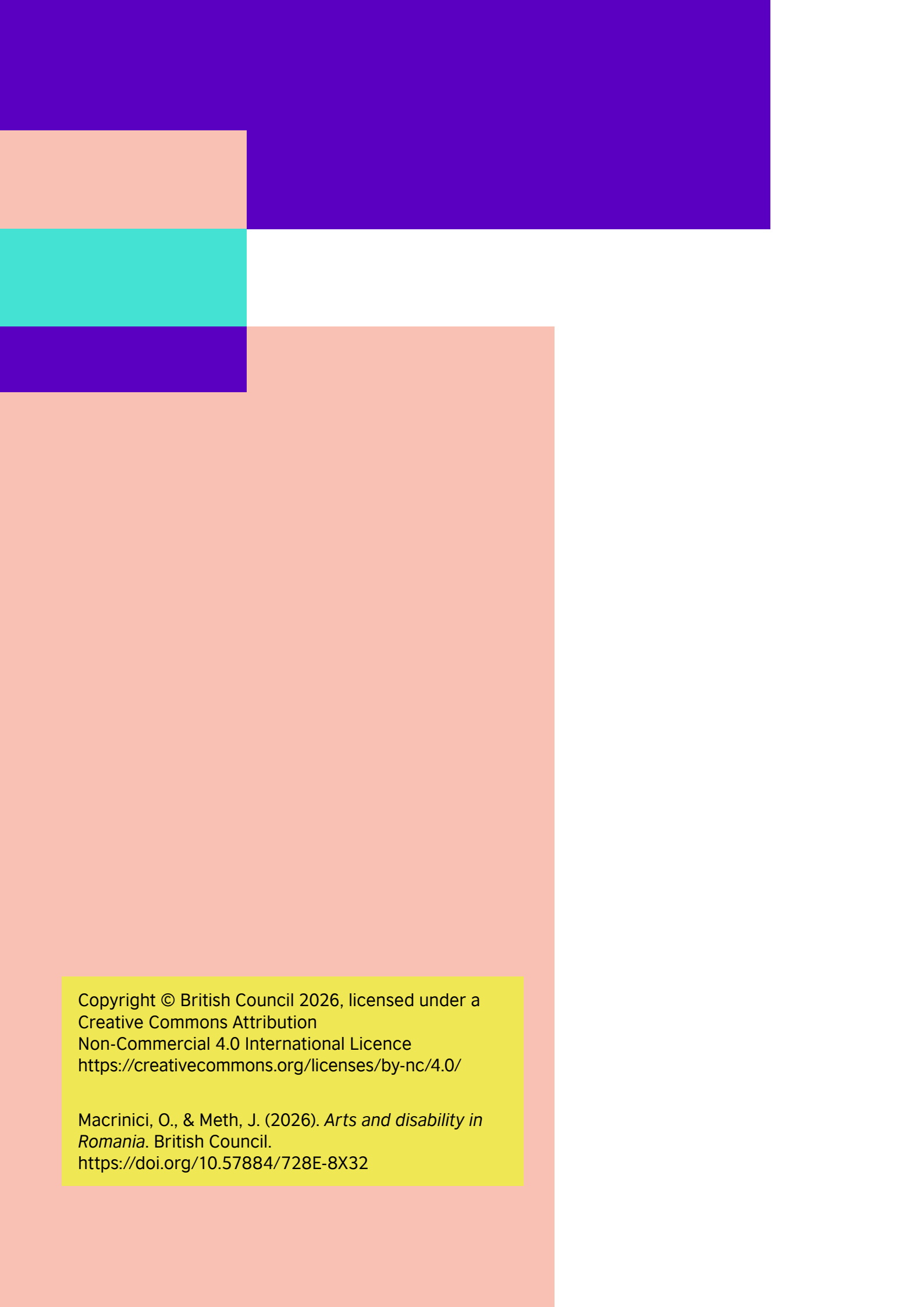


Arts and disability in Romania

From fragmented practice
to a national framework





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A note on terminology¹

Both ‘disabled people’ and ‘people with disabilities’ are generally accepted terms, and here used interchangeably. ‘Disabled people’ is often preferred by disability advocates as it reflects the social model of disability, emphasizing that society disables people through barriers rather than focusing solely on the individual’s condition. ‘People with disabilities’ aligns with the United Nations and is sometimes seen as more person-first, but it can implicitly place the onus for change on the individual rather than society.

Neurodiversity posits human brain variation as natural and inherent, meaning *all people* are ‘neurodiverse’. ‘Neurodivergent’ describes someone whose brain functions, learns, or behaves differently from what society considers ‘typical’, a term used for people with conditions such as autism or ADHD.

¹ Rahman, L. (2019, July). *Disability Language Guide*. Stanford Disability Initiative. https://disability.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbjybj26391/files/media/file/disability-language-guide-stanford_1.pdf

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Foreword

There are people for whom contact with artistic creation can be an alternative way of perceiving the world and being present within it. And yet, for many of them, the path to art remains difficult or even impossible. Not because of a lack of interest, talent, or desire, but because of obstacles that are often invisible to others, yet extremely concrete for those who face them every day. In Romania, people with disabilities still encounter this reality far too often. Their presence in cultural life -as audience members, artists, or professionals - is fragile, sporadic, and dependent on isolated initiatives or individual efforts.

The way a society structures access to art and culture says a great deal about its true values. It reveals how willing it is to create spaces for genuine encounters, rather than merely proclaim generous principles. It shows whether diversity is truly embraced or remains an abstract concept, rarely reflected in everyday reality. When access is missing, the loss is not borne only by those who are excluded. It is a collective loss that affects the entire cultural community, impoverishing it by depriving it of essential perspectives, voices, and experiences.

Accessibility does not mean only technical adaptations or isolated solutions. Above all, it means people and relationships. It means how someone is welcomed, whether they feel genuinely included or merely tolerated, whether their voice is heard or fades away like an echo. Accessibility begins long before ramps, subtitles, or assistive technologies, and it continues long after them. It is a matter of attitude, openness, and the way cultural institutions define their mission and their relationship with their audiences.

Today, Romania has a solid legislative framework regarding the rights of persons with disabilities, and the commitments undertaken at both national and international levels are clear. Nevertheless, everyday experience shows that the application of these principles is uneven, and the gap between law and reality remains, for now, considerable. People with disabilities are still far too little visible in the cultural space - not because of a lack of interest or skills, but because of barriers built up over time: inaccessible infrastructure, fragmented educational pathways, a lack

of specific expertise within cultural institutions, and a public discourse that oscillates between compassion and avoidance. Under these conditions, participation becomes difficult, and trust is hard to build.

This study is grounded in the conviction that access to art and culture for all is, first and foremost, a fundamental right and a prerequisite for a society that values competencies rather than differences. People with disabilities are not merely beneficiaries of inclusion policies. They are creators, professionals, dialogue partners, and an integral part of a vibrant and diverse cultural space. Their presence should not be the exception, but the norm.

At the same time, accessibility cannot be built unilaterally. Cultural institutions have the responsibility to open their doors, adapt their practices, and invest in long-term skills and strategies. But this process equally requires dialogue and the active involvement of people with disabilities, through feedback, co-creation, and jointly developed solutions. Sustainable change emerges where there is a willingness to work with one another, not merely for one another.

This study does not propose quick fixes or universal recipes. It brings together voices, experiences, and diverse perspectives, all of which are necessary to understand the complexity of the field. Between the legislative framework and lived reality, between good intentions and implementation, between courageous initiatives and a lack of resources, a landscape takes shape that calls for greater coherence, accountability, and a long-term vision.

Above all, this report is an invitation addressed to authorities, cultural institutions, artists, educators, funders, civic organizations, and the general public to view accessibility not as a formal obligation, but as an opportunity to enrich the cultural life of all. An invitation to move from fragmented initiatives to a shared effort built on respect, collaboration, and trust. Not all changes can happen immediately, but the direction is clear: integration, not isolation; dialogue, not unilateral decision-making; long-term construction, not short-term solutions.

There are already people who care. There are initiatives that work. There is a sincere desire to do things better. This study aims to bring them together, to offer a common language and a solid starting point for the next steps – because a truly vibrant culture is one in which no one is left behind.

Executive summary

This scoping study examines the current landscape of **arts and disability** in Romania and sets out an evidence-based foundation for strengthening cultural participation, representation, and professional pathways for disabled people. Commissioned by the British Council, the study draws on national legislation, international frameworks, and qualitative research undertaken with both disabled and non-disabled artists, cultural practitioners, educators, public authorities, funders, non-governmental organisations, and civil society actors. Throughout the process, the British Council has acted as an honest broker, creating the conditions for open dialogue across sectors and connecting Romanian perspectives with wider UK and European practice.

The study seeks to understand how disabled people currently experience cultural life in Romania, both as audiences and as creators, and to identify the structural barriers and enabling conditions that shape participation. Three core questions run throughout the report. The first considers how national values, public discourse, and legal frameworks influence disabled people's visibility and participation in cultural life. The second examines systemic barriers across education, employment, public space, and cultural institutions. The third explores opportunities for coordinated action through capacity building, funding, and European cooperation.

The report is organised across ten chapters, moving from national context and public discourse to sector-specific analysis, and concluding with a proposed **National Arts and Disability Framework**. Each chapter combines contextual analysis with insights from consultations and concludes with key findings that inform the recommendations set out at the end of the report.

Context and methodology

Romania has a well-established legal framework for disability rights, including constitutional protections, anti-discrimination legislation, and ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2010. However, implementation remains

uneven. Nearly one in twenty Romanians is registered as disabled, yet disabled people remain largely absent from mainstream cultural spaces and cultural production. Evidence gathered for this study highlights a persistent gap between legal commitments and lived experience, particularly in relation to access, representation, and sustained professional pathways.

The research underpinning this report is qualitative and exploratory. It draws on seven focus groups held in Bucharest and Timișoara, meetings with ministerial and local government representatives, and individual interviews with experts from across Romania. The focus groups were deliberately dialogic, creating space for listening, reflection, and shared sense-making. While individual voices are not attributed directly, the analysis reflects recurring themes and priorities across the consultations. An intersectional approach is adopted throughout, recognising that disability intersects with poverty, rurality, ethnicity, gender, age, migration, and other forms of exclusion.

National values, public discourse, and intersectionality

The report situates **arts and disability** within a wider social and cultural context shaped by historical legacies, public attitudes, and patterns of invisibility. While legal language has increasingly aligned with international standards, public discourse often remains paternalistic and shaped by limited contact with disabled people's lived experience. Disabled people are frequently invisible in everyday public life, yet hypervisible when they enter cultural or civic spaces. This tension reinforces exclusion and undermines confidence for both disabled individuals and cultural institutions.

An intersectional lens is central to the report's analysis. Disabled people in Romania often experience multiple and overlapping forms of disadvantage. Access to culture is therefore not solely a matter of physical infrastructure or compliance. It is also shaped by social relations, representation, affordability, and power. The report argues that a universal approach to access, embedded from the outset rather than added later, offers a more sustainable foundation for inclusion.

Education, skills, and professional pathways

Education is identified as a critical determinant of access to cultural life and professional participation. While access to education for disabled learners has improved, structural gaps persist across early education, vocational training, and higher education. Support systems remain under-resourced, and staff often lack training in inclusive pedagogies. These factors limit progression into artistic and cultural careers.

The transition from education to employment remains particularly fragile. Disabled artists face barriers to professional training, adapted work environments, and access to production systems. Although legislation requires larger employers to employ disabled people or contribute financially to a national fund, evidence shows that many employers choose to pay penalties rather than invest in inclusive employment. The cultural sector reflects these wider labour market dynamics, resulting in continued under-representation of disabled artists.

Public space, infrastructure, and capacity building

Access to public space extends beyond the physical environment. It includes communication, digital access, and how disability is imagined within society. The report identifies persistent shortcomings in the accessibility of cultural venues, transport routes, and public buildings, alongside inconsistent enforcement of existing legislation.

Digitalisation presents both risks and opportunities. Poorly designed systems can reproduce exclusion. Inclusive digital practices, however, have the potential to significantly expand access, particularly in a country with a strong IT sector.

Capacity building emerges as a key lever for change. Cultural institutions often lack dedicated access roles, trained staff, and long-term strategies for inclusion. Progress is frequently driven by grassroots organisations and individual advocates working with limited resources. While these initiatives demonstrate strong potential, they require formal recognition and sustained investment to move beyond isolated examples of good practice.

Funding, partnerships, and the European dimension

Funding constraints affect all aspects of the **arts and disability** landscape. Cultural institutions and disabled artists face challenges in accessing resources, navigating complex funding processes, and securing long-term support. Existing funding models tend to prioritise short-term outputs rather than sustained impact.

The report highlights significant opportunities within European frameworks, mobility schemes, and cultural cooperation programmes. Romania's experience with the European Capital of Culture, alongside wider EU funding instruments, offers pathways for strengthening international partnerships and capacity building. Accessing these opportunities requires improved coordination, targeted support, and match funding.

Towards a National Arts and Disability Framework

This study concludes that **arts and disability** in Romania is best understood as a mosaic. Provision is uneven and often fragile, yet there are committed individuals, organisations, and institutions capable of driving meaningful change. To move from fragmented initiatives to systemic progress, the report proposes the development of a **National Arts and Disability Framework**.

Five strategic priorities underpin this framework. These include stronger national coordination and governance, a shift in public discourse towards visibility and representation, improved education and professional pathways, embedded accessibility and workforce capacity, and funding models that support long-term impact and European cooperation.

This report is intended for policymakers, funders, cultural leaders, educators, and practitioners with a role in shaping Romania's cultural ecosystem. It is designed to support informed decision-making, cross-sector dialogue, and strategic planning.

While not all recommendations can be implemented immediately, this study provides a clear and shared evidence base for action. Progress will depend on collective responsibility, sustained collaboration, and long-term commitment across public institutions, the cultural sector, civil society, and disabled people themselves.

Introduction

This is a scoping study of the **arts and disability** landscape in Romania, commissioned by the British Council. While the study seeks to highlight and address systemic challenges, it also acknowledges the openness and willingness of the Romanian government to continue to improve access for disabled people to the cultural life of the nation.

The British Council supports the arts sector to respond to global challenges² around inclusion and sustainability, by capacity building and developing networks, celebrating good practice and giving people access to international showcasing platforms. Global awareness of how culture can, in particular, address the wider place of disabled people in society, includes creating more opportunities for disabled artists and widening audience access.

This current scoping study builds on the British Council's already extensive global Disability Arts work, expanding towards a new, complementary template to the well-established successes of Europe Beyond Access.³ While focusing on Romania in particular, it also aims to raise productive questions and provide practical recommendations which will resonate with additional countries in the EU and beyond.

Every country has its own trajectory. **arts and disability** in Romania does not resemble **arts and disability** in the UK and other North-Western European countries with a longer history and more developed infrastructure. In this report the authors reflect the mosaic-like ecology encountered, which reveals an interdependence across different stakeholders. It advocates for achievable Romanian growth by bringing those stakeholders together, within a wider European context to leverage further resources.

This report is for all those who have a stake in **arts and disability** in Romania. With inevitable political and economic flux, the report recognises that not everything recommended can necessarily be actioned. Instead, it invites all the stakeholders to explore what might be achieved and how. In the spirit of the Cluj-Napoca response to its

² British Council. *Culture responds to global challenges*. British Council. <https://www.britishcouncil.org/culture-responds-global-challenges>

³ <https://www.europebeyondaccess.com>

unsuccessful bid for European Capital of Culture (ECoC) – where they recognised that some of their ambitions could not be realised but they nonetheless committed to working with diverse stakeholders to do what they could.

Here the British Council has operated as honest broker. As reflected by Iris Popescu, Architect specialised in inclusive design and accessibility, founder of AMAIS:

‘Last month, during the UK experts’ visit to Romania, we held an intense and insightful week of consultations with artists, activists, NGOs, public institutions, cultural spaces, and funders. The conversations were honest, often challenging, and deeply necessary... The field of arts and disability in Romania clearly needs further exploration, not only because inclusive practices are still rare, but also because art and culture remain chronically underfunded sectors. It’s time we ask better questions, have more trust in each other, and create more space for diverse voices and experiences.’

The recommendations of this report arise from the many conversations held and are intended to provoke discussion, debate, and ultimately action. While some are directed at specific stakeholder groups, creating a **National Arts and Disability Framework** will require shared responsibility across cultural facilitators, civil society organisations, universities, cultural institutions, local authorities, funders, policymakers, and disabled artists, activists, and allies.

“

It’s time we ask better questions, have more trust in each other, and create more space for diverse voices and experiences.

Iris Popescu

Report structure

Chapter 1 further develops the national context for disabled people in Romania, drawing on national and international legislation. It articulates fundamental needs and identifies key infrastructural barriers.

Chapter 2 outlines why an intersectional approach to public discourse around the participation of disabled people in cultural life is much needed, in order to fully engage with disabled people across the enormous variety of their human experience.

Chapter 3 looks at education: from Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision at school, through to universities and the need for a move away from mere compliance towards a different kind of inclusion.

Chapter 4 links education to employability and makes a key recommendation around joining up disabled audiences with disabled artists.

Chapter 5 broadens the thinking around public space to include not only access to the built environment and the digital realm, but also the need to make room for disability in our collective imaginary.

Chapter 6 focuses on capacity building, drawing on examples of practice that illustrate how training and development can enhance access for disabled people as artists, audiences, and participants in cultural life.

Chapter 7 turns to funding and how extant funding models might evolve productively.

Chapter 8 looks at the 2023 European Capital of Culture as a bridge between a domestic and wider European approach to furthering **arts and disability**, then further into relevant European funding.

Chapter 9 reviews major disabling barriers and enabling facilitators.

Chapter 10 sets out the Recommendations for a **National Arts and Disability Framework**.

References, EU Funds and **Tools** appendices together constitute a policy and practice resource for all stakeholders to further advance thinking and debate towards action.

The Romanian ABC of arts and disability serves as a jumping off point, and is neither a comprehensive dictionary, nor a checklist. It is an invitation to engage in dialogue.

Methodology

The study combines analysis, snapshots taken from interviewed participants, or encountered in focus groups, with supporting literature and culminates with recommendations for a **National Arts and Disability Framework**.

