

4-5 DECEMBER 2025

EUROPEAN DAY OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES



#EDPD2025
#UNIONOFEQUALITY
#EUACCESSCITY

ACCESS CITY
Award **2026**

EUROPEAN DAY OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Report completed in March 2026

This report was written by Andrea Schouw-Naphegyi, Independent Expert on Disability and Inclusion, Rapporteur of the EDPD in 2025.

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Executive summary

On 4 and 5 December 2025, the European Commission (EC), in partnership with the European Disability Forum (EDF), hosted its annual conference in Brussels to mark the European Day of Persons with Disabilities (EDPD 2025). The conference brought together more than 430 policymakers, experts, civil society representatives and persons with disabilities.

The 2025 edition provided an opportunity to:

- **Reflect on the achievements** of the [EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030](#) (Strategy), **discuss priorities** for its implementation in the coming years,
- Examine how the EU budget can effectively promote disability inclusion and
- Discuss inclusive emergency preparedness and crisis management strategies.

Cities were recognised for their initiatives to improve accessibility for persons with disabilities through the celebration of the **Access City Award**.

The EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 is the policy framework for implementing the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) (UNCRPD). It sets out an ambitious range of actions and flagship initiatives across multiple domains, with the objective of ensuring that all persons with disabilities in Europe can fully enjoy their human rights and participate on an equal basis with others in society and the economy. In recent years, the European Commission has delivered a number of key initiatives under the Strategy, including the [Disability Platform](#), the [Disability Employment Package](#), the renewed [Human Resources Strategy](#) of the EC, [AccessibleEU](#), the [European Disability Card](#) and the [European Parking Card](#), as well as the [Guidance on independent living](#), among others.

The report summarises the **key messages** and **challenges** highlighted during the EDPD 2025 by speakers and participants.

The first day of the conference focused on **advancing the implementation of the Strategy** and delivering visible outcomes in its second half. Speakers highlighted the importance of achieving tangible improvements in the daily lives of persons with disabilities. Particular emphasis was placed on **strengthening oversight**, **reinforcing accountability** and **empowering institutions** to ensure that commitments are effectively translated into practice at national and local level.

Funding emerged as a central theme throughout the first day. Speakers and participants highlighted that EU funding instruments are **powerful drivers of change**, but can also perpetuate exclusion if not properly aligned with disability rights and fundamental rights obligations. Discussions stressed the need for stronger safeguards, conditionality and monitoring, as well as the meaningful involvement of organisations of persons with disabilities throughout the funding cycle. Case examples illustrated both effective practices and ongoing risks, highlighting the need to **ensure that funding is aligned with disability rights obligations**.

Personal testimonies and lived experience played an important role in grounding the discussions. Contributors emphasised that **participation must go beyond consultation** and enable **real influence on decision-making**. The principle “Nothing about us without us” was framed as a practical requirement for effective implementation rather than a symbolic commitment.

The second day of the conference addressed the role of local action, **preparedness** and **crisis management**. Discussions highlighted that recent crises have shown how **persons with disabilities are disproportionately affected** when preparedness systems are not inclusive by design. Accessibility and inclusion were therefore presented as essential components of safety and resilience.

A recurring message was the **recognition of persons with lived experience as experts**. Veterans and others directly affected by crises illustrated how lived experience can contribute to preparedness, peer support and training, thereby **strengthening the effectiveness of response systems**. Inclusive emergency communication, including accessible emergency services and information, was identified as a priority for future actions.

