

European Parliament of Persons with Disabilities

Speech - **City** Brussels - **Country** Belgium - **Date** 23/05/2023

Good morning and let me begin by thanking the European Parliament and the European Disability Forum for organising this what is now the fifth time that this event has been held. It puts the issues around disability at the physical centre of EU decision-making in the people's parliament here in Brussels.

As European Ombudsman, my role is to help people facing problems with the EU administration and to make sure the EU's institutions, bodies, and agencies adhere to the highest administrative standards. This includes ensuring the administration enables all EU citizens effectively to participate in the decision-making process as this is their right under the EU treaties.

When people think about the right of public participation, they tend to think first about elections yet that is but one piece of our democratic jigsaw. A strong democracy does not go to sleep between visits to the ballot box. The democratic process instead continues as citizens engage with their government through whether through grassroots activism, petitioning their representatives, or participating in public fora and consultations.

In that sense, today's event provides an important opportunity to bring EU citizens closer to decision makers and to help shed a more intense light on the issues they face. While there are many benefits associated with being an EU citizen, it can be difficult at times to take full advantage of them and particularly if you are a person with a disability.

Free movement is one such example. The ability to live, study, and work anywhere in the EU is frequently praised as a key achievement of European integration by policy makers and European citizens alike yet in practice, it is much more accessible to some than to others. Persons with disabilities often face barriers to exercising their freedom of movement, whether that be due to unsuitable transport options, poor infrastructure or the failure to harmonise the recognition of disabilities across the Member State.

I was very struck time ago at a hearing in this parliament by the comments of a young EU trainee. Her particularly disability means that she uses a wheelchair. She made the point that while it was fine to talk about long distance travel between member states, she and others with similar mobility issues would be happy if they could easily make their way around this city. I think that all of us can think about our own big cities and reflect on the extent to which they also



do not adequately factor in the needs of those with mobility issues.

Freedom of movement is, one of the preliminary issues highlighted by the United Nations committee that is currently reviewing EU compliance with its obligations under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, or CRPD for short.

My Office, alongside the European Parliament, the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency, and the European Disability Forum are currently providing input to the UN committee on this and other issues and we will all no doubt look forward to their assessment.

Another obligation is the right of persons with disabilities to independent living and inclusion in the community. Under the CRPD, countries should work to replace dedicated institutional care with support services available within local communities through a process known as deinstitutionalisation.

I concluded an inquiry last year into how the European Commission monitors European Structural and Investment funds to ensure they are actually being used by Member States for deinstitutionalisation and not to refurbish existing care homes or build new ones. Our inquiry showed that certain EU countries were still using EU funding to prolong institutional care and that some Member States had no specific deinstitutionalisation strategy in place.

To improve the situation, I suggested that the Commission issue clear guidance, both to Member States and its own staff, about the need to promote independent living and inclusion via EU funding. This guidance should ideally contain examples of measures that have been effective in supporting the transition of persons with disabilities to family and community-based care. It should also cover funding under the newer Recovery and Resilience Facility to make sure that the mistakes made in the Structural and Investment funds are not repeated.

Reflecting on 'nothing about us, without us', I also suggested that the Commission encourage Member States to facilitate the participation of organisations representing persons with disabilities in monitoring committees that look at how EU funds are being spent.

When it comes to inclusivity and participation, the EU administration itself also has a duty to lead by example. The EU is itself an employer and has therefore a legal and moral obligation to provide good conditions for all their employees. Part of my role as Ombudsman is to ensure this is the case.

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, I wrote to the Commission to ask how they intended to accommodate the needs of staff with disabilities. Based on their response, as well as input from organisations representing persons with disabilities, other EU institutions, and the European Network of Ombudsman, I published a list of best practice. Specific examples include ensuring a dedicated support line and email for staff with disabilities, suitable IT equipment and furniture for remote work, and the provision of training on reasonable accommodation for managers.

I had also previously called on the Commission to revise the rules governing the health



insurance scheme for civil servants after receiving complaints from staff members with disabilities and following the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities statement that the scheme does not comply with the CRPD.

EU recruitment procedures should also be accessible for persons with disabilities. Following complaints from persons who are visually impaired, I called on the European Personnel Selection Office, or EPSO, to ensure its application forms and procedures meet modern accessibility standards.

Within my own Office, we are also working to ensure that we comply with accessibility best practice. This is especially important given that persons with disabilities frequently turn to us if they face problems with other EU bodies. In that sense, we have an obligation to set a high standard.

We work to ensure that our website is as accessible as possible by subtitling videos we produce, ensuring our content is readable by persons who are visually impaired, and providing a section accessible to those with intellectual disabilities. We have recently expanded our traineeship programme to include a traineeship specifically for persons with disabilities and this year our Awards for Good Administration includes a category on inclusiveness and equality. We received several nominations in relation to disability and how the EU administration is trying to improve in this area. All of this is on our website if you wish to get more information or even vote for the People's Choice Award.

Nevertheless, we know that we can always do more and there may have be things that we have missed. We are always willing to listen to suggestions that can make our institution more accessible for all the people that we serve.

The EU and its Member States have made a lot of progress in protecting and promoting the rights of persons with disabilities. The cases that I continue to receive I nonetheless show that there continue to be instances where people's needs have been overlooked by governments or administration, instances that could have arguably been prevented or remedied through better consultation with the people affected. The European Union still has a distance to go to ensure the full inclusion and participation of persons with disabilities, but through dialogue, reflection, and continued vigilance, I believe we can get there. I hope that today's discussions help make the future path clearer to all.

Thank you.