



European Economic  
and Social Committee

## EESC FACTSHEET

# DISABILITY RIGHTS



### The EESC: a strong advocate for persons with disabilities

Many of the estimated 100 million persons with disabilities in the EU suffer regular discrimination through physical barriers, prejudice and stigmatisation. Practical and social hurdles affect all aspects of their lives, including at work, school and the polling station.

Persons with disabilities have equal rights and are entitled to dignity, equal treatment, independent living and full participation in society. These rights are enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which the EU ratified in 2010.

The CRPD was revolutionary in moving the world from treating those with disabilities as recipients of charity, medical treatment and social protection to putting the onus on society to remove the barriers that prevent them from contributing to their communities.

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) actively monitors and contributes to the implementation of the CRPD through its Thematic Study Group on Disability Rights. EESC member Pietro Vittorio Barbieri, a disability activist who was directly involved in drafting the CRPD, currently leads the group.

Pietro Vittorio Barbieri,  
President of the EESC  
Thematic study group  
on disability rights



## Gathering input

The group provides guidance to the EU on the CRPD with input from disability and civil society organisations, among others.

This input is particularly significant today as the EU is preparing to adopt its new EU strategy on the rights of persons with disabilities for 2021-2030. This strategy gives all EU countries the opportunity to fully implement the CRPD. Some have yet to sign the UN convention.

The group also plays an active role in the annual Conference of States Parties to the CRPD.

To gather input, it organises at least two public hearings or conferences a year, which are attended by many stakeholders. It also carries out fact-finding missions on the status of CRPD implementation in EU countries. These missions have led to reports on the Czech Republic, Ireland, Cyprus, Portugal, Poland and Italy.

This input, along with EU-wide recommendations from the EESC, feeds into the EU's regular reports to the UN, forming part of the thrust of the EESC's ongoing advocacy for disability rights.

## Taking action

In its opinion of December 2019, the EESC urges the Commission to align its new disability strategy with the CRPD and strengthen EU supervision of its implementation.

Persons with disabilities must have a voice in the process of change to a fairer Europe, says Ioannis Vardakastanis, rapporteur for the opinion.

“Nothing about us without us’ is not a slogan, but a way of life and a form of emancipation,” he says. “We need to make disability discrimination a thing of the past! We still have a long way to go to implement the CRPD. It’s the EU’s obligation to do so, out of duty to more than a hundred million persons with disabilities in Europe.”

Mr Vardakastanis is also president of the European Disability Forum and of the Greek National Confederation of Disabled People, with long experience in human rights campaigning in his native Greece, the EU and globally.



Ioannis Vardakastanis and Gunta Anča at the EESC conference Shaping the EU Agenda for Disability Rights 2020-2030 in March 2020. The EESC would like to see the new Agenda fully aligned with the UNCRPD.

In the opinion, the EESC among other recommends:

- fully implementing the CRPD and mainstreaming disability equality in all EU policies;
- establishing 'disability focal points' in all EU institutions, which should ensure that the CRPD and the new strategy are properly monitored at EU level;
- developing a coordinated approach between the European Commission, Parliament and Council, and a working group on disability within the Council;
- adopting EU rules to eliminate all discrimination based on disability;
- developing common rules on recognising persons with a disability from another EU country, and accessibility standards in general and for workplaces;
- establishing guidelines for common standards on disability benefits and services;
- improving data collection on disability;
- putting pressure on EU countries, through the European Semester, to develop their own national strategies; and
- ensuring civil society and disabled persons' organisations are involved in all aspects of the EU's Disability Rights Strategy for the next decade.

## The right to vote for all

Persons with disabilities also face many barriers to being able to vote in local, national and EU elections, as outlined in an EESC's information report in March 2019. After the European Parliament elections in May 2019, it was established that national rules in 14 EU countries had deprived around 400 000 persons with mental health problems or intellectual disabilities of their right to vote.

Furthermore, millions with disabilities were also unable to cast their ballots or were discouraged from



The EESC Thematic study group on disability rights organises numerous hearings and conferences dedicated to disability topics.

doing so because their specific needs were not taken into account in the information provided, at polling stations and in burdensome administrative procedures.

These barriers occur more or less in all Member States, a situation the EESC finds unacceptable and contrary to fundamental EU values. In its opinion of December 2020, the EESC called on the EU and Member States to urgently amend the 1976 Electoral Act in a way that guarantees that all EU citizens with disabilities have a genuine right to vote in the EP elections in 2024.

"The right to vote is a fundamental right and a cornerstone of European democracy. But above all, it is also a matter of human dignity," said Krzysztof Pater, the opinion's rapporteur. "How is it possible that in the 21st century, millions of EU citizens with disabilities cannot enjoy that right and decision-makers do almost nothing to change that?"

In the opinion, the EESC asked for the principles of universality, secrecy and directness to be clarified in the EU's 1976 Electoral Act, among other recommendations.

## Find out more

### UN's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=1138>

### Union of equality: Strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities 2021-2030

<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1484&langId=en>

### European Semester

[https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester_en)

## EESC Opinions and Information Reports

**Opinion:** The need to guarantee real rights for persons with disabilities to vote in European Parliament elections (additional opinion), December 2020

<https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/need-guarantee-real-rights-persons-disabilities-vote-european-parliament-elections-additional-opinion>

**Opinion:** Shaping the EU agenda for disability rights 2020-2030: a contribution from the European Economic and Social Committee (own-initiative opinion), December 2019

<https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/shaping-eu-agenda-disability-rights-2020-2030-contribution-european-economic-and-social-committee-own-initiative-opinion>

**Information Report:** The real right of persons with disabilities to vote in European Parliament elections, March 2019

<https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/information-reports/real-right-persons-disabilities-vote-european-parliament-elections-information-report>

**Opinion:** Regulation on the European Regional Development Fund and Cohesion Fund, October 2018

<https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/regulation-european-regional-development-fund-and-cohesion-fund>

**Opinion:** The situation of women with disabilities, July 2018

<https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/situation-women-disabilities-exploratory-opinion-requested-european-parliament>

**Podcast:** The long and winding road to accessibility

<https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/avdb/audio/episode-04-long-and-winding-road-accessibility>

## The EESC on social media



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