During the EDPD 2025, the Access City Award 2026 ceremony took place. The following European cities were rewarded for their outstanding efforts to become more accessible for persons with disabilities:

- First place: **Zaragoza** (Spain)
- Second place: **Valencia** (Spain)
- Third place: **Rennes** (France)
- Special Mention on Accessibility in Housing: **Salzburg** (Austria)
- Special Mention on Accessibility in Emergency Preparedness: **Valencia** (Spain)
- Special Mention on Information and Communication Technologies: **Piacenza** (Italy)

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACA	Access City Award
COP	Community of Practice
DG ECHO	Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
DG EMPL	Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion
DG ENER	Directorate-General for Energy
DG JUST	Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers
EASPD	European Association of Services Providers for Persons with Disabilities
EDC	European Disability Card
EDPD	European Day of Persons with Disabilities
EDF	European Disability Forum
EESC	European Economic and Social Committee
EP	European Parliament
EPSCO	Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council
ESF	European Social Fund
EU	European Union
EUD	European Union of the Deaf
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
MS	Member State
OPD	Organisation of Persons with Disabilities
UN	United Nations
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities



Day 1

Opening session



Welcoming by **Ana Carla Pereira**, Director “Equality and Non-Discrimination”, DG JUST, European Commission

SPEAKERS

Hadja Lahbib,

European Commissioner for Equality, Preparedness and Crisis Management

Sophie Hæstorp Andersen,

Minister for Social Affairs and Housing, Denmark

Ioannis Vardakastanis,

President of the European Disability Forum (EDF)

In her opening remarks, **Ana Carla Pereira**, Director “Equality and Non-Discrimination”, DG JUST, European Commission, welcomed participants and emphasised the long-standing role of the European Day of Persons with Disabilities (EDPD) as a platform for dialogue between persons with disabilities, their representative organisations, policymakers and political leaders.

She noted that EDPD 2025 takes place at a significant moment, as the [EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030](#) (Strategy) reaches its mid-term point. She outlined the main themes of the conference and referred to recent milestones, including the [Concluding Observations](#) of the [UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) and the proposal for the [Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034](#).



Ana Carla Pereira highlighted the value of the conference discussions in informing ongoing work at EU level and thanked participants for their active engagement over the two days.

Hadja Lahbib, European Commissioner for Equality, Preparedness and Crisis Management, placed the discussions in a broad political and strategic context. She underlined that disability rights must be understood as a horizontal responsibility cutting across all EU policies. Equality requires consistent integration in policy design, implementation and funding decisions. She situated the conference at an important moment, as the European Union enters discussions on the next Multiannual Financial Framework. She highlighted the EU budget as a key instrument for advancing the [Union of Equality](#).

She referred in particular to the proposed [AGORA EU programme](#), under which funding would more than double to **EUR 3.6 billion** to promote equality and non-discrimination, combat gender-based violence and strengthen democratic participation. She also referred to the existing [Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme](#) (CERV) as part of the broader effort to reinforce democracy, equality and citizens' engagement.

Commissioner Lahbib recalled that the mid-term of the [EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030](#) represents an opportunity to consolidate progress and reinforce action. She referred to recent developments shaping this next phase, including the Concluding Observations of the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, discussions among Member States at the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council (EPSCO) meeting on 17 October 2025 and the European Parliament report setting priorities for the second half of the Strategy. As announced in the Commission Work Programme 2026, she confirmed that the Strategy will be strengthened by an initiative of the EC, titled "Enhancing the strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities up to 2030".

She emphasised the importance of inclusive governance, noting that Commission services are in active dialogue with social partners and civil society organisations, including through the Open Public Consultation launched in the context of the Strategy. She also highlighted the Disability Platform as one of the key achievements of the first half of the Strategy, supporting coordination, exchange and participation at EU level. She underlined that the EC will continue to support civil society organisations, describing them as the backbone of participatory policymaking, and stressed that the Strategy is built on the principle of mainstreaming disability inclusion across all EU policies and programmes.

She also addressed preparedness and crisis management as an integral part of disability inclusion. Referring to the Preparedness Union Strategy, she highlighted the Commission's commitment to a whole-of-society approach, ensuring that persons with disabilities have access to information, support and appropriate tools in emergency situations. This includes work on guidelines, training for first responders and strengthened crisis communication to reach all persons, including those with disabilities.

Looking ahead, Commissioner Lahbib stressed that accessibility, employment and independent living will remain top priorities under her mandate. She underlined that accessibility is a horizontal requirement that must be taken into account in the design and implementation of national and regional plans, in line with the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and the rule of law.

