



# Autism Spectrum Pathways National Report - Romania

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## 1. Introduction

In the framework of the Erasmus+ project Autism Spectrum Pathways, and as part of its state-of-the-art research, the Romanian partner, Help Autism Association, has drafted this national research report to review the current legal framework, existing solutions and lived experiences regarding the topic of employment and training for people on the autism spectrum.

This national report focuses on Romania, starting the legislation that directly applies to autistic people in Romania and then providing a review on the data and existing systems, projects and programs that promote access to employment for autistic people. Lastly, we will present first-hand testimonies from two people responsible with supporting young people with ASD in getting a job.

Elena Nicolae, psychotherapist, therapy coordinator, accessibilization counsellor<sup>1</sup>:

*I am a counsellor / specialist for young people with ASD accessing the labour market as well as for companies interested in making jobs accessible for neurodiverse people.*

*During training sessions, I always see young people that want to be taken into consideration and understood. They need to learn new activities in a work environment, to be validated for the accomplished tasks and in this way to develop their self-esteem.*

*On the other hand, during the interaction with the employers in the program, I met people willing to understand the needs of young people with ASD, to support and make them part of the team. For me, the project was a challenging one in which I grew alongside with the beneficiaries.*

Laura Muntean, HR responsible, mentor of a young person with ASD within Help Autism Association, accessibilization counsellor:

*For the last 6-months, I have worked with young people with ASD, guiding the first interviews before meeting the employer. I managed to learn much more about them, their needs and the way they express themselves in an interview. They want a job, but the fear exceeds the intention to apply for jobs because the employers reject them, because they do not understand their needs. The fear of being rejected, I think, makes them not access job opportunities. They need specialized courses adapted to their needs, a platform where they can find accessible jobs where they are not discriminated against but supported by a mentor. It is also important to meet the need for information on behalf of employers (small, medium or large companies). From my point of view, awareness in Romania is still very low.*

## 2. Autistic people and employment: the legislative framework

People with ASD in Romania are not considered as a distinct category regarding employment (or other subjects - education, health etc.). They are often assimilated to the larger category of people with disabilities (or "other disorders of psychological development" in documents of the Ministry of Health).

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<sup>1</sup> Project "Increasing chances for access to labour market for autistic people" financed under the Active Citizens Fund Romania (2022 - 2024) implemented by Help Autism Association



The Romanian legislative framework in the domain of protecting and promoting the rights of people with disabilities is aligned with the international and European policies. Thus, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted in New York by the United Nations General Assembly on December 13, 2006, signed by Romania on September 26, 2007 was ratified with LAW no. 221 of November 11, 2010. The law assigns the authority in charge with the implementation of the Convention - National Authority for the Handicapped Persons<sup>2</sup>, presently named National Authority for Promotion the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Romania has in place a national strategy regarding the rights of persons with disabilities, named "An Equitable Romania", 2022-2027 (continuation of the former National Strategy "A society without barriers for persons with disabilities" 2016-2020). This strategy stipulates, "All disabled people who want to work should be able to take up a job" as well as "Jobs must be suited to the needs of disabled people". In addition, it sets as the specific objectives of the employment strategy: increasing access to employment, increasing the quality of employment and increasing access to vocational training.

Specific for autism, there are efforts of the civil society (federations and networks of associations in autism) to put in place a national program for autism for more than 5 years. Only at the end of 2022, a dedicated subprogram was approved as part of the National Mental Health Program, to ensure the access of people diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders to services related to the medical act.

Other legislative measures related to access of the ASD people on the labour market are:

- Emergency Ordinance 114/2022 for completing and amending Law 196/2016 on the guaranteed average income
- DECISION no. 584/27.05.2021 for the amendment and completion of Government Decision no. 1217/2006 regarding the establishment of the national mechanism for the promotion of social inclusion in Romania
- LAW No. 292/2011 on social assistance and other legislative documents with reference to the rights of persons with disabilities
- Order no. 721/481/310/2019 of the Ministry of Labour and Social Justice regarding the approval of the Subsidy Granting Procedure for supporting people with disabilities in accessing and using assistive technologies and devices and access technologies, other than those financed by the National Single Health Social Insurance Fund within the system of social health insurance

In Romania, labour legislation aims to protect and facilitate access to the labour market for people with disabilities, to offer them equal opportunities and ensure a working environment suitable to their needs. The next paragraphs will present the main amenities and benefits for both employers and employees. The law makes it easier for people with disabilities to access jobs, and companies get more facilities to make it easier for employers.

