

Socialisation of Children with Neurodivergences in Bulgaria through Mountain Sports and Mountain Activities. An Exploratory Study

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Abstract: The mountain and its nature, spaciousness, and silence give people the feeling of freedom. It is a meeting place for different groups, for recreation, for spiritual practices, for hiking or other sports activities. The mountains are the main 'arena' of such sports as skiing, snowboarding, climbing, mountain biking, etc. Some of these, such as climbing and skiing are also accessible to people with neurodivergences or physical disabilities.

On the one hand, based on an analysis of found in the internet interviews with neurodivergent people aged over 20 and other online published written, audio, and video sources (podcasts, YouTube videos), the paper will provide a brief overview of individual and collective cases of athletes with disabilities or intellectual difficulties in some West-European countries. On the other hand, based on a short online questionnaire completed by parents of children with neurodivergent differences living in two major Bulgarian cities (Sofia, Smolyan), visits to the mountains, and online research, this text will outline existing opportunities for sports and other mountain activities and facilities for such people in Bulgaria as well as the role they have for their socialisation.

Keywords: mountain para-sports, para-athletes, camps and socialization, activities in Bulgarian mountains for people with disabilities

According to the European Commission there are more than 135 million people with disabilities in Europe. However, only at about 9% of them regularly use mountain and other touristic services, with the main reasons for this being a lack of accessibility and suitable infrastructure¹. In April 2018 Kiril Nikolov – the Diesel, the most famous runner nowadays in Bulgaria, shares: *In all the years I have spent so much time and so many days in the mountains, I have never met a person with a disability there*². People with neurodivergences are even harder to see as their difference is not always recognisable at first glance. Has the situation changed since then? What possibilities do neurodivergent people in Bulgaria have to reach the mountain slopes in their home country?

Even though first para-skiing events begin in Europe in 1935 and gain popularity in the United States in the 1940s (McKenzie 2024), adapted skiing and other adapted winter sports are not well-known in Bulgaria. Furthermore, despite the basic right of going out to nature and travel, in contrast to the people without limitations the majority of people with physical and/or intellectual disadvantages in Bulgaria have a very limited access to ski and other mountain and winter sports, and respectively to the beauty and tranquility of Bulgarian forests and mountain landscapes. Their marginal position in the society reflects to a given extent their marginality in sports, tourism and other leisure activities. However, there are good examples showing that these boundaries are blurring – or perceptions are changing – and that more and more outdoor and mountain-related activities are attracting people with disabilities and/or neurodivergences, and contributing to their socialisation.

Neurodivergent athletes have the opportunities to participate in the World Games held by Special Olympics in the disciplines snowshoeing, alpine and cross-country skiing, and snowboarding³. Respectively, people with physical disabilities could practice alpine and cross-country skiing, para snowboarding, and para biathlon registered in the International Paralympic Committee.

Eventhough para-climbing as sport ‘was born’ at the Climbing European Championship in 2006 in Ekaterinburg (Russia) (see Hubmann et al. 2024: 173) it is rapidly growing and the Paralympic Games in Los Angeles in 2028 will welcome a total of 80 athletes – 40 men and 40 women – divided into classes according to the disease and the affected part of the body, i.e. who are visually

impaired, who have upper limb impairments or lower limb impairments⁴. Until then, they compete in regional or national para-climbing competitions, world cups, and world championships. In some cases, para-climbing competitions are held in parallel with (non-para) climbing events (examples among others are the World Climbing Championships in Bern in 2023 and in Seoul in 2025). From the examples outside Bulgaria it could be concluded that many people who are involved in para-bouldering and para-climbing today used to climb even before their physical condition changed. Among them is the Scottish mountaineer Jamie Andrew, who suffered frostbite to his limbs during an alpine trip and is now a quadruple amputee (see Berry 2016b). He and others like him undertake sometimes risky expeditions not only to improve their previous results but also to raise money for charity and awareness for such people. One of them is the team of John Churcher (with visual and hearing impairments), Alex Taylor (with multiple sclerosis) and Jay Owen whose participants, wishing to raise awareness of para-climbing on an international stage, summit the Eiger (Switzerland) accompanied by an experienced mountaineer and a climbing coach (Berry 2015). There are also similar examples of people with intellectual difficulties. The 17-year-old Georgia Pilkington and the above-mentioned mountaineer Jamie Owen as part of the *Autism at Height* project tried to summit the Matterhorn (Switzerland) in order to raise awareness of autism in adventure, as well as funds to help the initiative organise more projects sharing the benefits of climbing as therapy for autism.

Like running and swimming, climbing is natural and inherent to children. As preliminary internet research has shown it helps for the normal physical and psychical development of these people and as such it is seen in Europe as an alternative form of therapy (which has common traits with the treatment way of ergotherapy) for both people with physical and intellectual disabilities (see also Frühauf et al. 2021):

In Austria and Germany in particular, climbing as therapy is well-established, with educational courses on the topic, books and even hospitals boasting climbing facilities. Scientific research into the positive effect of climbing in the areas of physiotherapy, ergotherapy and psychotherapy is growing, to provide solid evidence for its use as an alternative therapy (Berry 2016a).

Climbing and ergotherapy can be combined well because climbing movements develop a person's sensory and motor systems. Ergotherapy or occupational

therapy, in itself, reflects the interaction between the individual, the environment, and action, thus fulfilling its primary goal – to enable people to participate freely in the activities of daily living, improving their health and well-being. Respectively, for people with physical disabilities or neurodivergences it is a way to become more independent and autonomous as their daily self-care and work skills are restoring and developing through the therapy.

