



European Day of **Persons** with **Disabilities** 2017

‘We are EU
citizens’



Conference Report

Rapporteur: Mary O'Hara

Social Europe

Executive Summary

The annual European Day of Persons with Disabilities Conference which was held in Brussels on the 4th and 5th of December 2017 fulfilled once again its unique role as a major event for highlighting the challenges faced by persons with disabilities, and exploring how these can be solved.

Against a backdrop in Europe of rapid social change and political uncertainty, this year's conference was an opportunity to discuss the impact of major European Union policy developments affecting the rights of persons with disabilities, and in particular the rights to full inclusion and participation in political and public life. The event, which focused firmly on EU citizenship, posed key questions such as how persons with disabilities can be better informed of their rights and how to ensure direct involvement in developing and implementing policy.

Hosted by the European Commission in partnership with the European Disability Forum, the conference is part of wider EU efforts to promote mainstreaming of disability issues in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD), to which the European Union and the majority of its Member States are parties, and also in line with the eight areas of the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020. The packed event gathered together hundreds of delegates including self-advocates, politicians, academic experts on a range of disability and rights-related issues, representatives from international and European institutions, and members of disabled people's organisations from across the European Union.

During two days of thought-provoking and engaging debate, three diverse panels examined fundamental aspects of what EU citizenship means in reality for persons with disabilities. Panel one addressed the important question: What does the EU do for its citizens with disabilities? This was followed by a panel focused on whether active political participation remained just a dream, and on the final day, a third panel considered how accessible cities might produce sustainable inclusion for everyone. Each panel session was followed by lively and informative contributions and comments from the conference floor while the event was promoted widely on social media.

Highlights from this year's event included valuable discussions about how the European Pillar of Social Rights can be best employed to advance the rights of EU citizens with disabilities, the significance of the European Accessibility Act and the role of UN Sustainable Development Goals. More broadly, topics that featured prominently emphasized the continued social exclusion of persons with disabilities in employment and education, including those with learning disabilities, plus the many and various barriers remaining in the way of full participation in all aspects of political systems. Guaranteeing equal citizenship with others was a central theme throughout.

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Key themes included

- Ensuring that EU citizenship means equal participation and inclusion for all.
- Using instruments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Accessibility Act and UN Sustainable Development Goals to the fullest to ensure that rights are protected and promoted.
- The necessity for persons with disabilities to be consulted at all stages of the EU policymaking process, as well as having their voices heard at a local and national decision-making level.
- Addressing high levels of poverty, unemployment, social exclusion and discrimination.
- Accepting that participation in political life should be understood in its widest sense, including the right to take part in elections as voters and as candidates on an equal basis.
- Improving engagement between EU institutions and citizens with disabilities.
- Eliminating jargon and focusing on how to make political and policy-based communication simpler, and therefore more accessible for all.
- Prioritizing groups such as women and children with disabilities and people with learning or intellectual disabilities, who often face multiple barriers.
- The importance of collecting comprehensive data on social, economic and political disparities.
- The value of monitoring the impact of policies and strategies on an ongoing basis.
- Challenging austerity policies and cuts to vital social programs and benefits.
- The role of cities and municipalities in leading the way for accessibility and full inclusion.
- Raising awareness of how accessible transport planning can foster inclusion.
- Developing and delivering a strong and bold European Disability Strategy for 2020-2030 to ensure EU implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

DAY ONE: 'We Are EU Citizens'

The Conference Opens

Introductory speeches by **Michel Servoz**, Director General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL), **Yannis Vardakastanis**, president of the European Disability Forum & **Helena Pall**, counsellor for Social Affairs, Social Policy, Equal Treatment and Accessibility, Gender Equality, SPC: Estonian Presidency

On the road to full participation

With the theme of citizenship at the heart of the 2017 European Day of Persons with Disabilities conference **Emmanuelle Grange**, head of the Disability and Inclusion Unit, DG Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion enthusiastically welcomed delegates on day one. Underscoring the significance of an event "devoted" to citizenship in the run up to the 2019 European Parliament Elections she set the scene for the following day and a half of discussions by introducing the opening panel, including the first speaker, **Michel Servoz**.

Mr Servoz began by highlighting that "inclusive growth" was central to the Commission's agenda and by stressing the importance of this to persons with disabilities. Despite progress in many areas, persons with disabilities remain at "very high risk" of social exclusion compared to wider society. Drawing on data to illustrate his point **Mr Servoz** observed that while for the general population the employment rate stood at 72%, citizens with disabilities did not have a comparable level of employment with the rate currently at just 48%.

Unacceptable gaps

"If you look at education, only 28% of persons with disabilities have completed the third level education," **Mr Servoz** reminded the conference. "The gap is huge. And frankly, it is unacceptable". Such stark figures were part of the reason for the impetus behind the European Pillar of Social Rights, he explained. Reporting that the Pillar had been proclaimed at the Social Summit in Gothenburg and signed by leaders, **Mr Servoz** declared that it "is becoming a shared political commitment of all the key actors at European level, but also a commitment we share with social partners, civil society and NGO's." The European Pillar of Social rights, he said, was also one of the means to implement the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD).



Remarking on the importance of acknowledging wider progress, **Mr Servoz** mentioned that there had been important forward momentum on the European Accessibility Act. As well as the adoption by the European Parliament of a report

during the plenary session in September, he announced there had been significant welcome developments in Member State negotiations. If there was some agreement in the end of 2017- early 2018, he concluded, it would be “a big step forward” for the Act’s progression. He pledged that the Commission would consider how to build on this.

Bringing the subject round to citizenship specifically he emphasized how crucial it was for persons with disabilities to be actively involved in preparation for the 2019 elections. Putting the issues that matter to disabled people “on the political map” is vital.



“ You can be a passenger or an actor. It is important the political participation of persons with disabilities is improved. It is important to put these issues at the level of the decision makers. ”

Michel Servoz

After final comments by **Mr Servoz** on the need for cities to become progressively more accessible, especially since increasing numbers of citizens are expected to live in them in the future, he passed the floor to Mr Vardakastanis.

Making sure commitments are met

In a multi-faceted address to the conference **Mr Vardakastanis** first of all reflected on the work still to be done on the European Accessibility Act and in terms of the European Pillar of Social Rights, if the rights of EU citizens with disabilities are to be fully guaranteed. “There is no question that the proclamation of the Pillar of social rights is a positive development,” he told delegates. “But we should keep it in mind, that it is a voluntary commitment.” When it comes to progress on the European Accessibility Act, **Mr Vardakastanis** said the Commission “delivered as promised” and that hard work by all involved, including representatives of disabled people’s organisations (DPO’s) had paid off. Nevertheless, there were some issues remaining to be brought up with the Parliament.

Are we all equal citizens?

The lion’s share of Mr Vardakastanis’ opening focused on citizenship and what it means in reality for persons with disabilities. “We are not on equal terms with others,” he said. He challenged the conference to consider the actual status of disabled citizens when there was still so much work to be done to confront discrimination, improve accessibility and guarantee rights.



Going forward, EU institutions must address key challenges in the way of achieving full participation by persons with disabilities, he said. Values of inclusion, solidarity, tolerance and justice should “be respected” for all citizens. Referring to **Mr Servoz’s** description of being actors rather than passengers, **Mr Vardakastanis** pointed out that for hundreds of thousands of persons with disabilities, a lack of full access and inclusion means they are not actors in the system. “They are just deprived,” he cautioned.

