



**International Conference for Exchange of Best Practices on:  
“Equal enjoyment of human rights and freedoms by persons  
with disabilities: Achievements and challenges”**

**Co-organised by the Council of Europe and the  
Ministry of Labour and Social Policy of Bulgaria**

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[Deputy Minister, Distinguished Participants, Ladies and gentleman,]

It gives me great pleasure to join the Bulgarian Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe and welcome you to the **International Conference for Exchange of Best Practices on the “Equal enjoyment of human rights and freedoms by persons with disabilities: Achievements and challenges”**.

I am pleased that the Bulgarian Chairmanship decided to include, amongst its priorities, this important topic.

The Council of Europe Dublin Conference of November last year provided an **opportunity to take stock of progress** in the framework of implementing the **Council of Europe Disability Action Plan which ended in 2015.**

Achievements over the past ten years are considerable. They include **changes in legislation, service provision, physical environment and progress towards challenging stereotypes and changing attitudes.**

In spite of these achievements, challenges remain, **notably the implementation gap between standards and the reality in the member States.**

I encourage you to look at the Abridged Evaluation report to know more about action at a national level for each of the 15 action lines of the Action Plan.

But what do these challenges mean to persons with disabilities in their everyday life? They mean that too many persons with disabilities are still **institutionalised against their wish, deprived of the right to vote, exposed to higher risks of violence and abuse compared to the rest of the population, deprived of their right to enjoy arts or take part in sports, and discriminated when it comes to having access to mainstream education and employment.**

While it is easier to recognise and work towards removing legal or physical barriers, **it is much harder to tackle our assumptions, our prejudices and our stereotypes.**

It is in this context that we are building our **new disability strategy of the Council of Europe** for the years to come. The guiding principle for the preparation of the new strategy is our **human rights-based approach, working for and with persons with disabilities, to shift the focus from disability to ability.**

The Council of Europe will continue to strive for the efficient and full implementation of the commitments entered into by member States, **notably the UN CRPD.**

Whether it is about **collecting reliable data**, or **providing independent expertise and targeted analysis**, or still, **providing advice and training**, you can count on the Council of Europe expertise to improve the everyday life of persons with disabilities.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we continue to work on the preparation of the **new Council of Europe strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities**, we should make sure that it becomes what it is meant to be – **a strategic document, a flexible policy instrument and framework** that can be adapted by each individual member State, taking account specific developments at national level, their legislation and policies. Its main aim should be to provide political decision-makers with **a roadmap for innovative disability legislation, policy and practice, based on the UN CRPD**.

In this process, we need to keep in mind a few basic needs.

- The need to provide benchmarks to ensure compliance and respects for the commitments taken by member States;
- The need to be practical in our approach and policies;
- The need to foster partnerships, co-operation, co-ordination and synergies with all relevant stakeholders;
- The need to engage at all times with persons with disabilities;
- The need to monitor implementation of existing commitments;
- The need for targeted technical co-operation to support member States.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We must strive **to meet the needs of every person with a disability, without exception and regardless of the age, origin, nature or severity of the disability.**

I look forward to your inputs, ideas, suggestions and, most importantly, to working together because only together can we bring about positive change and achieve our common goal, which is the full enjoyment of human rights for all and by all.

Thank you for your attention!