a) Amenities a disabled person who is employed benefit from:

- reasonable adaptation to the workplace;
- persons with severe or severe disabilities who are employed, benefit from an exemption from paying income tax for salaries<sup>3</sup>;
- counselling in the period prior to employment and during employment, as well as during the trial period, from a specialized counsellor in labour mediation;

<sup>2</sup> Set as individual institution in 2014 by the Governmental Ordinance 86/2014 and approved by Law 174/2015 (previously it functioned as department of different institutions)

<sup>3</sup> As provided in art. 76 para. (1) - (3) from Law 227/2015 according to the Fiscal Code, with subsequent amendments and additions



- a paid trial period of at least 45 working days;
  - a paid period of at least 30 working days notice when termination of contract at the initiative of the employer for reasons beyond his control;
  - the possibility to work less than 8 hours a day;
- a) Social benefit - it is granted regardless of income, they do not stop when getting a job;
  - b) Use of assistive technology at work;
  - c) The right to social assistance services:
    - are granted on request or ex officio, as the case may be, based on supporting documents;
    - are granted at home, in the community, day/residential centres, public or private;
    - are granted in the form of social benefits, ex officio, for persons possessing a disability classification certificate;
  - d) Fiscal benefits include: exemption from paying the taxes/fees for buildings, land, transportation means
  - e) Other benefits include:
    - Access to any form of education, regardless of age
    - Reduction of the standard retirement age, for people in the field of work
    - Loan with the interest incurred from the state budget for the purchase of a car or adapting the home according to needs
    - Priority for renting, at the lower levels, living spaces in buildings that belong to the public domain of the state or its administrative-territorial units
    - Free or partially subsidized access to cultural, sports and leisure events (even the respective events are not accessibilized).

Other support measures that can be accessed by employers employing disabled people:

- Deduction of the amounts related to the adaptation of protected workplaces and the purchase of machinery and equipment used in the production process;
  - Deduction of the expenses for transporting disabled people from home to the workplace, or working materials;
  - Settlement of the specific expenses of preparation, training and professional guidance and employment of disabled persons;
  - State subsidy.
- f) The authorized protected unit is the entity under public or private law, with its own management, in which at least 3 disabled persons are employed, representing at least 30% of the total number of employees, and the cumulative working time of they represent at least 50% of the total working time of all employees, as well as any form of organization chosen for carrying out an economic activity by a natural person holding a disability classification certificate<sup>4</sup>.

### 3. Access to the labour market and inclusion in the workplace for people on the autism spectrum- desk research

#### 3.1. Background

Unfortunately, in Romania there are no unified statistics regarding people with ASD. We have collected data from multiple sources (social assistance, medical sources, etc.), but even so, the

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<sup>4</sup> According to Law 448/2006



problem of taxonomy arises, because these people are considered in categories named differently or that include other categories (of disabilities, medical conditions etc.):

- a) Data collected from the National Statistical Institute regarding “Number of new cases of illness declared by family doctors with the diagnosis of other disorders of psychological development and without specification (ICD 10 CODE - F83-84, F88-F89), during the period 2014-2022” shows the following numbers (as totals): 1031 cases in 2014, 967 cases in 2015, 1082 cases in 2016, 1127 cases in 2017, 1215 cases in 2018, 1204 cases in 2019, 1156 cases in 2020, 1240 cases in 2021, 1436 cases in 2022.
- b) Data collected by Help Autism regarding the number of children with pervasive developmental disorders (autistic disorder, Asperger's disorder, atypical autism/pervasive developmental disorder without other specification), childhood disintegrative disorder, infantile autism (registered at the social assistance service on July 1, 2021): 13,992 children (age 0 to 18) at national level and 1,095 ASD people that left the services during the last 2 years at age 18. In addition, out of the 13,992 children, 6,152 children were in the educational system, 3,446 children were in the special education system and 4,394 children were out of any educational system (being under educational age of out of school).
- c) Data extracted from “National analysis of the situation of enabling/rehabilitating the person with autism spectrum disorders (child and adult)” made in preparation of the development of the National Plan for Autism 2020 - 2024 (that was only discussed during 2019-2020 with the Romanian institution in force until the political system was changed in 2020):
  - On June 30, 2019, at the national level, a total number of 15,537 people diagnosed with ASD were identified, of which 4,346 were female and 11,191 were male;
  - Out of the total of 15,537 people with ASD, only 1,632 are adults, and 13,905 are children. An explanation of the difference between the small number of adults compared to the number of children diagnosed with ASD, at the national level, results from the way in which the assessment was carried out with a view to classifying adults with ASD as a disability until the year 2013. Prior to 2013, the assessment for placing people with ASD in a degree of disability was carried out through the complex assessment, which was focused on the functional deficit assessed on the basis of the specialist medical report (the diagnosis of autism, as a rule, was not recorded in the report, but only associated disorders, for example mental retardation and/or associated neurological/psychiatric conditions) and on the functional-adaptive capacity of the respective person, the assessment of the degree of personal, social and psychocognitive autonomy of the person. Considering these aspects, regarding the number of adults with ASD classified as disabled, the diagnosis of ASD was not found as such neither in the criteria nor in the medical documents attesting the condition at the time of the person's presentation for evaluation. There were situations where the diagnosis of ASD was mentioned in the documents issued during childhood, but this diagnosis was no longer found in the documents issued during adulthood;
  - On June 30, 2019, a total number of 9,808 people in the records of psychiatric structures with an ASD diagnosis can be noted at the national level.