According to instructors (see Dean 2019) climbing improves the body sense, the physical functioning and development because it requires complex motor-skills because the independent movement of the arms and legs develops cross-lateral moving, balance, and coordination between the hands and eyes, which are important for maintaining posture and muscle balance, which in turn are key to keeping the maintaining health throughout life:

Climbing involves many cross-movements, crossing the lower limbs with the upper limbs, which greatly helps the connection between the left and right hemispheres. Also, tactile sensitivity in children with autism is either hyper- or hypo-tactile: they are either hypersensitive to touch or have absolutely no sensitivity. Climbing helps them balance this process and they begin to feel the grips, which scratch slightly, to have a hold, which these children often lack; (...). When they sit on the seat in the air, it helps them understand where their body is (Ivanova 2021).

At the same time, occupational therapist claim that these climbing movements evolving gross and fine motor-skills are also contributive for the cognitive development, i.e. for identifying colors and objects, vocalisation in nonverbal children, decision-making, and problem-solving⁵. As a result, their socialisation and interaction with peers also improves, especially when part of the training takes the form of play. Furthermore, for children and adults with ASD climbing outdoors and indoors offers a stimulating and a calming challenge which leads to the acquiring of ability to resolve more difficult emotional states, as it aids the process of self-regulation and stress reduction.

Research approaches

This preliminary study aims to give an overview and fill some of the gaps in the Bulgarian context of anthropological research on the sports- and leisure

activities of children, young people and adults with neurodivergences, mental disorders or physical limitations, as well as on the benefits of mountain sports and activities in the lives of these people. In its focus are predominantly children and youth with intellectual difficulties who supported by their closest people choose mountains and mountain sports as climbing (indoors, outdoors), skiing, and other mountain activities (walks, camps) as recreational and socialisation opportunities. Respectively, for the sake of the studied subject, in the period May 2025 – September 2026, mountain facilities for people with disabilities are visited, a children and youth climbing competition is observed and are held several informal conversations with parents of three children diagnosed with autism. Another empirical source is the anonymous, Google Form-administered online survey *Children and the Mountain*, featuring questions on participation in mountain sports, mountain winter camps, family outings, walks, and other mountain activities⁶. It is completed voluntarily by thirty parents, having a child with autism, who live in Sofia and Smolyan and whose children are training at sports clubs for people with Down syndrome or mental disorders. As this is a study on children and the main respondents are their parents and trainers, the ethical standards have been upheld, on the one hand, by informing parents of the aims of the study and the researcher's academic interests, and by ensuring adequate protection of their personal data and interests, as well as those of their children as third parties, through the anonymisation of their statements⁷. On the other hand, the data obtained has been analysed as transparently, accurately and comprehensively as possible, without any unfounded assumptions. In order to become further data, all answers and other secondary resources as scientific and popular publications and online articles, audio podcasts, and YouTube-videos are being content analysed for clubs, initiatives, mountain facilities, and possibilities for hiking and other events accessible for children, youth and adults with different physical and intellectual disabilities around Sofia and other places in Bulgaria.

Socialisation of people with disabilities

Referring to the universal human right to participate in sports, the Vasil Levski National Sports Academy, various sports clubs, federations, and nongovernmental organizations – including Special Olympics Bulgaria, whose work focuses

specifically on sports activities for people with physical and/or intellectual disabilities – seek to prove that “sport has the universal power to unite people, to overcome political, cultural, and social barriers, and to foster the human personality” (Djobova et al. 2020: 891).

The reality in Bulgaria is that many children and adolescents with serious illnesses are unable to live as full members of society due to limitations in mobility, communication, education, sports, and recreation. In some cases, those who live with their families are not able to adapt to the general education system, and their parents are forced to homeschool them or enroll them in specialized educational institutions. Although this keeps them from being completely marginalized and confined to their homes, these circumstances place them in a situation of isolation from their peers, limiting their independence and individual social adaptation, and, as a result, their sense of belonging to society as a whole is disrupted or entirely absent (Sheiko 2013: 87). However, when they participate in training sessions, competitions, and sports camps, the training environment itself and playing sports with others like them help the children develop a sense of inclusion, acceptance, and belonging to a community (team, club) and adapt to society. Because of its collective (and often club-based) nature, sports also serve to bring participants and their close ones together: participation in sports activities (training, competitions, camps, sports festivals, etc.), along with their planning and preparation, contributes to maintaining and strengthening community bonds among participants. The community fostered in this way, though small and at the local level, is in fact part of a larger community in which the focus is not on the problem – i.e. the deficit – but on sports – i.e. something positive. The sense of belonging to such a micro-community at the local level also contributes to integration into a larger one.

Socialisation and climbing. The situation in Bulgaria

Emerged in the mid-20th century as a non-traditional sport first in England and then in Europe and USA (see Seifert et al. 2017: xviii⁸), nowadays climbing (rock climbing, sports climbing, bouldering, etc.) attracts people of different age, social and health status, and sports commitment (see Adjanin et al. 2025). This could be explained by the fact that climbing is a social sport supporting

the development of pro-social behaviour. The latter is very important for people with ASD (autistic spectrum disorder) as they often have difficulties in communicating with others and social integration with peers, which often affects self-confidence, the feelings of difference, and potentially create a sense of exclusion. In general, climbing requires exchange of experience with the rope climbing partner and with the trainer. Through belaying and working in tandem the involved people learn to communicate, to protect oneself and the others, to have faith, and trust in someone else, evolving thus the feeling of safety which is especially important for the social development of people with ASD:

When learning to climb, children are working in a partnership. For example, belaying isn't the most exciting part of climbing, but gives them a huge level of responsibility for another person, allowing them to enjoy themselves and feel a sense of achievement (Dean 2019).