“Do we all enjoy democracy on the same basis?” He asked. “No we don’t.” Yannis Vardakastanis

The opportunity should be grasped to really “mainstream” the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities across the European Union, **Mr Vardakastanis** told delegates. “We need to prepare ourselves for the next decade,” he suggested saying that the European disability movement “calls on the Commission to be forward looking”. A robust 10-year 2020-2030 strategy for implementing the UN Convention was essential he remarked. “A decade of inclusion, a decade of non-discrimination, and a decade of equal treatment,” is what is needed to guarantee rights.

In addition, against a backdrop of widespread austerity cuts to vital social protections since the financial crisis of 2008, “a very important momentum” is necessary.

In conclusion, **Mr Vardakastanis** stressed what it means to be a citizen: “To be a citizen means to be a truly free spoken person. To be a citizen means to be able to exercise rights, to be part and parcel of society. Not to be in the corner of society. And this is what we fight for. This is what we strive for. And this will be the demand.”

“ We need to place the rights of persons with disabilities where they belong. We all adhere, we all promote, we all believe in the European project. It is a project we really want to see being always successful...Freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law, human rights. These are all very important dimensions of our presence as citizens in the European Union and in our member states. ”

Yannis Vardakastanis

Challenges remain for full participation

Ending what was an impassioned opening to the conference, **Ms Pall** told attendees that it wasn't enough to talk about rights as "abstract". Instead, she argued, "more action" and "practical steps" were needed to ensure the full inclusion of persons with disabilities.

Ms Pall began her remarks saying: "Europe cannot be truly inclusive if we cannot ensure equal opportunities for all." She went on: "In the context of ageing society and decreasing population, sharing equal opportunities for all really is something we have to talk about more. And take action as it is becoming more and more acute."

The European Accessibility Act was to be a key priority during the Estonian Presidency she assured the conference, as was the pursuit of independent living for persons with disabilities and efforts to achieve de-institutionalization and community-based living – all essential for full inclusion. Among other recent steps in the right direction, she concluded, was the progress made on the European Pillar of Social Rights. The proclamation of the 20 principles of the Pillar was a clear illustration of the unity across EU Member States' institutions and social partners she said and reflected the "main values" of EU social policy.

Ms Pall also mentioned the value of a number of forums during the Estonian Presidency in Tallinn. Of particular importance, **Ms Pall** said, was the conference on accessibility organised by the European Disability Forum and the EU Diversity Charters Annual Forum for the proportion of non-discrimination in organisations, jointly organized by the Commission. The latter was the first such forum to take place in Eastern Europe.

In conclusion, she stressed the importance of the rights of persons with disabilities being placed in a human rights context adding that despite the ratification of the UN Convention, challenges remained for achieving full participation in society.

“
Facilitating an inclusive society and equal opportunities for all and also for persons with disabilities, is important for creating an inclusive and barrier free society.
”
Helena Pall



DAY ONE: Morning Session

Panel One: What does the EU do for its citizens with disabilities?

Part 1

The members of Panel One were: **Madi Sharma, European Economic and Social Committee and moderator of the panel; Professor Anna Lawson, Academic Network of European Disability experts; Rodolfo Cattani, executive committee member, European Disability Forum; Thorkild Olesen, Disabled People's Organisations Denmark; Ciara O'Brien, COHOM Chair, European Union External Action Service.**

Moving forward: *Securing rights for all*

The opening panel of the conference got underway with a rousing introduction from the moderator. "Any injustice is a threat to justice everywhere," **Ms Sharma** told attendees. In her statement, she stressed the importance of everyone being treated as equal, declaring that the solutions to challenges for persons with disabilities "will come from the people, not the politicians."

Anna Lawson, the first panellist to address delegates, took the floor explaining that her focus would be on the European Pillar of Social Rights and what it means for persons with disabilities in the EU. After outlining key stages of the Pillar's progress she summarized its overall purpose as well as its scope. "In essence, it is to harness the energy of EU bodies, member states, social partners to really work on the social side of the social market that is at the heart of the EU enterprise. It doesn't represent a new law in its own right," she said. "It doesn't enhance the competence or power of EU bodies. It is a compass."

Placing the European Pillar of Social Rights in the context of what the EU does for persons with disabilities **Ms Lawson** declared that disability "has a very high profile in the European Pillar of Social Rights." Referring specifically to Principle 17 on the inclusion of persons with disabilities from the total of 20, and to disability also being mentioned in Principle 3 on equal opportunities, she reminded the conference that disability is also "embedded in the other principles."

Ms Lawson's speech concentrated on the work of The Academic Network of European Disability experts (ANED) in evaluating and critiquing the European Pillar of Social Rights. In 2017, the network adopted the Pillar as its main annual theme and after the Commission's Recommendation in April,

“
Persons with disabilities have the right to income support that ensures living in dignity, services that enable them to participate in the labour market and in society. And the work environment adapted to their needs.
”

Anna Lawson



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which laid out the specifics of the Pillar following the consultation period, the organisation conducted two types of review. The first was a short analysis of the Pillar's 20 Principles and how disability factors into each with the second, a more in-depth critique drawing on the input of experts from 35 countries, exploring what is happening in individual countries and what might be learned from their experiences.

The in-depth analysis centres on four primary themes: education and skills; access to the open labour market; housing and also benefits caps and transitions. Key points made by **Ms Lawson** included an outline of an upcoming report on the in-depth analysis, due to be published in 2018. She concentrated on Section 3: The Disability Gap. Among her main points were:

- Targeting and mainstreaming disability through the European Pillar of Social Rights is important against a backdrop of ongoing exclusion.
- The EU employment disability gap is significant with 25% difference between persons with disabilities and non-disabled people. Employment chances for women with disabilities are a serious concern because it is harder for these women to enter the labour market. The opportunity to enter into work for people with severe impairments is also especially tough with an average employment rate across the EU countries of just 27.6% for this group.
- Education remains an area of concern with 22% of young persons with disabilities leaving school early compared to 12% of their non-disabled counterparts, and completion of tertiary education for persons with disabilities currently less than 30%. For others it is 43%.
- The risk of household poverty for those aged 16-64 with a disability is 38% while for non-disabled people in the same age bracket the figure is 22%.
- The absence of any explicit reference to disability in the 43 measurement indicators within the Social Scoreboard of the European Pillar of Social Rights will make it harder to monitor the impact of the Pillar on persons with disabilities. This is in contrast with Sustainable Development goals "where disability has been highlighted".

Ms Lawson left the conference with some valuable questions on how to maintain the profile of disability in monitoring the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. These included: How can the social partners use disability in engaging in Social Pillar discussions? How can we encourage social partners who are interested in disability to engage with the European Pillar of Social Rights? How can disabled people's organisations out there use the Social Pillar in their campaigning work?

Rodolfo Cattani began his address with a passionate emphasis on human rights, fundamental freedoms and the need for active involvement of persons with disabilities in the shaping of EU policies and initiatives. **Mr Cattani** dedicated a significant portion of his speech to the wider social, political and economic context in which persons with disabilities continue to fight for equal rights. These included the fallout from the 2008 financial crisis and the ongoing austerity measures in a number of Member States that have contributed to poverty and social exclusion. "The economic and the social integration in the EU has been almost completely stopped," as a result he told delegates.

Mr Cattani also referenced major human rights challenges facing the EU brought about by rising populism, Brexit, terrorist attacks and the migration crisis that have created “uncertainty and insecurity”. At a policy level the human rights approach to disability is “often missing”, he said. “The social and human rights situation in Europe is clearly under threat and in a society where social inequalities are growing it is imperative to recognize that the rights of persons with disabilities.”



“ Now, more than in the past, EU decision makers must engage themselves to build a strong, social Europe and to realize human rights for all people in the EU.

