



European
Commission

EUROPEAN DAY OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

30 NOVEMBER - 1 DECEMBER 2023



ACCESS
CITY
AWARD
2024

#EDPD2023
#EUDisabilityRights
#UnionOfEquality
#EUAccessCity

CONFERENCE
REPORT



Social Europe

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 30 November and 1 December 2023, the European Commission, in partnership with the European Disability Forum, hosted its annual conference to celebrate the European Day of Persons with Disabilities in Brussels.

Across Europe, persons with disabilities still face considerable barriers:

- Although 1 in 5 people have a disability in the EU, they are not adequately represented in public life;
- Employment gap between persons with and without disabilities is still significant (21.4 percentage point in 2022). The employment situation of persons with disabilities has not improved, despite the unemployment rate being at a record low in the EU;
- Persons with disabilities cannot enjoy their right to free movement across the EU on an equal basis with others, due to the lack of recognition of their disability status. Several policy solutions and initiatives were discussed to remove those barriers, among others, that prevent persons with disabilities to live their life to the fullest. The conference provided an opportunity to exchange knowledge and ideas on how different stakeholders can work together towards building a Union of Equality. This report summarises the key messages and challenges highlighted during the European Day of Persons with Disabilities 2023 conference (EDPD2023) by the different participants. The European Day of Persons with Disabilities 2023 conference (EDPD2023) brought together more than 400 policymakers, high-level experts, and civil society representatives from Member States to discuss structural barriers faced by persons with disabilities across the EU. Panelists and participants of the conference discussed:
 - The right to vote and to stand for elections and the importance of removing barriers for persons with disabilities in the EU Parliament elections;
 - Skills and employment of persons with disabilities; and
 - The EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030: achievements, challenges, and next steps

The **EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030** is the policy framework of the European Commission for the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). The strategy includes an **ambitious set of actions and flagship initiatives in various domains**, linked to the UNCRPD. The objective of this Strategy is to progress towards ensuring that all persons with disabilities in Europe enjoy their human rights and can participate on an equal basis with others in all aspects of life. Over the last couple of years, the **European Commission delivered on many actions** under the Strategy, including the [Disability Platform](#), the [Employment Package](#), the European Commission's own Human Resource strategy, [AccessibleEU](#) and the proposed [European Disability Card](#), among others. As testimonies by persons with disabilities showed, the strategy has **an impact on the daily life of many citizens in Europe**. In the upcoming months, further initiatives will be implemented, such as:

-
- the guidance on independent living;
 - a framework for Social Services of Excellence for persons with disabilities;
 - a report assessing the progress of the implementation of the Disability Strategy and an update on its objectives and actions.

In view of the upcoming **European elections** between 6 and 9 June 2024, there are **still many legal and practical barriers that prevent persons with disabilities from participating in political life** as voters or candidates. While the competence and responsibility to organise national elections lie with Member States, in accordance with their international commitments, the **European Commission stands by the highest democratic standards in elections** so all citizens can participate in political life. A wide range of measures and tools are discussed with national authorities as part of the European cooperation network on elections to **increase accessibility for persons with disabilities** such as full accessibility of polling stations, on-site support, or templates for visually impaired voters. It is key for the electoral management bodies as well as other stakeholders like political parties and public broadcasters to consider persons with disabilities at every single step of the election process.

The European Commission is developing under the **Disability Employment Package** a range of **guidelines for employers and public authorities** to improve labour market outcomes for persons with disabilities. **Knowledge transfer of good practices** is facilitated when it comes to recruitment, providing reasonable accommodation, return to work (through vocational rehabilitation), or alternative employment and pathways to the open labour market. An important success factor is to have close **collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders**, central and regional authorities, Public Employment Services (PES), as well as with the private sector. EU funds, like the [European Social Fund Plus \(ESF+\)](#) can contribute to the **independence and social inclusion** of persons with disabilities through skill development and creating employment opportunities. There is a **crucial link between inclusive education and the labour market participation** of persons with disabilities as those who do not have their accessibility needs covered in the learning environment may drop-out from education early.

Improved disaggregated data by disability from Eurostat will allow better monitoring of the situation of persons with disabilities across the EU. In the years to come, the disability movement wants to see **more concrete actions, including legislative proposals** to tackle some of the persistent challenges persons with disabilities face, for example related to passenger rights.

During the EDPD2023, the Access City Award 2024 ceremony took place with the participation of Helena Dalli, Commissioner for Equality. The following European cities were acknowledged for their efforts to make their cities more accessible and inclusive:

- First prize: **San Cristóbal de La Laguna** (Spain)
- Second prize: **Łódź** (Poland)
- Third prize: **Saint-Quentin** (France)
- Special mention on the “New European Bauhaus”: **Tübingen** (Germany)
- Special mention for “Landscape and playground areas”: **South Dublin County** (Ireland).

List of abbreviations

ACA	Access City Award
AI	Artificial Intelligence
COVID	Corona Virus Disease
CV	Curriculum Vitae
DARE	Disability Advocacy Research in Europe
DG EMPL	Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion
DG ESTAT	Directorate-General - Statistical Authority of the European Union
DG JUST	Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers
ECFIN	Economic and Financial Affairs Council
EDC	European Disability Card
EDPD	European Day of Persons with Disabilities
EDF	European Disability Forum
EESC	European Economic and Social Committee
EP	European Parliament
EPSCO	Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council
ESF	European Social Fund
EU	European Union
GALI	Global Activity Limitation Indicator
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
MS	Member State
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSHA	European Agency for Safety and Health at Work
PA	Personal assistance
PES	Public Employment Service
UN	United Nations
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
VDAB	Flemish Employment Agency

OPENING SESSION

Moderator: **Katarina Ivankovic-Knezevic**, Social Rights and Inclusion Director, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, European Commission

Speakers:

Helena Dalli, Commissioner for Equality, European Commission (video message)

Stefan Olsson, Deputy Director General, DG EMPL, Commission

Ana Peláez, Secretary General of the European Disability Forum (EDF)

Jesús Martín Blanco, Director General on the rights of persons with disabilities, Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Union



Katarina Ivankovic-Knezevic, Social Rights and Inclusion Director in the European Commission welcomed participants of the European Day of Persons with Disabilities conference (EDPD2023). The EDPD 2023 is an important annual event, organised by the European Commission, in collaboration with the European Disability Forum to discuss key, timely topics that are relevant for persons with disabilities.

Helena Dalli, European Commissioner for Equality emphasised in her opening remarks the EU's commitment to fulfil the rights of persons with disabilities in the EU. The EDPD2023 is a great occasion to reflect on the implementation of existing instruments like the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#), or the [Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) (the Strategy) and reinforce joint efforts to build a **Union of Equality**. As part of the Strategy, the European Commission already delivered on several flagship initiatives, including the creation of the Disability Platform,

the launching of the **Disability Employment Package**, the European Commission's own Human Resource Strategy, **AccessibleEU** and many more. In September 2023, the Commission adopted a proposal for a Directive to establish a **European Disability Card** and an improved **European Parking Card**. Once adopted by the co-legislators, the European Disability Card will support persons with disabilities to exercise their right to free movement when visiting another Member State. Linked to the **European Year of Skills**, it is important for the European Commission to focus on how to improve the labour market inclusion of persons with disabilities through increased skills. With the upcoming **European Parliament elections** in 2024, the right of persons with disabilities to vote and stand in elections is a key topic to ensure inclusive democracies.