As physio- and ergo-therapists and trainers report, children who prefer to be alone and find it harder to be in a gym, play, and do exercises, break down their inhibitions and barriers through climbing, because group sports activities in general, and climbing in pairs in particular, make it possible for them to enjoy the benefits of being active and a member of a sports community.

Other benefit of climbing, and of bouldering especially, is the focus on the next hold, on the search of solutions. For this reason, bouldering as a form of rock climbing practiced without ropes or harnesses, is gaining popularity as a therapeutic activity for children with ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder)⁹. That is the reason why besides a good cardio training, climbing is also a good mental workout and for children with ASD. On the one hand, in their struggle to concentrate they practice avoiding distractions in an enjoyable but effective way. On the other hand, they succeed to get a prolonged focus in an environment that is noisy, busy, with bright colours, etc., things which are usually disturbing for such children (see Dean 2019). In this context, another positive outcome is the acquiring of abilities to solve problems as climbing a route requires problem-solving skills to assess the most effective method of reaching the top: *Obviously there is more to climbing than the people – I loved the feeling of the intense focus when trying hard moves, figuring out bits and trying different sequences* (Graham 2015). In other words, climbing gives children and youth with ASD opportunities to develop and hone their determination and resilience, which are important not only in climbing but also in life in general.

However, even though climbing helps people find solutions to their everyday problems, it is not recommended for coping with tough situations and for people with ASDs who are afraid to climb. A reason for that could be the fear inherent for autistic people as they are afraid of new experiences, of making mistakes, of losing routine. For those who are not afraid to climb, though, this is a space which makes them feel secure and happy that they are learning to overcome boundaries. *Climbing is a world of acceptance* (Graham 2015) which improves controlling of feelings and emotions and lowers the feeling of loneliness because in climbing – regardless if indoors or outdoors – both beginners and elites, athletes and athletes with disabilities (usually) are equally welcome.

The Bularian Case

A Bulgarian website informs about the location of 144 places for all types of climbing, including outdoor artificial walls and sport climbing¹⁰. However, information about their use by para-climbers and people with intellectual disabilities is hardly found.

In comparison to countries in Western Europe where the number of para-climbing clubs and groups for deaf climbers, blind climbers, amputee climbers, wheelchair climbers are growing, climbing lessons for such people in Bulgaria are rarely offered. There is no official information available on the number of national Bulgarian climbers with physical disabilities, neither on the Bulgarian federation's website nor in the international climber list which is lacking a section for para-climbers.

Similar are the results about young and adult climbers with ASD or other intellectual difficulties. During the study period, it was found that only in cities where professionally educated climbing trainers reside – coaches who have integrated the specific knowledge about disabilities in their trainings (see also Hubmann et al. 2024) (and there are very few of them) – do children with any kind of physical or intellectual challenges have opportunities to reap the benefits of climbing. Most major cities in Bulgaria (23 of 27) do not offer such opportunities. As a trainer at the alpine club *Zheleznik* in Stara Zagora Rosen Totev reports, some parents in the city are keen for their children to learn to climb, but this remains limited to one-off training sessions. Access to climbing walls and rocks have children in Sliven who guided by the climber Elena Gvozdeykova

of the local alpine club *Blue stones* (**Сини камъни**) learn to climb in- and outdoors at a secured climbing location. In Sofia, *Concordia* foundation starts in 2021 as an innovative project the programme *Climbing without Boundaries* in the Family centre *Direction* (Посока), offered nowadays as a regular activity to children from risk groups, including those with disabilities which are most often children with physical disabilities, mental disorders or other intellectual disabilities from family-type accommodation centres in the capital¹¹. It has also achieved to organise in the summer of 2022 twice a one-day rock climbing at the Alekova skala, Vitosha Mountain¹². Much popular in Sofia and beyond are the activities of the only sports club with regular classes *Heights – Climbing and Adaptive Sport* (Висоти – катерене и адаптиран спорт), founded and lead by the professional climbing trainer Violeta (Villie) Evtimova, working in the field of climbing as a therapy and climbing for children with intellectual or physical limitations for several years. Since 2018, as a therapeutic trainer she organises climbing training sessions for children with special needs. Nowadays at about 35 such children from Sofia and other places enjoy all the benefits of climbing. For such children in Sofia possibilities for climbing lessons gives also the Bulgarian branch of *Momentum LCC* which has a climbing hall also in Plovdiv.

Parents of children visiting the club and who have taken part in the online questionnaire *Children and the Mountain* share that their children calm down after climbing trainings and become stronger, more coordinated, and better able to control their emotions. Even though as trainer Evtimova herself by analysing each training session says that the difficulties are numerous and the work is not easy as working with such children is physically demanding and mentally and emotionally engaging, because *the diversity and specificity of each disorder in children are completely individual and different*¹³ – she works with a lot of patience and individual attention paid to each child. Once she has gained their trust, they come back to her by themselves and seek social contact: *They are like other children – they want to laugh, they want to turn things into games, they are afraid of the unknown... Just like any other child* (Ivanova 2021). This is again due to the nature of climbing which, as it has been already mentioned, requires high degree of trust and social connection with others, because one cannot climb without trusting the person who is belaying him. In this regard, a 20-minute film *Summits at a Low Attitude* (Special Summits 2021) reveals not only the personal achievements in climbing indoors but also outdoors of the

friendly young man with ASD A. Mahnev, but also the results of this cooperative character of sports climbing.