### 3.2. Literature review

A synthesis of what has already been published by accredited scientists and researchers in relation with the employment situation for autistic people in Romania include the following:



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- The article “Autism and Inclusive Employment”<sup>5</sup> makes a review of the numbers of people with disabilities in the labour market, as well as success factors to foster access to employment and keeping the job as well as some recommendations for interventions at national level
- “Study on Discrimination against Children and Young People with Autism, Especially Those of Roma Ethnicity in School Environment, Community and the Labour Market”<sup>6</sup> presents some point on “Stigmatization and discrimination of people with mental disabilities and of Roma people on the labour market from the perspective of specialists in assisted employment”. The report says, “Employers are relating to disabled people most often on the basis of stereotypes, prejudices and fears they have and through which they define the disabled person strictly in terms of incapacity and not ability and the potential it has.”
- The study “Myths, Biases and Stereotypes over the Autism”<sup>7</sup> reveals how the issue of autism is represented in the collective mind through a series of myths and stereotypes that are emotionally responsible for prejudices and discriminatory attitudes.
- The article “Interventions for People with Asperger Syndrome. The Transition to Adult Age”<sup>8</sup> focuses on how real social inclusion will only be possible if the long-term needs of adults, as well as children with autism, are fully recognized and adequately supported
- “Opinions, Representations, Disabilities and Professional Guidelines”<sup>9</sup> presents a research on the opinions, perceptions, representations of teachers, parents of children with disabilities about disability, professional orientation and the role of the psychologist in this process
- “Social and Professional Discrimination for People with Disabilities”<sup>10</sup> - the paper tried to highlight the factors responsible for disability discrimination and exclusion from the socio-professional life, coming up with proposals for improvement in this regard.
- The case study “Adapting A Professional Integration Swiss Model for People with Disabilities to the Romanian Context”<sup>11</sup> presents the difficulties that Prietenia Association encounters in its undertakings to implement a social enterprise for the integration of the mentally disabled people, having at core the model of its Swiss partner, Sonnhalde Gempen.

<sup>5</sup> “Autism and inclusive employment” published in Social Economy Magazine no 2 / 2021, ISSN 2587-4179 (Pages 84-93) by Suveică Luminița from "Nicolae Testemițanu" State University of Medicine and Pharmacy –

[https://ibn.idsi.md/vizualizare\\_articol/159770](https://ibn.idsi.md/vizualizare_articol/159770)

<sup>6</sup> “Study on discrimination against children and young people with autism, especially those of Roma ethnicity in school environment, community and the labor market” - developed by Sociometrics Association – Social and Economic Analysis Group, 2015, [http://maspa.raa.ro/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Raport\\_Discriminare\\_Persoane\\_TSA\\_c.compressed.pdf](http://maspa.raa.ro/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Raport_Discriminare_Persoane_TSA_c.compressed.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> “Myths, Biases and Stereotypes Over the Autism” published by Beatrice Manu and co in COMMUNICATION, CONTEXT, INTERDISCIPLINARITY, Volume III, Section: Psychology and Sociology, “Petru Maior” University Press, 2014 (page 25) - <http://asociatia-alpha.ro/cci/03-2014/CCI-03-Psys.pdf#page=25>