Rodolfo Cattani ”

In a wide-ranging speech, Mr Cattani addressed a number of key issues. Among these were:

- Persons with disabilities continue to be marginalised in multiple ways with discrimination and social exclusion related to employment, education and training commonplace. In addition, fully accessible and affordable mainstream products and services remain unavailable for many.
- Social protection schemes across the EU are too often inadequate or underfunded meaning they fail to enable persons with disabilities to live fully independent lives and to fully participate in society. These problems are made worse by moves to “make a business” out of social protection programmes and disability services rather than keep them in the public sector.
- Persons with disabilities are often excluded from spheres of European society that focus on social justice meaning that some groups, including women and children with disabilities, are further marginalised.
- A rights based, social and sustainable strategy that stops austerity and backs social investment is essential going forward if full equality for persons with disabilities is to be achieved.
- The importance of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is critical and the rights enshrined in it and the obligations it specifies must be vigorously championed and implemented across the EU.

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After the adoption of the UN CRPD there has been a revolution in the public approach to disability. The UN CRPD is the strongest tool to promote radical change. While the level of ratification in Europe and globally is high, serious human rights violations continue to affect the everyday life of persons with disabilities. Many governments continue to adopt policies and maintain systems which are in conflict with the convention.

Rodolfo Cattani ”



Part 2

In asking what does the EU do for persons with disabilities, **Thorkild Olesen** told the conference that as a representative of persons with disabilities, he believes the focus should be not just on what is currently being done, but crucially, “what we can do in the future”. He stressed that it is essential for increased EU Member State engagement with the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDG’s), which highlight that no one should be left behind. As an important plank of the EU’s commitment to persons with disabilities going forward, more could be done.

The topic of United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) arose a number of times during the conference. The 17 Goals were a key part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by countries in 2015. The Agenda is, according to the UN, “a universal, inclusive and indivisible” call for action by all countries “to improve the lives of people everywhere.”



Mr Olesen used some of his time to specifically examine the place of SDGs in the disability rights landscape of the EU. While SDGs affect populations broadly, he explained that “some of the goals are however very important for persons with disabilities because they are very useful in bridging the gap between us and the other part of society.”

One issue that needed to be highlighted **Mr Olesen** said was that persons with disabilities should be directly involved in implementing SDG’s as well as the Convention, but he cautioned: “this is not the case,” at present. **Mr Olesen’s** speech spanned a range of related topics and recommendations.

Some of the primary points he made were:

- It is disappointing that the Sustainable Development Goals Platform established by the EU does not include representatives of persons with disabilities. When people do not have a voice and input at the outset, it is not only a missed opportunity for direct participation, it makes avoidable misunderstandings and errors possible.
- The EU should take the needs of persons with disabilities into account throughout its operations and within the development and implementation of its programmes, Structural Funds and general strategies, for example actions to tackle poverty.
- “Disability inclusive” budgeting should be a reality throughout the EU’s planning processes.
- In terms of the economic, social, cultural and political gaps between people with and without disabilities, it is essential that robust and regularly updated statistics are collected and reported, and that information on country comparisons is available. The data should be across all relevant categories affecting persons with disabilities including housing, poverty and on policy areas affecting women, who are often absent from the statistics.

We need to establish partnerships across all societal sectors. It includes all policy areas and other civil society organisations. Private enterprises should be part of this partnership as well. There is mutual interest in all areas in the EU, with the EU, with the member states and holistic approach. I think we can do it better.”

Thorkild Olesen

Reflecting on **Mr Olesen’s** address **Ms Sharma** made some additional remarks saying that concerted advocacy was essential to make sure the Permanent Study Group on disabilities within European Social and Economic Committee is a strong voice. Ensuring that budgets affecting persons with disabilities are not subject to cuts is crucial.



Following on with the theme of Sustainable Development Goals and their potential to have a positive impact on the lives of persons with disabilities within the EU, **Ciara O'Brien, chair of the Working Group of the Council of the EU on Human Rights (COHOM)** rounded off Panel One. She first of all provided a brief overview of the working group's external human rights remit and goals on behalf of the EU, including some examples of where it has played a role in enhancing the rights of persons with disabilities, such as negotiating accession to the UN CRPD in 2011.

Ms O'Brien stressed that the group is committed in the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy (2015-2019) "to step up the promotion of the rights of persons with disabilities in EU action by promoting equal access and enjoyment of equal rights, to mainstream disability concerns in human rights actions, and develop targeted actions to remove barriers to equal participation by and improve the social inclusion of persons with disabilities."

With a particular focus on SDG's, **Ms O'Brien** highlighted a number of points. These included:

- The universal nature of SDG's, in that they apply to all countries, is significant.
- The contribution of the stakeholder group of persons with disabilities to the UN High Level Political Forum analysing how the SDG's can best be implemented to protect the rights of persons with disabilities has been extremely important.
- Reporting on the monitoring and implementation of the SDG commitments to the Forum are not yet obligatory but a good number of EU Member States – 11 in 2017 - have already made 'Voluntary National Reviews' available.
- The Forum also carries out annual reviews of the implementation of SDG's and in 2019 these will concentrate on empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality, a key topic for discussing progress on the rights of persons with disabilities.



Panel One: Open Debate

Protecting rights and having a 'voice at the table'

Comments from the floor and panel responses

The questions and comments from delegates following the first panel were varied and incisive and fell under two broad categories reflecting on citizenship: how to guarantee the protection of rights for EU citizens with disabilities, and making sure persons with disabilities shape the decisions and institutions that affect them. First up were questions about how the EU can ensure progress continues despite practical political challenges. The rights of disabled parents who have children with disabilities as well as how the European Pillar of Social Rights might be used to counteract retrogressive measures that undermine rights also featured.

There were enquiries too about rights in the workplace, specific examples of where the EU and Member States are taking significant steps to promote rights, and what the representation of persons with disabilities is within EU institutions.

Protecting the rights of EU citizens with disabilities: In the first instance **John Dolan, chief executive of the Disability Federation of Ireland** wondered how, against a backdrop of "devastating" social exclusion, discrimination and other ongoing barriers faced by persons with disabilities across Europe, the EU could act definitively to ensure rights are vigorously protected. One delegate raised the issue of "retrogressive" measures by some Member States that undermined rights, such as reversing legislation, institutionalization or cutting support services which she said violate Article 19 of the UN CRPD's principle on "prohibition" of such actions. She then enquired how the European Pillar of Social Rights might reflect on the prohibition of such actions.

I was involved as an Irish diplomat in the negotiations of the SDGs and one of my clearest takeaways from those negotiations was the tenacity with which the EU pursued the mantra of no one left behind. I don't think even we however realised the speed with which the concept would become embedded in the implementation of the Agenda.

Ciara O'Brien



Gergely Tapolczai from the European Disability Forum wanted to know how the rights of disabled parents who have children with disabilities to make decisions on behalf of their families can be guaranteed. Another attendee, **Callum Jones** from the European Commission, put a direct question: “How can we ensure persons with disabilities are not exploited with regards to poor working conditions or low pay?” Meanwhile **Maureen Piggot** wanted concrete examples of “significant” initiatives across the EU that “promote the rights of persons with disabilities.”

A Voice at the Table: To a loud round of applause, **Massimo Ellul** from the Malta Federation of Organisations of Persons with Disability asked the panel to answer a question on the representation of persons with disabilities within EU institutions. He was keen to establish the numbers of persons with disabilities elected to the EU Parliament and the proportions they made up of staff in other institutions.