Heights – Climbing and Adaptive Sport organizes in Sofia since 2022 the climbing competition “The Heights of All Special Children”. It is aimed at children with special needs, not only on the autism spectrum, but also with Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, children with hearing and motor impairments, dyspraxia, etc.:

For some children, this is the first competition in their lives, which means dealing with new emotions and a new task that is much more difficult than coordinating their movements and climbing high. Held the first time on an experimental basis it gives the coaches the opportunity to check whether these children can meet some of the competition criteria, how they will feel in such an environment, etc. Then, thirty “normal” children and twenty children with special needs participate in this event, competing in their respective groups in the categories ‘lead’, ‘bouldering’, and ‘traverse’ (Ivanova 2022).

The fourth edition of the competition (renamed) *Together to the Heights*, held in 2025, brings together 120 children, 35 of whom have a physical or intellectual difficulties (Ivanova 2025). This event is a great example for the socialisation of the latter group as they, divided in five age groups, climb parallel, shoulder to shoulder with the climbers from the first group, and everyone is ranked and awarded according to his achievements and health category. The main hope of its initiator, Villie Evtimova, is to contribute to participation, integration and equality in sports by bringing children closer to climbing and by involving them in national championships¹⁴.

Other mountain sports and socializing activities for people with disabilities in Bulgaria

Bulgaria has its athletes competing in alpine, cross-country skiing, and biathlon in Paralympics and others with intellectual limitations participate also in Special Olympics World Games: Svetoslav Georgiev is a visually disabled cross-country para-skier at the Sochi 2014 and Pyeongchang 2018 Paralympic Games¹⁵ and athletes with intellectual difficulties are the cross-skier Ivan Vezyuv (*Pirin*,

Bansko) and Down-syndrome alpine-skier Radena Angelova (*FAPA Bulgaria*, Sofia) (see also Struma.com 2025).

A non-professional sit-skier is Vladimir Gyurov, immobilised from the chest down after an accident, who is an excellent example for mountaineering “without boundaries” after summitting the Black Peak (Черни връх) in Vitosha and Musala (Мусала) in Rila Mountains with a specially adapted wheelchair designed for movement on sloping surfaces¹⁶. Besides mountaineering he is also paragliding, training tennis, and hand-biking at marathons in Bulgaria, a national wheel-chair basketball player and the first practicing Bulgarian wheelchair-skier/ sit-skier. Even he does not see himself as a professional athlete he is an inspiration for many people in Bulgaria¹⁷, because his *love for life and an unyielding spirit fill his every step – in a wheelchair, but with the heart of an Olympian* (Христов 2025). Through his very active way of life, he proves that innovation technology and social support could overcome physical boundaries.

A step towards the inclusion of people with disabilities in mountain activities is the laid in 2004 (and renewed in 2024¹⁸) educative eco-lane Dragostinov Chark / Rolban in Pirin National Park, funded by the Swiss government, the National Trust EcoFund and an Environmental Protection Activities Management Company (ПУДООС). Similar attempt is observed in Kirilova Meadow in the Rila Monastery Nature Park where in 2015 is laid another eco-lane for people with disabilities. As the Dragostinov Chark lane in Pirin, it is one and a half kilometers long and has appropriate flooring, safety railings, and rest areas. The idea of the initiators of both lanes is that people regardless of their health status can engage in sports and enjoy nature together, i.e. not division but integration: *People with disabilities already feel isolated and lonely in their daily lives. We want them to be an integral part of society when they come to Rila, equal to everyone else*¹⁹. However, nowadays only the eco-lane Dragostinov chark looks more maintained and used, also by families with small children. In contrast, the other one in Rila Mountain is in a poor condition, and difficult to see in some places, suggesting that it is not being used as much as it is planned by the initiators.

According to Snezhana Petrova, director of Vitosha Park (Kalcheva 2018) first specialised routes with adapted facilities in the mountains close to Sofia are installed in Vitosha Mountains in 2001–2003. One of them is established in Arboretum and is for visually impaired people, where in October 2025 Sport Club for Integration Vitosha organises a chess tournament for those with visual

limitations. Another place, for people with mobility difficulties, is laid at Iglika meadow which in result of the aggressive natural environment and of vandalism is damaged in the following years. Additionally, with funds raised during events under the motto *Vitosha Accessible to All* in 2018, are installed further three sports grounds for people with special needs at the Iglika meadow area (see also Sofia 2018: 2020). Almost two years later, thanks to the initiative of photographer Anna Yoncheva, a combined swing-see-saw suitable for children in wheelchairs is added²⁰. All the facilities there are visited by children and youth with mobility difficulties, visual impairment (as students from the Special Secondary School for Children with Hearing Impairments), and intellectual limitations until their removal or destruction (in September 2025, several facilities were missing, others appeared to have been demolished). Other facilities for people with physical disabilities were built in another part of Vitosha, in 2014–2015. The Quiet Corner (Тихият кът) features several bars installed at different heights and configurations, a children's play house and rest areas. They are located near the Dragalevski Monastery and are still in good condition, 'waiting' for their physically active visitors with different physical or mental difficulties.

Since 2019, at Iglika meadow the National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski", Vitosha Nature Park, together with the associations Parakids and Vertical World hold *Shared Games* (Споделени игри). It is a continuation of the Vitosha super marathon 2018 to raise awareness for people with disabilities. Included activities in the Shared Games in 2021 – socialising people with physical or intellectual disadvantages in mountain areas – among others are table tennis, badminton, orienteering, running for the blind with an escort, motor exercises on gymnastics and fitness equipment as well as a relay race with wheelchairs, and other entertaining games. The 7th edition in 2025 brings together nearly 100 children with different health status trying out various sports, games, and quizzes, and providing guidance and assistance to disadvantaged peers.