These are drawn from the qualitative exploratory research based on seven focus groups (five in Bucharest and two in Timișoara), meetings with two ministerial and two local government departments; as well as individual conversations with experts (13) from different regions in Romania and a wide range of experience connected to the field. All focus groups took place in person and most interviews online. The focus groups were by their nature dialogic, polyphonic, partial and broad. They created a shared space in which the authors of this report were able to listen and think. While individual voices may not be cited, the fabric of this report emerges from those discourses. Selection of participants was made in collaboration with local experts from 'Supereroi printre noi'⁴ and 'AMAI5', as well as recommendations from other participants in the focus groups / interviews.

Compliance in terms of responsible research protocols was observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and individuals could withdraw at any time without consequence. Data was collected through audio recordings and written notes, used solely for research and program development. All personal information remained confidential, and no identities were disclosed in any outputs. Anonymised data will be stored securely in the [UK Data Service](#) and may be shared in a recognised data service for future research. The study complied with relevant UK data protection laws, and participants had the right to access, correct, or request deletion of their data.

While we aimed to cover as wide an area as possible, both geographically, as well as across the diversity of the art forms, disabilities, experience and expertise of our participants, this study is inevitably limited owing to its duration, resources, and the lived experience of the involved participants.

Disabled people should not be defined by their impairments. This is why you will not find here an impairment-specific chapter, but rather an intersectional approach.

4 <https://supereroiprintrenoi.ro>

5 <https://amais.ro>

We provide **snapshots** – to illustrate some of the fantastic work that *is* happening, but this is also why you will not find a geographic map, because inevitably provision would be at best partial – even in the better resourced cities. Together, these snapshots form a mosaic – spanning art, activism, therapy, allyship, institutions, and individual voices – that adds depth and broadens the overall picture.

Each chapter concludes with **key findings** that bring forward the most important insights and directly connect the analysis to the recommendations made in chapter 10, ensuring a clear link between the evidence presented throughout the report and the actions proposed at the end.

The final part of this document, include references to the supporting literature, as well as a set of practical tools. Please use them.

Social and cultural context

In order to better understand the arts and disability relationship it is necessary to draw on certain wider societal analyses. Foundational to any analysis of the Arts and Disability landscape in Romania is the need for a shared understanding of *disability*.

This scoping study adopts the concept of *disability* based on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which places the **medical model** in dialogue with the **social model**⁶ and ‘recognizes that ‘disability is an evolving concept’⁷, defining it as:

‘The long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments that, in interaction with various barriers, hinder full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.’⁸

6 Mencap. (2023, February 13). *The models of disability* [Easy Read].

<https://www.mencap.org.uk/easyread/models-disability>

7 UNCRPD. (2006). *Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities and optional protocol*. New York: UN. p.1. <https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf>

8 UNCRPD. (2006), p.4.

Disability and barriers to inclusion

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung report: *Country Reports with a Difference – Romania: Digital Solutions for Better Inclusion*, posits: ‘The state’s approach to disability points to this: In Romania, disabilities were long perceived as a “medical problem”. This meant that a disability was primarily the problem of the individual concerned and, if necessary, of the relatives involved. Gradually, however, the discourse is shifting towards inclusion. More and more often the question is now: what barriers are there in Romanian society for a specific person to enjoy the same basic rights as everyone else and to participate actively in social life? Accordingly, it is important to make infrastructure, services, products, but also the way we communicate, inclusive from the very beginning.’⁹

Poverty and disability are closely intertwined in Romanian society, creating a cycle of exclusion that denies many disabled people access to education, employment and healthcare.¹⁰ These, combined with other systemic barriers, severely limit disabled people’s ability to participate actively in cultural life. Based on Leahy and Ferri’s cross-European study¹¹, five key barriers that reinforce the systemic exclusion of disabled people from cultural life are:

- lack of effective/adequate laws and policies
- lack of adequate services
- negative attitudes
- lack of accessibility
- lack of consultation with, and involvement of, persons with disabilities in cultural organisations.

⁹ Plate, K. C. (2023, July). *Country Reports with a Difference – Romania: Digital Solutions for Better Inclusion*. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. & Code4.ro. <https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/22815146/Country+Reports+with+a+Difference+%E2%80%93+Romania.+Digital+Solutions+for+better+Inclusion.pdf/0fa402da-8b0a-28ad-def9-bd0f-4906ca2c?version=1.0&t=1690903019564>

¹⁰ World Bank. (2023). *A tale of two Romanias in Romania systematic country diagnostic update (Systematic Country Diagnostic Update)*. p.23-26. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099134003102323181/pdf/BOSIB0480d508207e0805908b215a1d78b8.pdf>

¹¹ Leahy, A., & Ferri, D. (2023). *Barriers to cultural participation by people with disabilities in Europe: a study across 28 countries*. *Disability & Society*, 39(10), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2023.2222898>

These are all interconnected and reduce considerably the chances of a disabled person attending a cultural event in Romania. Based on these and the findings of the 2023 Romanian Cultural Barometer¹², we can acknowledge the existence of a double exclusion process: at the audience level, cultural spaces amplify existing social disadvantages and at the creative level, disabled artists lack access to production systems.

How might this best be addressed?

The National Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ‘An equitable Romania’, 2022-2027, in particular – ‘Section 8. Political and public participation. Specific objective 1: Increase access of persons with disabilities to cultural activities’¹³ sets out a goodly portion of the terrain:

12 Institutul Național pentru Cercetare și Formare Culturală. (2024, November). Croitoru, C., Becuț Marinescu, A., Ceobanu, I., Georgescu, I., Matei, Ș. *Barometrul de consum cultural 2023: Comunități de consum în contextul schimbărilor societale*. <https://www.culturadata.ro/barometrul-de-consum-cultural-2023-comunitati-de-consum-in-contextul-schimbarilor-societale/>

13 Autoritatea Națională pentru Protecția Drepturilor Persoanelor cu Dizabilități. (2022). p.106-113. <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>

According to the World Bank Report – *Diagnosis of the Situation of Persons with Disabilities in Romania* (2020)

What is the situation in Romania?

1. Persons with disabilities have limited access to cultural activities (movies, theatre, dance, concerts, museums).
2. The life experience of persons with disabilities is rarely described in movies, books, shows or other cultural products.
3. Very few persons with disabilities are creators of culture (for example, writers).
4. Cultural acts and products are rarely adapted (for example, there are few theatrical performances in sign language).

What caused this situation?

1. The authorities do not give enough attention to the access of persons with disabilities to culture.
2. Cultural institutions are not accessible.
3. There is not enough money for cultural products on disability.
4. There are no training programs to support persons with disabilities to become creators of culture (for example, accessible painting, dance or music courses).

What has to be done?

1. Persons with disabilities must have access to schools and programs offering training in the cultural field.
2. Cultural and artistic institutions must be accessible to persons with disabilities.
3. The state must ensure the training and employment of interpreters for persons with hearing and visual impairments in cultural institutions.
4. The state must fund cultural projects on issues related to disability.”¹⁴

¹⁴ World Bank. (2020). *Diagnosis of the situation of persons with disabilities in Romania* (Report delivered to the National Authority for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Children and Adoptions). <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099000112102186335/pdf/P1686120781d3b04d09dc908045e63a0220.pdf>

This scoping report picks up on these issues, synthesising them with what was heard from the focus groups held in Bucharest and Timișoara, one-to-one interviews conducted both in person and on-line, cultural visits and informal conversations.

There are many reasons why we do not see disabled representation in Romanian museums, in concert halls, on theatre stages, in cinemas, or simply on the street. Some of these we will try to unpack based on the information and knowledge we gathered between May and September 2025, from focus groups and conversations we had with cultural workers, disability and human rights activists, social workers, artists, students, representatives of disability groups, funders (public and private), parents, university lecturers, therapists, central and local government employees, policy makers and all those who kindly made the time and had the openness to meet and talk with us.

Romania and wider Europe

For several reasons which will become apparent as the report unfolds, but particularly around legislative compliance, we have deliberately chosen to conduct this exercise in dialogue with a wider UK and European context.

However, we note that The European Court of Auditors' Special Report (2023) points to a Europe-wide deficit in both the employment and poverty levels of disabled people:

'Overall, we conclude that the practical impact of EU action on the situation of persons with disabilities in the member states has been limited. In recent years, there has been no significant improvement across the EU in the disability employment gap or the risk of poverty for persons with disabilities, two of the key equality indicators available at EU level.'¹⁵

The aim of this report is to share what we have learned, but most of all to bring into spotlight the people, projects, organisations and initiatives that despite all the barriers, resistance and questioning, continue working in an underfunded and undervalued sector – **arts and disability in Romania**.

¹⁵ European Court of Auditors. (2023). *Special Report 20/2023: Supporting persons with disabilities: Practical impact of EU action is limited*. p.41. https://www.eca.europa.eu/ECAPublications/SR-2023-20/SR-2023-20_EN.pdf

Chapter 1: National values and public discourse

Based on data¹⁶ from the Ministry of Labour, Family, Youth and Social Solidarity, at the end of March 2025, nearly 1 in 20 Romanians is registered as disabled. There is a notable difference in disability registration rates: 4.45 per cent in Romania compared to 24 per cent in the UK and 23.9 per cent in the EU (in 2024, for people aged 16 years or over).¹⁷ While this may suggest under-reporting, it is important to recognize that definitions, classification systems, and registration processes vary significantly between countries, which can influence these figures. Despite a robust legal framework, with the Romanian Constitution giving disabled people ‘special protection’ (Article 50)¹⁸ and further guarantees against any type of discrimination, under the law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Disabled Persons (Law no.448/2006)¹⁹, the perception of disability in Romania continues to be influenced by longstanding cultural narratives, including the Orthodox Christian concept of *neputință* (powerlessness)²⁰ and paternalistic legacies from the communist era. These perspectives, while historically

16 *Ministerul Muncii: 966.637 de persoane cu dizabilități erau înregistrate la sfârșitul lunii martie în România* – Economica.net. (2025, July 26). Economica.net. https://www.economica.net/ministerul-muncii-966-637-de-persoane-cu-dizabilitati-erau-inregistrate-la-sfarsitul-lunii-martie-in-romania_858296.html

17 Eurostat. (2025, July). *Population with disability*. Eurostat Statistics Explained. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Population_with_disability

18 Romania 1991 (rev. 2003) Constitution. https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Romania_2003

19 *Law no. 448/2006 regarding the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Disabled Persons*. Official Gazette no. 1006 / December 18, 2006; Part I no. 1 / January 3, 2008. United Nations. Available at: https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2019/11/Romania_Law-no.-4482006-Regarding-the-Protection-and-Promotion-of-the-Rights-of-Disabled-Persons.pdf

20 Maican, P. (2024). *Powerless in Christ: A Romanian Orthodox Insight into Disability Theology*. *Journal of Disability & Religion*, 28(2), 285–303. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2024.2320636>

rooted, may contribute to viewing disability through lenses of sympathy and dependence, rather than embracing it as an expression of human diversity and social belonging.”

Romania ratified the UN Disability Rights Convention in 2010 (Law no.221/2010)²¹, however, despite notable advances, systemic barriers still need to be addressed. The lack of participation of disabled people in ‘all aspects of life’ is entangled with many other aspects of the Romanian society’s dynamics.

Most of the time, disability is still seen through a patronising gaze, or at its worst, with pity and fear. These attitudes are reinforced by limited contact with disabled individuals and a lack of awareness of their lived experiences. Although most people express a ‘positive’ attitude towards disability inclusion, actual awareness of what this means is low.

As a country, Romania is not yet at a point when the needs of disabled people are seen and understood as relevant. Though not in contradiction with overall European trends²², further measures need to be implemented to guarantee the right of persons with disabilities to participate in cultural life (Article 30(2), CRPD).²³

This is also largely reflected in a recent (June 2025) attitudinal study²⁴ regarding the inclusion of disabled people in society, undertaken by CED Romania, with support from Accenture and Accessible EU. The study shows that 66 per cent of non-disabled respondents admit fear of offending disabled people when communicating with them, and 11 per cent feel shame, discomfort and insecurity in their presence.

21 Romanian Parliament. (2010, November 11). *Legea nr. 221/2010 pentru ratificarea Convenției privind drepturile persoanelor cu dizabilități, adoptată la New York de Adunarea Generală a Organizației Națiunilor Unite la 13 decembrie 2006*. Monitorul Oficial nr. 792. Available at: <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocumentAfis/123949>

22 Leahy, A., & Ferri, D. (2023). *Barriers to cultural participation by people with disabilities in Europe: a study across 28 countries*. *Disability & Society*, 39(10), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2023.2222898>

23 United Nations. (2006). *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*: Article 30 – Participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-30-participation-in-cultural-life-recreation-leisure-and-sport.html>

24 CED România; AccessibleEU; Accenture. (2025, June). *Cum percep românii integrarea persoanelor cu dizabilități în societate? Un studiu despre atitudini, percepții și bariere sociale. „O familie de milioane”*. Romania-Accessibilă. Available at: https://romania-accessibila.ro/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Studiu_Cum-percep-romanii-integrarea-persoanelor-cu-dizabilitati-in-societate.pdf

Following on the CED Romania study, when it comes to defining their needs, 82 per cent of disabled respondents name social activities as essential for their quality of life, while 72 per cent prioritise access to cultural and recreational activities. In contrast, 68 per cent of people without disabilities believe that it is more important for people with disabilities to receive state support and accessible infrastructure (69 per cent).

While 72 per cent of disabled people and 78 per cent of their support persons consider professional engagement as vital for leading an independent lifestyle, only 40 per cent of individuals without disabilities share this perspective.

One way to challenge these attitudinal barriers is through the visibility and representation of disabled people in the arts. However, disability is rarely explored artistically in Romania, mainly because few disabled people identify as artists (or the other way round). The same structures and attitudes that need to be challenged, are the ones that keep disabled artists away from the arts sector. Despite the obligations under Article 30(2) of the CRPD, many individuals face significant barriers, particularly the lack of access to professional and arts-focused education.

From resources to accessible infrastructure, the responsibility to overcome these barriers remains unfairly placed on disabled individuals – rather than being addressed structurally through policy change, institutional support, and meaningful engagement with the disabled community. For a disabled person in Romania to become a professional artist, they would need to demonstrate a lot of resilience; and/or be perceived as truly exceptional.

Without addressing these structural obstacles, the transformative power of disability-led art remains largely unexplored. In the absence of inclusive educational policies from early schooling through to higher education, combined with cultural policies and dedicated funding that actively support and promote the work and voices of disabled artists, they will continue to be invisible in cultural life, in the same way disabled people are almost invisible in our everyday life.

Key findings

Notable difference in disability registration: 4.45 per cent of Romanians vs 24 per cent of UK population and 23.9 per cent in the EU is registered as disabled, suggesting significant under-reporting.

Legal framework insufficient without a broader shift in public values and discourse: Despite constitutional protection, anti-discrimination laws, and UN Convention ratification since 2010, under-representation of disabled people in public life persists, which widens the gap between policy and implementation.

Systemic exclusion from the arts: Structural barriers (inaccessible education, lack of funding, infrastructure) keep disabled artists invisible, reinforcing broader societal invisibility of disabled people.

Regular inclusive programmes are needed to strengthen community participation: Previous negative experiences and reliance on disability-specific spaces can limit confidence and engagement, making consistent mixed-group activities important for building trust and connection (e.g. The Beautiful Octopus Club, Heart and Soul, UK).

Quiet day at Circular Catalysts 2023 Exhibition © Roald Aron



Chapter 2: Intersectional access and inclusion

There are differing opinions on whether to adopt an explicit focus on disability or situate disability within a wider inclusion context. On the one hand intersectionality acknowledges various social and cultural forces which also impact and define disabled people, on the other hand disabled experience is still subject to erasure via exclusion from wider diversity agendas, or marginalisation via sub-categorisation.

In this chapter we offer snapshots to illustrate some of the initiatives and experiences which bring variety and texture to the wider **arts and disability** mosaic.

Disability rarely exists in isolation. Many disabled people in Romania also navigate rurality, poverty, Roma identity, old age, queerness, migration, or linguistic exclusion. These are not separate categories of marginalisation but interconnected structures that shape lived experience in complex, compounding ways.

Any attempt to develop an **arts and disability** sector that excludes these intersecting identities fails to understand how access is not just a physical or legal concern, but most of all, a social and cultural one. Inclusion should be viewed not only through a disability lens, but through all (or as many of) the entangled realities people live within.

Drawing on Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality²⁵ as a *reflective process* – not a checklist of identities, but a method of analysing the

25 Crenshaw, K. (1991). *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Colour*. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.

complexity of human identities in contemporary society, to be truly meaningful, access must be approached as a dynamic, inclusive, and relational process. An intersectional approach challenges us to ask not just *who is missing*, but *why*, and to commit to access practices that are flexible, collective, and constantly evolving in response to nuanced social realities.

The social model of disability has significantly influenced the conversation by shifting the focus from placing the sole responsibility on the individual to understanding how society can sometimes create barriers. Support systems – when they exist – are often bound by rigid cultural structures rather than designed to be responsive, flexible, and inclusive, which is essential for a genuinely accessible and sustainable sector.