<sup>8</sup> “INTERVENTIONS FOR PEOPLE WITH ASPERGER SYNDROME. THE TRANSITION TO ADULT AGE”, Source: Journal of Cognitive & Behavioral Psychotherapies. Sep2004, Vol. 4 Issue 2, p223-231. 9p., author Patricia Howlin: “true social inclusion will only be possible if the long-term needs of adults, as well as children with autism, are fully recognized and adequately supported.” <https://t.ly/fzQNW>

<sup>9</sup> “Opinions, representations, disabilities and professional guidelines” - Univers Pedagogic, Pag. 102-107, Cucer Angela, Institutul de Științe ale Educației, January 2020 [https://ibn.idsi.md/vizualizare\\_articol/91590](https://ibn.idsi.md/vizualizare_articol/91590)

<sup>10</sup> Social and professional discrimination for people with disabilities” - Central and Eastern European Online Library, Author Lioara Bianca Bubuoiu, Published by: Fundatia Română pentru Inteligenta Afacerii – <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=534187>

<sup>11</sup> “Adapting A Professional Integration Swiss Model For People With Disabilities To The Romanian Context” - Central and Eastern European Online Library, Authors: Despina Iancu, Eva Varga, Published by: Asociatia Alternative Sociale - <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=242085>





### 3.3. Review of available public data

The National Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities “An Equitable Romania”<sup>12</sup>, 2022-2027 (approved by the DECISION of the government no. 490<sup>13</sup> of April 6, 2022) includes data and information from the “Diagnosis of The Situation of People with Disabilities in Romania”<sup>14</sup>, published in 2021. Regarding the employment domain, the following difficulties have been identified (the following data are extracted from the Diagnosis):

- Limited access to occupation
- Low quality of employment
- Limited access to professional training programs

The causes result from the poor implementation of the previous strategies in the domain. Thus, the strategy for people with disabilities 2016-2020 included objectives focusing on ensuring an open, inclusive and accessible work environment for promoting the valuable contributions of people with disabilities through employment. However, of its 24 proposed measures, only one was fulfilled, 19 of them being considered under implementation, and three not implemented at all (for one of the three no information was collected). At the same time, in the National Strategy for Employment 2015-2020, people with disabilities are mentioned several times as presenting a higher risk for unemployment, but no further arguments or explanations were offered, and no specific objectives were set for this vulnerable group.

Other numbers in Romania:

- Romania has the lowest employment rate of people with severe disabilities compared to the other countries of the European Union (12%), but the situation is hard also for people with moderate disabilities (51%).
- in 2019 only 0,28% of the adults with disabilities are registered as unemployed, even the inactive rate is very high.
- Between 2015 and 2019, the number of disabled persons receiving employment services has dropped to half.
- People with disabilities living in rural areas who have a low level of education or ages 20-34 are at an even higher risk of not being employed.
- Women with disabilities have a lower employment rate than men.
- 88% of the people with disabilities aged between 20 and 34, as well as 92% of those aged between 50 and 64 years old are economically inactive.
- Also 90% of severely disabled people from rural areas and 90% of those with severe disabilities who did not graduate primary education are inactive.
- Number of disabled people employed in December 2019 in authorized protected units: 121; persons employed in December 2019 in insertion social enterprises: 11.
- 19% of people aged 18-64 with disabilities who were working were at risk of poverty in 2018, by 5 percentage points over the employed non-disabled population.
- People with disabilities are included more frequently in low-skilled jobs, respectively less often in high-skilled jobs, than those without disabilities.
- Professional training programs of the state employment agency included in 2019 only 39 people with disabilities.

<sup>12</sup> <https://anpd.gov.ro/web/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/The-National-Strategy-for-the-Rights-of-Persons-with-Disabilities-An-equitable-Romania-2022-2027.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/254203>

<sup>14</sup> <https://anpd.gov.ro/web/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Diagnosis-of-the-situation-of-persons-with-disabilities-in-Romania-Summary.pdf>



- Only 2% of people with severe disabilities attended qualification courses compared to 10% of people without disabilities, and 1% of people with severe disabilities attended adult education training programs.