In general, these trails and installations for people with special needs are funded through donation campaigns and volunteer initiatives. They are often supported by passionate enthusiasts who strive to make the mountains more accessible to everyone, regardless of his health status, by organising larger-scale events (as the Shared Games) and by engaging in non-governmental associations which focus part of or all their activities on the inclusion and socialisation of people with physical and intellectual difficulties in the Bulgarian society.

Another direction in socialising children and young people with physical disabilities through the mountains is seen in the activities of several non-governmental associations having such a section in their work. Two of them (supposing among others) are the *Bulgarian Shield Association* and *Come You Too*.

Even the main priority of the *Bulgarian Shield Association* is to preserve Bulgaria's cultural and historical heritage and the national identity among young people, and instill in them fundamental human values its members hold also a *Make a Child Happy* campaign with the concept to give children and young people with mobility difficulties the opportunity to experience the joy of movement and nature. Thanks to donations and charity bazaars at sports events in various cities is purchased all-terrain (suitable for stone, sand, and snow surfaces) strollers which allow access to mountains, beaches, and outdoor activities – things that are everyday occurrences for many, but unthinkable for these children. Some of these activities are excursions to Vitosha and other mountains for children and young people with physical disabilities are organised as birthday gifts, others – just for the sake of doing good.

Another very focused on helping people with limited mobility is the *Come You Too* Foundation established with the aim of taking people with mobility difficulties (young and adult) in friendly company to mountain peaks, lakes, caves, waterfalls in Vitosha, Pirin and Rila Mountains through all seasons so that they could immerse themselves in an atmosphere of friendship and share thoughts, words, and experiences, and be part of the group and the community to which they belong:

It is difficult to describe the joy and excitement of these people when we arrive together at a place surrounded by nature. It is not just about the view; they absorb every moment and everything they touch. They are impressed by many more things than we are. They have only seen all these places on postcards or on television. For many of them, it is their first and last time there, in the deep mountains or some other secluded place in nature. The emotion is so strong that not everyone can express what they think and feel. Their hearts are certainly pounding, and the smile that appears on their faces is the telltale sign of the heart that we cannot hide, revealing their strong emotions (Stoyanova 2024).

As a result of these experiences and the knowledge gained while visiting Vitosha and Sofia's landmarks, some of the participants created an interactive guide²¹ to

Sofia and Vitosha, which presents the active position of people with disabilities, *provoking visitors to view cultural attractions in a different way, unfamiliar to them until now* (Stoyanova 2024).

As many other similar foundations also *Come You Too* use donations to purchase wheelchairs adapted for mountain climbing (Vasileva 2024). Often, reaching hard-to-access places and interesting spots tucked away in the mountains and Bulgarian nature, is impossible without the help of numerous volunteers who join and stand behind this cause, so that people who are half or completely immobile, like their compatriots, can get close to Bulgarian nature.

Here should be mentioned that besides the tough organisation needed for such actions (coordination of transport, volunteers, people with disabilities), hiking in the mountains can often require from the people with disabilities great effort, as they are not usually so proactive, and this means for them to leave their zones of comfort and be prepared mentally for the event:

We talk to them about why it is good to come. Very often they are driven by fears and this is the main reason why they do not dare to take the step, even though they have a great desire to do so (...). Their knowledge of what happens in the mountains is very limited, and this barrier is sometimes difficult to overcome. Once they take the plunge (...), they eagerly await each subsequent adventure (Maneva 2025).

Additionally, people with permanent disabilities, who live in specialised institutions take part in various excursions to the mountains and nearby towns to diversify their daily lives but also to learn about and see Bulgaria's natural and cultural heritage. Their excursions sometimes include visits to places of worship (chapels, monasteries, wonderworking natural objects as trees, stones, etc.). This shows that religious tourism is also adaptable for marginalised groups and can be applied as a means for socialisation. The realisation of such tours however is easier to holy sites situated in more accessible and nearby locations with good roads. In the main church of Rila monastery, one of the most visited monasteries in Bulgaria, there is also a ramp for people in wheelchairs willing to enter the church. Places of worship located at more distant and heavier to access areas, most often lack 'disability friendly' paths and thus visits for such people (without any kind of transport) are very limited. For this group of people, visiting Rila monastery or other places of worship, on the one hand, could bring them relief, hope and strength to continue their more difficult and specific way

of life. On the other hand, such trips give them the possibility to get closer to the Bulgarian natural and cultural heritage and to the monuments of Bulgarian history. An interesting example in this regard is the excursion organised by Bulgarian Association for Recreation and Tourism (BART) in June 2025 in the frames of the project “History Through the Lens”, implemented with the financial support of the Agency for People with Disabilities and involving the participation of people with permanent mental disorders who, through the art of photography, seek a path to personal and creative expression, as well as a deeper connection with Bulgarian history and culture. The photographs taken by the participants are presented in a final exhibition, showing their specific perspective on Bulgarian cultural heritage. As a consequence: *The Rila Monastery was not just a subject for photographs – it became a place of silence, inspiration, and spiritual experience, captured through the lens of different but deeply sensitive eyes*²².

The National Association for People with Acquired Disabilities (NAPAD) also includes in its annual plan, along with hikes to huts in Stara Planina and Vitosha, visits to religious sites. In February 2023, combining business with pleasure, is organised a hike to the Dragalevski Monastery, during which, in addition to experiencing the cultural and historical heritage of the place, is carried out also a charity clean-up of metal and plastic waste in the form of a competition in the area around the monastery²³.

