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## **Equality, Inclusion, and Participation in Europe**

### **Introduction**

The vision of the European Union, since its very beginning, is the equal participation of every EU citizen towards a fully inclusive society. This inclusiveness is achieved through an optimum representation of each social group in the Union.

On the grounds of the EU's fundamental principle of equality, the Disability Intergroup of the European Parliament was formed, five years prior to my birth date, in 1980, which makes it one of the oldest intergroups, proving the fact that the inclusion of disabled persons had been and remains one of the major priorities in the EU.

### **The elements of the Disability Intergroup**

The Disability Intergroup is an informal group of Members of the European Parliament, currently consisting of 86 MEPs, coming from all Member-States and most political parties. Every MEP can apply for membership, regardless of his/her former involvement in disabled people's rights, if they are interested in raising awareness on disability and acting for these rights. The Disability Intergroup is operated through its bureau, which is composed of five chairs. I have the honor to be one of the co-chairs, eight vice-chairs and two bureau members, while the European Disability Forum (EDF) acts as its secretariat. The Intergroup works closely with the EDF and with most of the active European disabled persons' organizations.

### **The purpose of the Disability Intergroup**

The Disability Intergroup promotes disabled people's rights throughout the EU. Rights on the areas of accessibility and transportation, independent living and deinstitutionalization, inclusive education and employment, access to healthcare, leisure, athletic and cultural activities, political involvement, along with the enhancement of an equal participation of the disabled persons in every aspect of life.

These objectives are reached through advocacy at the European Parliament, as well as at the national level. The role of the Disability Intergroup has been instrumental in adopting the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD), furthermore in its implementation and monitoring (EMPL, PETI, and LIBE committees are involved in both). It also holds a crucial responsibility in forming specific EU strategies and directives, designed to protect disabled people's rights and mainstreaming disability in every EU policy, such as the European Disability Rights Strategy 2021-2030, where I was the shadow rapporteur for my political group (EPP) and the EU Disability Card.

### **Processes used by the Disability Intergroup in fulfilling its goals**

The most important component of the Intergroup in the successful realization of its role, is the continuous, essential and productive dialogue and close cooperation with the disability movement, giving the disabled people and their organizations a permanent representation and a strong voice at the European Parliament and at every EU institution and mechanism.

The members of the Disability Intergroup can draft written and oral parliamentary questions, resolutions, and reports. They are expected to make interventions and joint actions. They can submit amendments that contribute to numerous EU guidelines, strategies and policies concerning disability. They also co-organize events, such as expert meetings and communication initiatives with the wider European disability movement, as well as debates at the European Parliament and other EU bodies.

### **Specific initiatives to enhance the participation of the disabled persons**

There is a wide range of EU activities, within or beyond the Disability Intergroup, to promote the participation of the disabled persons throughout the EU, by advancing their living conditions and independence. I have already mentioned the European Disability Rights Strategy, which aims at fulfilling the obligations derived by the UN CRPD, on behalf of the EU and the Member-States. The key to the Convention's implementation is the mandatory active involvement of the disabled persons and their representative organizations, in co-producing every related policy, therefore there are specific mechanisms and funding to facilitate their participation.

Moreover, mainstreaming disability on every policy has led to specific actions taken for the disabled persons; in the Equal Treatment Directive, the Employment Equality Directive, the Gender Equality

Strategy, the Directive on combating violence against women, the Pay Transparency Directive, the Child Guarantee, the revision of the Victims Rights Directive, the EU Multiannual Financial Framework, the Minimum Wage Directive, the Care Strategy of which I was a shadow rapporteur, and more.

Most important of all these policies, is a potential reforming of the electoral law, so that disabled persons, who lack of legal capacity, will stop being deprived of their democratic right to vote. This restoration of justice is one of my priorities as a disabled MEP and as a co-chair of the Disability Intergroup.

### **A challenge always constitutes an opportunity**

During my electoral term as a MEP, the EU has been through a lot of unprecedented crises. The Covid-19 pandemic and its challenges, the war in Ukraine and the dislocation of thousand disabled persons, have highlighted the importance of mainstreaming disability in every single policy, even in the ones that seem to be irrelevant. EU statistics have proven that the disabled persons are the ones most affected by every crisis, therefore special action should be taken, and policymaking must always take disability into account.

Our era is a time full of transitions, such as the digital and green transitions, which are topics of high importance within the EU. Any transition must be carefully planned so no one will be left behind. The only way for this to be done is, once again, through the participation of disabled persons in forming policies, such as the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive, the Just Transition and Social Action Fund, the Digital Services Act, the Artificial Intelligence Act, the Digital Markets Act and others.

On top of that, humanitarian aid is needed more and more across the world. Disabled people face the highest risk of death, injury, extreme poverty, abuse etc. in emergency situations, during disasters. All these unpleasant challenges show the way to the EU to make planning inclusive.

### **Will the next European elections carry a wind of change?**

The EU must always show the way to the Member-States. Disabled people cannot be equally included in the Member-States of their residence, when they are excluded, or they cannot fully participate in the EU. The next European elections are the best opportunity for the EU to show its democratic face. I wish that every single EU citizen will have the chance to vote or to be voted in these elections, no matter of disability, the Member-State of his/her citizenship or residence. I hope that all the barriers will be removed so that the voting procedure will be fully accessible. I expect the electoral laws of many Member-States to be reformed to grant an electoral right to everyone. These essential changes would make the next European Parliament an inclusive Parliament that could represent the people of the EU equally for the next five years.

One of my dreams for the next day of the elections, no matter if I will be elected or not, is a European Parliament with a sufficient percentage of disabled MEPs who will contribute to disabled peoples' rights.

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