The Diagnosis identified some factors that contributed to the current situation:

- Factors related to institutions (including decision makers) and legislation in place:
  - Even the legislation stipulates that companies with more than 50 employees have to employ a minimum rate of disabled people (4% from the total number of employees), they prefer to pay fines to avoid the extra-work and costs involved.
  - The state itself fails to ensure this rate in its institutions.
  - The national employment agency has a low rate of efficiency especially regarding people with disabilities (not even their offices are accessible physically, informationally and communicationally for people with disabilities). The lack of efficiency is proven by the fact that less than 30% people - with or without disabilities, access its services, despite the needs.
  - The National Employment Agency and its territorial offices lack specialists able to work with persons with disabilities. According to the law, they can contract specialized services from accredited private providers, but there are no regulations in place to allow implementation (regarding minimum standard cost or minimum quality standards).
  - Discrimination is still at a high rate.
  - Protected workplaces are very few, not encouraged by the state (financially) and allow segregation.
  - There are no employment support services adapted to the needs of persons with disabilities - they have to support both the individuals as well as the employer.
  - In Romanian legislation, there are no recommendations, obligations or performance indicators to monitor the situation of the disabled people on the labour market.
  - Lack of monitoring on the working conditions for people with disabilities.
  - People with disabilities were considered as target group for projects financed under the European Operational Program (Human Capital Operational Program), but only for one of the three priorities. However, the number of people with disabilities benefiting from training programs from European funds was very low (0,29% of the total number of beneficiaries).
- Factors related to individuals (persons with disabilities):
  - Awareness of the population with disabilities able to work is low and depends on the family support system.
  - Often people with disabilities prefer disability pension / state allowance instead the instability and discrimination / bullying on the labour market.
  - People with disabilities are put in a position to approach the labour market without any assessment of their abilities, limitations or expectations.
- Factors related to potential employers:
  - Often, employers do not know how people with disabilities can work and / or for how much time a day or a week.
  - The subsidy system for employers that employ people with disabilities is not attractive enough (compared to the costs of the company). In 2019, only 171 employers applied for these subsidies.
  - Few jobs are adapted (in terms of physical environment, work program, tasks) so that people with disabilities can work in good conditions and do their best. Work procedures were the most common adaptations among employers in Romania, probably because they are the easiest to make (through organizational decisions).



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- There is a certain tendency to profile the job offer for people with disabilities, depending on the type of disability (for example, in the past, the expectation was that people with visual impairments would work in making brushes, and now there is an expectation that they would be trained and employed as masseuses).
- In Romania, trade unions do not actively represent the specific rights and needs of people with disabilities.

However, even the Diagnosis document gather a lot of information on the employment situation of the persons with disabilities, representatives of the civil society claimed that they were not consulted when collecting and processing the data. So that the information in the document might still not be accurate enough.

### 3.4. Internet and press releases

Projects focusing on access of the disabled people to the labour market:

- The “Facilitating the insertion of disabled people into the labour market” project financed under Human Capital Operational Program 2014-2020 (May 2019 - October 2023) and implemented by the National Authority for promotion of Rights of People with Disabilities offers vouchers (4,600 euro) for purchasing of technologies and assistive devices and access technologies, other than those financed by the unique national health social insurance fund within the social insurance system of health.
- The "Start in life for young people with autism" project<sup>15</sup> was initiated by AUTISM ROMANIA in 2014 - 8 young people with Asperger Syndrome and high-functioning autism benefit from vocational counselling and training for finding and maintaining a job. The project also elaborated a mini-guide<sup>16</sup> for employers.
- The "Valorisation of opportunities for insertion on the labour market for vulnerable groups, through integration in VALORIS Social Enterprises"<sup>17</sup> project - ID 144616, implemented by DGASMB (2015). The project aimed to implement 9 social economy structures and included, among the vulnerable groups, 20 persons with disabilities.
- Bethany Social Services Foundation implemented in 2016 the project “Integrated Solutions for Social Inclusion of Children and Young People with Disabilities” (financed through the Swiss-Romanian cooperation program) and developed the guide “Disability Vs. Opportunity - Manual of Good Practices Addressed to Specialists in the Field of Social Services for Persons with Disabilities”<sup>18</sup>. Results: development of a protected employment program (Association for Community Support and Social integration Iasi), founding 3 protected units with 36 workplaces for persons with disabilities (Next to You Romania Foundation).
- "Let Me Hear Your Voice" Association in Albestii de Arges developed a professional program<sup>19</sup> for persons with autism in collaboration with ELECTROARGEŞ S.A., a local business producing

<sup>15</sup> The "Start in life for young people with autism" <https://debunavoie.ro/ro/projects/iJyqIB8/%E2%80%9Estart-in-viata-pentru-tinerii-cu-autism%E2%80%9D>