Thus, this type of cultural and religious tourism adapted for people with disabilities contributes not only to the psychical and physical strengthening and exercising of their bodies but also to the overall improvement of their living conditions. It enriches their knowledge and worldview and gives them access to mountains, holy sites, and natural landmarks which in turn have a restorative and healing effect on them as a whole, which would otherwise be difficult for them to access. Seen from a socialisation perspective, these and other examples of group visits and excursions to the mountains and nature prove that such socially adaptive tourism contributes to the socialisation of people with disabilities and other individuals from such risk groups.

Socialisation in the mountains and children camps

A mother of an autistic boy is in the opinion that:

It is imperative that parents of special children and young people understand that it is very important to take their children out into the fresh air and nature; it is a kind of free sport that can only be beneficial for everyone (AIF I No 688, a. u. 2).

Indeed, many of those surveyed said that they go on family or individual outings and walks, attracted by the Bulgarian mountains, their nature, spaciousness, beauty, and tranquility:

We often go to Vitosha Mountain, near Iglika Meadow, the Arboretum, and the Hoof (Копитото)²⁴. We walk around, have a picnic, or eat at one of the huts, near the bear and owl museum, near the White Birches (Бели брези) children's playground and education centre. There are rope facilities where he climbs with his friends and his father (AIF I No 688, a. u. 29).

We go to do exercises in the nature, to connect with the mountains and its tranquility (AIF I No 688, a. u. 1)

Other reasons mentioned in the online questionnaire are the possibilities to walk a dog, to get out of the big city and breath clean mountain air (AIF I No 688, a. u. 2). There, children enjoy picnics, splashing and playing in the river, walking barefoot: *he loves places where there are rivers* (AIF I No 688, a. u. 13). Others pick strawberries, blackberries, elderberries, and other fruits (AIF I No 688, a. u. 8). Parents share that they also combine recreational activities and eco-trails with eco-activities as cleaning up plastic bottles (AIF I No 688, a. u. 1): *We walk around all day, have picnics, sometimes clean up trash, light fires in permitted areas, and grill sausages* (AIF I No 688, a. u. 18). Those participating in winter camps learn and practice skiing.

The scarce data on snow sports among children and youth with physical disabilities show that *the risks of engaging in snow sports appear similar to those of the general population and that participating in snow sports might positively influence self-esteem, standing balance, and gross motor function* (Degache et al. 2018: 1–2). That comes not only from the fact that they learn to ski down the slope but because they could be in the natural environment as anyone else and enjoy everything happening there:

We are in the mountains, riding chair lifts, skiing down the slopes with other skiers, watching the Snowboard World Cup live, making new friends, recog-

nising the peaks we learned about in textbooks, seeing part of Bulgaria as if it were in the palm of our hand (Ivanova 2023).

Sports and winter mountain activities have similar influence on children and youth with intellectual disabilities as parents report:

We have been trying to ski every winter since we were little, but skiing is a big challenge for us. As a child, he loved sledding and being pulled on a sleigh by dogs²⁵. This winter we tried snowshoes and he seemed to like them a lot and he is quite good at it (AIF I No 688, a. u. 4).

The responses in the survey show that skiing is not of the most practiced winter sports by their children: just one is skiing every winter, two-fifths of them do not ski and even very few venture to try skiing during winter camps. In comparison, many of the parents say that their children like sledding in the snow:

He loves snow very much. He tried skiing for the second time in his life this year, but sensory deficits prevent him from wearing tight boots, so he switched to sledding. He happily walks up the slope and slides down (AIF I No 688, a. u. 18).

He is sledding and hiking. He feels great! (AIF I No 688, a. u. 21).

They most often go sledding. We go two or three times during the winter to the Lale during the day. Putting on gloves with fingers is a problem for him, so he likes to go often to warm places to warm up (AIF I No 688, a. u. 23).

Some of them have to fight with their feeling of unsafety: *She doesn't train, but she likes sledding. But not alone. Rather with an adult (AIF I No 688, a. u. 29); We are hiking only. He is afraid of losing balance and does not ride a sled (AIF I No 688, a. u. 17).*

The feeling of unsafety is inherent also for some children who have tried climbing: *He's not climbing walls. He's climbing Swedish walls, but getting down is a problem (AIF I No 688, a. u. 8); We went to Concordia, but he was afraid and gave up (AIF I No 688, a. u. 13); He is afraid to climb because he still has dysfunctional Moro and Fear paralysis reflexes (AIF I No 688, a. u. 17).* The results of the survey show that one-fifth children regularly attend climbing training sessions, one-sixth five have tried it in previous years, and almost three-fifths have not tried climbing. This relatively low number proves that the possibility

to climb in an adapted form and as an alternative therapy is not wide spread in Sofia and in Bulgaria in general. The good percentage of children involved in climbing is probably due to the good and dense parents' social network, their ephemeral community within which they exchange knowledge and experience (see Matanova 2026). Such information is shared also during sea and mountain camps.

Sports camps for children with physical or intellectual difficulties besides being a place where children are helped to socialize, to become more independent, and disciplined, for the parents they are an additional place for gathering, communication, exchange of therapies, acquired knowledge, and treatment suggestions.

ParaKids (Sofia) are pioneers in organising camps for children and youth with physical or intellectual difficulties in Bulgaria. They start their sea sports camps *Sea Adventures* and mountain camps in 2017. Five years later, through the Adapted physical activity and sport sector of the National Sports Academy, the sports club *BG and Sport for All* (Sofia) together with *SOP, Sport, and Sambo for Development* (Sofia) begin to hold at the sports base of the academy each year a *Children and the Sea* summer camp. These clubs are also trailblazers in the organization of mountain camps for these social group.