Responses from panelists on the protection of rights included: **Mr Cattani** addressed a number of the issues raised around rights for persons with disabilities, one of which was regarding the EU’s role in ensuring these rights. He said there was an “absolute need for the disability movement” to make sure the EU ratifies the UN CRPD Optional Protocol.” **Mr Cattani** also responded to the question on the rights of workers with disabilities saying the tendency is for “an under-evaluation” of their working capacities and that too many employers still don’t believe a person with a disability is “is capable to perform a job on an equal basis.” On the rights of parents he said: “We cannot impose the state solutions to families. I am strongly convinced about this.”

Mr Olesen suggested that the EU should have more power to shape social policy to protect rights generally. “I think that because I see the different ways of working on the disability area around the EU is making it difficult for us to participate. Without any common solutions I don’t think we’ll get much farther.” On workers’ rights he suggested two things to improve employment rates. The first was more information about what persons with disabilities can do and second that “there has to be a little bit more enforcement.”

Setting an encouraging tone on the issue of how the EU can protect rights going forward **Ms Lawson** referred to measures currently in the process of being realized, like the European Accessibility Act, “that have potential to make really dramatic changes on people’s lives.” **Ms O’Brien** echoed **Ms Lawson** saying concentrating on policies that have a “human rights” focus and emphasizing the UN CRPD as a “legal instrument”, were important. In addition, she urged delegates to “continue to be as plugged in as possible” to policy development.

When it comes to how the European Pillar of Social Rights could be utilized to guard against retrogressive policies and actions **Ms Lawson** suggested this might be something that is considered during ongoing monitoring of progress with the Pillar. “That’s a really important issue to keep on the agenda.”

Responses from panelists on ensuring citizens with disabilities have a voice in decision-making and are represented in EU institutions included: The panel moderator **Ms Sharma** stressed how vital it was to have persons with disabilities around the table. Summing up what this means she added: “If you are not around the table you are on the menu.”

Emmanuelle Grange addressed the question on representation within EU institutions telling the conference that, from what she knows, four current Members of the parliament have disabilities. She said that between 6% and 7% of Commission employees declared to be individual with disabilities. She said that between 6% and 7% of Commission employees were individuals with disabilities but that she didn’t have figures for other EU bodies. She finished by saying that there was still a lot to be done in terms of recruitment and in other areas such as accessibility of buildings but said that a lot was being done to continually improve.

“So, let’s keep driving the change together and let’s make the world we want.”
Madi Sharma”





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DAY ONE: Afternoon Session

Panel Two: Political participation as a disabled person: Dream or Reality?

The members of this panel were: **Maureen Piggot**, President, Inclusion Europe and moderator of the panel; **Albert Prevos**, committee member, European Disability Forum; **Harry Panagopulos**, policy officer, European Commission, DG Justice; **Soledad Cabezon Ruiz**, Member of the European Parliament; **Sanja Tarczay**, president of the European Deaf Blind Union; **David Clarke**, self-advocate and participant in 'My Opinion, My Vote' campaign on the right to vote in Ireland; **Madeleine Kayser**, head of the Integration and specific needs department, City of Luxembourg.

Making Change Happen: *Achieving active citizenship*

Part 1

As she welcomed delegates back following the highly engaged morning session the moderator of Panel 2, **Maureen Piggot** told the conference: "We are going to tackle the question of how we increase political participation to have real power." She encouraged everyone to ask themselves some key questions as the session progressed: "What is your dream for the political participation of disabled persons in Europe? What's your reality? What would you change and how?"



Setting the tone for the rest of what would prove to be an ideas-packed afternoon, the first panellist, **Mr Prevos** focused right away on the core of what genuine participation should mean in reality for persons with disabilities. **Mr Prevos** put a clear spotlight also on the significance of being directly involved in the political and electoral processes of Member States and of the EU – as well as on what was at stake if this was not achieved.

Even at the most basic level of access to voting, **Mr Prevos** remarked, huge issues remained. "Five Member States still automatically prevent persons with disabilities who have legal representatives under guardianship from voting in their country," he pointed out. He also provided examples from his own country, France, where judges "continue to decide whether a citizen has the right to vote," because they have guardians.

Being absent means leaving up to other people the decisions of our own autonomy. It is not a question of the law of the majority. It is above all the protection of minorities.

Albert Prevos

During his detailed address **Mr Prevos** offered a number of observations. Among these were:

- Not being involved in political life means that others are making fundamental decisions that affect all aspects of the lives of persons with disabilities.
- Participating in political life is not a luxury; it is essential.
- Equality in voting has many important consequences including creating a sense of belonging in society and promoting real inclusion.
- Too many significant barriers remain in the way of persons with disabilities fully participating in political and public life including that elections are often inaccessible. This is exemplified by a lack of clear, accessible election literature and fully accessible voting facilities.
- Frameworks that should guarantee access to the political process already exist, including standing for political office. The UN CRPD, and in particular Article 29, which obliges Member States to ensure persons with disabilities enjoy their political rights equally with others, should be enforced to make sure people are not excluded.
- We are living in a period of great threat to democratic principles as people in many countries lose faith in political institutions and anti-democratic, populist forces begin to flourish. This has an impact on persons with disabilities because populist movements tend not to accept people "who are different."

It is time the European Union, together with member states and representative organisations, launched an ambitious campaign for everyone to be involved in political and public life

Albert Prevos



Stepping in to replace Marie-Helene Boulanger, head of the Citizenship Unit at the European Commission, DG Justice her colleague, policy officer **Harry Panagopulos** presented a comprehensive outline of policies and actions aimed at promoting electoral rights and increasing political participation in Europe, including by persons with disabilities. “The full inclusion of persons with disabilities is a prerequisite for a fair Europe in which the interests of the citizens are represented,” he told the conference.

Putting the issue in context **Mr Panagopulos** explained that while research by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) clearly demonstrated that persons with disabilities were more interested in politics than the wider population, the study also “revealed underlying inequality.” Persons with disabilities were often excluded in different ways, the report concluded, prompting the FRA to highlight five key issues to be addressed. These were: lifting barriers to political participation, expanding opportunities to participation in public and political life, making voting procedures and election materials more acceptable, raising awareness of the right of persons with disabilities to participate and vote and, finally, collecting data on participation.

Mr Panagopulos also provided a rundown of the four major themes within the EU Citizenship Report 2017 and how these related to promoting participation in the political process by persons with disabilities in line with shared democratic values and rights and strengthening equality.

The main points of his presentation included the following:

- Efforts to improve the accessibility of election materials at the EU level are ongoing, including of websites and other forms of communication. There is also a proposal for a “single digital gateway” for access to online services.
- Seeking the views and suggestions of citizens, including those with disabilities, is a key activity in the run up to the 2019 elections, as are awareness campaigns on rights and the impact of policies on different groups. There are also individual projects underway to examine how electoral processes, including electronic voting, can improve voter turnout and engagement.
- The European Commission has pledged to work with the Parliament and with stakeholders to “better inform citizens,” and prior to the elections will hold a “high level event on democratic participation” with a focus on unrepresented groups including persons with disabilities.
- Equality and combatting discrimination will be central considerations going forward and will incorporate efforts on behalf of groups who face additional barriers such as women with disabilities.

The challenge is for us to work together to bring citizens into the political process, to involve them into decision making, explain policies, to hear their concerns and inspire them to join the debate.

Harry Panagopulos



The last speaker for the first half of Panel 2 was European Parliament Member, **Soledad Cabezon Ruiz** who began by reminding those present of the work the European Parliament’s Committee on Petitions (PETI Committee) undertakes in the pursuit of the full inclusion of people with different disabilities, including those with intellectual impairments. **Ms Cabezon Ruiz** touched on a number of important areas in relation to political participation such as stating that everyone, regardless of their disability, should have the opportunity to fully participate in political life at the local, national and EU level.