A video message from **Sophie Hæstorp Andersen, Minister for Social Affairs and Housing of Denmark**, presented the priorities of the Danish Presidency of the Council of the European Union. She emphasised that during the last six months, the Presidency had focused in particular on independent living for persons with disabilities, underlining its importance for improving living conditions and for the realisation of human rights, as set out in Article 19 of the UNCRPD.

She referred to recent initiatives undertaken during the Presidency: in October, the Council of the European Union approved conclusions on the social inclusion of persons with disabilities through the promotion of independent living. In November, the Danish Presidency hosted a high-level conference on this topic in Copenhagen.

Sophie Hæstorp Andersen pointed to challenges that persist across the European Union, including increasing self-reported experiences of discrimination, a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion among persons with disabilities. The number of persons with disabilities residing in institutional settings has not decreased significantly over the past decade. She concluded by expressing the hope that ongoing efforts and discussions would contribute to further progress.

Marilena Evangelou, Deputy Minister of Social Welfare of Cyprus, stated that the rights of persons with disabilities are a key priority for Cyprus at both national and European level. She stressed that inclusion is not an abstract concept but depends on the active participation of persons with disabilities in all areas of life, supported by concrete measures that enable participation in social and economic life.

Welcoming the EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, she called for continued concrete actions towards 2030. At the same time, she noted that significant challenges remain, including higher risks of poverty and social exclusion, lower employment levels and slow progress on deinstitutionalisation, as well as the disproportionate impact of housing shortages and rising costs.

Cyprus is currently pursuing a major legislative reform with a new draft law aimed at strengthening community-based social services through a combination of financial support and in-kind services, including supported decision-making and personalised assistance to enable independent living and participation. She also announced that Cyprus will host a High-Level Conference on disability in May 2026, followed by related meetings with the Disability Platform and the European Disability Forum. Cyprus will co-organise with the EC a side event at the 19th session of the Conference of States Parties to the UNCRPD in New York. Marilena Evangelou concluded that disability inclusion is not only a social and human rights issue but also a factor for Europe's economic resilience and competitiveness.

The perspective of the disability movement was articulated by Ioannis Vardakastanis, President of the European Disability Forum (EDF), reflecting on the evolution of the disability rights movement and the establishment of EDF in 1997. He recalled the important role played by organisations of persons with disabilities in shaping the UNCRPD and in securing its ratification by the EU. While acknowledging the progress achieved at EU level, he underlined that these advances still need to be further reflected in people's everyday lives.



He emphasised that, for many persons with disabilities, rights remain insufficiently realised in practice. Education systems, labour markets, housing, transport and public services continue to present barriers, despite existing legal and policy frameworks. He referred to concrete indicators illustrating these gaps, including persistently low employment rates, a high risk of poverty and social exclusion, and continued investment in institutional settings in a number of Member States.

Looking ahead, Ioannis Vardakastanis stressed that the second half of the EU Strategy must move beyond reflection towards concrete action. He underlined that political commitments need to be translated into ambitious and enforceable measures, supported by adequate funding, effective implementation and close cooperation with organisations of persons with disabilities. In this context, he emphasised that the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework will be a key opportunity to ensure that disability inclusion remains a clear political and financial priority.

Panel 1

Forging ahead : the next chapter in implementing the strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities 2021-2030



MODERATORS

Ana Carla Pereira, Director DG JUST, European Commission
Catherine Naughton, Director EDF