“The message is clear: persons with disabilities should not face obstacles when making their own decisions, developing their talents or flourishing in all aspects of their lives.”

Stefan Olsson, Deputy Director General of DG Employment in the European Commission also highlighted that the EDPD2023 is a good opportunity for EU institutions, high-level experts, Member States, and disability activists to come together and discuss common challenges and existing policy solutions. The Strategy is the European Commission's comprehensive implementation plan for the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(UN CRPD\)](#). The inclusion of persons with disabilities in political and public life on an equal basis with others is an important element of democracy. While the unemployment rate is at a record low in the EU (below 6%), this is not the case when it comes to persons with disabilities, thus more needs to be done for **real opportunities, skills and innovation**. Three out of four employers say they cannot find employees with the right skills, which creates a momentum for persons with disabilities to enter the labour market. Since March 2021, there have been several achievements during the implementation of the Strategy, but it is **important to take stock of the remaining challenges**.

Ana Peláez, Secretary General of the European Disability Forum (EDF) started her intervention with remembering Jolijn Santegoeds, a well-known disability rights advocate and a champion for persons with psychosocial disabilities who passed away in 2023.

Ms Peláez underlined that since the last European Parliament elections, the COVID-19 pandemic and the unjustified war of aggression of Russia against Ukraine caused **adverse changes for persons with disabilities**. This group is often forgotten in times of crises as authorities are ill-prepared for providing adequate support for persons with disabilities. Despite these challenging times, **some progress has been made to improve the situation** of persons with disabilities and ongoing initiatives like the European Disability Card have great potential to guarantee equal rights. In 2023, the [5th European Parliament of Persons with Disabilities](#) represented a united voice of the disability movement in preparation to the upcoming elections which should be inclusive and accessible for all persons with disabilities. During the last 4 years, the **European Commission showed strong leadership**, through a designated Commissioner for Equality, and

EDF would like to see similar, or even stronger commitment after the 2024 elections, for instance through the establishment of a European Parliament Committee on equality and persons with disabilities. EDF calls the next Commission to **make women and children with disabilities a priority** (consider 2025 as a European Year of women and children), mainstream disability rights across EU policies (e.g., in the Gender Strategy) with the support of EU funding.

On behalf of the outgoing Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, Jesús Martín Blanco, Director General on the rights of persons with disabilities welcomed the participants of the EDPD2023 and thanked everyone who supported the ambitious efforts of the Spanish Presidency towards a more social, accessible, and inclusive Europe. The conclusion of the general approach on the European Disability Card is an important milestone as the Card would allow persons with disabilities to travel freely across the EU. Mr Blanco emphasised that universal suffrage is a prerequisite for citizens to exercise their fundamental rights and nobody should be deprived of their right to vote, which is unfortunately still the case in several Member States when it comes to people under guardianship. Spain is committed to upholding the rights of persons with disabilities, by guaranteeing the right to vote, providing accessibility, banning forced sterilization of women with disabilities, and respecting their integrity. Spain wants to construct a Europe that is feminist and inclusive and therefore supports the initiative to make 2025 a European Year of Women and Children. Persons with disabilities are also among the victims of the ongoing wars in Ukraine and in the Middle East, so what we need is peace, concluded Mr Blanco.

“There is no greater human right than peace.”



PANEL 1: RIGHT TO VOTE AND TO STAND FOR ELECTIONS - REMOVING BARRIERS FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE EU PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS

Moderator: **Alejandro Moledo**, Deputy Director and Head of Policy of the European Disability Forum (EDF)

Speakers:

Armin Rabitsch, Election Watch EU

Susanna van Tonder, Luxembourg national champion of the European Commission's communication campaign 'Together for rights' on the Disability Rights Strategy

Marie-Helene Boulanger, Deputy Director on Rule of Law, Democracy and Fundamental Rights, European Commission, DG JUST

Tom Rüütel, Estonian employer counsellor

Domènec Ruiz Devesa, Member of the European Parliament and lead negotiator of the Electoral law reform



As Mr Moledo explained, the European Parliament election is the biggest democratic exercise in the world, but, in fact, it is composed by 27 national elections, where each Member State is responsible to organise their own election. According to the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), around 400 000 persons with disabilities were deprived of the right to vote at the last elections. The European Parliament (EP) has currently 705 members, but less than 5% have a disability. Therefore, the participation of persons with disabilities both as voters and as candidates is an important and timely topic, just ahead of the 2024 EP elections.

Armin Rabitsch represented Election Watch EU, a network of European election observers that assessed after the 2019 EP elections the rights of persons with disabilities during the elections process. Now a new assessment is being conducted to see if there have been any enhancements.

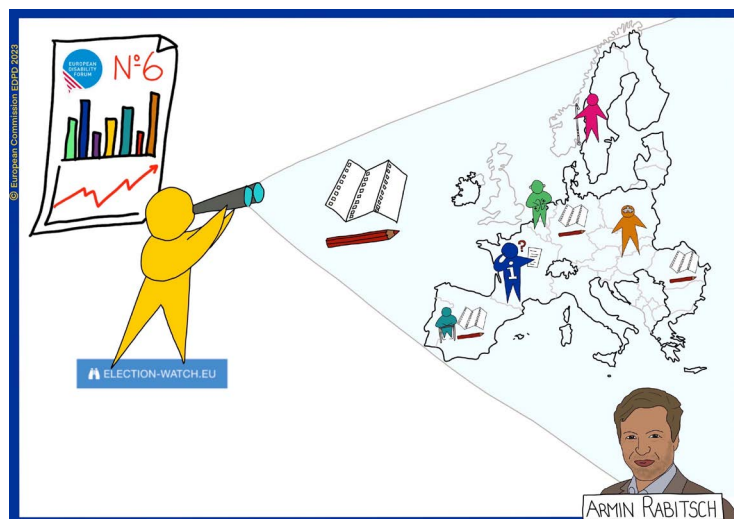
Election Watch EU also contributed to [EDF's 6th Human Rights Report on Participation in political and public life](#) (Article 29 of the CRPD). They are highlighting **legal and practical barriers** and are advocating for reforms at EU and national levels to **improve the accessibility of elections**.

The **next EP elections** will take place between **6 and 9 June 2024** to elect 720 members (up to 750) for one joint Parliament through a proportional representation system. There is no central electoral management body, thus it will be 27 separate elections, regulated by an overarching legal framework that provides the right to vote to European citizens and stand as candidates wherever they reside. **There are no similarities among Member States' electoral systems**. In most countries, voters can cast a preferential vote, while in others there are closed lists with order of candidates determined by political parties. Only two EU Member States (Ireland and Malta) allow single-transferable vote.