Among **Ms Cabezon Ruiz’s** main points were:

- The UN CRPD must be fully implemented by Member States to make the fulfilment of the rights of persons with disabilities a reality across the EU. There must be a full evaluation of the Convention’s impact on people with different disabilities.
- The rights of people with intellectual disabilities to fully participate in the political process must be addressed. In too many places this is a group whose interests and fundamental rights are not met in the same way as others, even with the UN CRPD in place.
- There should be a dedicated, separate strategy across Europe to ensure persons with disabilities, including those with intellectual disabilities, have full access to the political process not just voting. Conditional access to voting is not acceptable.
- Improvements within the EU electoral processes could inspire those working at a local and national level to further promote the rights and participation of persons with disabilities.

Persons with intellectual disabilities shouldn’t be considered to be people with more disability, but different abilities.

Soledad Cabezon Ruiz



Panel Two Part 1: Debate

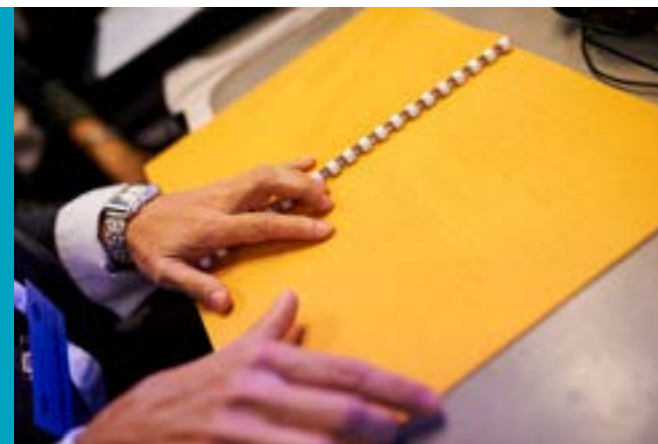
Holding politicians to account & dismantling barriers to participation

Comments from the floor and panel responses

A short but stimulating question and answer session followed the end of the first part of Panel 2. Comments and questions from the floor pinpointed two broad and crucial areas of concern including tackling the barriers faced by persons with disabilities who wish to make their views heard by the European Parliament, and eliminating voting barriers.

Political accountability and eliminating barriers to participation: The first issue was raised by **David Adams, president of The European Guide Dog Foundation**. **Mr Adams** outlined how people who are blind repeatedly encounter “double discrimination” because they are turned away from a range of environments simply for having a service dog with them yet, when an attempt was made to raise a petition with the Parliament to highlight the problem, a lack of accessibility created barriers of its own. “The European Parliament accepted our petition but it is totally impossible for a person with sight loss to fill in the petition. It is awful,” he explained. **Mr Adams** said he wanted to hear more than “fine words” about participation but “fine actions” instead.

Elaborating on the theme of dismantling barriers to participation, **Zara Todd** representing the European Network on Independent Living made a strong statement about framing and language around disability and its impact on inclusion. The depiction of persons with disabilities as “vulnerable” and “having needs” must be turned on its head if real progress



was to be made and clearer, simpler language that is inclusive for people, for example those with intellectual disabilities is essential, she said. **Ms Todd** asked: “How do we change the dialogue so we are not looking at disabled people as the problem that needs to be integrated?”

Another attendee, **Rui Coimbra** from Cerebral Palsy – European Communities Association was curious to know about any current programs to develop technical solutions that would increase the accessibility of voting.

Responses from the panel included: **Mr Panagopoulos** dealt with the enquiry about technical solutions by first pointing out that “the general rule” is that Member

States organize how national and local elections run but that funds from the European Parliament had been directed toward looking into technological solutions to improve access to voting. A number of grants were running currently, he said. On European Parliament Petitions **Ms Cabezon Ruiz** commented that “to some extent” access has improved but that petitions in particular needed to be looked at and that citizens “have to be involved” in finding solutions.

Mr Prevos reiterated that disability should never be used as a pretext for denying the vote. A big question as the 2019 elections approached was if the EU and the Commission were going to “lead by example,” including on fundamental

It is not about us being vulnerable. It is about being discriminated against.
Zara Todd

Nowadays we are hearing about inclusive education and environment. We actually forget about inclusive politics.
Sanja Tarczay

concerns like using straightforward language, he said. A tendency towards “technocratic language” was regrettable but common **Mr Panagopoulos** told the conference. “The Commission has a long way before it starts to explain itself in plain English,” he added. “Nonetheless it is a serious point and we are working to improve how we present the information that we have to our citizens.”

Part 2

Outside the main conference room a ‘Talking Wall’, where delegates were encouraged to make comments and suggestions on the topic of EU citizenship, was filling up with ideas “about future actions we want to see”, the moderator **Ms Piggot** said as she welcomed the final three panellists of the day. First up was **Sanja Tarczay**.

As a representative of the Croatian Association of Deafblind Persons and a prominent pioneer in fight for the rights of people who are deafblind, the first speaker, **Ms Tarczay** took time to reflect on barriers to participation. “As one of the members of the European Parliament says: ‘Deafblind persons are excluded from the excluded,’” she told the conference.



Ms Tarczay summarized some of the primary barriers, such as the failure in some parts of Europe for deafblindness to be “recognized at all” and a lack of services and interpreters. After providing some positive examples of deafblind people who had broken through in politics such as British Parliamentary candidate, Ben Fletcher, she ran through her key points. These included:

- European and international actions and instruments that seek to address the problems faced by deafblind people are important. These include the UN CRPD, the European Accessibility Act and the European Parliament’s Resolution on sign language and sign language interpreters.
- While there has been some progress, much more needs to be done to overcome the barriers to participation for deafblind citizens. Even the basic act of following the election process is made difficult because information about the election and candidates is not in an accessible format leaving deaf-blind people “totally disconnected.”
- On election days, interpreters can be denied entry into voting booths creating an easily avoidable impediment to exercising the right to vote.

- Participation is about more than the right to vote or being invited to contribute a view. There must be accommodations for interpreters and assistants to be available, for example at meetings, and these provisions should be uniform.
- Prejudice remains in many political forums and persons with disabilities are not always taken as seriously as their non-disabled counterparts.

With self-advocacy being a pivotal element of efforts to increase the political participation of persons with disabilities, **David Clarke** was a perfect choice to address the conference on elections and voting. **Mr Clarke**, who has Down Syndrome, is a respected campaigner in his home country of Ireland and he was keen to talk about the importance of taking part in elections and the fact that people with learning disabilities are all too often excluded from the process. "We are not expected to have an opinion or to make decisions," he explained of how citizens with learning disabilities are sometimes regarded.

Mr Clarke went on to inform everyone about the 'My Opinion, My Vote', political participation project of which he was a part. The initiative, funded by the EU, assists people with learning disabilities to be aware of their rights in elections. **Mr Clarke** described how the idea was to educate people with learning disabilities but also their families and carers and "even politicians."

We have opinions. We have rights. And we wish to be included. The decisions that politicians make affect our lives, but we are almost always excluded.

David Clarke



Ending his presentation, he called for elections to have easy-to-read materials and also made a suggestion for ballot papers that included pictures of candidates.