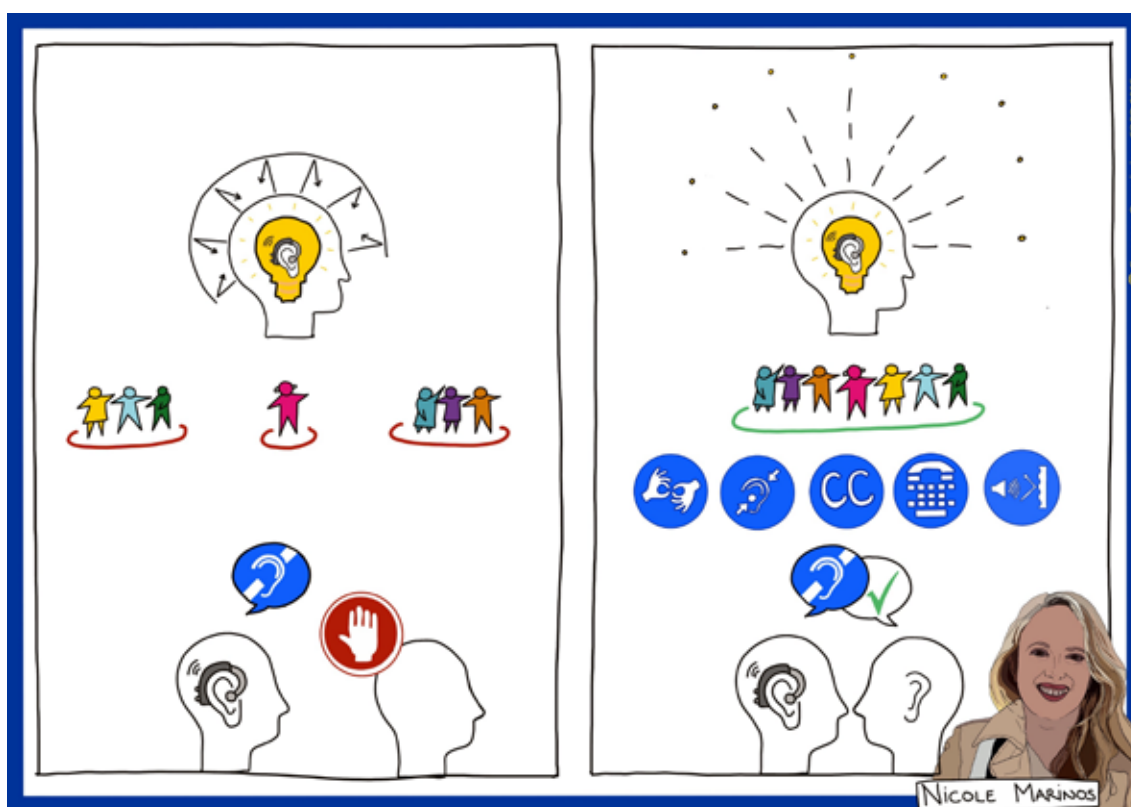
SPEAKERS

Personal testimony of Nicole Marinos,
Disability advocate, AHEAD
Li Andersson,
chair of the EMPL Committee, European Parliament
Marie-Pierre Le Breton,
President of the Permanent Group on Disability Rights,
European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)
Markus Schefer,
Member of the UNCRPD Committee

It opened with a personal testimony by **Nicole Marinos, disability advocate at AHEAD**. Drawing on her personal experience, she illustrated how barriers often emerge at key transition points, in particular when moving from education into employment. She explained that she relied on specific auditory and communication support, such as captioning and accessible recordings, during her studies. When entering the workplace, this support did not automatically carry over, requiring repeated discussions with employers to secure reasonable accommodation and appropriate support.

Referring to her experience with university internship programmes, she described having observed this transition from both perspectives: first as a student with a disability entering the labour market, and later through her professional work at AHEAD, where she now supports graduates with disabilities in their transition to employment. This dual perspective highlighted how administrative discontinuities and limited awareness can place a disproportionate burden on persons with disabilities.

She concluded by stressing that accessibility, reasonable accommodation and support services are prerequisites for equal participation. In her view, meaningful participation requires that persons with disabilities are actively involved in shaping decisions, particularly in the next phase of the Strategy. Nicole Marinos summarised her key message as follows: **“Inclusion is not determined by disability, it is determined by the environment. The environment is the variable, not us.”**



Li Andersson, Chair of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL) of the European Parliament, presented the European Parliament's position on the next phase of the EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. She stressed that political commitment, adequate funding and strong implementation are necessary to turn rights on paper into real change in the everyday lives of persons with disabilities.