There are also great differences among the Member States on how votes can be cast. In some countries, **reasonable accommodation** is offered to persons with disabilities, for instance through **early in-person voting**, or making **in-country postal voting** possible. **Providing mobile ballot boxes**, allowing voters to **choose their polling stations**, or **offering electronic voting** are also important measures that can support the participation of persons with disabilities in electoral processes.

Persons with disabilities still face numerous legal and practical barriers when it comes to exercising their right to participate in political life. Across the EU there are even wider restrictions on the right to stand as candidates than on the right to vote. Mr Rabitsch made several **recommendations to overcome existing barriers**, including:

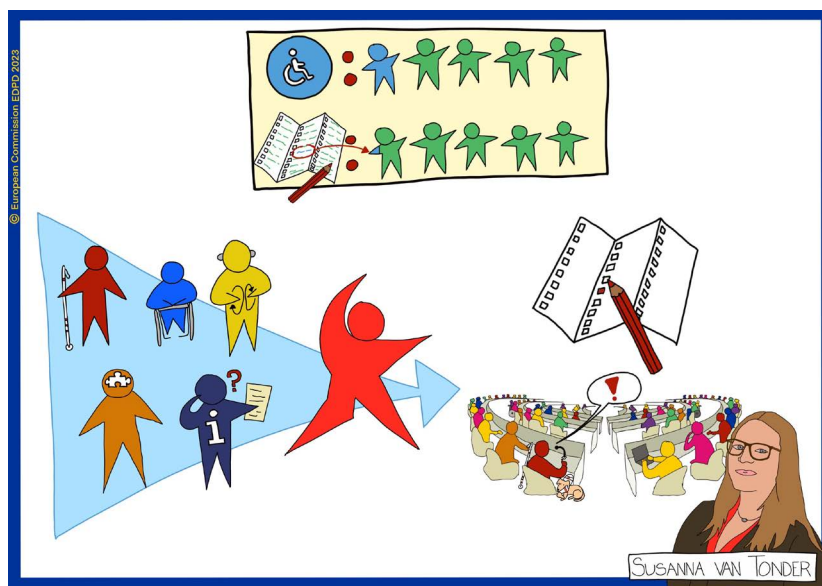
- Relevant **EU legislation** should **consider the aspect of persons with disabilities** (e.g., Artificial Intelligence (AI) Act, the European Media Freedom Act, or the regulation on political advertising);
- Election management bodies in all 27 Member States still have enough time before the 2024 European elections to **improve the accessibility of information** (e.g., in Czechia, accessible information about the elections is available through a QR code);
- As part of the implementation of the UNCRPD, **public broadcasters and political parties** are also responsible for **providing information in accessible formats** about the upcoming EU elections (e.g., when they facilitate TV debates).



Susanna van Tonder, Luxembourg national champion of the European Commission’s communication campaign [‘Together for rights’](#) on the Disability Rights Strategy shared personal experiences about standing at municipal and national elections as a person with disability. Ms van Tonder became a disability activist after being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and discovering the **barriers persons with disabilities face daily**. Although 1 in 5 people in the EU have a disability, persons with disabilities are underrepresented in politics. Persons with disabilities need **different support, and reasonable accommodation** tailored to their needs to take an active part in public and political life. Ms van Tonder highlighted another crucial aspect of political participation, namely how persons with disabilities in politics can **be protected against harassment and discrimination**.

Political decision-makers must be behind the trajectory on improving persons with disabilities’ participation in political life. The recent **legislative reform in Luxembourg** granted voting right for people under guardianship and improved the accessibility of voting by, for example, allowing voting via letter. However, despite significant improvements, there are still accessibility gaps, for example polling stations are not included in the scope of the legislation as they are not permanent buildings.

“Discrimination is something persons with disabilities encounter daily and I have an invisible disability”

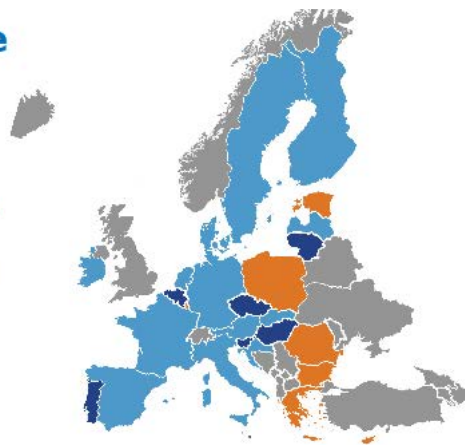


Marie-Helene Boulanger, Deputy Director on Rule of Law, Democracy and Fundamental Rights at DG Justice of the European Commission expressed the **Commission’s commitment towards making elections inclusive** in full compliance with the highest democratic standards. As outlined in the EU’s Disability Strategy, it is essential for the Commission to **ensure that persons with disabilities can participate in elections**. However, it is national competence to organise elections to the European Parliament, to be carried out in full compliance with EU law and international commitments. During the last couple of months, the Spanish Presidency has shown great interest to support the electoral rights of persons with disabilities and prepared a declaration which was supported by many Member States.

In the framework of the [European cooperation network on elections](#), the European Commission frequently exchanges with representatives of national authorities on a range of topics, including on **measures and tools that can increase accessibility** for persons with disabilities during elections. These measures may include on-site support, a template for visually impaired voters, easy-to-read booklets of adapted electoral information, alternative voting methods, and many more. While it plays no formal role in the ongoing procedure, the Commission supports the European Parliament in securing an agreement on the electoral law reform with the Council, in which one of the areas where progress needs to be made concerns the election accessibility for persons with disabilities. The European Commission also organises events to raise awareness on the importance of the political participation of persons with disabilities, such as the high-level event on elections (23-24 October 2023) which included a dedicated session on “Best practices for ensuring electoral rights for people with disabilities”.

The right to vote of persons with disabilities

- Countries denying the right to vote to persons under guardianship (7)
- Countries upholding the right to vote without exemptions (13)
- Countries with a possibility of restricting the right to vote (7)



In December 2023, the European Commission has published a [“Guide of good electoral practices in Member States addressing the participation of citizens with disabilities in the electoral process”](#), which covers municipal, regional and national elections and will be a reference point in the upcoming European elections.

The European Commission is also working on a **compendium on e-voting practices** and the use of ICT in elections, which will consider the accessibility aspects. Ahead of the 2024 European elections, the Commission is in touch with **all relevant stakeholders** to make sure they will play their role in **promoting disability-inclusive and accessible elections**.