Bringing an end to the day's panel presentations was **Madeleine Kayser** who, in her capacity as head of the integration and specific needs department of the City of Luxembourg, presented to delegates on the policies and processes that can contribute to greater accessibility in urban centres. For a city to be truly accessible a number of things have to be in place, **Ms Kayser** told conference delegates. When the municipality of Luxembourg decided to prioritize the accessibility of "the entire territory" it was accepted that there had to be a central person to oversee it but crucially, that the people for whom it was intended – citizens – were consulted. Making sure "that the persons concerned participate and are involved" is essential, she said.

Ms Kayser put forward a number of observations and ideas. These included:

- Taking account of the full range of specific needs when it comes to accessibility and participation is key. "Design for All" that seeks to accommodate everyone means non-disabled and disabled citizens are treated equally. "It is not about putting people in categories."
- Political will is critical if positive change and meaningful participation is to be achieved.
- It needs to be understood that accessibility and the right to participate is more than physical barriers. It is also "socio-political" and this means addressing issues like how public information is communicated, exploring how plain language can be incorporated into all aspects of city life.

- Examples where Luxembourg's efforts to promote inclusion and participation have practical outcomes include making sure the terminology used across public services is accessible and providing interpreters for formal meetings. They also include running awareness campaigns about accessibility as well as participatory and political committees that encourage engagement and representation, especially of persons with disabilities.
- Making elections and political institutions more accessible and pushing for greater participation has grown as a priority, but more progress is needed.

Before you can vote in elections as a voter, before you can stand in elections as a candidate, a lot of work needs to be done upstream and providing the right information is important.

Madeleine Kayser

Panel Two Part 2: Debate

Rhetoric versus reality

Comments from the floor and panel responses

As the day came near to ending there was no sign of the discussion winding down. Rather there was "a forest of hands" from people who wished to speak, as **Ms Piggot** noted. This was followed by a burst of wide-ranging comments and questions from the floor. Unfortunately there was not enough time for all the questions to be asked and, also due to lack of time, responses from the panel were brief.



The core themes that came up during the session covered the adequacy of resources to promote participation by disabled citizens and ensuring inclusion in political processes for those most marginalized, such as people with learning disabilities.

Ensuring adequate resources for participation and tackling marginalization: As was clearly indicated by participants

throughout the first day of the conference, making sure that promises to bring about inclusion in political life and in elections are backed up by sufficient resources, matters enormously. **Styilanos Kypouropoulos** from I-Living, the first independent living organization of its kind in Greece, asked panellists for their thoughts on how more opportunities for persons with disabilities to participate in political life is possible if vital resources like personal assistants are not adequately provided and funded.

How can we decide which is our political party if we don't have the opportunity, in employment, in education, in ruling our own life? If there is not the right for self-advocacy

Styilanos Kypouropoulos

Mirela Bukovac from The Youth Group of Spina Bifida raised the issue of representation of young persons with disabilities. “My question for the whole panel is: do you have any suggestions how we as a society can involve young persons to attend this kind of event? And how can they be active?” Autism Europe representative, **Pietro Cirrincione** wanted to draw attention to some of the specific challenges people with autism encounter with communication in the political sphere. “We interpret words and meanings literally. Therefore we find ourselves disoriented by what political parties say,” **Mr Cirrincione** explained.

The characteristics of political dialogue, including that politicians often contradict themselves presents difficulties, he added. “You have politicians who one week say one thing and the next week the opposite, to attract different groups within the electorate. For us it is disorienting.” Equally problematic was the practice of parties exaggerating their claims, he concluded.



In terms of further comments, **Andrey Tikhonov** From the University of Wroclaw, Poland remarked that democracy and political participation “is not just about elections,” and that we “have to look at the issue in the broader sense.” He made a call for persons with disabilities to be “more active” in the political process. Another came from **Elizabeth Harrington**, a self-advocate from Ireland who has Multiple Sclerosis directed at **Ms Piggot**. She wanted to know if Inclusion Europe “could be made leaner” and spend more of its budget on delivering services rather than on staff costs. **Tamas Barnabas** from Budapest meanwhile addressed a statement to everyone present saying he hoped to see more political leaders with disabilities in the

future. “It is not a dream,” he said. “It’s our homework.”

Responses from the panel included: **Mr Prevos** took up the question about the importance of seeing the right to vote “within the broader context.” Higher standards within education systems, including inclusive education for young people that better informs individuals about citizenship, was part of the answer to promoting greater participation, he suggested. On the topic of personal assistants and resources **Mr Prevos** agreed with the commenter, saying more assistants were needed. **Ms Tarczay** echoed his view adding that the focus should be on provision of the full range of assistance, such as sign language interpreters. This was especially true for young people in education “so they will be participating in politics in the future.”

Responding to **Ms Harrington’s** question about how Inclusion Europe uses its resources, **Ms Piggot** said she stood by the organisation’s record and that it: “Does an enormous amount of work for a modest amount of money.”

“That has to be the message from here: That the political participation of persons with disabilities at the moment is not fair, won’t do and we must do better.”

Maureen Piggot

DAY TWO: ‘We Are EU Citizens’

Panel Three: I have dream that one day my city takes disabilities into account...

The members of this panel were: **Inmaculada Placencia Porrero**, disability and Inclusion Unit, DG Employment & moderator of the panel; **Nadia Hadad**, board member of the European Network on Independent Living; **Roberto Castiglioni**, chair of the Heathrow Access Advisory Group; **Lara Méndez López**, Mayor of Lugo, Spain.

Creating real accessibility for all

The final panel of the conference got underway before the Access City Awards winners were announced later in the morning. **Emmanuelle Grange**, who kicked off the session, took time to comment on the success of ‘Talk Wall’ outside the room and to thank everyone who had contributed their ideas and thoughts. The panel moderator **Inmaculada Placencia Porrero** provided a brief overview of the many dimensions to accessibility in urban settings before introducing each panellist.

“It is not a dream, but a nightmare” was how **Nadia Hadad** described her everyday experience as a disabled citizen living in Brussels as she began her presentation. In what was a detailed address filled with personal observations and recommendations for how to improve the accessibility of cities, **Ms Hadad** used her personal experience of navigating Brussels to shed light on what many persons with disabilities deal with living in modern cities.



She illustrated her points with practical examples speaking for instance of the lack of access to public transport networks in Brussels and the expensive, inconvenient substitutes like taxi-buses that are often the only alternatives. She explained that as a person who can’t use her fingers, common technologies like automated banking and ticketing machines are unusable.

Cultural and sporting activities, so easily enjoyed by other citizens, are all too often not accessible for persons with disabilities she pointed out. “Nothing is automatically well designed.”

As a passionate advocate for the attainment of independent living **Ms Hadad** laid out why, in the context of city living, ensuring independence was vital to all aspects of life. She told delegates: “Why I say independent living is important inside a city: it is only possible through a combination of various environmental and individual factors that allow us to have control over our own lives by making choices and decision regarding where we live, with who we live and how we want to live.”

Ms Hadad summarized some of the key tenets of achieving independent living including access to information, transport, technical aids and equipment, adapted housing, adequate income plus appropriate health and social care provision. Peer support and cultivating strong self-advocacy networks are also crucial, she added. She reminded delegates of the various principles within the UN CRPD that should mean full accessibility is the reality for people with “all types” of disabilities.

The environment should be designed to meet the needs of all persons who wish to use it. If an environment is accessible, usable, convenient, and it is a pleasure to use for everybody, it is in everybody's benefit.

Nadia Hadad



WHAT CAN CITIES DO for citizens with disability?

Ms Hadad made a number of comments and recommendations related to universal design as a key strategy for improving accessibility. These included:

- Universal design is design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used “to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability.” It must be flexible and simple to use.
- Considering diverse needs should be a prerequisite throughout the design process and local stakeholders, including persons with disabilities, should be involved at all stages of consultation planning, implementation and monitoring.
- There should be commitments at a local, regional and national level to implementation.