She recalled that around one in four adults in the European Union lives with a disability and noted that many continue to face significant barriers, including lower employment rates, higher risks of poverty and social exclusion. She also referred to the situation of more than one million persons with disabilities still living in institutional settings and emphasised the need to accelerate the transition towards community-based support. In this context, she underlined that the future Multiannual Financial Framework should support this objective and remain fully aligned with fundamental rights obligations.

She outlined key priorities highlighted by the European Parliament, including the proposal for an Employment and Skills Guarantee for persons with disabilities, targeted measures within the future EU anti-poverty strategy, and stronger efforts to advance inclusive education at all levels. She also noted that digitalisation and artificial intelligence can support inclusion only if accessibility is ensured and safeguards are in place to prevent discrimination. Concluding, Li Andersson stressed the need for clear targets, timelines and adequate resources to ensure that EU action leads to tangible improvements in people's lives.



Marie-Pierre Le Breton, President of the Permanent Group on Disability Rights of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), presented the Committee's priorities for the second half of the Strategy, stressing the need for stronger legal ambition and a more robust framework to ensure comprehensive protection against discrimination in all areas of life, regardless of where persons with disabilities live. She emphasised that the next phase should move from non-binding measures towards binding commitments, supported by dedicated funding under the next Multiannual Financial Framework.

She underlined that employment is central to inclusion and personal fulfilment and called for the establishment of a Disability Employment and Skills Guarantee, modelled on the Youth Guarantee, alongside strengthened use of the European Social Fund (EDF) to support access to employment, education, training and career development for persons with disabilities of all ages. She also called for the [AccessibleEU Resource Centre](#) to be further developed into a full agency to support monitoring and implementation of EU accessibility legislation and to assist the Commission in future initiatives.

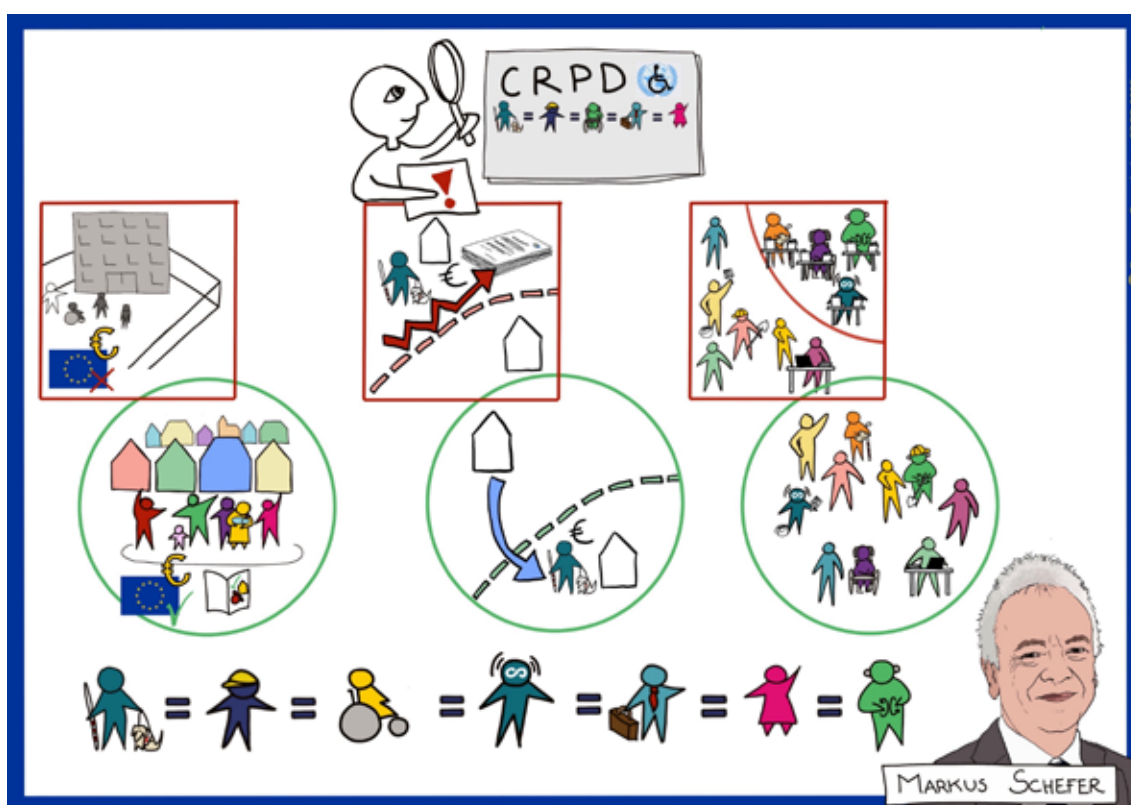
Addressing broader rights issues, she highlighted the need for decisive action on gender and intersectionality, including measures to prevent the forced sterilisation of women with disabilities and to ensure equal access to sexual and reproductive healthcare. She called for the creation of a dedicated EU fund for accessible housing to support both new construction and the adaptation of existing housing, and stressed the importance of accelerating the transition to independent living. Marie-Pierre Le Breton further emphasised the need for legislative safeguards to prevent discrimination in the use of artificial intelligence, action to address hate speech and online violence, and stronger EU external action, including a dedicated disability component, to reinforce the Union's credibility as a global leader on disability rights.