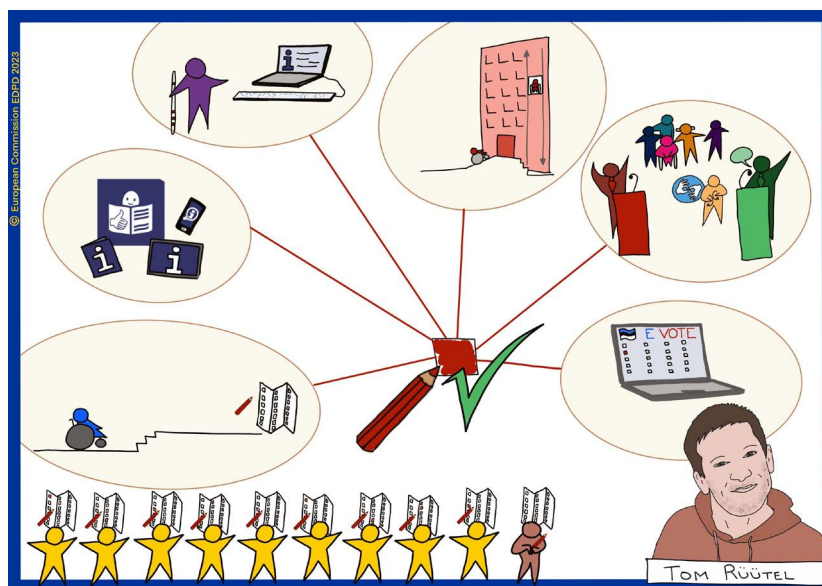
“No one should be left behind in European democracies. All citizens should be able to participate effectively in political life in the European Union.”



Tom Rüütel, Estonian employer counsellor shared his personal experiences about the importance of exercising his right to vote during elections. He considers voting as his duty and an opportunity to have a say in where society is going. Mr Rüütel described the barriers persons with disabilities still face when wanting to participate in political life, including the **lack of accessibility of polling stations or information about the programmes of different political parties**. In Estonia, about 10% of the population live with some form of disability, however, political parties do not place enough attention on addressing the needs of these almost 130 000 voters. They could **better target voters with disabilities** by making their website accessible or publishing their programmes in simple language. The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People provides information summaries in accessible formats and organises online discussions.

In Estonia, **e-voting is a possibility**, with the use of a computer and national ID cards, citizens can vote from anywhere. According to Mr Rüütel, this helps persons with disabilities who have mobility issues and rely on personal assistants or support from family members, or friends to cast their vote independently, directly from their home. There is also the possibility to order a ballot box to one's home. However, there are still barriers that impact the participation of persons with disabilities in elections.

“As a citizen I care where my country Estonia or widely Europe is moving, because we are one.”



Domènec Ruiz Devesa, Member of the European Parliament and lead negotiator of the Electoral law reform provided an overview on **ongoing legislative initiatives** that are relevant for the political participation of persons with disabilities. The EP is supportive on the topic of the right of persons with disabilities to vote and to stand as candidates. The **Parliament's Proposal for a new electoral law** (adopted in May 2022) included elements that concern persons with disabilities. The three focus areas were: 1) transnational lists, 2) gender dimension of lists, 3) rights of persons with disabilities to participate in elections. Unfortunately, several Member

States in the Council are not interested in moving forward with these ideas and the negotiations between the EP and the Council have not started yet. This means that the **electoral law reform will not be in force by the upcoming European elections in 2024**. Nevertheless, nothing prevents Member States to already incorporate some of these points in their legal framework. MEP Ruiz Devesa encouraged representatives of the disability movement to advocate at the national level and **put pressure on their governments**, especially in those countries that are still limiting the right to vote for people under guardianship.

The EP also prepared a report for the 2024 elections which recognises several barriers persons with disabilities faced in previous elections:

- Lack of possibility of postal voting, or changing polling stations (12 out of 27 Member States);
- Lack of accessibility of polling stations;
- Exclusion of people under guardianship from the right to vote or stand as candidates, among others.

The EP wants to make postal voting mandatory across the EU, while digital voting is proposed as an option for Member States, as it is a controversial topic due to potential cyberattacks. The EP report will probably be adopted in January 2024 and the Parliament will continue its alliance with civil society to improve democratic procedures in the EU.



DISCUSSION

Can we still expect progress on the Electoral law reform before the next elections?

MEP Ruiz Devesa explained that a few of the Member States claim that their subsidiary is not reflected if changes are made in the electoral law. A number of Member States limit the participation of their citizens in political life, for instance by not providing ballots in Braille, or preventing them from postal voting. However, these limitations should not exist in the context of EU elections.

The usage of having Braille ballot papers as an ad-hoc measure is not very good for anonymity, because in small villages, it is easy to identify who voted what. Would it be possible to print Braille on all ballots so blind people can preserve anonymity?

Marie-Helene Boulanger agreed that protecting the secrecy of vote is a basic right in democracy.

In order to change the traditional way of how politics works, we need quotas. Why not introduce them for persons with disabilities?

Armin Rabitsch mentioned that few countries have a quota system in place, like Uganda. **Susanna van Tonder** believes that quota is necessary to make a real change and thus she supports them.

PANEL 2: SKILLS AND EMPLOYMENT OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Moderator: **Dana-Carmen Bachmann**, Social Protection Head of Unit, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, European Commission

Speakers:

Monika Chaba, Disability Policy Officer, DG EMPL, European Commission

Virginia Carcedo, Secretary General of ONCE Foundation

Patrick Ruppel, Counsellor at the Flemish Employment Agency (VDAB)

Claudia Coveney, School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Leeds

Martine Eliasson, Political Adviser at Uloba Independent Living Norway



Monika Chaba, Disability Policy Officer at DG EMPL of the European Commission explained the Disability Employment package, which is one of the flagship initiatives of the EU's Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030. The aim of the Employment package is to **improve labour market outcomes for persons with disabilities** through a set of guidelines and learning opportunities. The Commission takes a comprehensive approach and looks at all aspects of employment of persons with disabilities, such as **recruitment**, providing **reasonable accommodation**, return to work (**vocational rehabilitation**), or alternative employment and **pathways to the open labour market**. It targets employers and public authorities and facilitates **knowledge transfer of good practices** as there are already many of them across the EU.

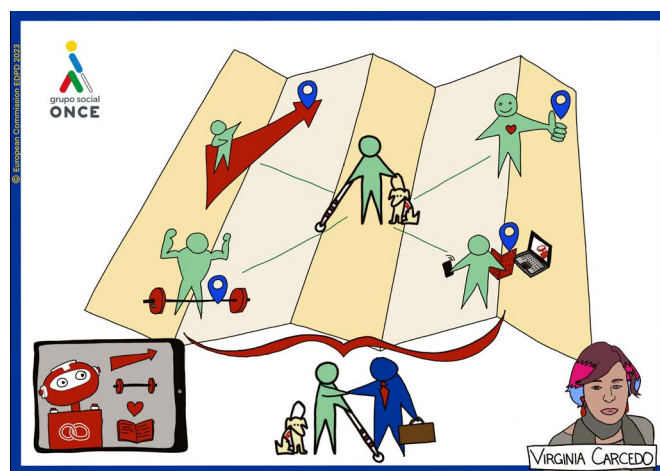
One of the key outputs is a toolkit for public employment services (2022) which was written with the help of the [European Network of Public Employment Services](#) (PES), and besides provision of information, guidance, and job placement services, it also focuses on **internal PES measures and inclusive human resources strategies**. As part of the implementation of the Disability Employment Package, there will be a dedicated page on the website of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (OSHA) on '[Disability and occupational safety and health](#)' that will help better understand **how to put vocational rehabilitation in practice** and facilitate the (re)

entry and retention of persons with disabilities and people with chronic health conditions into the labour market.