Accessible travel, including to and through airports, is an issue that frequently arises whenever there are discussions about equal citizenship and independence. With this in mind **Roberto Castiglioni** took the opportunity to outline how his work with Heathrow Airport in London might indicate the future of access at airports for persons with disabilities, and also what local administrators and lawmakers might learn from it. “There is a correlation between the eco system of an airport and the city it serves,” he told the conference.

Mr Castiglioni emphasized in the first instance that consultation is central to introducing a functioning, accessible system. “Without consultation, without listening to the people who benefit from accessibility, we cannot have a full understanding of it.” He said the aviation sector was “at the forefront” of accessibility, in part because it is a legal requirement across Europe to consult with disability organisations. With Heathrow, he said this had “been taken to a new level” because the advisory group of which he chairs is involved in “every aspect of accessibility.”

There were a number of innovations underway at Heathrow highlighted. Among these were:

- For the new terminal 6 at Heathrow due to open in 2025, the advisory group was involved as early as the blueprints.
- Effective use of signs are vital to airport flow of passengers and as part of a plan to de-clutter and simplify signs, Heathrow is the first airport in the world to adopt the UN's accessibility symbol. The language accompanying signs is also being revised. “It is clear. It is holistic. It is open. It tells it is accessible. It doesn't remind why it has to be accessible, because a person is in a wheelchair or visually impaired or so on. It just reminds everybody the place is accessible.” The airport has also launched a new ‘Sign Live’ initiative for deaf passengers with an App and online directory.
- The wider London transport network including The London Underground is improving, though ‘a work in progress’. Notable innovations such as step-free access on the Heathrow Express and call buttons for additional assistance as well as tactile paving have been introduced while the new overground train line, the Elizabeth Line, will have step free access.

Mr Castiglioni concluded by showing two short videos illustrating improvements to the wider London transport tube network and another on the Sign Live project.



Accessibility has to be on the forefront of thinking in order to meet and serve the needs of the travelling public. Accessibility is first and foremost a cultural issue. We need to see where improvement is required in order to understand it.

Roberto Castiglioni

Lara Méndez López brought the final speakers' session to a close by first mentioning her gratitude for the city of Lugo's special mention at the Access City Awards 2017. She then reviewed how within Spain, efforts to increase accessibility were taking place and how Lugo approaches the issue. "We have been able to make progress in order to guarantee the autonomy of people who have disabilities, including their full participation in community life," **Ms López** said.

Because municipality administrations are closest to the citizens, people tend to turn to local officials for action. For an ancient city like Lugo, accessibility is fundamental to building the kind of city it aspires to be, **Ms López** said. "More human; more social, which considers the needs of everyone."

Among the examples of progress on accessibility in Lugo were the following:

- Officials responsible for focusing on delivering inclusion and equality are in place, as is a municipal 'cabinet' that "works towards adapting" parts of the city.
- On transport there is municipal financial aid available and Lugo has the highest number of accessible taxis in Galicia. There are acoustic traffic lights, smart houses, accessible tourist information, and interpreters at public events, while it is a requirement that 5% of all public sector jobs are reserved for persons with disabilities.
- European investment is targeted at improving accessibility in the historic centre, an urban plan enables greater use of public spaces, and there is also a 'smart city' project to "continue to take advantage" of new technologies.

Panel Three: Debate

Taking cities and transport to the next level of accessibility

Comments from the floor and panel responses

Transport, and in particular airports, dominated the discussion for the final debate with multiple questions directed at **Mr. Castiglioni** on issues spanning how airports interact with people who are deaf or hearing impaired or have hidden disabilities and how those with service animals manage at airports. In addition, some specific comments reflected on what full inclusion entails in reality while others were put to **Ms. Lopez** regarding Lugo's accessibility record.

Establishing accessibility through direct consultation: **Gergely Tapolczai** from the European Union of the Deaf, complemented **Mr Castiglioni** on the work so far at Heathrow and followed up by enquiring about what is being done to make sure that when a person with a disability requests assistance, the response takes into account what is needed for different disabilities, for example, communication support. He also reminded **Mr Castiglioni** that one of the short videos he showed had subtitling and sign language while the other did not. A question from **Teresa Amat** from the European Association of Cochlear Implant Users focused on the fact that people with implants can't go through the usual airport security gates. "I don't know whether the authorities in the airport have taken this aspect into account," she said. "I'd like to know if it is about that."

David Adams from the European Guide Dog Federation wondered what facilities are available at Heathrow for service dogs to go to the toilet and if there will be facilities past security in future. **Mary Passeri** from the UK, the mother of a son with autism mentioned that their personal experiences differed between airports in how staff interacted with her son.



Through all of this we have been able to make headway in the course of the last 20 years as setting up Lugo as an inclusive integrated city.

Lara Méndez López





PANEL THREE DEBATE

She said: “The last time we flew from Heathrow it was murder. He was terrified. Security grabbed hold of him and we had to leave and go back home. Do you take autism into consideration in your planning?”

Tamas Barnabas from Budapest enquired if the Heathrow advisory group was examining ways to make sure there were explicit references to the needs of people with different disabilities in rules and regulations governing emergencies.

The principle of ‘nothing about us without us’ was raised by **Mari Siilsalu** from the European Network on Independent Living. She reflected on the importance of mainstreaming, commenting that decision-makers and politicians dividing issues into non-disabled and disabled was not the way forward. She asked panellists to contemplate the phrase: “nothing without us because everything is about us.” On Lugo specifically, **Teresa Amat** of Euro-ciu Cochlear Implants commented that she thought Lugo did not have a theatre accessible for deaf people.

Answers from the panel included: **Mr Castiglioni** addressed questions on airports responding first to safety and emergencies. He commented that security protocols are ever-changing as a result of different threats and considerations and said he would take concerns raised on board. As far as hidden disabilities go, he said Heathrow “had a lot of room for improvement” but that a new staff-training program was on course to be introduced within days. He said also that he “totally” understood the point about service dogs saying a review of the issue was scheduled to be completed in January 2018.

Mr Castiglioni added that he agreed it was time to “move past” the nothing about us without us mantra towards: “we have to do it all together.” Regarding Lugo’s theatres, Ms Lopez said it was true there wasn’t a deaf-accessible theatre in Lugo but that “we are working on this,” along with other efforts around the city.