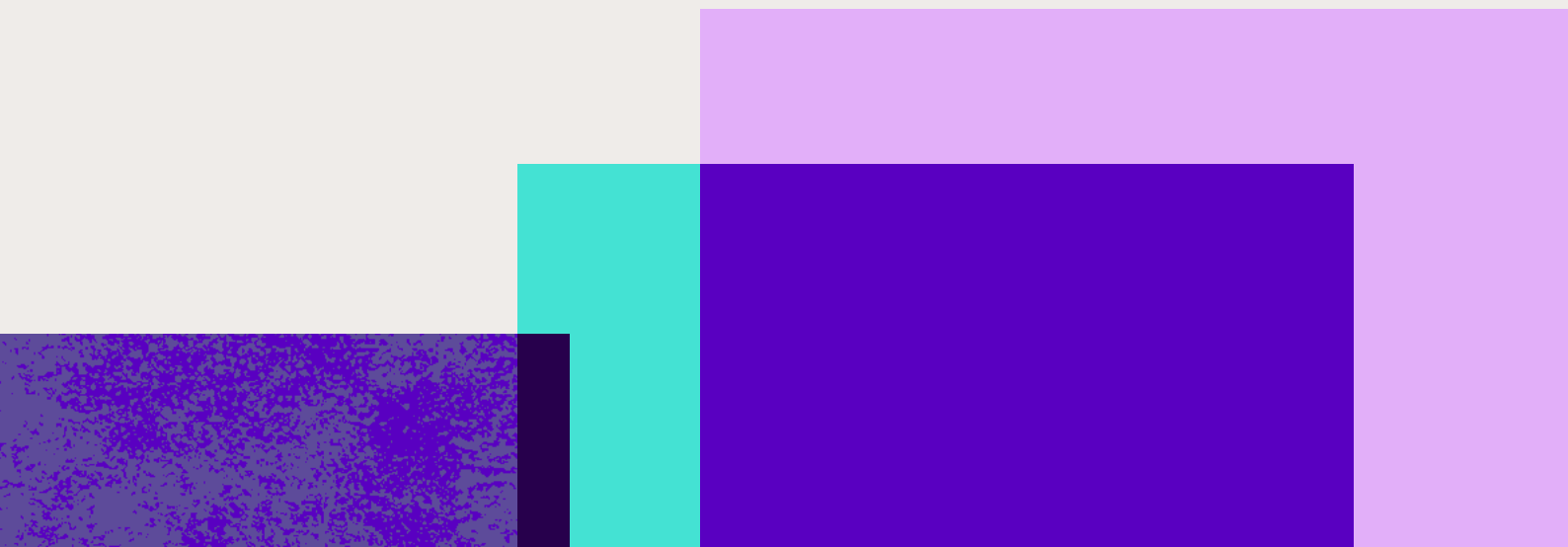
A universal approach to access is inherently intersectional: it responds to a spectrum of needs, identities, and circumstances, transforming access from an afterthought into an integrated design principle. For example:

- learning disabled and neurodivergent persons who need the information presented in Easy Read format and/or access to a quiet room
- a person who uses a wheelchair but does not always rely on it
- a young parent/carer navigating last-minute childcare challenges
- a poor person unable to afford a ticket at a concert
- a d/Deaf person that does not have the privilege to choose what performance they want to see, as the ones with Sign Language interpretation are few and far between
- a whole class of children living too far from the theatre and who only get to see a show once a year
- a Roma person concerned about entering a museum for fear of being asked to leave
- a trans person navigating public spaces without fear of harassment.

When thinking about all these people and situations together, access becomes more than an add-on to something already there, it is a solution found in the process of responding to an existing need.

At the same time, a universal approach to access asks for the reimagining of the cultural experience itself, across the interconnected dimensions of cultural participation: communities, audiences, and artists. These are not separate silos, but interdependent components of a sustainable cultural ecosystem. A sector made **for, with and by disabled people** asks for **a meaningful representation of their complex identities**, that reflects their interests and experiences and has the power to facilitate opportunities for agency and authorship.

Access, when seen through an intersectional lens, is not just about doing more for more people – it is about creating adaptable systems open to human diversity rather than forcing people to fit into rigid structures. By embracing intersectional access, the cultural sector can move from accommodating difference to actively enabling agency, authorship, and participation for all, particularly disabled people.



SNAPSHOT

Inclusive Disco²⁶

One initiative that reflects the above are the **Inclusive Disco** events organised by **AM AIS**, **La Firul Ierbii** and **Supereroi printre noi**. Started in 2023 as a yearly celebration and timed to coincide with the International Day of Persons with Disabilities (December 3rd), **Inclusive Disco** aims to bring together people from diverse backgrounds and provide a social space free of physical, sensory, and social barriers.

Inclusive Disco is free and invites registration, so that specific accessibility needs (support persons, mobility aid access, etc.) can be anticipated. The event emphasises the intersection of disability with other identities by making sure that people of different ages, abilities, social and sensory needs can all enjoy it.

The first event was a great success among the disabled participants, not only because they had the chance to experience a club atmosphere for the first time, but because they were able to enjoy themselves without feeling watched, ordering a drink or having to worry about accessing the bathroom when they need it.

In 2025, besides the usual December Inclusive Disco, there was another edition that took place in April and had a new home – The HUB, British Council headquarters in Bucharest. The music was delivered by DJ Mike, a DJ with autism from Timișoara, well known among various music festivals across the country and internationally.

By joining forces and expertise, the three organisations involved in generating this event, provide a model for other cultural institutions to programme inclusive events that go beyond tokenistic gestures.

²⁶ <https://amais.ro/2023/12/18/discoteca-incluziva-si-lansarea-clubului-cmu/>



It was healing. I say this with the heart and mind of a mother of a child with a disability. It was healing and gave hope that things are happening even in Romania – that different people can be in the same space, living, enjoying, socialising, dancing without being analysed or pitied.

(Diana, participant)

Inclusive Disco © Roald Aron



SNAPSHOT

Inclusion for Real (Cristina Săracu, Timișoara, Incluziune pe Bune)²⁷

The Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI)²⁸ Unit at Politehnica University of Timișoara was established through the passion, work, and initiative of Cristina Săracu, responding to concrete needs (one example being a hate incident targeting an LGBTQIA+ student).

‘We often meet students who define themselves through intersecting identities. The DEI Unit is about students and staff, but also faculty and the wider community – it’s about broader inclusion. We are a small team, helped also by volunteers, but we run many projects that focus on building informal connections: workshops with professors – essential to engage everyone. The power of storytelling: we selected a few intersectional themes and told real stories. We foster dialogue by bringing different topics and diverse speakers. We seek to collaborate with experts. We also produce info guides – Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), simple and friendly tools.’

²⁷ <https://incluziunepebune.ro>

²⁸ https://www.upt.ro/Informatii_inclusion-upt_2633_en.html

Inclusion for REAL. Best Practices © Incluziune pe Bune



I respect the rule of law. Everyone needs to understand the law first.

Cristina Săracu



SNAPSHOT

ALL INCLUSIVE: Performing Arts Project for Diversity and Social Inclusion, a *European Spaces of Culture*²⁹ project

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, an innovative socio-cultural project is creating a platform for marginalised groups to express their creativity. Minority groups, refugees and people with disabilities face discrimination and dehumanisation regularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, just like anywhere else. Adopting an explicitly intersectional approach, **ALL INCLUSIVE: Performing Arts Project for Diversity and Social Inclusion, a *European Spaces of Culture*** project, addresses systemic discrimination in Bosnia and Herzegovina and aims to amplify the voices of these marginalised groups.

Focused on marginalised groups – the Roma minority, people with disabilities, and refugees on the Balkan route – it establishes a platform where their stories and creativity take centre stage. Through artistic productions, community engagement, capacity-building workshops, and storytelling, it empowers individual community members to be multipliers and stronger actors of change and raises awareness of their struggles against discrimination and dehumanisation.

All Inclusive project is part of the *European Spaces of Culture Diversity, Human Rights Migration Social Inclusion Theatre* programme, created by EUNIC – European Union National Institutes for Culture.

²⁹ https://www.goethe.de/ins/ba/de/kul/sup/allinclusive.html#accordion_toggle_26108909_1

SNAPSHOT

Iris Popescu and AMAIS

Iris' work through **AMAIS**³⁰ exemplifies an intersectional approach to inclusive design, addressing the overlapping realities of disability, gender, neurodivergence, age, and social marginalisation.

The Empathy Retreat (2022) in Sibiu gathered a diverse group of participants from various social and professional categories, among them architects, urban planners, expert citizens, public administration, activists, from the queer spectrum, with visual, locomotor, hearing disabilities, neurodivergent people or (temporarily) without disabilities – to identify biases on disability and explore how design norms create systemic exclusion. Participants navigated the urban landscape together, reflected on daily accessibility barriers, and engaged in exercises that dismantled professional hierarchies and ableist assumptions. This immersive, multi-perspective process revealed how design fails when it centres the normative user, while emphasising why accessibility and inclusion should be natural parts of the design process, not just special cases.

In 'The Uninvited' (2023), showcased at the Bucharest Architecture Annual, AMAIS tackled the erasure of non-normative bodies from the architectural imagination. The project, co-designed with architect Mihaela Șerban, presented real stories and spatial injustices through installations and video interviews, challenging professionals to confront how aesthetics, regulation, and cost-cutting perpetuate systemic exclusion. It revealed that ignoring human diversity excludes social groups and minimises designers' roles in creating accessible, inclusive spaces. It called for inclusive design to be a default – not an afterthought.

³⁰ More information available online in English and Romanian at <https://include.amais.ro/>



The real success in building an equitable society will come when the word **inclusive is part of the definition of the word **design** and no longer needs a separate category for it.¹**

¹ Excerpt from *Inclusive Design: Empathy Exercises in the Design Process*, Iris Popescu, AMAIS, 2023

Key findings

Cultural representation presents opportunities: There is potential to better reflect disabled people's diverse identities and experiences within cultural participation as communities, audiences, and artists.

Single-dimension approaches have limitations: Implementing access is a multidimensional process and requires taking into account all factors that shape an individual's lived experience.

Combined lived experience and professional expertise is essential when implementing access: Without this balance, accessibility solutions can unintentionally conflict across disability groups, undermining the development of coherent and inclusive practices.

Focus group – Inclusive spaces © Marius Lupu



Chapter 3: Education

In the academic year 2023-2024, there were 78,074 children registered as having Special Educational Needs (SEN), 73 per cent of them³¹ were enrolled in mainstream education. This number is triple compared to what it was in 2019 (20,999).³² However, the number of support teachers is far from covering the increased need. According to the current law³³, each support teacher should be allocated a maximum of 8-12 students. Based on official data, at the moment, there is one support teacher to cover 42 children. In Galați county, there are 140 SEN registered students to one support teacher.³⁴

31 Ministerul Educației. (2024). Raport privind starea învățământului preuniversitar din România 2023-2024. https://www.edu.ro/sites/default/files/_fi_per_centC8_per_cent99iere/Minister/2024/div/Rapoarte_sistem/Raport_Stare_invatamant_preuniv-2023-2024.pdf

32 Ministerul Educației și Cercetării. (n.d.). Rapoarte publice periodice. <https://www.edu.ro/rapoarte-publice-periodice/>

33 Edupedu.ro. (2024, April). Noul regulament de organizare pentru Centrele județene de resurse și asistență educațională CJRAE. <https://www.edupedu.ro/noul-regulament-de-organizare-pentru-centrele-judetene-de-resurse-si-asistenta-educationala-cjrae-numarul-de-elevi-care-revine-unui-consilier-scolar-profesor-de-srijin-profesor-logoped-trei-depa/>

34 Edupedu.ro. (2024, May). Grafic: Numărul elevilor cu CES din școlile din România aproape s-a triplat în ultimii 5 ani, în timp ce numărul profesorilor de sprijin este ținut de Ministerul Educației cu mult sub standardul legal. <https://www.edupedu.ro/grafic-numarul-elevilor-cu-ces-din-scolile-din-romania-aproape-s-a-triplat-in-ultimii-5-ani-in-timp-ce-numarul-profesorilor-de-srijin-este-tinut-de-ministerul-educatiei-cu-mult-sub-standardul-legal/>

Inclusive read-aloud book club for people with intellectual disabilities © Marius Lupu



Additionally, based on the 2021 World Bank report:

- one school out of every five has no access ramp
- half of all classrooms are not accessible to students in wheelchairs
- 98 out of 100 schools do not have bathrooms adapted to meet the needs of all children.³⁵

Many children with special educational needs (SEN) spend a limited time in mainstream education. Even when they have the necessary support and they remain in school, few are able to fully develop their learning potential, as the Romanian education system continues to face challenges in providing consistent and adequate support.

With barriers such as these - to formal education - informal / non-formal education become inevitable vehicles with which to work around. These initiatives also extend to the education of the wider community.

³⁵ ANPD. Grigoraş, V., Salazar, M., Vladu, C. I., & Briciu, C. (2022). *Diagnosis of the situation of persons with disabilities in Romania: Summary*. p.231-260. <https://anpd.gov.ro/web/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Diagnosis-of-the-situation-of-persons-with-disabilities-in-Romania-Summary.pdf>

SNAPSHOT

Ana Dragu and ‘The Little Prince Association’ Bistrița – it takes a city to grow a disabled artist³⁶

Founded 18 years ago by Ana Dragu and a group of parents who needed a space to run therapy sessions and other activities for their young autistic children, the association developed various projects in partnership with local institutions - from the city council to the local police department - to ensure the training of everyone coming into contact with SEN children. The association became nationally known for their approach to inclusion, as well as for therapy for autistic children. There are families moving to Bistrița simply for this reason. This year, the association is running the project ‘Bistrița – Autism Friendly’³⁷, training local businesses that will be included on a map - and receive a visual identification - so that their neurodiverse visitors can be made aware of inclusive spaces in the city.

The motivating force behind Ana’s work is her son, Edi, who was one of the first beneficiaries of the association. Edi went through Romanian mainstream education and just finished his first year at the National Music Academy in Cluj-Napoca. Edi is a pianist and got to the final of the 2023 ‘Romania’s Got Talent’ competition.

Originally a journalist, Ana both knew how to ask the right questions, but also how to access the different elements of civil society that would need galvanising. Over time, the association has also sought to professionalise itself via training and qualification / accreditation and, thus, built its capacity.

³⁶ <https://centruldeautism.ro>

³⁷ Bistrița – oraș accesibilizat autism friendly.
<https://centruldeautism.ro/bistrita-oras-accesibilizat-autism-friendly/>



The city became more inclusive, as our children grew. We started with kindergartens and went all the way to high school, to ensure that our children can access mainstream education. They say I am the enemy of the special education system.

Ana Dragu

Higher education

When it comes to Higher Education (HE), the low number of registered disabled students is proportional to the high number of dropouts and lack of inclusion of disabled children in mainstream education. From 2005 to 2010, disabled students in HE never exceeded 0.07 per cent of the total number of students.³⁸ In 2020, there was a total 0.23 per cent registered disabled students, and in the academic year of 2023-2024, there were 2,435 (0.45 per cent)³⁹ students with a disability certificate in the Romanian HE system. The growing numbers in official statistics are definitely encouraging. However, there are still many questions related to how data is collected, as well as the actual number of disabled students, as not all of them hold a ‘handicap’ certificate⁴⁰ (please see more in chapter 9 on the challenges regarding language used in legislation) or feel safe to disclose their status. Regardless, representation of disabled students in HE is far from the *actual* numbers of disabled people, and a co-ordinated effort is much needed to ensure that the HE system is properly accessible for disabled students.

Since 2025 (Law No. 199/2023, complemented by Order no.4.481/22/05/2024)⁴¹, all HE institutions in Romania have ring-fenced places for disabled students (25 undergraduate, 25 postgraduate, regardless of the size of the university). Each institution can ask for funding from the Ministry of Education a) to ensure access to the learning process for these students and b) to open Disability Offices with a minimum of two employees (proportional to the total number registered disabled students)⁴² who will facilitate the inclusion process and work closely with both students and teachers.

38 Dervis, O.-A., Trifan, E., & Jitaru, G. (2022). *The socio-economic challenges in access to Romanian higher education: Student perception and funding policy directions*. In *Higher education in Romania: Overcoming challenges and embracing opportunities* (pp. 71–92). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-94496-4_5

39 Ministerul Educației. (2024). *Raport privind starea învățământului superior din România 2023–2024*. https://www.edu.ro/sites/default/files/_fi_per_centC8_per_cent99iere/Minister/2024/div/Rapoarte_sistem/Raport_Stare_invatamant_superior_2023-2024.pdf
40 <https://anpd.gov.ro/web/dizabilitate/evaluarea-in-grad-de-handicap/>

41 <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/271898> and <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocumentAfis/283314>

42 Edupedu.ro. (2024, May 29). *Drepturile studenților cu dizabilități și/sau cu cerințe educaționale speciale: resurse și materiale adaptate, locuri gratuite în tabere, însoțitor în timpul cursurilor sau susținerii examenelor*. <https://www.edupedu.ro/oficial-drepturile-studentilor-cu-dizabilitati-si-sau-cu-cerinte-educationale-speciale-resurse-si-materiale-adaptate-locuri-gratuite-in-tabere-insotitor-in-timpul-cursurilor-sau-sustinerii-examenelor/>

Given the autonomous status of each university, the decision of opening a Disability Office and the amount of funding dedicated to the inclusion of disabled students is dependent on local decision makers. Additionally, there is lack of know-how in implementing this law, as university staff have not received guidance on working with disabled students, nor how to access the above budget. If the university has no previous experience in adapting their learning processes, the responsibility falls on the students' shoulders to ask for accessible training and follow-up their requests.

When it comes to vocational (arts) education, there is an added layer of complexity, based on the specifics of the course. Though often well intentioned, tutors lack the experience and necessary training to adapt their coursework for disabled students. The responsibility once again falls to the student to find the tools and support needed to make their learning accessible, at the expense of their recovery time and already scarce resources.

There is also the 'hard-working, exceptionally talented student' expectation that the prospective disabled student has to meet. From the conversations we had with university representatives, their experience is based on their personal contact with disabled students who overcome barriers by masking their disability to continue to work alongside their fellow non-disabled colleagues. No one is *discriminated against*, as long as they do not cause a problem, and successfully adapt to the requirements of mainstream, non-disabled provision.



SNAPSHOT

Babeş-Bolyai University (BBU) Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD)⁴³

A good practice example is BBU's Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD). The university's work in this area began in 2003, when, with support from the 'Travelling Book' Foundation⁴⁴ and in collaboration with the Department of Special Education - BBU established a Centre for Assistive and Access Technologies for People with Visual Impairments.

On the back of a growing number of students with disabilities, in 2013 the university inaugurated the OSD as a Rectorate-level structure, serving all students with disabilities across BBU. The office draws on American and Northwestern European models and is funded from the university's core budget.

Over the past decade, as services expanded from visual impairment to all disability groups, the OSD has built substantial experience and now offers advice and consultancy to universities nationwide that are establishing their own disability offices.

⁴³ A full account can be found in *Transforming Lives at the Institutional Level: Equity Promotion Initiatives Across the World*, edited by Jamil Salmi, pp. 86-95. <https://worldaccesshe.com/research/database/the-office-for-students-with-disabilities-at-babes-bolyai-university-romania/>

⁴⁴ <https://www.fcc.ro/index.php?pid=1>



In 2024, we had a record number of d/Deaf students registered at BBU. 7 out of a total number of 45,000 students.

Marian Pădure, Coordinator of OSD at BBU¹

¹ <https://bsd.centre.ubbcluj.ro/despre-noi/>

SNAPSHOT

Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu

PerformAccess⁴⁵ and **EchoShapes**⁴⁶ – two projects from ‘Lucian Blaga’ University of Sibiu (ULBS) that open the path to disability arts studies and create opportunities for the disabled community, theatre artists and students to work together and learn from one another.