Virginia Carcedo, Secretary General of the **ONCE Foundation** shared the story of ONCE and how it works on supporting the labour market participation of persons with disabilities. ONCE Foundation was established in 1988 with a particular focus on training and employment for all, facilitating the **access of persons with disabilities to different sectors and companies**. Since 2000, the ONCE group has been dealing with the management of ESF in Spain and has been working closely with the central administration, as well as autonomous communities and private entities, because they want persons with disabilities to be present at all levels of employment. The anti-discrimination programme, adopted in 2000 was an important step to the right direction and now they are aiming for **universal accessibility and inclusion**. The collaboration with PES and business companies is essential to improve the labour market inclusion of persons with disabilities. Ms Carcedo also highlighted the **importance of working with a diverse group of persons with disabilities**, so the ONCE Foundation consulted 16 000 persons with disabilities in 2022 and consider personal stories relevant to understanding persistent challenges. The Disability Employment Package is a useful initiative, but it should be implemented at regional and local levels to reach persons with disabilities who need a job.

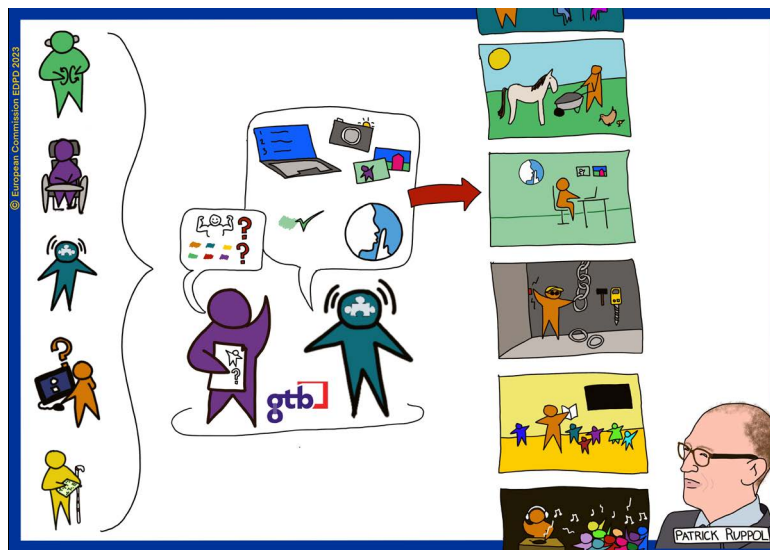
“Employment means a right to social security and to independence.”



Patrick Ruppol, Counsellor at the Flemish Employment Agency (VDAB) brought the regional level perspective in the discussion. In 2008, Flanders, as a federal state in Belgium undertook a number of important steps towards ensuring the right to paid work for persons with disabilities. In sheltered workshops, employees were already entitled to **equal pay** as in regular companies. They decided to move sheltered workshops away from the Department of Welfare and integrate them into the Flemish Department of Work, so the target group could be expanded to any employee who cannot enter the regular labour market. By now, **sheltered workshops have grown into social workplaces** (called collective tailor-made companies) and have also found specific niches in the market, such as in the circular economy, the green sector, and logistics.

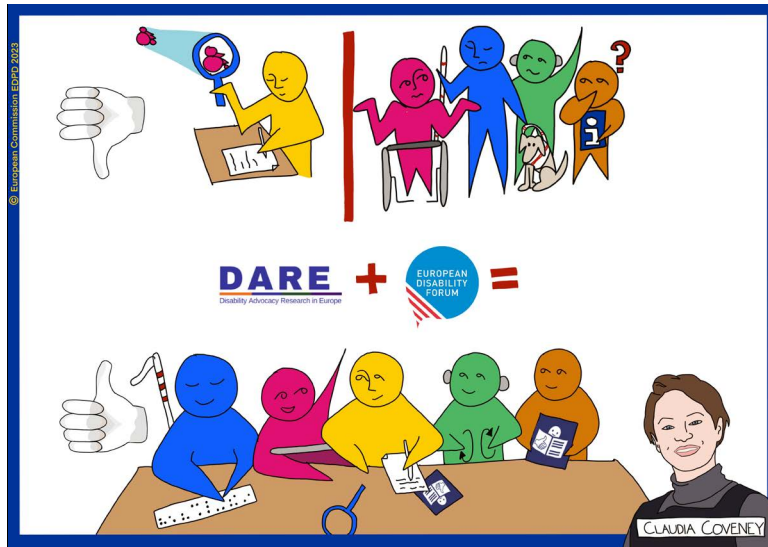
VDAB, as the PES in Flanders is committed to deliver on the mission of zero exclusion in the Flemish labour market. At present, the employment rate for persons with disabilities is 45%, so even **more investment is needed to create further employment opportunities** for this group. Sheltered collective workshops are not closed yet, but there is a possibility of internal or external coaching and assistance, so those who want to transition to the open labour market have the same rights and opportunities as in collective employment.

“We brought together employers, trade unions, sheltered employment workshops and created a vision that supported employment is the future in Flanders.”

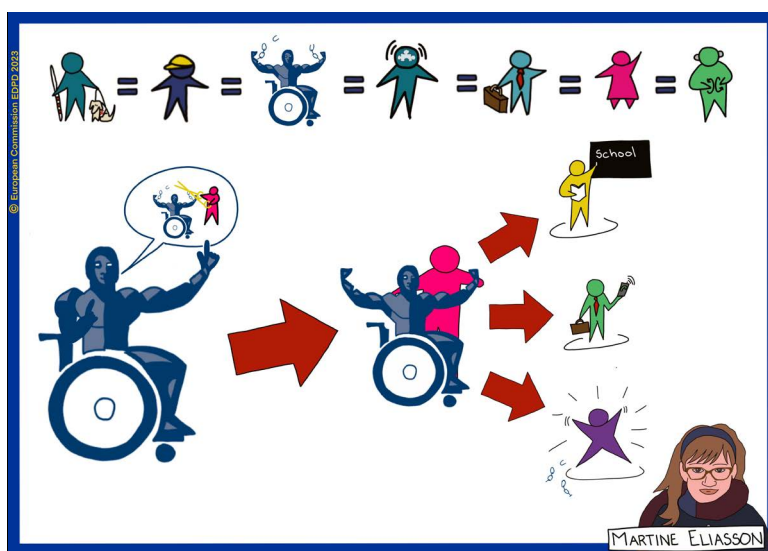


Claudia Coveney from the School of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Leeds presented the [Disability Advocacy Research in Europe \(DARE\) project](#) which was funded under the Horizon programme. The aim of the project was to conduct research that can inform policy change in the interest of persons with disabilities, guided by persons with disabilities and their representative organisations. It is crucial that **research about disability involves the voice of this group** to strengthen the collaboration between research and civil society. Some of the early-stage researchers were persons with disabilities. The Horizon programme is quite weak regarding inclusion and accessibility and while the DARE project provided additional support for researchers with disabilities, this could only be used from the second year of the project. Other funding rules also **limited the possibility to offer reasonable accommodation** for persons with

disabilities, for example an extension of the contract is not possible for those who need more time, due to different disabilities, in order to complete the research project. The DARE project was an important initiative to **connect research with policy impact** and further efforts are needed to **make research programmes fully inclusive**, also beyond research on disability.