<sup>16</sup> <https://autismromania.ro/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/angajare-persoane-cu-autism-minighid.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.dgas.ro/comunicat-de-presa-incepere-proiect-valorificarea-oportunitatilor-de-insertie-pe-piata-muncii-pentru-grupurile-vulnerabile-prin-integrarea-in-intreprinderi-sociale-valoris-id-14/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://bethany.ro/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/manual-bune-practici.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.argesexpres.ro/index.php/actualitate/28922-asociatia-lasa-ma-sa-ti-aud-glasul-desfasoara-initiativa-zilele-portilor-deschise>



household and professional appliances and industrial equipment that employ young beneficiaries of the association when they turn 18.

- “Increasing Chances for Access to Labour Market for Autistic People”<sup>20</sup> is a project implemented by Help Autism Association (April 2022 - March 2024, funded under Active Citizens Fund Romania, EEA Grants) focusing on training young people with autism for accessing the labour market (30 persons), and assisting them to obtain practice / internship contracts (3-4 persons) in one of the 10 companies that will also participate in a neurodiversity-related awareness program. Help Autism specialists assist both the candidates and the companies (in their effort to make workplaces accessible for neurodiverse persons). The project is in progress and, until now, helped 1 young man with ASD to find a job (internship was transformed into a permanent job) within the Romanian headquarters of a big multinational cosmetic company in Romania and another 2 young people with ASD are within the recruitment process with other 2 big companies. Help Autism specialists accompany them as well as the companies. Along with the ASP project (Erasmus+), the project is part of the HelpHIRE direction of Help Autism Association.
- A.W.A.R.D. (Autistic World a Real Dimension)<sup>21</sup> (Project code 2018-1-IT01-KA202-006809) is an Erasmus+ project aiming to build an innovative model in the field of professional training to support the access of young people with autism to the labour market involving all interested parties: teachers, educators, mentors of practice and young people with autism. The Romanian partner "Ioan Slavici" High School, a private technological high school in Timisoara, Romania. The project included training programs for both professionals and autistic young people as well as development of a video game aimed to facilitate the people with autism spectrum disorders' learning process.
- Autism Transylvania Association is implementing the pilot project “I Want to Be Independent!”<sup>22</sup> (May - November 2023), with support from Cluj-Napoca Local Council and the Social and Medical Assistance Directorate. The project includes a non-formal education program for young people with autism aiming to develop abilities to be further on use on labour market.

## 4. Voices: barriers and opportunities

The State-of-the-art Research focuses on current challenges, needs and difficulties that ASD job seekers have in relation to finding, securing, and retaining employment together with those that employers and employment agencies face in meeting the needs of the ASD community.

Help Autism Association conducted the research in Romania.

For the State-of-the-art Research, Help Autism used the focus group method, complemented by a survey (11 questions questionnaire), as projected in the application. The researching instruments were designed and agreed among all the project partners in online meetings and email communications - see Annex 1 - ASP Focus Groups - Guidelines - English version and Annex 2 - Questionnaire - Romanian version). The research (focus group and survey) took place during the period May-August 2023 in Bucharest and online.

<sup>20</sup> <https://helpautism.ro/help-hire/sanse-angajare-adulti-autism>

<sup>21</sup> <https://islavicitmliceu.ro/proiecte-europene/erasmus-award/>

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.autismtransilvania.ro/Causes?resourceId=23>



The participants were representatives of the following categories considered within the project: ASD jobseekers (15 participants), vocational educators / employment agencies or intermediary (15 participants) and employers (15 participants). The focus groups included 24 participants, while the survey included 21 participants.

Both focus groups and the questionnaire used by Help Autism in its national research were held in Romanian language (upon translation from the project working language - English). The participants were given equal speaking time and received minimal intervention from the moderators (some support was given on behalf of an assisting therapist, in some cases of difficulties of expression). As the feedback from the questionnaire and focus groups overlapped on numerous points, the research will be presented in a synthetic form, for each of the 3 categories of participants.

