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Building an inclusive Europe

With the EU elections looming, it's time for policy-makers to dismantle the barriers faced by millions of persons with disabilities

Persons with disabilities are expected to be patient — constantly in receipt of promises by policy-makers that change is on its way and that their concerns will be acted upon. Yet, it is hard to ignore just how light certain manifestos for the June election are on their commitment to the more than 100 million persons with disabilities living in the European Union.

It is not only that the pledges on disability inclusion are meagre. Even the websites of the main European political parties were recently found to be incompatible with basic accessibility requirements.

This is even more incomprehensible when Europe is juggling so many crises which disproportionately affect persons with disabilities — often not just left behind but forgotten. Far from the 'polycrisis' justifying the sidelining of disability issues, on the contrary, it enhances the case for their prioritisation.

A startling picture

We are talking about a very significant group of people. The latest figures from Eurostat suggest that 27 per cent of individuals in the EU have some kind of disability; among women, this rises to almost 30 per cent. It's hard to let policy-makers off the hook for overlooking challenges faced by more than a quarter of the population.

The data speak for themselves as to the urgency of removing the barriers faced by persons with disabilities. EU-level figures paint a startling picture of just how different life looks if one has a disability.

Take poverty. In the EU, 18.3 per cent of people without a disability live at risk of poverty and social exclusion. For those with a disability, however, this figure jumps to 28.8 per cent. It leaps even higher for

women with disabilities, of whom 29.8 per cent are so at risk, and soars to around 36 per cent for persons with disabilities who have high support needs.

Or consider employment. On average, the employment rate of persons with disabilities in the EU is over 21 percentage points lower than that for persons without. In some countries, the difference is far greater, such as in Ireland (37 percentage points), Croatia (36pp) and Belgium (35.3pp). Persons with disabilities are also far more likely to be working only part-time, in low-paying jobs or in sheltered workshops, which has a huge impact on their quality of life.

Persons with disabilities do not need sympathy but expect their rights as citizens to be vindicated. And while the EU cannot be expected to resolve all of these issues, it could do a number of things much better.

Young people with disabilities have it particularly hard. Many are forced to drop out of education early because they do not get the support they need: 22.1 per cent of persons with disabilities in the EU drop out of school, compared with only 8.4 per cent of people without disabilities. Again, the higher a person's support needs, the more likely it is that these will not be met by the education system: a whopping 41.8 per cent of young people with high support needs do not finish school.

Those who manage to complete their schooling and go to university then meet an array of further barriers, particularly if they plan to take up learning opportunities abroad. The lack of quality, inclusive education worsens employment perspectives generally for young people as they make the transition towards adulthood: 31.1 per cent of young persons with disabilities are not in employment, education or training (NEETs); among those with higher support needs, the figure is around 42 per cent.

Nor does it stop there. Countless persons with disabilities are denied boarding on planes, trains or buses each year in the EU without explanation or arrive at their destination to find their assistive devices broken without any hope of receiving full compensation. More than one million persons with disabilities are still segregated in institutional care across the EU. And countless women and girls with disabilities continue to undergo forced sterilisation.

This is a snapshot of the barriers society creates for most persons with disabilities in the EU. They do not need sympathy but expect their rights as citizens to be vindicated. And while the EU cannot be expected to resolve all of these issues – the treaties do not give it the prerogative to do so – it could do a number of things much better.

Greater ambition is needed

First, its institutions need to acknowledge the scale of the challenge and allocate financial and human resources accordingly. Structural innovation is required: there should be a directorate-general for equality and fundamental rights in the European Commission, working in close co-operation with a disability committee or co-ordinator in the European Parliament and an equality configuration in the Council of the EU.

The union also needs to be much more ambitious in its political and policy priorities, focusing on the concerns of persons with disabilities with the courage to impose legally binding measures. The EU has proved its ability to do so through initiatives such as the new EU Disability Card and Disability Parking Card and legislation such as the European Accessibility Act.

In line with the EU's competences, why not begin the new mandate by finally tackling denial of boarding on flights and ensuring fair compensation when mobility equipment is lost or damaged during travel? The commission has proposed legislation to revise these rights but stopped short when it comes to passengers with disabilities. The parliament and the council have the chance to propose a better, rights-based text.

The EU could pave the way by better controlling the availability and affordability of assistive technologies and devices persons with disabilities depend on across the single market.

The EU should also work on employment. There is a blueprint in the European Youth Guarantee, an initiative supported by €99 bn of EU funding that has assisted tens of millions of young people across the EU to get into jobs and training programmes and resulted in a reduction in the number of unemployed youth. The European disability movement is asking the EU to put in place a similar initiative for persons with disabilities. This 'European disability employment and skills guarantee' would be an adapted version, removing age limits for eligibility, allowing individuals to retain their much-needed disability allowance when in their new role and providing extra funds to support employers in making any necessary workplace adaptations or purchases.

It is crucial, too, that people be given access to the assistive devices and technologies they require to carry out day-to-day activities. The EU could pave the way by better controlling the availability and affordability of

assistive technologies and devices persons with disabilities depend on across the single market.

We also urgently need the forced sterilisation of women and girls with disabilities to be prohibited. And the EU must immediately stop its money being used to fund institutions where persons with disabilities are segregated and denied basic rights.

What is needed, first and foremost, is for policy-makers to acknowledge the barriers faced by Europe's disabled population and to make removing them a priority. Our message to all political groups, all candidates for the European Parliament and all those in line to represent their member states in the next term within the other EU institutions is: do not pity persons with disabilities — just act.

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