Martine Eliasson, Political Adviser at Uloba Independent Living Norway talked about Uloba’s commitment to empowering equality through a unique vision for **independent living and personal assistance**. There is a crucial link between education and empowerment and those who cannot have their accessibility requirements fulfilled in the learning environment (e.g., the support of a personal assistant) may **drop-out from education early**. In Norway, data shows high dropout rate among young persons with disabilities at upper secondary school, with only four out of ten completing higher secondary level, creating a **significant barrier to higher education**, and **limiting their opportunities to find employment** in the future. Ms Eliasson highlighted the important role personal assistance plays to allow persons with disabilities to work. However, insufficient coverage and limited hours of personal assistance still prevent many people from taking up a job in Norway. Uloba is working towards creating a society where everyone can contribute and thrive in the workplace.



DISCUSSION

How are persons with disabilities involved in the Disability Employment Package?

Monika Chaba explained how the European Commission involves persons with disabilities and representative organisations in the implementation of the Strategy. The Disability Platform brings together national authorities and persons with disabilities to reflect on the strategy and has a dedicated subgroup on the Disability Employment Package, with regular meetings to discuss the draft deliverables of the package, to make sure they fit for purpose. Ms Chaba agreed with the importance of ensuring that documents are useful at the local level.

How can we talk about Union of Equality when a lot of persons with disabilities cannot access jobs or work abroad? The freedom of movement is not a reality for everybody, we should also think of those in institutional care. I work from Athens, because I will never get the support to come to Brussels and work here with my colleagues in the office.

Martine Eliasson argued that a personal assistance scheme that can be used all around Europe would be the solution for persons with disabilities who need a PA and at present, cannot move to another country. Getting persons with disabilities into paid jobs would be a benefit for Europe.

Self-employment was not mentioned in the input presentations, however, it is a good way out of unemployment for many persons with disabilities, like I run my own company, and it gives me independence.

Virginia Carcedo agreed that self-employment leads to continuity and ONCE has projects on that, especially because persons with disabilities are traditionally excluded from entrepreneurship, especially persons with intellectual disabilities. ONCE tries to support and empower all groups. **Monika Chaba** added that OECD and the European Commission published a study on entrepreneurship which found that persons with disabilities have the same potential as others but encounter additional barriers. The Commission aims to take a comprehensive approach and incorporate this aspect in the recommendation on social economy.

From an autism perspective, what people with Autism find difficult are things like how to write a CV or how to conduct themselves during the interview process. What tools and practices do you have in place to support people with Autism?

Virginia Carcedo emphasised that in the discussion about employment of persons with disabilities, it is important to consider all types of disabilities. In Spain, companies with more than 50 people must employ persons with disabilities as at least 2% of their staff. However, these days most employers have less than 50 staff members, where there is no legal obligation to hire persons with disabilities. Raising awareness and convincing employers about the advantages of employing persons with all kinds of disabilities play a particularly important role in such cases.

2024 ACCESS CITY AWARD CEREMONY

On the second day of the EDPD2023 conference, the ceremony for the 2024 Access City Award took place. It recognises and celebrates cities' outstanding efforts to become more accessible and inclusive to persons with disabilities. The ceremony was attended by Helena Dalli, European Commissioner for Equality, Elisa Ferreira, Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms (via video message) and Magnus Nilsson, Vice Chairman of Skellefteå, last year's ACA winner.

For this 14th edition of the award, 32 applications were received from European cities, showcasing innovative solutions to ensure accessibility, especially in the built environment, transport and related infrastructure, information and communication (including ICT) and access to public spaces and services. The national juries preselected 21 applicants, who were narrowed down to five finalists by the EU jury.

All cities deserve recognition for putting tangible measures in place to ensure that everyone, including persons with disabilities have access and can enjoy everything the city has to offer. For example, when they design local areas, services and communication in an accessible way and remove barriers from historical sites for many persons with disabilities. Cities play a central role in re-imagining sustainable living and accessibility is also a non-negotiable element in EU funded infrastructure projects.

"The Access City Award recognises cities that work hard to achieve inclusion and accessibility should be at the heart of tackling climate change and building sustainable cities." (Helena Dalli, European Commissioner for Equality)



ACA 2024 SPECIAL MENTIONS

Special mention on the “New European Bauhaus”: Tübingen (Germany)

Tübingen’s new central bus station received a special mention on the New European Bauhaus for their ongoing efforts to ensure accessibility, through providing tactile and acoustic information and multi-level seating options, among others. Persons with disabilities participated in the design of the bus station.

Katarina Ivankovic-Knezevic awarded the prize on the “New European Bauhaus” to Tübingen.

Special mention for “Landscape and playground areas”: South Dublin County (Ireland).

South Dublin County has a strong commitment to integrate the lived-experience of persons with disabilities when making accessible solutions. In their playgrounds, they are providing sensory-rich environments and equipment using universal design to encourage imaginative, child-led free play for all children (e.g., bright, and shady spaces, quiet areas, etc.).

Amir Alibabić, Member of EDF Youth Committee handed over the ACA special mention on landscape and playground areas to South Dublin County.

ACA 2024 WINNERS

Third prize: Saint-Quentin (France)

Saint-Quentin has a long-term plan to make all its public spaces fully accessible. Over 700 pedestrian walkways, most public buildings and bus stops are already accessible to all. It is the only city in France where it is possible to use sign language when communicating with the municipal police.

Katarina Ivankovic-Knezevic awarded the prize to Saint-Quentin and in her speech emphasised the exemplary dedication of the city to improve accessibility and to make disability a priority, despite the architectural and infrastructural challenges.

Second prize: Łódź (Poland)

The cityscape of **Łódź** combines 19th century historic architecture with modern buildings and over the last 20 years, the reconstruction of the city included a holistic approach to accessibility, also shown by the adoption of the **Łódź Standard of Accessibility** in 2017.

Joost Korte, Director General at DG EMPL of the European Commission awarded the prize to Łódź. In his speech, he highlighted, the city's commitment to break down barriers and make public spaces as well as transport services inclusive and accessible.

First prize: San Cristóbal de La Laguna (Spain)

San Cristóbal de La Laguna successfully faced the challenges of adapting a World Heritage city and making it accessible for all persons with disabilities. Since 2022, the Ombudsperson for Persons with Disabilities coordinates and promotes the accessibility initiatives in collaboration with the City Council.

Commissioner Helena Dalli presented the first prize to San Cristóbal de La Laguna as a recognition of implementing an ambitious plan to make the historical city centre and cultural events fully accessible.