The **PerformAccess – Performative translations of silence** took place in 2024 and focused on how to make HE accessible and inclusive for d/Deaf people. Theatre and social studies students, as well as d/Deaf young participants took part in a series of workshops where they devised together a theatre show, each of its four representations being followed by a public Q&A session.

The project also included workshops in Romanian Sign Language (RSL) and engagement with disability arts for the management and creative team of the project, as well as librarians and teachers from ULBS. The aim of the project was to familiarise the wider HE community with the concept of disability theatre and create professional training opportunities for disabled people within the university.

This year, ULBS continued their attempts in opening doors to professional training for disabled people and is currently running the project **EchoShapes: Performative Aesthetics of (In)Visibility**. Besides d/Deaf people, this year’s project also involves Visually Impaired participants, as well as artists and organisations specialised in radio drama.

The organisers emphasise the lack of representation of disabled people in Romanian cultural life and have dedicated workshops on Deaf and Blind culture, introduction to Braille and RSL, as well as choreography and vocal training.

As with the previous year, the workshops involve both disabled and non-disabled participants, theatre and social sciences students, as well as activists and various theatre practitioners. The aim of the project is to explore disability culture, RSL as a performative medium, and to look for creative ways to provide accessible training in performing arts to disabled people.

Notably, the **EchoShapes** project, involves disabled persons not only as participants, but also as workshop designers and facilitators. By this, organisers take their exploration a step further, ensuring that lived

⁴⁵ <https://bcu.ulbsibiu.ro/en/performaccess-project/>

⁴⁶ <https://www.ulbsibiu.ro/news/ulbs-a-castigat-si-contractat-un-nou-proiect-finantat-de-afcn/>

experience informs the content of their programme. An essential aspect to authentic representation of the disabled community in the arts, as well as a solution-focused process to access and inclusivity training for the non-disabled participants.

Furthermore, both projects involve a wide range of stakeholders, both local and national – including social service providers, libraries, special schools, and NGOs – highlighting a growing awareness that access to culture is a collective responsibility.

Disability and public discourse: between invisibility and hypervisibility

As disability studies scholar Petra Kuppers says: *disability is at the same time invisible and hypervisible*.⁴⁷ In our collective imaginary, disabled people are somewhere at the margins; passive and hidden outside the public space. However, when a disabled person enters this space – they become *hypervisible*. One cannot ignore them any longer.

How can we educate the next generation to better understand Kuppers' paradox? How can we imagine a public space that is welcoming and safe for a disabled person? Where do we start? What needs to change so that a disabled person becomes visible *and* active in our society? (see chapter 4).

One start to rethinking, to re-imagining, would be to engage actively with disability studies and the disability arts movement, which challenge stereotypes and absences. Therefore, creating disability studies courses at universities, especially vocational ones, would further open up important conversations.

47 Kuppers, P. (2001). *Deconstructing images: Performing disability*. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 11(3–4), 25–40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10486800108568636>

Key findings

Physical infrastructure presents accessibility challenges: Essential features are lacking in most educational facilities.

Support system provision faces systemic gaps: The growth in registered SEN students has outpaced the number of support teachers, creating challenges in meeting established educational standards.

Higher education representation shows gradual progress: Disabled student participation in higher education has increased over recent years, though actual numbers may be higher than official statistics suggest. Practical mechanisms dedicated to implementation of existing inclusion policy are still emerging and need sustainable support from all structures involved.

Alternative educational pathways expand opportunities: Informal, non-formal, and disability-focused initiatives complement formal education, opening up society and creating learning and collaboration opportunities for all.

Chapter 4: Professional human resources, labour market

Romanian employers with more than 50 employees are required by law to ensure that 4 per cent of their workforce is made up by disabled people (Law no. 193/2020).⁴⁸ Failing to do so, leads to paying a penalty to the National Handicap (sic) Fund. Between 2023 and 2024, the National Financial Administration Agency (A.N.A.F.) reported collecting almost six billion lei (£988 million) in penalties to the National Handicap Fund.⁴⁹ Regardless of their size and/or scope, the majority of employers, including public institutions, pay the contributions rather than hire disabled individuals. There is no public breakdown on contributions, with A.N.A.F. citing taxpayer confidentiality, in the same way as there is no understanding of how these monies are redistributed within the national budget.

This trend is reflected in the low employment rate of disabled people (11 per cent)⁵⁰ compared to the overall employment rate (63 per cent); but also well below the average of other European Union countries (50.6 per cent)⁵¹, compared to that of people without disabilities (75.6

48 Agenția Națională de Administrare Fiscală – Direcția Generală Regională a Finanțelor Publice Iași. (2020, octombrie 1). Modificări privind contribuția la Fondul de Handicap. https://static.anaf.ro/static/30/lasi/20201001140851_modificari_per_cent20fondul_per_cent20de_per_cent20handicap.pdf

49 Grădinaru, A., & Avram, A. (2025, July 13). *De ce e în interesul tău să fii coleg cu o persoană cu dizabilități. De ce amenzi de miliarde de lei anual nu fac diferența. Europa Liberă România.* <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/tara-in-service-angajati-dizabilitati/33471594.html>

50 Code for Romania. Angajarea persoanelor cu dizabilități. <https://www.code4.ro/ro/raport-dizabilitati-angajarea-persoanelor-cu-dizabilitati>

51 European Commission. (2025, February 24). *Labour market information: Romania.* EURES. https://eures.europa.eu/living-and-working/labour-market-information-europe/labour-market-information-romania_en

per cent), according to the European Disability Forum.⁵² The tendency of Romanian employers to pay the associated penalties instead of hiring persons with disabilities contributes to maintaining barriers to inclusion and to increasing the risk of economic hardship among this group. According to Eurostat, in 2024, 26.7 per cent of people with disabilities in Romania experienced severe material and social deprivation.

Disabled artists

When it comes to employment in the arts, institutional employers support the **arts and disability** sector – in principle. Nevertheless, when it comes to actual implementation, the narrative often turns to structural challenges such as underfunding, the absence of a national framework, and limited institutional capacity or expertise within the sector. These all reinforce the existing systemic barriers that prevent the meaningful, professional participation of disabled artists in the cultural sector. At the same time, there is a general perception that disability arts operates as either a process for social intervention, an educational tool, or a therapeutic activity, rather than recognising it as a legitimate professional artistic practice (see chapter 7).

Legislative and structural challenges hamper the employment of disabled artists by cultural institutions. Professional training – often a prerequisite for such positions – remains difficult to access for many disabled individuals (as discussed in chapter 2). Moreover, the limited adaptation of work environments (as opposed to public access to them), continues to limit the full participation of disabled creatives within the field.

The situation is less complicated when it comes to the independent sector, where things can be amended more easily. The downside comes with the economic precarity of the sector, and the resultant lack of continuity. For disabled creatives to develop a sustainable practice, they need long-term commitment and support.

A direct consequence of these dynamics is **poor participation of disabled people in cultural life and extremely low representation of them in the arts: as makers, performers, producers, curators, or decision-makers.**

⁵² European Disability Forum - Employment Policy. <https://www.edf-feph.org/employment-policy/>

In recent years, some organisations have gained the knowledge and human resources to access EU funds and to put themselves in contact with the large European organisations in the field. Some of them are run by people who have nothing to do with disability, but who know cultural management and European funds management.

“

The State Theatre in Constanța added as many seats for disabled audience members as requested, but non-disabled people find it hard to imagine what is required, so this needs to be modelled in detail.

“

- ‘Colleagues lack the emotional context to work with disabled people.’
- ‘Everyone was OK with us.’
- ‘Yeah, but that was a lot of work.’

These quotes from focus group participants illustrate the need for a better synthesis between cultural management and access co-ordination.

Cultural mediation

Cultural mediation has already begun to be embraced by practitioners in the field and there is vocational training available for those who wish to follow this path further. See the work of Cluj Cultural Centre through ‘The Academy of Change’⁵³ project and the Cultural Mediation Forum⁵⁴, as well as that of the National Museum Complex ‘Moldova’ in Iași within the REACT Erasmus+ project⁵⁵ and their annual Cultural Mediation Conference.⁵⁶

⁵³ <https://academiaschimbarii.ro/en/>

⁵⁴ <https://academiaschimbarii.ro/en/cultural-mediation-forum-2024-edition/>

⁵⁵ <https://react-culture.eu>

⁵⁶ <https://palatulculturii.ro/eveniment/apel-pentru-participare-la-conferinta-internationala-medicult-mediarea-culturala-implicatii-oportunitati-resurse/>

Though representing different types of organisations, as well as fields of practice, both institutions have acknowledged the growing need of a new role in the cultural sector that would work as a liaison between various (marginalised) social groups and the cultural institution they represent.

Towards a new professional role: bridging culture and accessibility

Cultural institutions rarely have disabled people in mind when programming their events, as there is sporadic meaningful communication between them and disabled people. Most cultural workers have had limited opportunities to training on access and inclusion, resulting in gaps in the practical knowledge needed to engage effectively with disabled communities.

Based on the conversations we have had, and information gathered during the focus groups, the person responsible for the engagement of disabled people in the cultural offer can be: anyone from higher management, to someone from PR and Communication, to the Literary Department (in the case of theatres), to a curator interested in the field of Arts and Disability, or a curious artist commissioned to make new work. Given the fragmented processes in place and, in most cases, absence of follow-up actions, it is hard to track any progress made in establishing new audiences or to monitor their engagement with the programming.

To counter this, we propose an enhanced **cultural mediator / access co-ordinator** role. This would act as a **dialogue facilitator between cultural institutions and disabled communities**. They would be responsible for communicating (in diverse accessible formats) programmes, exhibitions and performances, as well as ensuring that the events are physically, culturally and intellectually accessible. Moving beyond legal compliance, they would advocate for authentic representation and ongoing accessibility as a core aspect of institutional practice.



This role would also act as a **bridge between disabled artists and cultural organisations**. This includes helping artists define their access requirements (based on their disabilities and the specifics of the role they are taking on) and connecting them with resources to meet those requirements - from the outset. Those in post will also coordinate with service providers, funders, and access experts to ensure resources are used accordingly and good practices are in place. For long-term commissioned disabled artists, periodic assessments would confirm that 'necessary adjustments' remain relevant and sufficient.

With appropriate resourcing, training, and commitment, one could readily imagine such posts evolving / being created in Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara, Iași and other cities.

To make meaningful and sustainable change, there needs to be a common effort within the cultural sector for the **creation of a new, focused, professional role: which combines cultural mediation with access co-ordination**. This role would bring together a disability focus on disabled citizens, audiences and artists, to be catalytic in growing the life of a cultural institution and its wider community.



**Visibility
comes through
employability.**

*(Focus group
participant)*

Focus group - Inclusive spaces © Marius Lupu



Key findings

Existing employment disparities: The employment rate for disabled people remains significantly lower than both the national average and EU benchmarks.

Employment compliance reveals systemic gaps: Employers' preference for payment of financial penalties over the inclusion of disabled people reveals limited understanding of - and exposure to - the needs and potential of disabled people.

Professional pathways require development: Access to professional training and adapted work environments in the cultural sector presents ongoing barriers to disabled artists' participation.

Cultural sector engagement shows emerging awareness: Institutional support is largely limited by funding and knowledge gaps. Cultural mediation shows great potential for building meaningful connections between cultural organisations and disabled communities.

Focus group – Activists © Marius Lupu



Chapter 5: Public space and the built environment

It is important to break down what is understood by accessible public space.

Way before reading or hearing about an event, let alone attending one, a disabled person needs to know it is safe for them to leave their house. Public space is not only about streets, parks and buildings. It is about what and how we think about things, and more importantly about how we imagine being together. We cannot create space for something we do not know is there. Before making our built environment accessible, we need to make space for disability in our collective imaginary.

At a closer look, one will quickly notice the lack of accessible infrastructure in public spaces in Romania. The 2021 World Bank report findings⁵⁷ show that Romania has not yet developed a comprehensive strategic approach to accessibility, noting the absence of coordinated planning for accessible public buildings and continuous access routes linking residential areas to public spaces in urban and rural settings.

Limited collaboration at both national and local levels contributes to a lot of variability across the country. As a result, access to public spaces and buildings differs significantly, and the enforcement of accessibility

57 Grigoraş, V., Salazar, M., Vladu, C. I., & Briciu, C. (2022). *Diagnosis of the situation of persons with disabilities in Romania: Summary*. Autoritatea Națională pentru Persoanele cu Dizabilități. <https://anpd.gov.ro/web/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Diagnosis-of-the-situation-of-persons-with-disabilities-in-Romania-Summary.pdf>

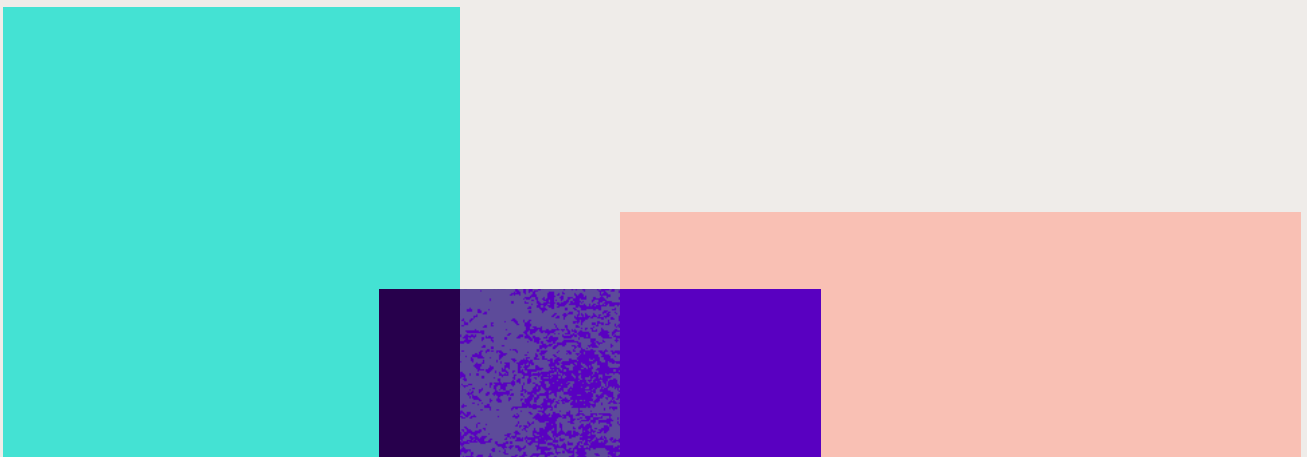
legislation remains inconsistent, as there is a lot of leeway left open to interpretation. Based on World Bank assessment criteria, none of the institutions inspected for their 2021 report were deemed fully accessible.

A year before the adoption of the Law 240/2024⁵⁸ (requiring all public performing arts and concert institutions to make at least one accessible production per year), the General Council of the Bucharest City Hall adopted a resolution regarding the accessibility of cultural events produced by performing arts institutions under its jurisdiction. None of the cultural institutions concerned agreed to sign the proposed guidance annexed to the resolution, claiming it was not their responsibility. Therefore, the implementation of the decision fell under the responsibility of the DGASPC⁵⁹, as they are the ones responsible for disabled people in the city of Bucharest. This situation reflects broader challenges associated with political and administrative instability in Bucharest. The predominance of interim management positions within performing arts institutions, extending in some cases for over five years⁶⁰, has constrained institutional capacity to engage in sustained strategic initiatives, including those related to accessibility.

58 <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliuDocument/285747>

59 The General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection (DGASPC) is the Romanian public institution subordinated to the county councils and subordinated to the local councils at sectoral level in Bucharest, which offers assistance and support for children, family, single persons, elderly people, people in need, abused, marginalized or with disabilities and any person in need. DGASPC from each county is in coordination with the National Authority for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Children and Adoptions within the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection. <https://copii.gov.ro/1/atributii-dgaspc/>

60 <https://stirileprotv.ro/cultura/interimat-de-1-900-de-zile-teatrele-bucurestene-din-subordinea-primariei-generale-acuza-numirile-politice-ale-managerilor.html>



SNAPSHOT

Touch ME NOT: The Politics of The Body (Inter)national Public Debates Tour (2019)⁶¹

and

You Are Another Me – A Cathedral of the Body project at the 59th Venice Biennale (2022)⁶²

Golden Bear winner of the 68th Berlin International Film Festival, **Touch Me Not** is an exploration of intimacy, and an invitation to dialogue on how we exercise empathy towards the *other*. Filmmaker Adina Pintilie is following closely Laura, Tómas, Hannah, Christian and Grit⁶³, as each of them engage in their own research journey in finding an answer to: *how to love another, without losing oneself?*⁶⁴

Touch Me Not – The Politics of the Body (Inter)national Debates Tour was born following strong reactions generated by the film since its premiere at the Berlinale. The tour was framed as a cultural and educational human-rights project by the film's creative team and aimed at opening up a conversation in public space about 'the body as *battlefield* for ideologies, otherness, intimacy and disability, personal freedom, gender fluidity, non-normative beauty'.⁶⁵

Each film screening was followed by a two-hour conversation with the film's five protagonists and moderated by a local keynote speaker from the communities represented in the film (disabled people, LGBTQIA+ community, psychotherapy professionals, alternative practices and alternative sex-practices).

The tour was organised in partnership with institutions in the five countries of co-production: France, Germany, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Romania. In Romania, the **Touch Me Not** team went to seven different cities across the country (Cluj-Napoca, Braşov, Iaşi, Bucureşti, Constanţa, Galaţi, Sibiu and Timişoara), most of the events being hosted at the local universities.

The great challenge of the tour in Romania was to find accessible cultural venues that would enable Christian Bayerlein's participation in the

⁶¹ <http://manekinofilm.com/ngo/>

⁶² <https://www.cathedralofthebody.com/en>

⁶³ Partners in real life and 'Outspoken advocates for the rights of disabled people, for better accessibility and inclusion in the community, they have a particular interest in sexuality and disability.' – from Touch Me Not pressbook.