Markus Schefer, Member of the [UNCRPD Committee](#), provided reflections from the perspective of the UNCRPD monitoring framework. Referring to the [Concluding Observations](#) on the combined second and third periodic reports of the EU, he recalled the Committee's recommendations to strengthen implementation, monitoring and accountability across EU policies.

He underlined that the UNCRPD requires a shift from formal compliance towards substantive equality, supported by a clear allocation of responsibilities and effective independent monitoring mechanisms in line with Article 33 of the Convention. In a complex governance structure such as the EU, systematic follow-up to the Committee's recommendations is essential to ensure consistent application across policy areas and funding instruments.

Markus Schefer framed the second half of the Strategy as an opportunity for the European Union to further demonstrate leadership in implementing the UNCRPD, stressing the importance of closer alignment between EU actions and the Convention's requirements to ensure reliability and impact.



Summary of discussion

How does the EU intend to ensure that the second half of the EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities delivers concrete and measurable results?

During the interactive session, **Li Andersson** further elaborated on the role of the European Parliament in ensuring follow-up to the Strategy. She outlined how parliamentary scrutiny contributes to implementation through resolutions, budgetary decisions and ongoing monitoring within relevant committees, in particular the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL). She pointed to persistent challenges in the area of employment, notably low labour market participation of persons with disabilities and insufficient access to reasonable accommodation. She stressed the importance of better aligning EU funding instruments with social policy objectives, so that financial support effectively contributes to implementation and delivers tangible results at national level.

How will the EU follow up on the recommendations issued by the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and translate them into concrete action?

Markus Schefer emphasised that effective follow-up to the UN Committee's recommendations requires clear allocation of responsibilities and systematic monitoring across the EU's governance framework. He noted that, given the complexity of EU competences and funding structures, implementation depends on coordinated action, reliable data and regular reporting.

How will organisations of persons with disabilities, social partners and civil society be meaningfully involved in shaping the next flagship initiatives under the Strategy?

Marie-Pierre Le Breton underlined the importance of early and structured involvement of social partners and organisations of persons with disabilities in shaping future initiatives under the Strategy. She stressed that upstream participation is key to translating strategic objectives into operational measures and to identifying implementation challenges at an early stage, thereby supporting coherence and effective delivery across policy areas.

How can meaningful participation of persons with disabilities be ensured in practice, beyond formal consultation processes?

Nicole Marinos highlighted that meaningful participation requires more than formal consultation and must enable persons with disabilities to engage on an equal footing throughout decision-making processes. She underlined the importance of predictable procedures, accessible formats and continuity of support, so that participation is not dependent on ad hoc arrangements. When these conditions are met, participation can contribute substantively to policy design and implementation rather than remaining symbolic.