i. ASD jobseekers

- Characteristics: The 12 participants in the focus groups were aged between 16 and 26 years old. They were coming both from urban (Bucharest, Targoviste, Giurgiu) and rural areas. All of them were currently living with their parents with state benefits.
- Experience related to vocational training: 6 of the candidates were attending of finished a vocational school and it is to consider that the rest of them are following / have followed a non-vocational educational program.
- Experience related to employment: only 2 candidates had previous experiences on the labour market, not assisted in any way. They both had experience with jobs with a significant lower level of requested education /specialised than the candidates'. None of the participants was aware of inclusive hiring programmes and inclusive job portals in Romania. As regarding types of support for people on the autism spectrum, the responses were distributed between 3 categories: the need for developing protected workplaces, the need for adapted training programs as well as the need for support mainly for the communication with the employers and co-workers. Responses regarding the lack of accessibility of the recruitment process were unanimous.
- Factors related to improvement of candidates' work nominated were related to the physical environment and program, but mostly the community (more understanding and empathy from colleagues). Discrimination and lack of empathy were the main causes for job loss, personal trauma and refusal to diagnosis disclosure (even some of them are willing to disclosure in order to receive the necessary support). So, most of the participants or their families decided to stay at home, with state benefits, giving up on training to live an independent life.
- Barriers for autistic people in keeping a job or staying in education are related to their lack in communication skills, their stereotypes and lack of focus on a long period.
- Reasonable adjustments for making the jobs accessible to autistic people start with an adapted working program and awareness (as a starting point towards inclusivity). Awareness needs to be raised not only in companies, but also in the society. In addition, when asked of the support needed, most of the candidates indicated the need to receive adapted explanations on the tasks to perform.

ii. Vocational educators / employment agencies or intermediary

- Characteristics: for this category, Help Autism contacted recruiters in recruitment agencies, as well as HR specialists and one vocational educator - 15 participants.



- Experience in working with people on the autism spectrum and employers - only 5 of them, admitting that the level is very low. As for inclusive hiring programmes and inclusive job portals, some of the participants nominated their own company (if the case) or companies that released on the market advertisements on this subject.
- Tools used - trainings, but mostly empathy in the best cases; none in most of the cases. Support needed for autistic adults to perform - the responses ranged from awareness and non-discrimination to support, accesibilization and participation.
- Barriers - were identified low performance, low adaptation to changing situations, and lack of information and specialists that can help companies make the necessary accesibilization.
- Accessibility of the enrolment or recruitment processes - half of the responses were positive and half were negative, but we think that this result is strongly influenced by the participation of the companies that collaborates with Help Autism in an employment project<sup>23</sup>. Success was related to support from specialists, trainings on accessibility, as well as more personal aspects, such as non-discrimination, support and equal opportunities.
- Reasonable adjustments - participants admitted that the good intentions are not translated into a plan, is more an adaptation to a real situation. The responses to the questions no 10 and 11 confirmed that there are no support system in place for career progression, as well as guidance on disclosing their diagnosis.
- Awareness - the level was appreciated half-positive and half negative.

### iii. Employers

- Characteristics: in this category were included companies located in Bucharest and the surrounding area and this aspect may influence the responses (in terms of higher awareness level on autism). Also, there are companies collaborating with the organization in an employment project<sup>24</sup> for ASD young people, as well as a company is working specifically with persons with ASD, so their openness, level of information and support is much higher. The level of experience in working with people with ASD is also growing (for the same reason).
- Inclusive hiring programmes and inclusive job portals are not known, even by the specialists in the area.
- Support offered ranged from therapy services with specialists (internal or external) to creating protected working places and developing partnerships with other organizations. In that case, the support is limited to the extent of the grant / financing resources identified.
- Things that could help people on the spectrum to work better were identified more accurately: proper adaptation of the environment, proper adaptation of the working program, proper adaptation of the tasks.
- Barriers for autistic people at work - also very accurately identified low level of awareness, discrimination, communication difficulties, and stereotypes.
- Recruitment processes is mostly accessible (or on the way to become more accessible, with support from specialists in the above-mentioned employment project).

<sup>23</sup> "Increasing chances for access to labour market for autistic people" financed under the Active Citizens Fund Romania (2022 - 2024) implemented by Help Autism Association

<sup>24</sup> "Increasing chances for access to labour market for autistic people" financed under the Active Citizens Fund Romania (2022 - 2024) implemented by Help Autism Association



- Reasonable adjustments made are also very good adapted to each case, to meet their needs: support through therapy, one-to-one support during activities, mentor, adjustments of the program, adjustments of the environment, and adjustments of the tasks. All the taken measures define a support system well put in place or on the way to become so.
- All participants agreed that there is not enough awareness about autism within your organisation, among employees and in VET schools & employment agencies. Moreover, that is necessary for an autistic employee to inform the employer of the diagnosis, so that the employer to take all the necessary measures to ensure candidate's best conditions to perform.