PANEL 3: STRATEGY FOR THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES: ACHIEVEMENTS, CHALLENGES, AND NEXT STEPS

Moderator: **Lucie Davoine**, Acting Head of Disability and Inclusion Unit, DG EMPL, European Commission

Speakers:

Testimonies of **Charlotte Albrechts** (on the European Disability card) and **Paul Alford** (on independent living)

Jakub Hrkal, DG ESTAT, European Commission

Maria Montefusco, Analyst, Swedish Agency for Participation

Nadia Hadad, Executive Committee member, European Disability Forum



The panel began with two powerful testimonies by persons with disabilities on existing barriers they face in Europe and on how the EU Disability Strategy had an impact on the daily life of citizens with disabilities in Europe and beyond. **Charlotte Albrechts** from the Belgian Disability Forum shared experiences about using the European Disability Card (EDC) pilot in the participating eight countries. EDC is an easy way to prove that one has a disability and to **exercise the right to several advantages** in the areas of **cultural, sports and leisure activities**. The recently adopted EDC proposal will allow the use of the card in more countries and in more situations.

"I used the European Disability Card for free entry in museums for me and my personal assistant. EDC makes life much easier!"

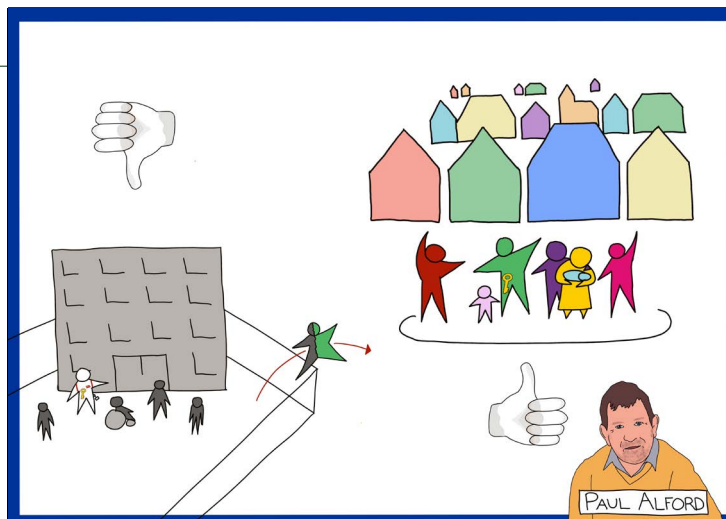
Ms Albrechts noted that the discounts could sometimes not be granted as the staff was unaware of the EDC. During the pilot phase, not all persons with disabilities knew about the card and it can be challenging to find information online about the places where the card can be used. Thus, it is important to **inform and raise awareness among persons with disabilities and staff** of cultural, sports and leisure facilities. EDC is **a step forward towards more social inclusion in the EU**, but more needs to be done to ensure persons with disabilities can use it widely when traveling across the EU.



Paul Alford from Inclusion Ireland talked about the story of his life and how **people can change their own life if they speak up for themselves**. When he was young, Mr Alford had to move out of his parents' house, into an institution, because of his intellectual disability. In the institution, people had **no choice about who to live with** (Mr Alford was sharing a room with nine other people), and the strict daily routine was decided by the management without considering the preferences of residents. The institution not only made him work on an extremely low wage but kept most of the money Mr Alford got from the State. Once Mr Alford received his money, **he decided to leave the institution and buy a house to live independently**.

After **spending 32.5 years in institutional care**, it took 3 years of fighting, with support from advocacy groups, to finally be able to move out to the community. With the right support, **Mr Alford can live on his own and make his own decisions**. He enjoys inviting friends over, going to the local shop and pub, jogging in the park. He received training from the bank that enables him to pay his bills online and could hire his own personal assistant eight hours per week from the personal budget allocated by the State. Living in institutional care is still the reality of hundreds of thousands of persons with disabilities in Europe. Mr Alford highlighted that **everyone has the right to live in the community** and persons with disabilities need **individualised support** to ensure equal chances and independent living.

“Having a key to my own front door is the best feeling.”



Jakub Hrkal explained that the role of **Eurostat** within the European Commission is to provide harmonised statistics for different EU policies. **Eurostat has its own strategy for data collection on disability for 2021-2030** that will contribute to the implementation of the EU's Disability Strategy, focusing on four main areas:

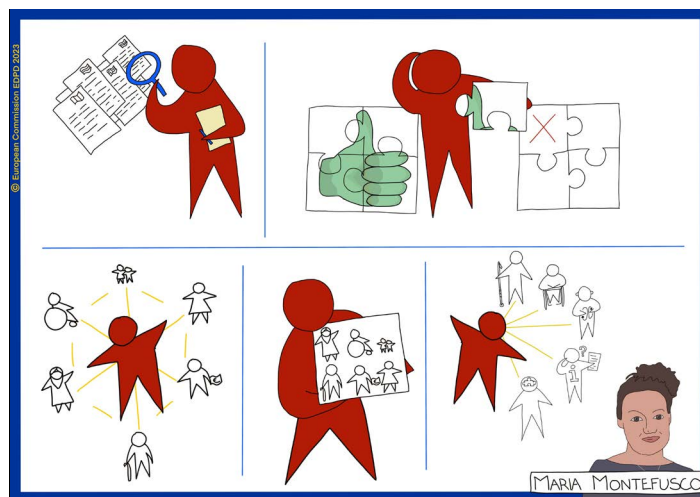
1. Inclusion of **information on disability in all domains of seven social statistics** (through a two-questions instrument – Global Activity Limitation Indicator (GALI)) – this will help to have more data disaggregated by disability;
2. Inclusion of **more information on type of disability** – this will increase knowledge, for instance, on the barriers that persons with different disabilities face;
3. Inclusion of **information on specific groups** – since 2021 data is collected on children with disabilities and in 2026 a pilot study will also look at people living in institutions;
4. **Improved dissemination of statistics on disability** – through a dedicated new page on Eurostat's website.

Mr Hrkal highlighted the **persistent gap between persons with and without disabilities** concerning, among other areas, employment (21.4 percentage point in 2022), at-risk of poverty or social exclusion (30% vs 19%), or the share of population using the internet (76% vs 91%). Therefore, the work carried out by Eurostat plays a crucial contribution to the development of legislation and policies towards improved equality, by shedding light on the situation of persons with disabilities through reliable data.



Maria Montefusco from the Swedish Agency for Participation shared the results of a study, initiated by the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the EU in Spring 2023 on **national and international disability strategies** and models for **cross-sectoral governance in Europe**. The aim of the study was to expand knowledge about how international and national actors within the European cooperation **use disability policy to improve the conditions for inclusion**. In June 2023, in the margins of the Disability Platform meeting, the Swedish Presidency organised a seminar with the European Commission to raise awareness of the EU Disability Strategy as well as efforts at national level, and further held events during the Conference of States Parties to the UNCRPD.

While disability strategies are embedded in the national context, the Swedish report reveals **various common experiences between the Member States**. Based on the findings of the study, Ms Montefusco made a number of concrete recommendations on how disability strategies could make a greater impact as well as tackle persistent inequalities and gaps. Challenges could be overcome through systemic **collection of high-quality data, mapping of necessary funding and capacity-building**, or the development of tools to **encourage a more intersectional approach to disability policy**, among others.