⁶⁴ <http://manekinofilm.com/films/touch-me-not/>

⁶⁵ From the project's presentation, kindly shared by the team.

post-show debates (a priority for the creative team). The difficulty in securing accessible spaces revealed not just infrastructural gaps, but also pointed to a deeper issue: *narrow mindedness and limited flexibility in problem solving*. This perspective comes from a mindset shaped by precarity. Within an unstable environment and lack of structural funding for independent cultural institutions, the expectation to ensure accessibility can become yet another demand in a long list of unsolved challenges.

Following the rich visual material collected during the filmmaking process, Adina Pintilie and the Manekino Film team developed a concept for an exhibition that was selected to represent Romania at the national pavilion in the 2022 Venice Art Biennale:



This is so overwhelming and such a complex issue that it's really the least of a cultural worker's concern if they're not dealing directly with the topic or if they're not themselves disabled.

Bianca Oana (Producer, Manekino Film)⁶⁶

⁶⁶ <http://manekinofilm.com>

***You Are Another Me – A Cathedral of the Body** marks the next stage of Pintilie's multi-platform research on the politics and poetics of intimacy and the body.⁶⁷*

Here, the creative team had to challenge the Biennale regarding the accessibility of the Romanian pavilion, which was not accessible for Christian who is using an electric wheelchair. Not all electric wheelchairs are made to the same spec. Making any adaptations to the space was also difficult due to the '30s architecture of the Giardini, characteristic to all the pavilions neighbouring the Romanian one.

⁶⁷ <https://www.cathedralofthebody.com/en>

The team of the project asked for an accessibility assessment from Erika Garnier⁶⁸ from the Motivation Foundation Romania⁶⁹, based on shared photographs, video footage and architectural plans of the building. Following Garnier's assessment and letters sent to the Biennale team by Daniel Neugebauer, mediation coordinator of the project⁷⁰, the Biennale accepted their request and built a whole new ramp in front of the Romanian pavilion.

This was the first win for the creative team, and a great permanent achievement of the project. Not only is the Romanian pavilion now accessible for artists invited to work there, but also for those who will attend the Biennale as audiences and participants.

The second permanent achievement for the **You Are Another Me – A Cathedral of the Body** project was a year later, in Romania, when they were invited by Kunsthalle Bega⁷¹ to be one of the three exhibitions programmed in the opening weekend of Timișoara 2023 European Capital of Culture.

While Kunsthalle Bega is accessible inside, wheelchair users cannot enter the building due to a set of stairs at the entrance. When the creative team made it clear that they could not take part in the event without an accessible entrance, the curators of the space reached out to the private sector for support. This resulted in funding that enabled the installation of an exterior lift, still in place at the moment. This is a valuable example of how thinking creatively about accessibility can lead to meaningful, even if temporary, improvements. It highlights the importance of flexibility in addressing access barriers in cultural spaces.

68 <https://seedig.net/erika-garnier/>

69 <https://motivation.ro/en/about-us/>

70 <https://www.cathedralofthebody.com/en>

71 <https://timisoara2023.eu/en/events/you-are-another-me-a-cathedral-of-the-body/>

SNAPSHOT

Coralia Costaş - Head of Public Relations, Cultural Marketing, Projects, Programmes, and Logistics at the Palace of Culture, Iași

Coralia has been working there since 1997, so she is enormously experienced with an understanding of institutional development over time. As part of Erasmus+ projects, she began peer learning with other EU organisations. Initiatives include tactile devices to be created at the Ethnographic Museum within the Erasmus+ Project REACT⁷², Braille description – which has also proved useful to get beyond the ‘don’t touch’ approach to museum objects - for all visitors.

One museum collection houses mechanical music automata. An experimental device was created with a selection of nine melodies from different automata. These were adapted to be experienced as vibrations. Blind people also used these vibration devices.

These were tested, as well, with a group of hard of hearing visitors. What *they* actually wanted was Sign Language Interpreted (SLI) professional translation. So, working with associate partners, the National Association of Professional Teachers with Hearing Impairment provided a Deaf teacher, using speech – to introduce SLI to 18 staff from various museums, twice a week over two months to provide essential visitor welcome information.

She also worked with an Italian lead partner around autism and the History and Arts Museum to create both a Guidebook for teachers on how to prepare museum visits and a Guidebook for museum staff to do the same: inclusive with headsets, rubber balls, simple pictograms, etc for non-verbal visitors.

These initiatives are cumulative, across different disabilities.

⁷² <https://react-culture.eu/the-project/>

Now they are creating a set of accessible tools for smaller museums, available onsite and online, in the framework of the REACT Erasmus+ project.

When it comes to staff training, there is a variety of experience:

- some have disabled family members
- some have already got some disability related training
- some for whom it is all new.

Mix teams as much as possible.

The Ethnographic Museum of Moldova, Palace of Culture, Iași (c) Mihai Neagu



We contact local associations, also departments. They contact the museum and liaise: choose a less crowded time. We ask these people, how best to adapt.

Coralia Costaș

69

SNAPSHOT

Alex Luchici and Iași Alliance for the Promotion of Alternative Transport (APTA)

Alex does not know of a single building to be made *fully* accessible, so it is a continuous process. However, APTA is implementing a partnership with the local city hall to make one 7km street in Iași more accessible, adapting it to the requirements of various disabled groups. In 2020, the alliance for the promotion of alternative mobility was formed as a local civic group from 10 NGOs: combining sports, architecture, inclusion and with an interest to include arts - to look at public spaces, public transport, cycle lanes, and promote sustainable policies with practical outcomes.

The project started five years ago and will finally be completed later this year. Though a long and difficult process, the project has also focused on making the needs of disabled people relevant to other groups: such as mothers with young children, elderly people, and cyclists.



We developed a new way of advocating for our needs. More meetings, closer talks with City Hall and all those involved. Work as partners: be realistic, but pragmatic. Propose solutions, bite size, step by step. We need to eat the elephant in the room in small chunks. We don't want to scare anyone. People in power need to understand why it is important to make the streets safe and accessible for all, not just for us.

Alex Luchici

Communication in public space

Theatres and arts institutions in receipt of government funding are also public spaces. Another of the main challenges when it comes to access to public space for disabled communities in Romania is communication. Before physically accessing a venue, a person needs to find out about that event. One can rarely find out about these in a different format than the one used for mainstream, normative communication.

Though recognised as an official language since 2020 (Law 27/2020)⁷³, the use of Romanian Sign Language in the promotion of cultural events is still all too rare. The same goes for making information accessible for visually impaired or learning-disabled audiences. There are, of course, some exceptions, like Basca theatre in Timișoara or more recently, Constanța State Theatre – who are making sustainable efforts to make their productions accessible in Romanian Sign Language, to communicate their events in Easy Read format, to use audio description and relaxed performances guidance for their shows. However, the lack of guidance and training in how to make information accessible in different formats was mentioned several times during our research conversations.

From January 1, 2025, all performing arts institutions (public and private) are required by law to have at least one accessible production per year (Law 240/2024).⁷⁴ Seen from afar, this law seems like a big win for disabled audiences in Romania. However, matters are not as straightforward as they seem. First, there are already initiatives which make performing arts events accessible, sometimes *more* than just once a year. Second, there is no guidance on what access actually means and how to implement the law in practice. For some venues this new regulation is perceived as another reason for incurring penalties and further disruption in meaningful communication with disabled audiences.

Public space is not just the physical environment. It is where society meets itself.

73 <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/224473>

74 <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/285747>

The digital realm

A great opportunity that could cut across many of these barriers and work as an additional system of inclusion for disabled people in public space, is the digital realm. There is a lot of potential⁷⁵, given good digital connectivity and with Romania as one of the growing IT and tech industries in Europe.⁷⁶ From 28 June 2025⁷⁷, all Romanian websites must implement accessibility standards stated in European Directive 2019/882 (European Accessibility Act).⁷⁸ Public institutions, private companies, and digital service providers need to ensure their online platforms are accessible to all – regardless of their abilities.

The great opportunity the directive presents goes beyond technical standards, it implies a shift in how everyone thinks about access. Making websites accessible is not just an add-on feature, it becomes a legal criterion for compliance. Companies developing digital products will also have to assess their work and implement changes that involve investments in inclusive design technology and testing with real users.

From a Creative Industries perspective, with the comparatively high standard of the IT industry in Romania, the digital access law, foreign investors who already have their HR trained in access and inclusion, this sector is more accommodating when it comes to working from home, shorter hours, longer deadlines and other necessary adjustments for disabled professionals.

Digital space is also public space and requires the same active conceptualisation as a shared social imaginary. Just like the physical world, disabled people require equality of engagement as audiences, participants and artists.

Centring disabled artists in the wider, **changing digital narrative**, rather than their customary relegation to the margins would prove uniquely insightful. At the same time, adaptive technologies and human resources which are currently insufficiently widely available could soon become meaningfully accessible. This could be transformative.

75 <https://business-review.eu/br-exclusive/industries-to-watch-2025/main-story-romania-it-industry-caught-between-tax-p pressures-and-ai-opportunities-278741>

76 <https://investromania.gov.ro/web/doing-business/itc/>

77 <https://legislatie.just.ro/public/DetaliiDocument/257778>

78 European Commission. *European Accessibility Act*. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/disability/union-equality-strategy-rights-persons-disabilities-2021-2030/european-accessibility-act_en

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

‘Research studies and focus groups have found that AI-generated text and images often misrepresent the experiences of people with disabilities and reinforce harmful stereotypes, and AI-generated responses have been found to provide inaccurate information to user prompts, which misleads people with disabilities who rely on the responses to summarize inaccessible content and other resources.

The Task Force maintains that a disability-inclusive AI ecosystem requires sustained collaboration among policymakers, industry, and the disability community. In response to these challenges, the report proposes ten recommendations for the development and implementation of AI systems, including increased inclusion of people with disabilities in designing new tools, mandating accessibility data inclusion in AI training sets, and continuous review by policymakers of anti-discrimination frameworks for AI.⁷⁹

‘The paper⁸⁰ concludes by advocating for **participatory, justice-oriented approaches to AI in education that centre human variation and resist the erasure of disabled experience.**’

Traditional paper-based and highly bureaucratic public services are gradually being replaced by digital systems. The key challenge for Romania lies not only in adopting new technologies but in ensuring that disabled people are actively involved in shaping this change. Their lived experience can provide valuable insights for identifying accessibility gaps and designing inclusive solutions. Digitalisation can also support transparency and improve access to information, fostering stronger trust between citizens and public institutions.

79 New York City Bar Association. (June 12th 2025). *The impact of the use of AI on people with disabilities*. <https://www.nycbar.org/reports/the-impact-of-the-use-of-ai-on-people-with-disabilities/>

80 Foley, A., & Melese, F. (2025). *Disabling AI: power, exclusion, and disability*. British Journal of Sociology of Education, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2025.2519482>

Key findings

Public space is both seen and unseen: Public space accessibility extends beyond infrastructure, it includes how disability exists within collective consciousness, creating opportunities for reimagining public space.

Communication accessibility shows promising developments: Romanian Sign Language received official recognition in 2020, and various accessible formats are emerging, with growing awareness of Easy Read, Audio Description, and relaxed performance guidance.

Digital Space is public space: Digitalisation presents a transformative opportunity for society to embrace the digital realm as an eminently achievable system of inclusion for disabled people, leveraging the country's strong IT sector to overcome barriers in public space.

Focus group – Activists © Marius Lupu



Chapter 6: Capacity Building

Although the 2023 Romanian Cultural Barometer⁸¹ does not specifically address disabled audiences, its findings indicate broader structural inequalities. Cultural participation tends to reflect existing social and economic disparities, reinforcing certain privileges while limiting access for groups facing social vulnerability (including those affected by poverty, age, or geographic isolation).



Quiet day at Circular Catalysts 2023 Exhibition © Roald Aron

81 Institutul Național pentru Cercetare și Formare Culturală. (2024, November). Croitoru, C., Becuț Marinescu, A., Ceobanu, I., Georgescu, I., Matei, Ș. *Barometrul de consum cultural 2023: Comunități de consum în contextul schimbărilor societale*. <https://www.culturadata.ro/barometrul-de-consum-cultural-2023-comunitati-de-consum-in-contextul-schimbarilor-sociale/>

SNAPSHOT

Ruxandra Mateescu, Disability and Cultural Rights Defender, Supereroi Printre Noi (Superheroes among us)⁸²

We would like to share the meaningful insights Ruxandra shared with us during our conversations, based on the experience she acquired in organising inclusive events with Superheroes Among Us, but also as the mother of a disabled child.⁸³

‘Private or state cultural institutions do not have a well-defined plan in terms of access to the arts for people with disabilities. With a few exceptions – mostly recent initiatives in Timișoara and Bucharest – we still cannot speak of a system refined and tailored through public feedback. They do not have a dedicated department on access and inclusion. Training of employees in this field is not a priority, therefore, they lack knowledge about how and where they could do this training. Accessibility and inclusion is *one more thing* they have to tackle on top of many others, with few human and scarce financial resources.

The parents of people with disabilities – from which many concrete actions of today’s cultural institutions and managers draw their knowledge – are the basis for change. Over the last 20 years, these families have been taking small steps and advocating at the local level. Either for a ramp, or for the opening of an adapted toilet in some theatre, or for an elevator button mounted at a level a person in a wheelchair can reach, or for their sons and daughters to be able to participate in various cultural activities.

We need to professionalise accessibility training and the training of trainers. It tends to be the same few people who work in the area of accessibility and inclusion. We have noticed that in various projects and collaborations we had, both public and private institutions. Their number is small, and, in almost all cases, this is not their main responsibility. This is, rather, an appendix to their core job. Most of them are self-employed and when the opportunity arises they leave.’

⁸² <https://supereroiprintrenoi.ro>

⁸³ <https://supereroiprintrenoi.ro/echipa/>

There are also some questions Ruxandra does not have an answer to, as they call for a collective response from the cultural sector. Addressing them could lead to a deeper understanding of the broader context and help identify valuable actions needed to advance the field of Arts and Disability.

- What types of training in the field of accessibility and inclusion in the cultural area are available in the country? Who organises them? How do people find out about them?
- What strategies do the ministries and public institutions have regarding oversight of these trainings?
- Is there a central repository of trained trainers? What kind of accreditation and validation might help strengthen this work?
- What types of training have people undertaken? In-country, abroad or on-line? How does training get paid for? By the institutions they represent, within projects or paid for by themselves?



Parents petitioned, complained, posted and sometimes spoke through interviews, but mainly their fight remains unseen.

Ruxandra Mateescu

(See Recommendations for a National Arts and Disability Framework in chapter 10)

Inclusive read-aloud book club for people with intellectual disabilities
© Marius Lupu

Arts Therapy in Romania

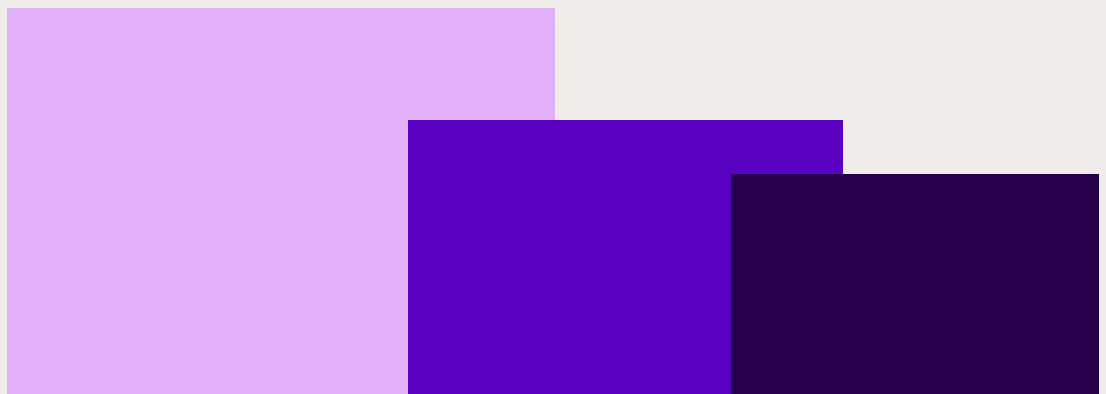
Art therapy is often the first practical encounter with the arts for many disabled people. Rather than merely audience members at a specially adapted cultural event, disabled people participate in various kinds of therapeutic artistic processes, many of which have long and extensively developed professional practices.

Almost all professional performing arts companies of disabled people start not as artistically-led, but housed within a social services context. Over time, for some, that focus attracts sufficient resources and political capital to morph into a professional, artistically led entity.

This developmental pattern can be easily recognised in the Romanian context and reflects broader systemic challenges, such as lack of resources for proper inclusion and traditional arts training programmes that more often than not, exclude disabled bodies.

Arts therapy, thus, presents a unique opportunity to bridge the inclusion gap by developing professionals who understand both artistic practice and disability support. Romania's emerging arts therapy sector - operating across different artforms - shows promise through organisations like EntuziArt Association, TMoves, Piano Therapy, Trupa din Atelier and Valentina de Piante's practice.

Arts therapy also represents a sustainable pathway to train professionals who work at the intersection of accessibility, inclusion, and the arts, ultimately facilitating more inclusive creative communities.



SNAPSHOT

Valentina de Piante⁸⁴

Valentina De Piante has extensive experience working with SEN children and teenagers in diverse settings, including a special school and two psychiatric hospitals. Through her work she has learned that traditional methods require adaptation, and more sensitive approaches that respect both individual boundaries and communication styles.

Valentina acknowledges the critical importance of embodiment and kinaesthetic attuning in therapeutic work. Touch is the first way of communication: the listening hand, not the imposing one. Through the mentorship of trainers Thomas Greil and Carla Bottiglieri and together with the Creative, Education, Health, Research Network (Rețea de Creație, Educație, Sănătate, Cercetare - C.R.E.S.C.), an Areal⁸⁵ project co-funded by the Administration of the National Cultural Fund (AFCN), she is creating bridges between Universities (The 'I.L. Caragiale' National University of Theatre and Film, University of Bucharest – Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, and the University of Psychology of Padua in Italy – Life Design International Research (LaRIOS) group), focusing on how the word 'care' means first of all 'to be aware, to observe'.

Therefore, she is applying a transversal methodology where you don't impose, but you create the conditions through a sensory attuning in order to be open to anything that can happen. And in this 'transitional space' (D.Winnicott)⁸⁶, you can use the knowledge of the body: your moving/dancing/sounding skills, to help children and adults to attune by applying different intensities and qualities of motion/voice.