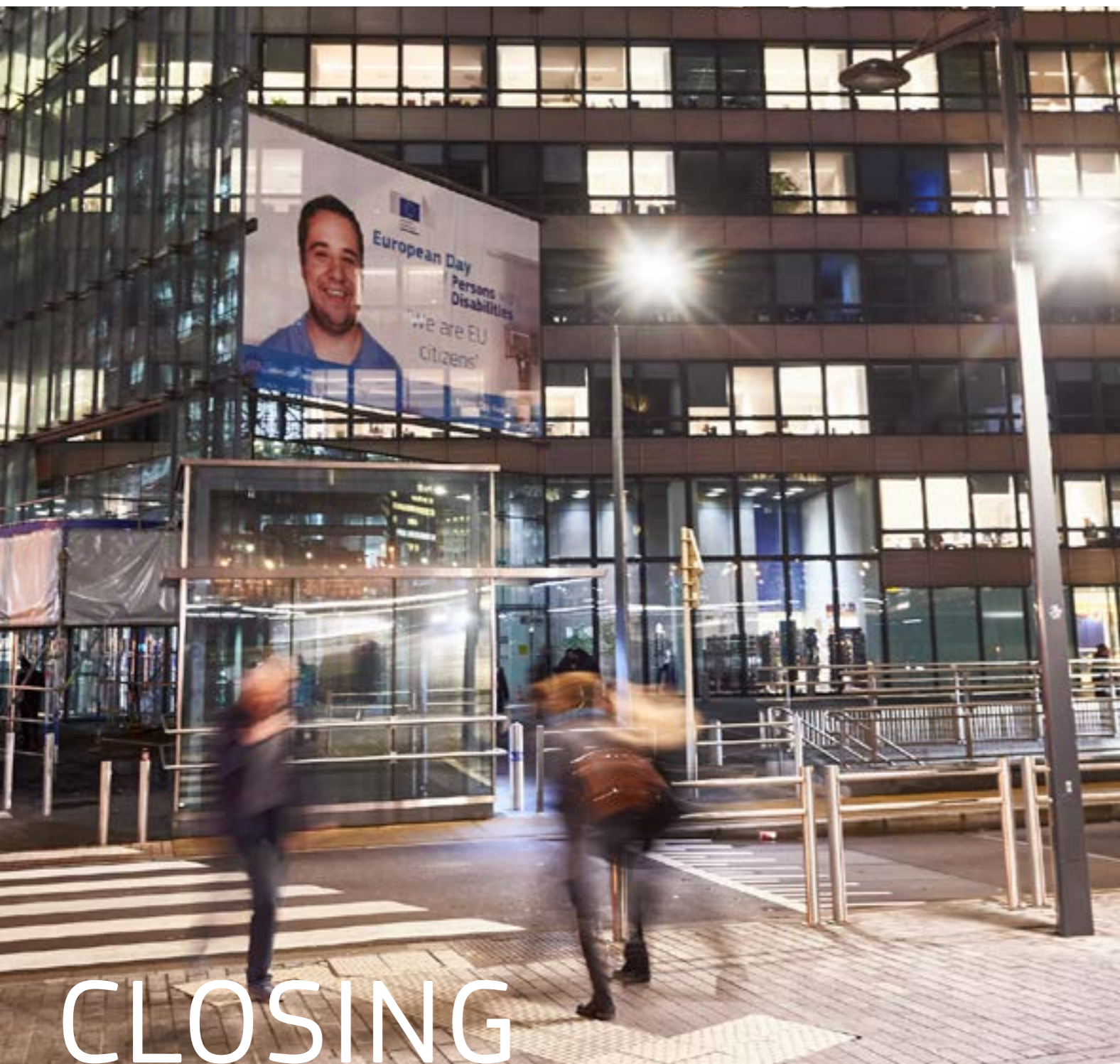
For final comments, the moderator **Ms Placencia** gave the floor to **Ms Hadad** who underlined the importance of mainstreaming advisory groups and consultations processes. She closed with a message for the conference organisers and attendees stressing that it was crucial that the conference encouraged feedback year-on-year.

During the Access City Awards Ceremony, which took place prior to the closing remarks of the conference, **Marianne Thyssen, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility**, took a moment to reflect on the importance not just of the awards, but the wider goal of increasing accessibility, inclusion and participation. Achieving a truly accessible Europe is something citizens wanted right now “to benefit everyone.”

After congratulating EDF members on the organisation’s 20th anniversary, **Ms Thyssen** echoed many of the sentiments expressed over the two days highlighting the significance of positive measures like the European Accessibility Act for ensuring the rights of citizens with disabilities. She also reiterated the historic nature of formally proclaiming of the European Pillar of Social Rights. She told the conference: “This means everyone is now mobilized to put the Pillar into practice. And the key principles of our European Pillar of Social Rights are the inclusion of persons with disabilities, equality of access to jobs and education, and access to goods and services.”

CLOSING Remarks

By **Nadejda Harizanova**, state expert, at the Integration of Persons with disabilities Department, Bulgarian Presidency; **Pat Clarke**, vice president, EDF; **Helga Stevens**, Member of the European Parliament (by video); **Manuela Geleng**, acting director for Social Affairs Directorate DG Employment.



CLOSING REMARKS

Following a day and a half of presentations and discussions that captured the broad scope of opportunities and challenges facing EU citizens with disabilities, the closing of the conference looked to the future. **Nadejda Harizanova** began by summarizing the priorities of the Bulgarian Presidency, which took effect on January 1st 2018. "It is very important because it is for our first time," she said. She explained the priorities of the presidency and told attendees that in preparation for the presidency, national priorities were developed with a focus on early childhood development and employment, including for persons with disabilities.

That persons with disabilities are supported to be "full members of society" is a key priority she added. It would be about: "developing opportunities, enabling persons with disabilities to exercise the rights and freedom to the fullest extent; guaranteeing equal opportunities." **Ms Harizanova** added: "We expect from all of us to find concrete solutions to concrete issues."

Pat Clarke offered a succinct summary of some of the pressing issues presented during the conference including the "unacceptable" ongoing gaps in education and employment, high rates of poverty and discrimination. He also reminded delegates of the discussions around the role of the European Pillar of Social Rights and the social dimension of Sustainable Development Goals. Echoing **Mr Vardakastanis** at the opening of the event he said: "Are we all equal? It becomes more and more evident throughout the discussions we are not. We should be, but we are not." Putting the issue of citizenship in context he went on: "Not everybody has the same opportunities to exercise the right to vote, to be elected, to social protection and work."

Reflecting the overall tone of the conference **Mr Clarke** concluded that there was still "a lot of work to do". He stressed the importance of policymakers and policies being brought closer to citizens, the need for the European Pillar of Social Rights to be an effective tool for fulfilling the commitments under the UN CRPD, and he called on the EU to work toward "an overarching and "comprehensive strategy" for 2020-2030 to implement the convention that is integrated into the annual financial framework. **Mr Clarke** said: "Political participation is crucial part of being a citizen in Europe."

A short video from MEP, **Helga Stevens** reminded everyone of the major elements of real participation and active citizenship. "The opportunity to be involved in political life, whether by standing or elected office, electing a candidate, joining a political party, listening to or participating in political debate, or even reading political news stories in the media, is the heart of what it means to live in a democratic society," **Ms Stevens** said.

She told those present that the importance of the European Accessibility Act "could not be overestimated". Alongside the Act making progress towards final implementation, she referred to the Parliament having in the previous week endorsed her report on the European Disability strategy 2010-2020 and beyond. It sent a "strong message" to the Commission and Member States she said that a "bold and effective" strategy for the next decade was necessary. **Ms. Stevens** also made a passionate call for persons with disabilities to make their views known to politicians at all levels to "demand that your rights are respected", and she encouraged those present to help her to keep advocating for rights in her role as an MEP. "It's time for action now."

In her closing address, **Manuela Geleng** gave an overview of core themes that emerged throughout the conference including the challenges to full and active participation in the democratic process and concerns about ongoing exclusion and the "multiple discrimination" faced by many persons with disabilities. Developments such as the European Accessibility Act and the European Pillar of Social Rights were significant, **Ms Geleng** said but, as had been raised a number of times over the course of the conference, the direct involvement of persons with disabilities in the development, implementation and monitoring of policies was vital.

In conclusion, **Ms Geleng** referred to the Commission's commitment going forward, including that in April 2018 the next annual Convention on Inclusive Growth will address the "central theme" of inclusion of persons with disabilities. Finally, she encouraged everyone to help build on the shared commitment to bringing about change in the future.

Ms Geleng said: "There is still a lot to do. But I also gathered from all of you today and yesterday there is a strong commitment out there to make things change."

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