In the fall of 2017, *ParaKids* launches hiking camps for children who cannot walk. Using all-terrain wheelchairs and supported by many volunteers, they accompany paralysed children on hikes in Borovets, Rila Mountain. The following year near Bansko happens their first winter camp held with four children with physical disabilities, who, with the support of professional ski instructors, make their first descents on sit-skis²⁶. The next year the adapted mountain camp is visited by 24 children with physical and intellectual disabilities (*ParaKids/ Sports club Shark* 2019). In 2023, the camp takes place in Semkovo, Rila Mountain, and combines activities *in the snow, sun, and a little mud, but always with good spirits and big smiles on our faces; swimming, skiing, walks, games in the snow, painting, dancing, extreme adventures, and conversations with good friends* (*ParaKids* 2023). In the following year, *BG and Sport for All* and *SOP, Sport, and Sambo for Development* start also their winter *Children and the Mountain* camps at the Semkovo winter resort, Rila Mountain. Their daily programme includes swimming activities, sledding, skiing, and various outdoor games in the snow. Here, too, the organisers' idea is *young and old to be together, to unite the community, to protect children, young people, and adults with various*

*developmental difficulties, and to support anyone who needs help*²⁷. As observations and answers show, these camps have a strong socialising contribution:

The camps allow us to get to know each other. Parents can communicate, share where we are, why, what therapies... Because ours is crazy, right? We are actually like in a jungle. Everything is trial and error. There is no accurate diagnosis. None, for any child (Matanova 2025).

When we get together, we, the parents exchange information about therapies and specialists. At first, I was very stressed and upset. The first camps were very painful because of the difficult situations the parents were in. I couldn't process the information and cried a lot. Now I know them better and even manage to have a good time with them (AIF I No 688, a. u. 23).

At the same time, thanks to the schedule of activities and the opportunity to “immerse” themselves in a controlled environment where children and young people are taught to follow discipline and perform tasks, they become more independent and more confident:

My child has been going to the mountains and camps since he was little, and I am sure that this has shaped a large part of his character – discipline, order, rules. At first, it was a big challenge, quite difficult and exhausting, but perseverance is what overcomes difficulties. Don't give up and be persistent (AIF I No 688, a. u. 4).

Several parents share during informal conversations that there their children build and maintain friendships with other children like them in their own way. In addition to sports trainings, participation in the camps contributes to the socialisation of the children and their parents. Families and single parents who join them receive care, assistance, and understanding, thereby gaining new strength to fight, new perspectives for action, and opportunities for resocialisation.

Overall, the multi-day camps for children with intellectual and physical difficulties become a space for acquiring new skills, building greater self-confidence, determining one's place in the social context of the given group, and the hours spent together in the mountains during trainings, meals, play, and rest reinforce the experience of groupness. Undoubtedly, the exercises and sports tasks set by the children's coaches during these type of events in

the mountains (and at the seaside) also make a significant contribution to the children's development, resulting in these individuals becoming more balanced, more independent, more sociable, with better self-esteem, and with a higher sense of self-preservation:

The mountains definitely give my child peace of mind, his behavior becomes much humbler and more controlled, he feels happy and more energetic. Nature definitely changes him. He picks flowers, gives them to me with a smile, enjoys all kinds of fruit and eats them there, whereas otherwise he doesn't really like them. He feels proud and satisfied when he reaches the top and always says: 'I can do it too... Look, I did it (AIF I No 688, a. u. 4).

Nature is the best regulator of the nervous system. My child calms down and tires out healthily, moves in a natural environment, uses their body as intended, and reduces their sensory deficits. It regulates their hypersensitivity to the environment (AIF I No 688, a. u. 18).

Conclusion and outlook

As the examples showed, climbing, hiking, and other mountain sports activities for people with disabilities are not unknown in Bulgaria but are not very popular. Some para-athletes and sportsmen with neurodivergences are visible in social media for their top results at international championships, Paralympics and Special Olympic world games. However, participation in mountain sports competitions at the Special Olympics and Paralympics is not a privilege for amateur para-athletes, but for those elite athletes who train in better developed and supported clubs, which are more often located in larger cities or those close to mountainous areas. There are furthermore only few clubs and groups for mountain sports for children and youth with physical or intellectual limitations and they are not available in every regional city. Thanks to social networks (individual and collective, offline and online) multi- and one-day-events organised mainly by nongovernmental sports organisations (*Special Olympics Bulgaria, ParaKids, Bulgarian Sports Development Association, BG and Sport for All*, etc.) mountain activities for children and youth with neurodivergences gain gradually popularity.

Climbing, skiing and other competitions held in public spaces, on the one hand, can be seen as socialising events, because people with limited mobility or intellectual disabilities participate in inclusive, empowering activities together with people without limitations, and, on the other hand, through them events for people with disabilities and the persons themselves become more popularised and familiar to the society.

Although more and more hiking trails and facilities for people with disabilities are being established in several mountain ranges (Quiet corner in Vitosha, Kirilova Meadow in Rila, Dragostinov Chark eco-trail in Pirin mountain), they are still few in number (and some are in poor condition). Members of clubs and organisations working with people with physical and intellectual limitations point to a lack of accessible environments, adapted sports facilities, and shortage of diversity and opportunities.