Her ultimate goal involves opening the university doors to these new methodologies, creating more inclusive, supportive, and vibrant learning communities for individuals with special educational needs. As a university teacher, Valentina expanded her teaching, training university students into new intervention methodologies, incorporating somatic methods, such as Feldenkrais method⁸⁷ and Body Mind Centering⁸⁸, alongside dance therapy and dance skills, in order to help students rethink their important role in society, as inventors of a new language created together with disabled people.

At the same time the students of the Psychology and Special

⁸⁴ <https://arealcolectiv.ro/en/2020/08/20/valentina-de-piante-en/>

⁸⁵ <https://arealcolectiv.ro/en/>

⁸⁶ <https://arttherapytrainingandstudiogroups.wordpress.com/2020/02/25/winnicott-the-transitional-object-and-the-potential-space/>

⁸⁷ <https://feldenkrais-itc.com/feldenkrais-method/>

⁸⁸ <https://www.bodymindcentering.com/about/>

Psychopedagogy University have the opportunity to ‘unlearn’ some ‘cognitive recipes’ and, in the end, to connect with their embodied knowledge, facilitating a learning process which includes everything: movement, breathing, sensation, feelings, a lot of creativity and playfulness.

Valentina calls for an ecological system, where everyone is involved: teachers, students, parents, children, special institutions and hospitals. At this moment, the department of Choreography from the National University of Theatre and Film ‘I.L. Caragiale’ is a strategic partner from a resource point of view, and it represents a concrete platform of projects where the artistic field serves education, health and therapy.

Valentina also suggests a study on the gaze, on how do we prepare the observer. In September 2026 the CRESC Festival will be the first inclusive platform where disabled people will be performing, where everyone can dance together, a dream becoming reality, or just a righteous space coming into existence.

The curative-performative qualities of touch / Valențele curativ-performative ale atingerii
© Luciana Gingarașu



SNAPSHOT

ADICLUS - European Arts and Disability cluster⁸⁹

European Arts and Disability Cluster Position Paper: *How the European Union can and must act to reduce discrimination against artists, cultural workers and audiences with disabilities*⁹⁰

ADICLUS observations on contemporary cultural discourse notes that in the last two years one of two key themes have dominated European cultural discourse: *Arts & Health* and *Arts & Wellbeing*. The following excerpt outlines the ADICLUS' position, which takes a critical stance toward the growing focus on the arts' relationship with health and wellbeing within European cultural discourse.

'The Cluster rejects the incorporation of the Arts & Disability / Cultural Accessibility discourse into an Arts & Health discourse (or an Arts & Wellbeing discourse). The subject of cultural rights of people with disabilities is not the same thematic as a cultural sector that supports better health outcomes. These are different topics.

There are, of course, valuable artistic practices which aim to support better health outcomes or better well-being. Sometimes, artists and cultural workers with disabilities are involved in delivering these activities. However, for too long, artists with disabilities have had their work automatically considered therapeutic or participatory in nature. It has often been assumed that the aim of work by all artists with disabilities has been therapeutic outcomes or better health outcomes. This is not the case. The purpose of the majority of artistic practices of artists and cultural workers with disabilities is to further the intrinsic artistic value of the work.

Incorporation into an Arts & Health thematic threatens the hard-won establishment of artists with disabilities as excellent and innovative professional artists that contribute to artistic practice. It also draws attention away from the fundamental inequalities of the mainstream European cultural sector. We encourage a cultural discourse which asserts the cultural rights of people with disabilities as a separate and pressing topic.'

⁸⁹ <https://www.europebeyondaccess.com/european-cluster/>

⁹⁰ <https://www.europebeyondaccess.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/ADICLUS-Position-Paper-2.pdf>

SNAPSHOT

Basca Theatre⁹¹ and Simona Smultea⁹² (Something to Say Association)⁹³

An excellent example of good practice that illustrates the transitioning from an activist/wellbeing to arts-led collaboration is the 'Accessible Theatre for All'⁹⁴, a project run by Basca Theatre Company and Simona Smultea, a visually impaired actress from Timișoara.

After losing sight in both eyes and not being able to practice as a kineto-therapist, Simona dedicated most of her time to the community of disabled people represented by the Something to Say Association, as well as to her passion for theatre, music and dance. In 2018, thanks to the British Council, she took part in a study visit programme to London, where she heard about audio description in theatre. Coming back home, she looked for opportunities to implement what she learned in London.

Her first collaboration with Basca Theatre was for their 'Forum Theatre' project, where Simona worked together with Ana-Maria Ursu and her team, to make all workshops accessible for disabled participants. Simona also got involved as an actress and took part in the show developed during the project. What she loved most about it, is that people were not aware that she is disabled, she was *only* one of the performers on stage.⁹⁵

After that, the collaboration between Simona and Basca theatre continued for the 'Accessible Theatre for All' project, where they worked on a production of 'Butterflies are free' by Leonard Gershe. The show is accessible for both Visually Impaired and d/Deaf people. Based on their experience, they also published a guide on how to make theatre shows accessible (see Tools section).

⁹¹ <https://basca.tm.ro/despre/>

⁹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDcYPjYSqOQ>

⁹³ <https://www.cevadespus.ro/en/>

⁹⁴ <https://www.cevadespus.ro/noutati/teatrul-basca-prezinta-primul-spectacol-de-teatru-din-timisoara-accesibilizat-pentru-persoane-cu-dizabilitati.html>

⁹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vf4mhzzB-5I&t=377s>

The project won the British Council Award⁹⁶ at the UNITER (The Romanian Association of Theatre Artists) Gala in 2021 and both Simona and Basca theatre continue their collaboration, in Timișoara and beyond.

Collaborations like these stand out as powerful examples of good practice, demonstrating the importance of involving disabled people as practitioners within projects led by non-disabled led organisations. By creating spaces where disabled and non-disabled people can collaborate meaningfully, these projects lay the groundwork for the arts and disability sector to grow in a sustainable and authentic way. A way that values lived experience, facilitates mutual learning, and challenges stereotypes and systemic barriers to accessing professional training in the arts.

UNITER Awards Gala 2021 – British Council Award Presentation © Basca Theatre (basca.tm.ro)



96 <https://basca.tm.ro/jurnal/premiul-british-council-la-uniter-2021-pentru-teatrul-basca/>

Key findings

Institutional gaps affect the consistency of accessibility and inclusion efforts: Cultural institutions often lack dedicated structures, trained staff, and coherent plans for access, which results in a continued dependence on families as drivers of change and calls for strengthened training and coordination across the sector.

Arts therapy creates professional pathways: For many disabled people, arts therapy represents an important first encounter with the arts, with companies often evolving from social services contexts into artistically led entities.

Dual expertise bridges inclusion gaps: Arts therapy develops professionals who understand both artistic practice and disability support, creating pathways to foster more accessible creative communities.

Focus group – Inclusive spaces © Marius Lupu



Chapter 7:

Funding models

How public funding works

Contextual snapshots drawn from two 2022 reports: **Cultural Mobility Funding Guide for the international mobility of artists and culture professionals** from On The Move, then **Mapping of stakeholders and income opportunities for future projects and programmes of the British Council in Romania**.

Domestic–EU

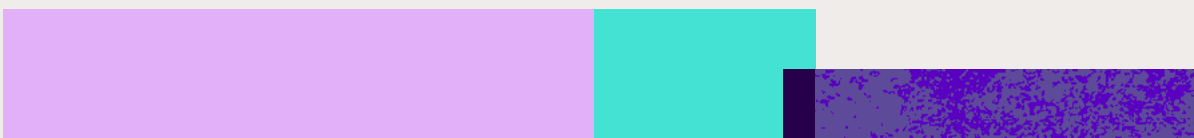
‘Public funding in Romania is mainly dispersed in the form of project grants to national public and private organisations in the cultural and creative sectors. Funding is also available at city and regional levels, via municipalities and county councils.

Many national and local grant schemes include relevant priorities linked to promoting collaborations and the visibility of Romanian arts and culture in Europe and worldwide, encouraging applicants to develop projects with this aim in mind.

Individual artists and cultural professionals cannot apply directly to these public grants, but they can benefit from transnational mobilities in the context of funded projects, which may include collaborative activities with foreign partners that cover cross-border travel.

An important exception in this respect is the Romanian Cultural Institute, which offers direct small grants and scholarships for individual students, artists, researchers and other professionals from Romania to travel to other countries, as well as for foreign professionals to come to Romania.

The mobility of artists and cultural professionals can also be considered in the activities of cultural programmes of foreign cultural institutes based in Romania, like Goethe-Institut, Institut Français, or British Council, and of foreign embassies in the country. Some of these cultural relations institutions have dedicated grant schemes that encourage artistic



exchanges and mobility with professionals in their respective countries, while others focus on their own projects and develop partnerships with sector-specific Romanian organisations for particular actions and events.

EU funding from various programmes (Creative Europe, Erasmus+, etc.) is also an important source of international mobility support for Romanian operators and culture professionals. Organisations who participate as partners in these co-funded cooperation projects are often able to provide further support for individual mobility within their project activities – for instance, through art residencies for Romanian and foreign participants.’

Cultural Mobility Funding Guide for the international mobility of artists and culture professionals⁹⁷

Analysing the wider landscape

“Although the local public grant making for cultural projects is, by a large margin, better funded than the national-level one, the local grant making policies and capabilities are less developed (...)

(...) With some exceptions, most are targeting artistic excellence, focus on a broadly defined access to culture as principle and goal, and prefer the funding of cultural projects with large audiences and free admissions to the events. Projects that focus on cultural education and cultural intervention initiatives have a chance to be funded through and are explicitly targeted by large municipalities like Bucureşti, Timișoara and Arad. Some cities have professionalised their grant making capacities by establishing dedicated public services for this function, the most recent (2021) being the Centre for Project of the Municipality of Timișoara.

Only Timișoara, particularly because of it being designated **European Capital of Culture** in 2023 (postponed, due to the pandemic conditions, from the initial scheduling of 2021), has taken significant steps towards an actual use of the local strategy for culture as guidance in its grant-making practices in a professional manner, by founding a dedicated Centre for Projects.

The City of Bucharest, also, via **ARCUB – the Cultural Centre of the Municipality**, attempts to guide its grant-making activities and its partnership areas in relation to the local cultural strategy. Still, the priorities for funding are often of a very general nature, referring to access to culture, artistic quality, participation, promotion of cultural heritage.

⁹⁷ On the Move. (2022, September). *Mobility Funding Guide for the Balkan Region*.p.103.
https://on-the-move.org/sites/default/files/funding-guides/OTM_MFG_Balkan-region_EN.pdf

In Cluj-Napoca the grant-making activity of the municipality is not professionalised and strategic, but the city supports the activity of the **Cluj Cultural Centre**, an NGO working for culture and sustainable development, legacy of the city's bid for the European Capital of Culture 2021 that 'implements an interdisciplinary programme to address strategic challenges of the society, based on a membership of 116 cultural organizations and institutions, universities, associations of the business sector and of the civil society, and the local and regional administration.'

Mapping of stakeholders and income opportunities for future projects and programmes of the British Council in Romania prepared by Raluca Iacob & Mihai Iacob (March-July 2022)

–

We had a series of wide-ranging and at times refreshingly candid conversations with national ministries, local municipalities, two foundations (Orange⁹⁸ and Dacia⁹⁹), and the Romanian Cultural Institute.¹⁰⁰ While chapter 8 will be more discursive and expansive around the EU funding context, what we heard from disabled artists, activists, allies and those applying boils down to two key questions as framing devices for change.

98 <https://www.fundatiaorange.ro>

99 <https://fundatiadaciapentruromania.ro/#tab-bde-advanced-tabs-47-119-2>

100 <https://www.icr.ro>

How can we design accessible grant schemes that encourage participation without conflicting with legal or bureaucratic constraints, or being contested in public procedures?

“

How can we support, convince funders to switch from just investing in innovation, new projects and focus more on the long-term impact of organisations and their capacity?

(Focus group participants)

”

The discussions, along with the challenges and questions raised by the focus groups participants, lead to the following key findings that shape the direction of this chapter.

Key findings

International collaboration is widely encouraged: Many schemes prioritise partnerships promoting Romanian arts at an international level, supported by EU programmes like Creative Europe, Erasmus+, Culture Moves Europe, as well as the European Cultural Institutes funding opportunities.

Disparity in funding capacity presents challenges to a strategic, inclusion-focused grant-making process: There is a great imbalance within the country between large urban centres and rural or less developed areas, especially regarding access to resources and strategic development in cultural education and intervention support.

Alternative approaches emerge through partnerships: Cluj's Cultural Centre, ARCUB, Timișoara Centrul de Proiecte represent innovative practices, convening organisations across cultural, academic, business, and civil society sectors to address strategic challenges through interdisciplinary programming.

Focus group – Inclusive spaces © Marius Lupu



Chapter 8: Romania and the EU

In the introduction to this scoping study, we explained that we had deliberately chosen to conduct this exercise in dialogue with a wider European context. This is for several reasons, including legislative impetus, but also because in order to achieve many of the recommendations made in chapter 10, it will require resources which are not readily available in Romania.

Accessing EU resources (not just money, but expertise, thinking and solidarity) may appear a daunting proposition, so in this chapter we look in particular at the recent European Capital of Culture (ECoC) as a bridging process, before going on to look at other European support (*for further details on various EU funds, see appendices*).

ECoC is particularly instructive as it represents the most significant investment lever for culture. This leverage manifests in several ways: funding, capacity building, 10-year strategic planning, multilateral partnership development, but perhaps most importantly in **the generation of cultural change**.

‘The (ECoC) team indicated that the public is not questioning the value of the ECoC per se, nor the money invested in it. Local debates and criticisms have arisen about specific aspects of the programme some parts of the population are not used to (e.g. programming for LGBTIQ+ communities, exhibitions on feminism etc.). This is precisely what the team expected and generating such debate was in fact one of the aims of the project. The team and the city are in full support of some of the most controversial choices made by the curatorial team and believe this is a valuable learning experience for the community – and an important ECoC legacy.’ **European Capital of Culture Expert Panel**¹⁰¹

101 European Capital of Culture Expert Panel. *Third Monitoring Meeting Report, Virtual Meeting, 10 November 2022*. p.8. https://culture.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2022-12/Timisoara-2023_3rd-monitoring_report-FINAL_forpublication.pdf

European Capital of Culture (ECoC)

*The European Capital of Culture 2021 in Romania: The Selection Panel's Final Report*¹⁰² on the three of the four shortlisted candidate cities is illuminating, as it affords us **(selective) insights** beyond just the successful winning city:

Bucharest

Context: Bucharest presented their bid as a city in transition balancing pre-89 socialist reality with post-89 neo-liberalism. A consequence is a polarised and fragmented society suffering in the words of the bidbook **'a total distrust of discourse and rhetoric'**.

Cultural strategy: Bucharest did not have a cultural strategy at pre-selection. The City Cultural Strategy was approved in August 2016. It covers 2016-26. It has six long term goals: **including to 'provide access for participation of all inhabitants in culture'**.

It was led by ARCUB and involved considerable engagement with the cultural sector and stakeholders. There was less engagement with the general public. The panel noted a **gap between the cultural policy creators and the city administration**. This raised a concern over implementation. The project to create a Cultural Observatory was sound.

Capacity: The project has the support of the six district mayors. The city mayor's support was read out to the panel in the presentation session. The panel understands that this **comprehensive support is unusual in Bucharest**. Despite this political level support the panel was not convinced of the active relationship between the city officials and the organisation sub-contracted to prepare the bid (and by the same token the subsequent agency who will deliver it).

Cluj-Napoca*

Context: The panel appreciated several project ideas which have the potential to develop longer term linkages between the cultural sector and other sectors. Notable among these is the 'Art and Happiness' flagship project which seeks to **position Cluj-Napoca as a leading regional centre in art and therapy** in the important health sector.

¹⁰² Romanian Ministry of Culture & European Commission, (2016). *European Capital of Culture 2021 in Romania. The Selection Panel's Final Report*. Timișoara 2023. p.9-18. https://timisoara2023.eu/document/view/150/ecoc-2021-report-romania_en.pdf

Capacity: The panel noted the **strong political support for the ECoC from the Mayor. The City and County Councils** re-affirmed their support for the candidature (including the financial aspects), in July and August 2016

Outreach: The panel appreciated the scope of engagement with citizens in the development of the Bid.

It is worth adding here Cluj-Napoca's subsequent co-ordination of **Culture Next – the ECoC candidate cities network¹⁰³:*

‘The mission of the network is to support current and former European Capital of Culture candidate cities to implement culture-led urban development programmes and policies.’¹⁰³

‘Cities are where democracy, inclusiveness and innovation are produced, with culture being a facilitator of this entire ecosystem. More cities with cultural programmes for sustainability mean more power to address European challenges and opportunities.’

Timișoara

Context: Timișoara presented their bid from an ‘intercultural, multi-confessional and entrepreneurial community’. The city has been a city of small sparks that ignited transcontinental transformations. The city, according to the bidbook, faces the same growing pains of any middle sized economically stable central European city: complacency, rejection of the new, griping without taking action. The city lacks the instruments necessary to make the much needed connections between the local and the international.

The bidbook recognises the current **weakness in evaluation** in Romania and intends to use the West University of Timișoara, European experts and consultants.

Outreach: The panel appreciated the innovative **central focus of the proposed programme on engagement** (supported by a senior staff member as engagement director) leading to participation to outreach. ECoCs have tried this approach but not with the same degree of centrality and attention.

¹⁰³ <https://culturenext.eu/>

ECoC Timișoara reflections

These reflections are framed as a discussion, but one which is taking place in parts, in different locations and with different stakeholders. Put together it creates a mosaic, a microcosm of what this study has found more widely.

We read some useful and fairly frank reports (see above) and held two very good focus groups: a) with artists/ activists / cultural institutions and b) with ECoC / local authority funders and policy makers. We also had a longer one-to-one conversation with Teodora Borghoff¹⁰⁴, expert in social inclusion and member of the curatorial team of Timișoara 2023.

Timișoara ECoC employed a curatorial team as opposed to one Artistic Director. Perceived as a successful model which allowed different experts. One member of the curatorial team was responsible for working with cultural operators around physical accessibility.