## Conclusions

- Steps have been made on the way to have a better understanding, at the level of the society on the rights of ASD people, but those regarding the labour market are still very unsatisfying. This result in an important part of the work force that is not used on the labour market (especially within the larger context of labour force crisis).
- The low level of information and awareness on the labour market foster discrimination, that is still high.
- Companies with clear, standard enrolment and recruitment procedures consider themselves able to handle a situation involving persons with ASD, but the practice shows that especially those procedures make the process harder (adaptations have to be personalised by case). People involved in enrolment and recruitment process (especially the interviewers) often cling on them to avoid failure, but this is exactly the result in absence of flexibility.
- There are necessary support services to both candidates and companies. As this kind of support is expensive (and not usually budgeted by the companies), the support from state institutions is imperative.
- In the successful situations, involvement of the decision-making factors (managers) is crucial and attract support of others at both professional and personal levels. The impact of a successful situation is very positive on the employees - they feel they are part of an inclusive community, giving their own contribution to a better world.
- Regarding the candidates, it was quite difficult to reach them, giving the fact that, after exiting the therapy, they are not registered in any other institution (apart from the one that provide the state benefits) / organization / services dedicated to adults with ASD. Only occupational therapy is available in some (insufficient) centres, against payment on behalf of the families (high financial burden).

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

The real situation regarding adults with autism is that they are not prepared to face the challenges of having a job.

In most of the therapy centres in Romania, the focus is on developing the affected areas of the autistic persons. As they grow old, this kind of therapy should be replaced with psychotherapy (for



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those who are verbal and autonomous), but at that time the families are already financially and emotionally exhausted, so that many of the autistic adults are prone to depression and anxiety. They see their pairs having a social life and they do not. They suffer and isolate themselves even more. Self-esteem gradually decreases and families cannot observe and understand the signs.

There are many things to do all over the country. The situation in Bucharest (capital) is a privileged one. The levels of communication all collaboration between actors in the field are lower in other regions and even non-existent in rural areas.

The participation in the ASP project and specifically the implementation of the Work package n° 2 - State-of-the-art Research Report has determined a deeper look on the employment situation of the ASD people on behalf of Help Autism (that has 13-years experience in autism, but only for the last 4 years started this direction) and the findings resulted in the following recommendations:

- Romania fails in using an important category of working force and this affects the entire society economically, but also socially (having a job increases the welfare of the individuals and their families, but also their well-being).
- Successful situations related to employment of autistic people are often associated with efforts of NGOs in the domain. Rarely, in partnership with state institutions. State institutions' enterprises itself proved inefficient, insufficient, incomplete. Real and strong partnership between NGOs (know-how and specialists) and state institutions (decisions, connections and funds) should be encouraged and supported.
- A bigger attention is required by the state institutions to employment for autistic persons, starting with the collecting of accurate, adequate, specific and transparent information. In addition, state institutions should be a model of inclusivity.
- As the type and amount of the support needed for autistic people to access the labour market is significant, it cannot be let entirely on the NGOs. The state institutions should develop but also implement integrated and adapted plans of actions and allocate the necessary fund.
- Legislation is still a problem. Even if it is in place, it is not enforced. Both families and companies lack efficient mechanisms to access the necessary information. For families, the natural protection reactions (even justifiable) also affect the access of autistic people to the labour market. As for the companies, the bureaucracy involved often discourages them to even try to access the mechanisms that allow them to become more inclusive.
- Training programs should ensure specialised personnel in vocational educational institutions and in economic institutions that have the intention to hire autistic adults. Additionally, it is necessary to increase the quality of the educational programs in faculties that deliver personnel for working with children and adults with ASD / disabilities (such as faculties of psychology and educational sciences), introducing actual and adapted methodologies and techniques for people with ASD / disabilities. Dedicated employment programs have to ensure specific equipment and training for the teams autistic adults will work with.
- Awareness campaigns and trainings are still needed at all levels of the society and even requested by employees.

## 6. Annexes



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Annex 1 - ASP Focus Groups - Guidelines - English version

Annex 2 - Questionnaire - Romanian version

## NOTE

The present report was reviewed by Gabriela Plopeanu, consultant at Brasov City Hall, President of Crystal Children Association and President FEDRA (National Federation for Rights and Resources for People with Autistic Spectrum Disorders).



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