Nadia Hadad, Executive Committee member of the European Disability Forum provided a detailed overview from the perspective of EDF on the progress made under the current EU Disability Strategy and areas where there is further room for improvement. EDF acknowledged the **strong consultation process** around the development of the Strategy and considers that the **strategy takes a human rights approach**, in line with the obligations of the EU and all its Member States to implement the UNCRPD.

The European Disability Card and the European Parking Card for persons with disabilities are among the most important flagship initiatives, however, the **Commission's proposal was unable to address** some fundamental infringements of the rights of persons with disabilities, such as **the freedom of movement for EU citizens with disabilities who want to work or study abroad** in another EU Member State. Furthermore, these initiatives did not lead to a revision of the EU's passenger rights' legislation to end the **repeated violations of the rights of travellers with disabilities**, especially during air travel (e.g., denial of boarding, poor compensation for broken

devices, etc.). More efforts are needed to bring EU policies and studies to the level of persons with disabilities through concrete actions and initiatives that improve their everyday lives.

In terms of the future of the EU Disability Strategy 2021-2030, EDF underlined that while the current Strategy runs until 2030, there are **no concrete actions proposed beyond 2025**. Regardless of the results of the European elections, EDF expects the Commission to **start planning for a range of new actions and flagship initiatives for the period 2025-2030**. EDF, along with other representative organisations of persons with disabilities, will be there to support the Commission in determining the priorities. EDF made some **concrete recommendations** on potential actions as of 2025, including a Disability Employment and Skills Guarantee, or a European Deinstitutionalisation Strategy.



DISCUSSION

How does Eurostat include deafblind people into its surveys?

Jakub Hrkal explained that there is no specific data collected on deafblind people, and while the data on deafness and blindness could be combined from the EU Health survey, there would be too few cases.

What is the definition of activity limitation?

Mr Hrkal responded that the main measure comes from a two-questions instrument, if the person, because of health problems, must limit his/her activity for at least the last 6 months. There are obvious disadvantages deriving from that general definition, but the advantage is that they could get in all EU social surveys, so more disaggregated data can now be collected by disability.

How much does Eurostat involve persons with disabilities in their work?

Mr Hrkal answered that Eurostat gets all input for improvement from the policy DGs (e.g., in DG EMPL) who are in direct contact with organisations representing persons with disabilities.

CLOSING SESSION

Moderator: **Katarina Ivankovic-Knezevic**, Social Rights and Inclusion Director, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion, European Commission

Speakers:

John Patrick Clarke, Vice-President of the European Disability Forum (EDF)

Gerard Quinn, former UN Special Rapporteur on Disability

Peter Samyn, President, Federal Public Service Social Security, Incoming Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union



On behalf of the European Disability Forum, **John Patrick Clarke**, Vice-President thanked all the speakers and the participants for very rich and interesting discussions about the right to vote, access to employment and the progress made regarding the European Disability Rights Strategy. It is **time to tackle the discrimination of persons with disabilities**, including children, young people, older persons, and women with disabilities. Everyone has the **right to stand for and to participate in local, national and EU elections** as well as to develop their skills and **find a fulfilling job**.

Thanks to the EU's Disability Strategy, important progress has been made, such as the AccessibleEU centre, or the proposal to establish a European Disability Card. However, **legal and practical barriers still prevent around 400 000 persons with disabilities to exercise their citizenship rights**, and only nine EU countries allow all persons with disabilities to stand as candidates in these elections. EDF took part in the drafting of the [Dublin recommendations on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to Participate in Political and Public Life in the OSCE Region](#), which will be launched in 2024. The recommendations are designed to help stakeholders advocate for the inclusion of persons with disabilities across the OSCE region, through gender-sensitive and intersectional representations.

During EDPD2023, promising practices were shared about the employment of persons with disabilities. It is important to note that women with disabilities face even more barriers than men, thus EDF strongly supports initiatives that aim to combat the gender and equal pay gap. In that regard, the Pay Transparency Directive, the Minimum Wage Directive, the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive, as well as the flagship initiative of the Employment Package will hopefully boost the participation of persons with disabilities in the open labour market.

“Let’s work together for a more inclusive and equal Europe.”

Gerard Quinn, former UN Special Rapporteur on Disability joined the conference remotely and drew his concluding remarks about the EU’s role in improving disability rights and on his experiences since 2020 as Special Rapporteur. When the Convention was drafted, a bigger role for regional bodies could have been envisaged, even beyond the possibility for them to ratify the UNCRPD. Compared to other regional bodies like the African Union, or the Economic and Social Council of the Arab League, **the EU is much more than an economic integration union and builds on values**. This also means that the EU goes much beyond what other regional integration bodies do and tangibly assists Member States to implement laws and policies. The **UNCRPD demands structural changes** which are not easy to implement, but the EU can play a key role here as other States listen to its voice. The EU is the biggest international donor, and the use of EU funding (both internal and external) is urgently needed to be aligned with the UNCRPD. It is also important that the EU makes its voice heard in the UN system on issues like the risks and opportunities brought by AI, or the protection of civilians during armed conflicts.

While there is still a lot to do across the EU to improve the participation of persons with disabilities in societies on an equal basis with others, the **EU could share experiences with other regional organisations**. It would be also important to see the EU leading on deinstitutionalisation reform and the transformation of the care economy.

“EU values are as good as the tangible support it gives to Member States to implement the UNCRPD.”

Peter Samyn, President of the Federal Public Service Social Security provided concluding remarks on behalf of the **incoming Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU**. He underlined that 2024 will bring a key political momentum in Europe with the upcoming elections and the end of the current Commission. The Belgian Presidency will have a **tight timeline to finalise the negotiations on pending legislative files** by March 2024. Mr Samyn thanked the Spanish Presidency’s efforts that led to the adoption of a general orientation in the Council on the **European Disability Card, which will remain a priority for the Belgian Presidency** to manage the dialogues as soon as possible after the European Parliament adopts its position.

The Belgian Presidency will work on the social agenda for the next Commission and will consider **key areas of employment and social policies** where reflection and future actions should be prioritised. A **new Action Plan for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights** will be needed. The Belgian Presidency is committed towards an **integrated approach** and political coherence towards tax, education, employment, social and environmental policies. In March 2024, there will be a joint ECFIN-EPSCO Council meeting on social Europe, where the Belgian Presidency will propose **recommendations on access to social protection of all**, a new equality strategy underscoring the situation of persons with disabilities and the implementation of the UNCRPD.

On behalf of the European Commission, **Katarina Ivankovic-Knezevic**, Social Rights and Inclusion Director at Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion thanked all speakers and participants for their input during the 2023 conference celebrating the European Day of Persons with Disabilities and the 2024 Access City Award. The Director outlined a few key commitments of the European Commission for the coming months as part of the continued implementation of the EU's Disability Strategy, including:

- a guidance on independent living;
- a framework for Social Services of Excellence for persons with disabilities;
- a report assessing the progress of the implementation of the Disability strategy and an update on its objectives and actions.

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