Teodora Borghoff sets out the ambition: ‘In 2016, the year we won the European Capital of Culture, there was no single cultural space in our city without barriers accessible to people with disabilities. Over the years, inclusive facilities in newly renovated cultural spaces have become natural. More and more cultural operators are concerned with creating works and performances adapted for diverse audiences. The steps have been small, and making the entire city accessible remains a mission for the future. Still, we are on the right track to putting our values into practice.’ ***Opening Timișoara 2023: an inclusive celebration for the entire community***¹⁰⁵

Alongside this optimistic assertion, we heard from the focus group of **disabled artists, activists, audience members and cultural institutions**:

- ‘We are conscious that society isn’t yet ready to create systems to give space to everyone.’
- ‘Infrastructure is missing, how to get there?’
- ‘One-off events that are not sustained, or coming from the community, can feel elitist.’
- ‘For institutions – what is the motivation? Legal requirement? Funding incentive? Being a good human?’
- ‘We thought about programmes, then thinking about the audience, realised we had not included them. We didn’t know how, where to go, what to do. We were unprepared; so we start to learn with the audience.’

¹⁰⁴ <https://continua.timisoara2023.eu/en/people/teodora-borghoff/>

¹⁰⁵ <https://timisoara2023.eu/en/news/opening-timisoara-2023-an-inclusive-celebration-for-the-entire-community/>

Post ECoC, a new 10-year cultural strategy for the city is in the process of coming onstream. We asked the **City funders and policy makers: what would you like to see around accessibility in the new strategy?**

They saw several levels to address, recognising that different routes to the same outcome is fine. The city needs to be seen in terms of collective public space (see chapter 5). This means:

- **physical access** - access to inaccessible spaces
- **broader civic access** (e.g. to the tram station, the flea market) with accessible routes more widely promoted
- **making content accessible** in order to enable access to arts and culture as a whole.

Their perception is that the public sector is now more open, as ECoC has changed the mindset of cultural managers. Mostly the issue is no longer *why*, but *how*: good intentions vs knowhow.

- Ensure all actions have a firm basis in law, reflecting **professionalism and reasonability**
- Treat **capacity building** as a priority, involving disabled people **from the outset**
- Have a dedicated team member (from **cultural state institutions**) responsible for accessibility
- Take **small, concrete actions** for different community groups to promote inclusion
- In **open calls for funding**, include accessibility as a **principal evaluation criterion**.

We conclude these reflections drawing on our conversation with Teodora Borghoff, who in dividing her working life as a consultant between Romania and abroad, now offers an external eye, having been previously inside the ECoC process.

Borghoff had several pertinent reflections around what works and gives hope, as well as barriers which remain.

In clearly situating progress possibilities firmly within an EU context, we discussed what might need to change in Eastern/South-Eastern Europe for a disabled artist to be fulfilled and thriving. In particular, what would the Romanian system need, in order to get disabled artists to access that experience and to create a climate where disability was no longer 'exceptional'.

While the ECoC experience shows how Romania in the EU can be a force for greater good, there is also a role for the EU to play in improving

the necessary conditions. For example, while on anti-corruption the EU is clear, on disability it is unclear. There is inconsistency between programmes in terms of funding access costs, but also, at a policy level, disabled people are not clearly defined, nor clearly or consistently located within cultural policy contexts. More pressure can certainly be brought to bear on EU policymakers (see the work of ADICLUS) to create additional leverage. Making disability a core Creative Europe programme component, would be a useful next step.

The digital realm does present possibilities. Techno-optimism (see chapter 5) can, of course, turn out in a number of ways, but rather than taking the traditional line that – ‘disabled people must adapt to a non-disabled world’ – it might be possible to pursue an approach which posits: ‘(with AI) you will *all* need new skills.’ This could create a low financial cost opportunity to manifest substantial digital inclusion.

In terms of promoting disabled self-representation: she sees weak signals, showing emergence: glimpses, but nowhere near enough. To counter this, Teodora advocates for the facilitation and co-creation of a collective programme devised with disabled people. Furthermore, courses run in audience development, including disabled audiences, with required participation from all cultural institutions. This could then form part of an explicit step-by-step methodology towards being agents for change: one which analyses structures, enables stories, looks for individual candidates to grow (**see key recommendation on cultural mediators and access work**).

Beyond ECoC

‘Romania’s past track record in absorbing and using EU funds effectively highlights persistent challenges. Between 2014 and 2020, Romania was eligible for an overall funding envelope of €34.8 billion (16 percent of 2020 GDP). However, by the end of the programming period, it had only absorbed 56.7 per cent of its allocation, due to institutional bottlenecks (e.g., low capacity, especially at the municipal level), complex processes, and the extended time usually required for completing investment projects.’

Romania Systematic Country Diagnostic, World Bank (update-2023)¹⁰⁶

106 World Bank. (2023). *Romania systematic country diagnostic update (Systematic Country Diagnostic Update)*. International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank. p.31. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099134003102323181/pdf/BOSIB0480d508207e0805908b215a1d78b8.pdf>

‘A different way to approach the local funding for culture is through an integrated development perspective leading to programme concepts that have, among others, a strong cultural component, that is permissive to the engagement of international partners and expertise.

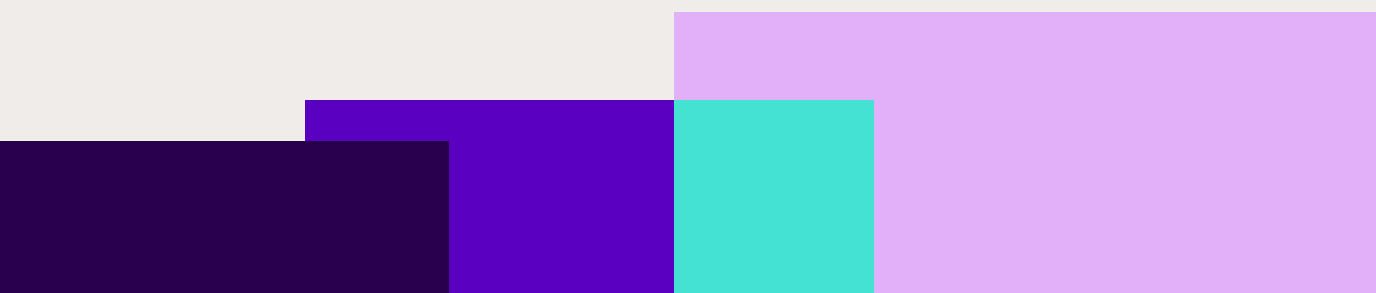
The **Erasmus+** Programme and its predecessors have been the biggest competitive funding scheme for educational institutions in Romania during the past two decades. The localized components have been **expertly run by ANPCDEFP**, with a focus on capacity building for organisations that could become beneficiaries. There are currently five areas covered by different types of grants: a) school education; b) adult education; c) higher education; d) VET education; e) youth.

Horizon Europe (along with previous Framework Programmes) is EU’s flagship programme for supporting research projects. Romania’s participation in the Horizon 2020 Programme has been below what would be expected given its size, reflecting low investment in research and development in all areas. The continued participation of the UK in this Programme, (*now confirmed*) would create opportunities for transfer of knowledge and cooperation with Romanian organisations.

The British Council has had a lot of experience with the Erasmus+ Programme, which (*along with **Creative Europe***) it has managed for the UK, prior to its departure from the EU. While it is ineligible to apply for funding in Romania under this programme, it needs to maintain a high level of awareness of how Romanian educational institutions access these funds, as they are the reference point when engaging with partners from the educational system.’

Mapping of stakeholders and income opportunities for future projects and programmes of the British Council in Romania prepared by Raluca Iacob & Mihai Iacob (March-July 2022)

In addition to these EU funds oriented towards culture and education, there are **three important further resources**.



European Economic Area (EEA)

The European Economic Area, an international agreement that extends the EU's single market to three European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries: Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway.

A quick glance at one of the EEA success story promotional videos is useful: 'Competitive Romania with EEA and Norwegian Grants.'¹⁰⁷

While the ostensible focus is on business competitiveness, you can also see other kinds of capital being usefully developed. Romania's research capability, which is key to accessing significant EU Horizon funding, but also education and social inclusion initiatives: in this case around gender equality and Roma communities, but there is scope here to model potential partnership collaborations with Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway based partners, around disability, using culture as a vehicle.

Within the next calls – EEA Romania may give more points to projects which engage social issues, so there is incentive. They are very open to financing cultural initiatives. 90 per cent of successful bids are developed bilaterally. While it is hard to find good partners, there is a considerable body of collaborative work on which to draw, with a sizeable – and growing – overall budget.

EUNIC Romania

EUNIC (**European Union National Institutes for Culture**) Romania¹⁰⁸ is part of a European network dedicated to strengthening international cultural relations. With 19 member organisations, EUNIC Romania supports cultural collaboration, intercultural dialogue, and sustainable social inclusion through diverse cultural projects. These include the Romanian Cultural Institute, British Council and other analogues.

The **HEI** (House of European Institutes)¹⁰⁹ in Timișoara is a vibrant cultural hub promoting European creativity, collaboration, and cultural exchange, particularly in line with the city's role as European Capital of Culture.

'By pooling together the resources and expertise of its members, EUNIC Romania carries out joint work in the areas of social inclusion through art and culture, equity, resilience and sustainable development of societies.'¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ *Romania competitivă cu granturi SEE și norvegiene*. <https://oportunitati-ue.gov.ro/en/poveste-de-succes/romania-competitiva-cu-granturi-see-si-norvegiene/>

¹⁰⁸ <https://eunic-romania.ro>

¹⁰⁹ <https://timisoara2023.eu/en/projects/hei-house-of-european-institutes-2023/>

¹¹⁰ Mission statement of EUNIC Romania

EUNIC Romania colleagues met with us, so we could find out how we might generate useful knowledge transfer in the first instance, towards a shared understanding of provision, needs and opportunities around **arts and disability** in Romania. There is a very clear willingness to explore how, through working together, EUNIC members can successfully create a capacity building and training focus on **arts and disability** in Romania.

Access City Award

The Access City Award, established by the European Commission in 2010 in collaboration with the European Disability Forum, recognises EU cities that demonstrate their **commitment to improving accessibility for persons with disabilities**. The award highlights **accessibility as a key condition for independence**, equal participation, and inclusion in urban life, acknowledging the crucial role cities play in shaping accessible services, buildings, and public spaces.

‘A city is accessible when persons with disabilities can, for instance:

- **go around the streets** and enjoy public areas, such as parks and playgrounds
- **get in public buildings** like hospitals, town halls, libraries, and sports halls
- **get the bus**, tram and metro to go to work or meet friends
- **communicate with the local administration** in person, by phone or online
- **get information** in ways that they can read and understand.

Why an Access City Award?

There are more than 100 million persons with disabilities in the EU. Ensuring access to their fundamental rights and freedoms is a priority, in line with the **Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030**¹¹¹ and the **UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**. Additionally, Europe is now essentially an urban society, with seven out of ten EU citizens living in towns and cities.

¹¹¹ European Commission. (2021, March 3). *Union of Equality: Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 (COM(2021) 101 final)*.

https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex_per_cent3A52021DC0101

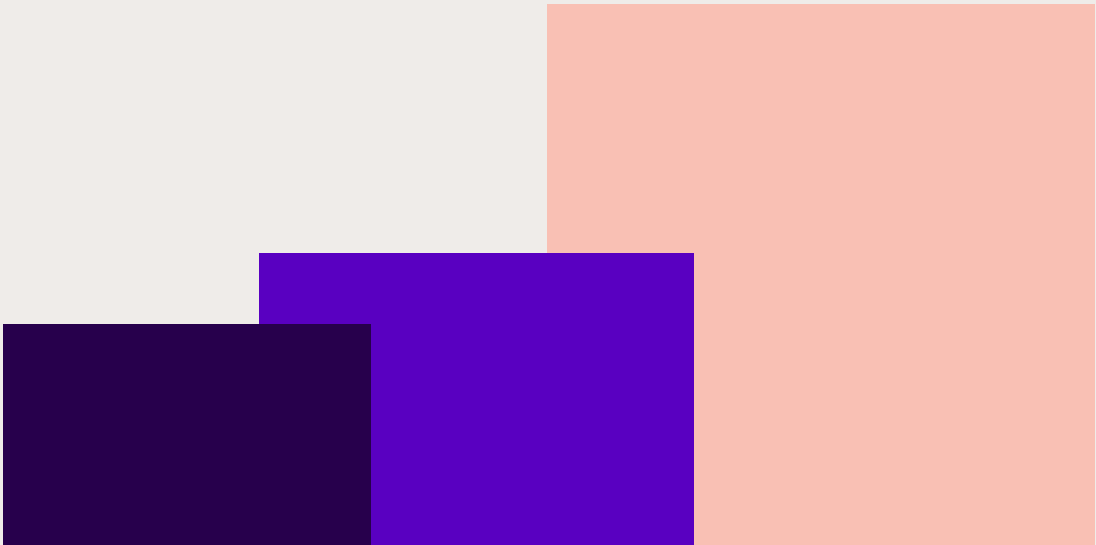
This award remains a key example of the Commission working hand in hand with other government levels to turn this commitment with citizens with disabilities a reality across the EU.

The Access City Award is an EU initiative that:

- **recognizes efforts by cities** to become accessible for persons with disabilities
- **promotes equal access to urban life** for persons with disabilities
- **allows local authorities to promote** and share their best practices.¹¹²

It would be a marker of progress to see Romanian cities actively participating in this initiative.

112 From the Access City Award website: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/disability/access-city-award_en



Key findings

The European Capital of Culture (ECoC) processes reveal infrastructure transformation capacity: Timișoara shifted from zero barrier-free cultural spaces in 2016 to inclusive facilities as standard post-ECoC, changing institutional mindsets from questioning *why* to addressing *how*.

Promoting disabled self-representation shows early signs of change: Facilitating disabled self-representation requires co-created programmes, mandatory audience development training across institutions, and structured support for individuals as agents of change.

European engagement provides essential accessibility resources: EU funding, expertise, and networks offer resources unavailable domestically, making European dialogue strategically necessary for achieving accessibility progress at a national level.

Focus group – Activists © Marius Lupu



Chapter 9: Conclusion

Here we borrow the term of **barriers and facilitators** (as that which disables, and that which enables) developed through the work undertaken by the EU Horizon-funded DANCING Project¹¹³ at Maynooth University's School of Law and Criminology.

Barriers

Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's concept of *bare life*¹¹⁴ refers to the state of human existence reduced to its biological dimension, stripped of its social, political, and cultural contexts. It is the life that remains when a person is excluded from the community, rights, and legal protections afforded to those considered fully human.

Disabled people still do not matter. There remains a cultural lag from Ceaușescu times where disabled people were discarded and hidden away.

A public programme of awareness raising which defines disabled people as fully human is still needed.

Low civic participation of the Romanian society in reform processes reflects people's lack of trust in the state and public institutions. While generally in the West the erosion of trust in the state apparatus has become both widespread and pervasive, this attitude goes back to the communist past, as well as more recent challenges when the state failed to follow through on reform attempts or deliver high-quality public services. Almost half of the total population (46 per cent in the 2023 Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index)¹¹⁵ believes that corruption is widespread within state institutions, political class and the judicial system. Constant political instability disrupts efforts to

113 <https://ercdancing.maynoothuniversity.ie>

114 Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign power and bare life* (D. Heller-Roazen, Trans.). Stanford University Press. (Original work published 1995)

115 Transparency International. (2025). *Corruption Perceptions Index 2024: Romania*. <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2024/index/rou>

build stronger institutions and often leads to implementing emergency solutions. **Committing to long-term reforms becomes almost impossible, yet this is what is needed.**

At the same time, **large differences between rural and urban settings** bring an additional layer of complexity. Though, overall, the country is considered a high-income one (WB classification), there is a big difference in income levels across regions. When Bucharest and other larger cities like Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara, Brașov or Constanța have experienced continuous economic growth, for large rural areas, especially those that are far from a dynamic urban centre, the average income is similar to that of a low-income country (2023 WB Systematic Country Diagnostic update).¹¹⁶

Romania adopted the National Strategy for the Protection of People with Disabilities¹¹⁷ in 2022. The strategy follows closely recommendations listed in the 2021 World Bank report ‘Diagnosis of the disability sector in Romania’ and aims ‘to ensure full participation of disabled people, based on freedom of decision, in all aspects of life, in an accessible and resilient environment.’¹¹⁸ In reality, implementation has been inconsistent - many institutions, at best, still work with outdated medical and charity models, considering disability as something to be fixed or pitied rather than a human rights issue.

Romanian disability legislation takes a one-size-fits-all approach, failing to address specific needs of different disability groups, or sector-specific activity. This prevents institutions from properly identifying and tackling different challenges (e.g. RSL interpretation, physical access to all levels of the building, making adaptations for neurodivergence and learning disabilities). Moreover, **dedicated training of professionals on how best to work with disabled people** is missing in almost all areas - and especially when it comes to the cultural sector. **To address the policy-practice gap, targeted legislation, proper training and long-term commitment is needed to create genuine inclusive spaces.**

116 World Bank. (2023). *Romania systematic country diagnostic update (Systematic Country Diagnostic Update)*. International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099134003102323181/pdf/BOSIB0480d508207e0805908b215a1d78b8.pdf>

117 Autoritatea Națională pentru Protecția Drepturilor Persoanelor cu Dizabilități. (2022). *Strategia națională dizabilități 2022-2027*. <https://anpd.gov.ro/web/despre-noi/programe-si-strategii/strategia-nationala-dizabilitati-2022-2027/>

118 Grigoraș, V., Salazar, M., Vladu, C. I., & Briciu, C. (2022). *Diagnosis of the situation of persons with disabilities in Romania: Summary*. Autoritatea Națională pentru Persoanele cu Dizabilități. <https://anpd.gov.ro/web/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Diagnosis-of-the-situation-of-persons-with-disabilities-in-Romania-Summary.pdf>

There needs to be a **review of the terminology in Romanian laws**. The terms ‘handicap’ and ‘invalid’ are still used in the country’s legislation (law no.448/2006 on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities¹¹⁹ and law 72/2016 on Invalid Pensions¹²⁰). The disabled community and their allies have been advocating for the review of all the normative acts and the replacement of the term ‘handicap’ with ‘disability’ for a while now. And the same would be most welcomed for ‘invalid’. **This change will align the national legal language to international standards, officially adopting a human rights approach to disability.**

A terminological review would contribute to the redefinition of stereotypical perceptions associated with the terms ‘handicapped’ and ‘invalid’, thus ensuring more appropriate communication among the disabled communities and society as a whole.