With regard to mountain sports activities for children and youth with intellectual difficulties could be summarised that whether they take place during training sessions, camps, mountain hikes or simply during a family outing, all parents agree that as a result of these activities their children become calmer, more sociable, have a better appetite, etc.: *The child calms down, gets tired healthily, connects with nature, learns to be grateful, recharges his senses, learns endurance, and most importantly: there, the difference between a normal child and a child with special needs disappears* (AIF I No 688, a. u. 1); *They run and laugh heartily* (AIF I No 688, a. u. 3); *contact with nature has a calming effect, the expenditure of energy and the combination of clean air and soft colors in the mountains add to the child's relaxation* (AIF I No 688, a. u. 7). Additionally, during winter the clean air and contact with nature, the moments of touching the snow, playing with snow balls, skiing, and snowshoeing turn to sources of joy and happiness.

Considering all this, it can be summarised that since the beginning of 21st century people from various groups, non-governmental organisations, and sports clubs make great efforts to make the mountainous areas and other natural landmarks more accessible to young and old people with physical and/or intellectual disabilities. Perhaps more could be done at government level for the establishment of more trails, modernisation of lifts, and the development, popularisation and financing of more clubs and the organised by them camps, trainings and other sports events because they bring happiness, sense of living and progress:

*Physically, he has become much more mobile and coordinated. But what we value most in training is socialisation and the fact that he has found a sense of belonging in the club. Here he feels at home – he is calm, understood, and accepted. Here he has blossomed and now has friends. (...) I see the smile on his face when he is in the gym and the way these children interact – it's magical*²⁸.

As respondents, parents of the children who have access to such sports communities, share they and their child feel accepted as there is greater sensibility for them there. They feel welcome, listened to, receive help, support, attention, and time.

Observations, experience and studies show that climbing, skiing, and other mountain activities, along with training in other sports, participation in competitions and adapted camps at sea and in the mountains, improve physical strength and balance stress levels and personal mental health. Disciplines for people with intellectual difficulties, para-sports for people with limited mobility, visual impairment, etc. give athletes (and their closest people) a sense of acceptance and belonging to a community, thereby reducing their isolation and contributing to their (re)socialisation. Viewed from a different perspective, climbing, hiking, and exploring the mountains as communal activities break down barriers to access and limits of perception, and experiences in the nature become pathways to inclusion, equality, and self-empowerment.

Archives

AIF I = (Written) Archive of the National Center for Intangible Cultural Heritage at the Institute for Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

a. u. = archive unit

AIF I No 481, a. u. 1–29, anonymous responds of a Google Form-administered online survey *Children and the Mountain*.

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Notes

¹ <https://shorturl.at/z046F>

² <https://btvnovinite.bg/bulgaria/za-edin-den-planinata-stava-dostapna-za-hora-suvrezhdanija.html>.

³ Other ski-disciplines are tandem-skiing or wheelchair skiing, sit-skiing.

⁴ See <https://www.ifsc-climbing.org/paralympics/2028-los-angeles>

⁵ Further therapeutic aspects could be seen in the work of the German former climber and now para-climber Tatjana Weiss who as a teacher in a wheelchair not only holds courses for people with neurological problems but also shows that bouldering helps against depression when trainings are applied as preventive therapy for stressed people who are on the verge of exhaustion in their daily lives (Fritz 2024). Actually, thanks to the ability of climbing to engage the mind, to make instant decisions and overcome difficulties on the route, on the one hand, it ‘cleans’ the brain from the worries of everyday life (see Luttenberger et al. 2020, Vidinovski 2020: 412–413).

⁶ See <https://forms.gle/LWW8QGsfBACvrNV9>

⁷ See also NESH 2024, Matanova 2012.

⁸ More about the history of climbing and mountaineering see in Hoibian 2017.

⁹ According to Wiebke Weber, a climber with ADHD and autism, bouldering is better than climbing, because it requires a longer concentration than climbing (Fritz 2025).

¹⁰ https://www.climbingguidebg.com/cdb.php?f=regionslist&tp=R&smap=1&idCountry=0&type_climb=A&type_struct=&filt_popular=&idPlace=0

¹¹ See <https://www.concordia.bg/programi/proekti/katerene-bez-granici-so/>

¹² <https://www.concordia.bg/napravleniya/novini/podrobnosti/deca-dostigat-novisini-so-katerene/>

¹³ <https://shorturl.at/s48dg>

¹⁴ See <https://climbacademy.eu/visoti/>

¹⁵ In the 2026 Paralympics in Milano – Cortina D’Ampezzo no paralympic athletes represent Bulgaria.

¹⁶ See <https://360mag.bg/posts/110415>

¹⁷ See also <https://shorturl.at/I9Tfd>

¹⁸ See <https://www.pirin.bg/?p=7058>

¹⁹ <https://bntnews.bg/bg/a/504701-ekopa-teka-za-hora-v-neravnostojno-polozhenie-okolo-rilskiya-manastir>

²⁰ Anna Yoncheva succeeds in installing 25 such swing-see-saws in different Bulgarian towns (Berkovitsa, Blagoevgrad, Varna, Vratsa, Veliko Tarnovo, Vidin, Velingrad, Dupnitsa, Kazanlak, Karlovo, Plovdiv, Pleven, Pazardzhik, Pernik, Rakovski, Ruse, Sofia, Stara Zagora, Sandanski, Haskovo, Harmanli, and Yambol (see Kocheva 2025).

²¹ <https://way-to.org/za-proekta/>

²² <http://bit.ly/3ZYXwpY>

²³ See <https://nahpu.org/>.

²⁴ The Hoof is a summit in Vitosha Mountains.

²⁵ In 2020, Parakids organises winter fun with dog sledding (see https://parakids.org/aktualno-novini-zimna_zabava_s_kucheshki_vpryag).

²⁶ See <https://shorturl.at/1032B>

²⁷ <http://bit.ly/4adbn2q>

²⁸ <https://shorturl.at/As2DP>

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