection early in 2005 noted that of the 1,000 children surveyed in five institutions, only 39 had access to any form of education.

In employment, the situation is similar, with all indicators suggesting that virtually nobody with intellectual disabilities has any type of job. A quota imposed by the Government on companies

with more than 50 employees, requiring between four and ten percent of employees to be people with disabilities, has not been successful because the penalties imposed on employers who violate the rule are too low to be punitive.

Work in sheltered employment settings exists, but these segregated enterprises for people with disabilities employ fewer than 300 people with intellectual disabilities nationwide, and the number of such workplaces has been on the decline in recent years. Smaller still is the number of people with intellectual disabilities working in supported employment, which provides a range of support to help people with intellectual disabilities work on the open market. Supported employment enhances social inclusion; however there is no policy framework to develop it at the national level, and for the time being it is only available through NGOs and on a very small scale.

Bulgarian legislation and social programmes continue to use outdated and stigmatising terminology to refer to people with intellectual disabilities. The OSI report urges the Bulgarian Government to replace degrading terms such as “imbecility”, “retardation”, “oligophrenia”, “handicap” and “mental deficiency” with the term “intellectual disability”.

The OSI report also expresses concerns regarding the procedures for the diagnosis and assessment of people with disabilities in Bulgaria. An alarmingly high number of children in special schools identify themselves as Roma – up to half the student population in special schools, according to an NGO estimate. This calls into question whether the assessment process accurately identifies children with intellectual disabilities, or whether cultural barriers, and in some cases discrimination, serve as the main factors in determining placement in a special school.

An additional major barrier to the social inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities is the lack of public awareness about their potential as active citizens, as well as the lack of awareness about existing programmes targeted towards them. Ms. Kukova said, “the Government should reach out to NGOs and parents’ organisations, as they can raise awareness in their communities. The Government should also launch a public awareness campaign to inform employers that new measures supporting the employment of people with disabilities are now available to them, and raise their awareness that people with intellectual disabilities can be productive employees.”

Note to editors

This report is part of a series of 14 country monitoring reports monitoring “Access to Education and Employment for People with Intellectual Disabilities” throughout Europe. The reports were prepared by EUMAP, the EU Monitoring and Advocacy Program of the Open Society Institute, in cooperation with the Open Society Mental Health Initiative. All reports are available online at www.eumap.org. More information on the Open Society Institute is available at www.soros.org.

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