Creating systemic change in a society recovering from decades of exclusion is not an easy task. Romania is still struggling with the legacy of a system that isolated it from global conversations. History has left behind social frustration, institutional trauma, and chronic under-resourcing.

There are limited financial incentives for collaboration, everyone is competing for already scarce resources; the **absence of formal mechanisms or platforms for regular dialogue further compounds the lack of representation**, general awareness and the tacit expectation for disabled people to be flawless and exceptional – to fit into a disabled world. *Misfitting*.¹²¹

The possibilities and **limitations of political representation of disabled voice** need better articulation. In cases where individuals with physical disabilities or parents of children with various disabilities *have* entered the political sphere, the general perception from the community of disabled people around their actions has been negative – huge expectations, but a lack of dialogue. Training and professionalisation issues writ large.

119 <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliuDocument/77815>

120 <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliuDocumentAfis/178177>

121 Garland-Thomson, R. (2011). *Misfits: A feminist materialist disability concept*. *Hypatia*, 26(3), 591-609. https://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/sps/documents/tackling/Misfits_per_cent20A_per_cent20Feminist_per_cent20Materialist_per_cent20Disability_per_cent20Concept.pdf

Facilitators

Discourse

Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin described the *open-ended dialogue* as ‘the single adequate form for verbally expressing authentic human life’.¹²²

In that spirit – and echoing the polyvocal nature of the focus groups which have informed this report:

- It comes naturally to leave behind those who slow us down.
- We first need to prove we deserve a seat at the table.
- There is no time to carry others, nor space to care for them.
- But even when we move fast enough, we’re still too late.
- The party is almost over.
- What we don’t see is that everyone else is late too.
- The change is too fast for one person to handle on their own.
- The table we’re trying to sit at is collapsing under its own narrowness.

What we can do now is welcome everyone to sit - and dialogue - together and to bring their own table. Just as it is: long or short, wobbly, handmade, three-legged, passed down through generations or newly built. We don’t have to all fit at the same table, we need to make space for many kinds of tables, side by side. And the more of us there, the longer the party will run.

We need a sustained programme of public awareness, using culture as a driver. **Involve disabled people in public discourse. Create opportunities for disabled people to be more visible and audible in public life.**

Cultural mediator / access co-ordinator role

Look again at **the relationship between disabled audiences and disabled artists**. See it as dynamic. Recognise the talent and value of disabled artists and their development. Support disabled artists to increase the visibility of disabled people in Romania.

¹²² Bakhtin, M. M. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky’s poetics* (C. Emerson, Trans.; W. C. Booth, Intro.). University of Minnesota Press. <https://archive.org/details/problemsofdostoe00bakh>



I found it to be a much-needed show... The feedback from people in the audience with disabilities, from what I saw, was also positive. Not so much with reference to the subject of the play, as to the presence of people with disabilities on stage. What I liked very much, however, was the insertion in the performance of videos of actors with disabilities in their personal environment, at home, in everyday situations: how does a person with wheelchair take a shower; the legs massage that the father gives to a young man before going to bed; the way in which the parents help their daughter to get into an adapted car; another person's room and office, the way he uses a laptop etc. I think it was the best decision taken by the director, with an emotional impact on the audience, beyond the text of the play.

Ruxandra Mateescu reviewing 'No Magic Pill' ^{1, 2}

1 'No Magic Pill' by Christian O'Reilly premiered on July 1, 2025, at the Media Hall of the National Theatre 'I.L. Caragiale' and is advertised as 'the first local theatre project dedicated to people with motor disabilities'. It has a cast of seven disabled and two non-disabled actors. After a short run in June, including a live stream on the 'Picioare de Play' platform, in December 2025, the show has been included in the monthly programme of the Bucharest National Theatre.

2 <https://www.tnb.ro/ro/nicio-pastila-magica>

Professionally trained individual **culture workers (with clout)** that combine the roles of cultural mediator and access co-ordinator will be key to implementing progress (this is set out in more detail in chapter 4).

A National Arts and Disability Framework

Disabled people remain disabled, regardless of the nature of the political administration in power and for longer than the periodic provision currently mandated, **The Ministry of Culture and City Halls must continue to work together productively**: so that disabled access to cultural provision moves beyond legislative obligation, towards strategic implementation and sustained impact.

This impetus could be further developed via an implementable **National Arts and Disability Framework**; drawing on multiple stakeholders. Representatives from both Ministries of Culture and Education have recognised the need for this. This should aim to cover disabled people's access to culture as audiences, participants and artists, and to view these as interconnected and dynamic.

- Could the aforementioned 'disability fund', drawn from non-compliance fines, be used to generate this?
- Could a lottery-type of fund further support this work?

This framework would join up public discourse and awareness, legal provision, regulation, implementation, training, accreditation and validation; formal, non-formal / informal education towards professionalisation and employability, monitoring and evaluation, and impact assessment with a long-term commitment.

We can see how change is possible – however bumpy - when e.g. ECoC requires strategic multi-agency collaboration over a 10-year period. Look at both a) Timișoara and b) Cluj-Napoca - as examples of what can happen both when c) ECoC resources can be accessed and deployed, but also d) when bids fail, yet different elements of civil society still find ways to do (some) things together.

Focus training around multi-sectoral partnerships across government / civil society/ arts and business, in order to address e.g.: lack of trust, the limited participation of disabled people and how this can be avoided in future. Learn from previous attempts at collaboration which have proved unsuccessful. Prepare professionals in accessibility skills; those with and without disabilities.

Use success stories and case studies to demonstrate partnership benefits. Focus on shared values (cultural participation, social cohesion) rather than differences in approach.

Reframe accessibility requirements as quality standards rather than special accommodations.

From the ground up

Disabled people, artists, activists and their allies will continue working on the ground, from the bottom up – and so will almost certainly know what follows.

In the absence of substantive available national resources / implementable legislation, it will be necessary to (further) build local / regional and cross-border relationships; partnerships, networks and constellations as strategies to by-pass hierarchical power blockages. Make use of neutral spaces for dialogue, away from institutional pressures (e.g. British Council and/or its EUNIC analogues). Keep the conversations going, work to build trust.

The Economic and Social Council¹²³ gathers (certain) voices of civil society, during the law-making process to vet legislative proposals. While these are just advisory, use them to generate action research that can respond to legislative gaps. Place both legal and bureaucratic constraints into a formal process of contestation. Use this context as a principle and developing practice of work-around. We know that legislation uncoupled from resources with which to implement is problematic. Seek ways to transcend these rhetoric/reality gaps. Use blockages encountered as needs analysis / evidence for future funding bids. Focus on what can be nudged; **harvest low-hanging fruit.**

At the same time, we have to convince people to build for a different future. This will require longer term investment (see chapter 7). If the economic climate and the political will are not deemed conducive by government, then these resources must nonetheless be accessed through civil society working more effectively with trusts, foundations, corporations and (abroad) philanthropy.

123 <https://www.ces.ro/en/>

Arts and Disability Romania

Keep (also) looking internationally for what might be useful. This could be the EU, UK or further afield.

‘Reports by States Parties’¹²⁴ refers to periodic, comprehensive reports that nations provide to treaty bodies to demonstrate their implementation of international treaty obligations, such as those outlined in human rights conventions. These allow them to conduct a comprehensive review of national laws and policies to highlight conformity with the CRPD but also to monitor the actual situation with respect to each of the rights and to identify gaps. However, as Ferri and Leahy note¹²⁵, the review process has not been uniform across all EU countries. At the time of their analysis, *Lists of Issues* and *Concluding Observations* had not yet been issued for Romania and Ireland, indicating that both were still pending full examination under the Committee’s review cycle.

One Irish response was the excellent project, which has just finished this September: ‘**Protecting the Right to Culture of Persons with Disabilities and Enhancing Cultural Diversity through European Union Law: Exploring New Paths (DANCING)**’, funded by the European Research Council, based out of Maynooth University (MU) School of Law and Criminology and the MU Assisting Living & Learning (ALL) Institute.¹²⁶

Just launching in the UK is Arts Council England’s **All In**.¹²⁷

All In is the new access scheme for creativity and culture in the UK and Ireland. Their remit is to improve accessibility and remove barriers to help theatres, museums, galleries, festivals and more to welcome deaf, disabled, and neurodivergent people through their doors. As well as developing UK and Ireland’s first Disability Accessibility Standards for the Creative and Cultural sector, the **All In** team is working on a business case for the social model of disability.

124 <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-35-reports-by-states-parties.html>

125 Leahy, A., & Ferri, D. (2024). *Barriers and facilitators: Monitoring implementation of the UNCRPD*. In *Dismantling barriers and advancing the right of persons with disabilities* (pp. 100-102). European University Institute. <https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/98396/9781040308073.pdf>

126 <https://ercdancing.maynoothuniversity.ie>

127 <https://allin.online/about-all-in/>

Arts and Disability Ireland evolved as a national organisation, based on the US model of Very Special Arts. See also Ireland's 'How to become a national resource?'¹²⁸

What needs to be in place to create **Arts and Disability Romania**?

Arts and disability in Romania are at a turning point. The sector demonstrates creativity and resilience, yet, continues to be constrained by structural barriers. The challenge now is to transform good intentions into long-term, coordinated action. Building trust between institutions, cultural professionals, and disabled communities will be essential to move from isolated initiatives to systemic change. With sustained commitment, accessibility and inclusion can become not just a policy goal, but a shared cultural value embedded across all levels of society.

128 https://adiarts.ie/assets/uploads/Becoming-a-National-Resource_Lo_Res.pdf

Key findings

Recognition as fully human remains contested: Disabled people in Romania are still not enabled to function as citizens with full, meaningful rights.

Historical legacies reinforce systemic barriers: Widespread institutional distrust and outdated terminology in legislation (‹handicap›, ‹invalid›) reflect deep-rooted attitudes where disabled people remain marginalised despite recent legislative alignment to international law.

Systemic fragmentation limits progress: Disconnected approaches across legislation, training, funding, and partnerships limit coherent development, while competition for scarce resources reduces opportunities for collaboration between disability organisations and cultural institutions.

Grassroots strategies are effective in overcoming structural obstacles: Local partnerships, regional collaborations, and cross-border networks offer practical solutions to hierarchical blockages and missing national frameworks, using neutral spaces for dialogue building. To ensure their continued success and development, they require formal acknowledgement from institutional structures and consistent, long-term support.

Focus group – Inclusive spaces © Marius Lupu



Chapter 10: Recommendations for a National Arts and Disability Framework

Policy and strategy

- **Adopt the social model of disability:** Shift from an individual to a societal view of disability, recognizing that structural barriers, not impairments, limit participation. Align the framework with Romanian law and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to create accessible cultural environments.
- **Enable equitable access:** Ensure equal access to cultural participation for all, addressing disparities based on location, education, ethnicity, gender, disability, and other factors. The framework should focus on bridging these gaps to foster inclusivity.
- **Proactive leadership at the local level:** Cultural centres like ARCUB in Bucharest can lead by prioritizing accessible spaces, accessible communication and fostering partnerships to model good practices. This leadership approach should be adapted and replicated across cities like Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara, and Sibiu to create a network of inclusive cultural hubs.
- **Prioritize capacity building:** Support the development of disabled artists and cultural professionals through targeted training and skills development. A bottom-up approach, in close collaboration with disabled people, should be embedded within the framework, alongside the reallocation of disability fund fines to support this work.
- **Involve disabled people in decision-making:** Embed disabled people as active partners, not just beneficiaries, in the creation

and evaluation of cultural projects. Ensure that funding application processes are fully accessible and provide support services to enable disabled individuals to participate in grant and funding opportunities.

- **Collaborate on funding strategies:** Bring together a diverse range of funders – corporate, trusts, EU – to align resources with actual needs. The framework should emphasize coordinated funding strategies to ensure more effective allocation and to create a shared understanding of the value of disability-inclusive projects.
- **Focus on rural access:** Recognize that rural areas face greater challenges in access to infrastructure and capacity-building initiatives. The framework should ensure that these regions receive targeted support to close the accessibility gap.
- **Value human diversity:** Affirm the intrinsic worth of all individuals and recognize how human variation enriches society. A **National Arts and Disability Framework** should prioritize the celebration of this diversity in cultural policy.

Education

- **Promote inclusive education from the start:** To ensure disabled children and young people can pursue arts education, provide accessible materials and differentiated exams from primary school onward. The framework should advocate for removing barriers to higher education (HE) and addressing the lack of support in HE institutions.
- **Reform HE practices:** Encourage HE institutions to move beyond compliance with non-discrimination laws, adopting inclusive practices that support all disabled students, including those who may not fit into the “norm” (e.g., those who mask their disabilities). The framework should include specific guidelines to help institutions adapt their policies and practices.
- **Adapt educational models:** Foster innovative, inclusive education models, including non-formal and peer-to-peer learning. Collaborations with external organizations and artists should be explored, as well as offering disability arts modules in partnership with other sectors. The framework should advocate for new theoretical models that challenge traditional hierarchies in education.
- **Promote disability studies:** Integrate disability studies into all cultural management and arts education programs, ensuring that inclusion is a core component of professional training.

Practice and workforce development

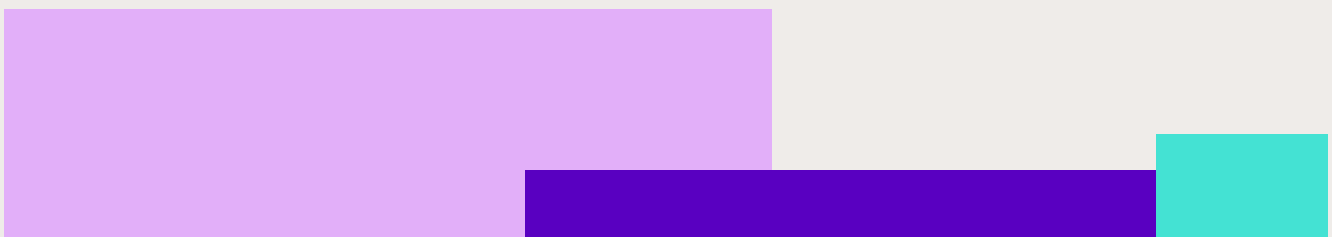
- **Link education to employment: The National Arts and Disability Framework** should establish qualifications and accreditations that directly link education to employability, fostering pathways for disabled artists and professionals. Collaboration with local, national, and EU governments will be essential for funding, regulation, and monitoring this initiative.
- **Train disabled artists and cultural professionals:** The framework should focus on fostering international collaborations to expand training opportunities for disabled artists. Local institutions should engage with international partners to adapt training practices and curricula to better support disabled artists' professional development.
- **Support non-formal education:** Provide curated experiences for university and high school students to engage with the work of disabled artists, both domestic and international. This will help build awareness and foster a future audience for disability arts.
- **Support recognition and professionalisation:** Raise the profile of disabled artists and cultural professionals through awareness campaigns, such as visible displays in public spaces and media. The framework should invest in long-term strategies to professionalize disabled artists and create opportunities for their visibility and recognition.
- **Invest in evaluators and access consultants:** Ensure that disabled people are trained and paid to serve as evaluators and access consultants. The framework should support the development of non-HE, vocational accreditation models, leveraging EU funding like Erasmus+ to create formal pathways for training and validation.
- **Professionalise support workers:** Ensure that support workers, such as Sign Language Interpreters (SLIs), are properly trained and that their services are integrated into the cultural sector. Local authorities should align support services with the specific needs of disabled individuals, ensuring personalized and effective support.
- **Improve visibility of provision:** Create a live, curated inventory of accessible resources and services for disabled people. The framework should leverage digital platforms and apps to connect

people with available support, helping to create a more connected and visible access network.

- **Enhance cultural management practices:** Shift cultural managers' expectations to proactively anticipate the needs of disabled visitors, rather than waiting for requests. The framework should support the training of cultural managers and staff to ensure they can make venues, performances, and events accessible to all.
- **Create a combined role of cultural mediator and access coordinator:** Establish a new professional role that combines the functions of cultural mediator with access coordinator. This position would act as a bridge between disabled artists, audiences, and cultural institutions, ensuring that accessibility needs are met while fostering engagement and collaboration across diverse cultural and disability communities. The role would involve coordinating accessible events, developing tailored programs, and advocating for inclusive practices within cultural institutions. By integrating these responsibilities, the role would enhance the accessibility of cultural spaces and ensure that all stakeholders are supported in a cohesive and coordinated manner. The **National Arts and Disability Framework** should prioritize the development and training of individuals in this dual role, creating a model that can be replicated across institutions.

Funding and partnerships

- **Empower disabled people to access funds:** Provide training for disabled individuals to understand how to apply for and manage diverse funding sources, including business sponsorship, philanthropy, and EU funds. The framework should prioritize the creation of accessible funding pathways for disabled-led projects.
- **Focus on long-term funding:** Ensure that funding models prioritize long-term impact rather than short-term outcomes. The framework should encourage funders to provide multi-annual support that allows for more in-depth project evaluation and beneficiary feedback.



- **Strengthen partnership development:** The framework should provide training on how to broker partnerships between cultural organizations, international entities, and other sectors. Public institutions and government bodies can offer in-kind support to build the capacity of cultural organizations to form successful collaborations.
- **Foster collaborative funding models:** Encourage cultural organizations to share costs and resources through partnerships, including joint accessibility consultations and equipment sharing. The framework should facilitate the creation of shared accessible venue platforms and curated resource exchanges.
- **Targeted funding interventions:** Implement shorter, two-phased grant application processes to ensure accessibility for all, including community organizations. The framework should prioritize funding models that offer continuity and predictability to enhance the sustainability of disability arts projects.
- **Leverage EU funding:** Advocate for Romania's participation in EU funding programs like Creative Europe by developing a match-funding scheme. The framework should support Romania's capacity to access and benefit from EU resources, enabling broader participation in European disability arts initiatives.
- **Promote women as change agents:** Empower women, especially those already active in disability advocacy, to take a lead in driving structural change in cultural policy and practices. The framework should facilitate the creation of informal networks for women to collaborate and address systemic barriers.
- **Engage the diaspora:** View disability arts as part of a broader European initiative by tapping into Romania's diaspora for support and knowledge exchange. The framework should encourage partnerships that integrate the experiences of Romanians abroad to drive cultural change.

By focusing on these strategic priorities, the **National Arts and Disability Framework** will lay the foundation for an inclusive, sustainable, and accessible cultural sector that supports disabled people as creators, professionals, and participants.

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