Panel 2

Funding the union of equality: towards a disability-inclusive eu budget



MODERATORS

Lucie Davoine, Head of Unit, DG JUST, European Commission

Thomas Bignal, Secretary General of the European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD)

SPEAKERS

Personal testimony of **Patrick Luybaert**, ICT Officer, Emino

Maria Toumazou,

Social Attaché, Permanent Representation of Cyprus to the European Union

Nadia Hadad,

Co-chair of the Board of the European Network on Independent Living (ENIL)

Paulina Sobolewska,

Independent Living Institute in Poland

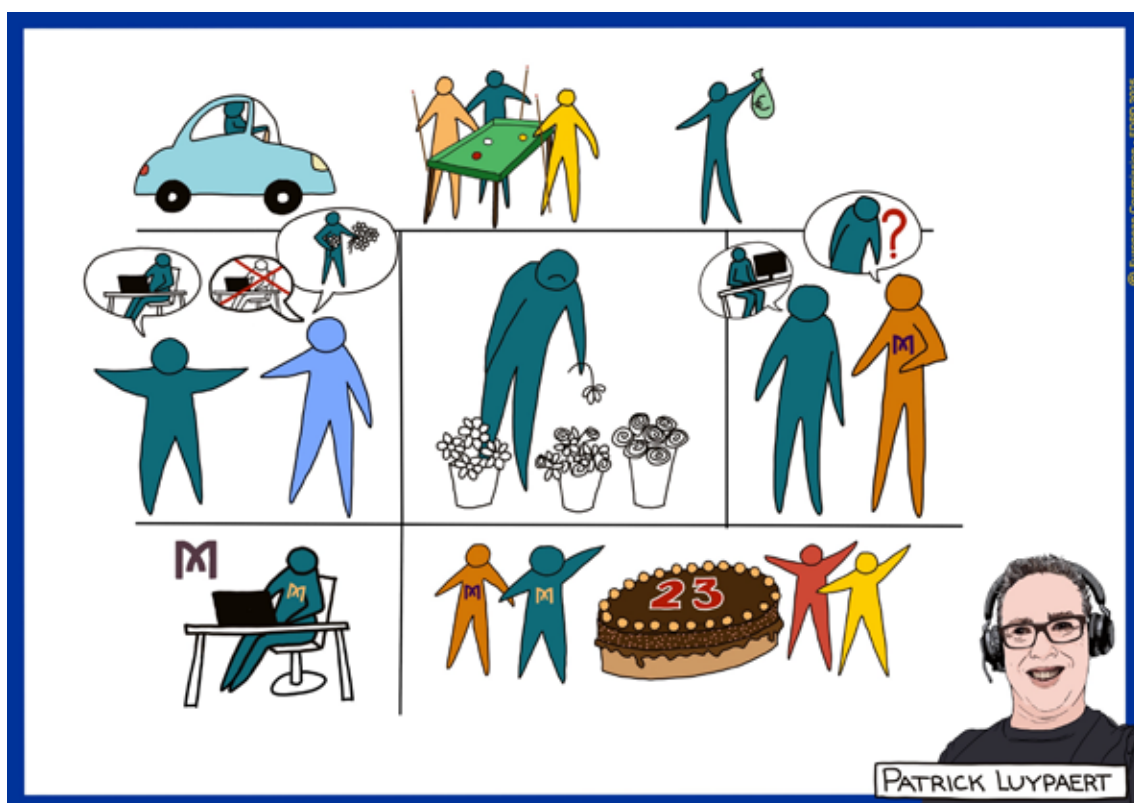
Franck Conrad,

Head of Unit, DG BUDG, European Commission

Patrick Luypaert, ICT Officer at Emino, who described his pathway into employment after facing barriers to entering the labour market due to disability. He explained how personalised guidance over time enabled him to retrain, move from horticulture into administrative work and later develop ICT skills. Over more than two decades, he progressed within the organisation to a role assisting colleagues with equipment and digital tools, illustrating the role of long-term support in enabling sustained employment.

Patrick highlighted the practical conditions that made this possible, including adapted tasks, appropriate equipment, workplace adjustments and the involvement of colleagues who helped him organise daily work. He stressed that when employers focus on a person's abilities and provide the right working conditions, individuals can build a career and contribute on an equal basis.

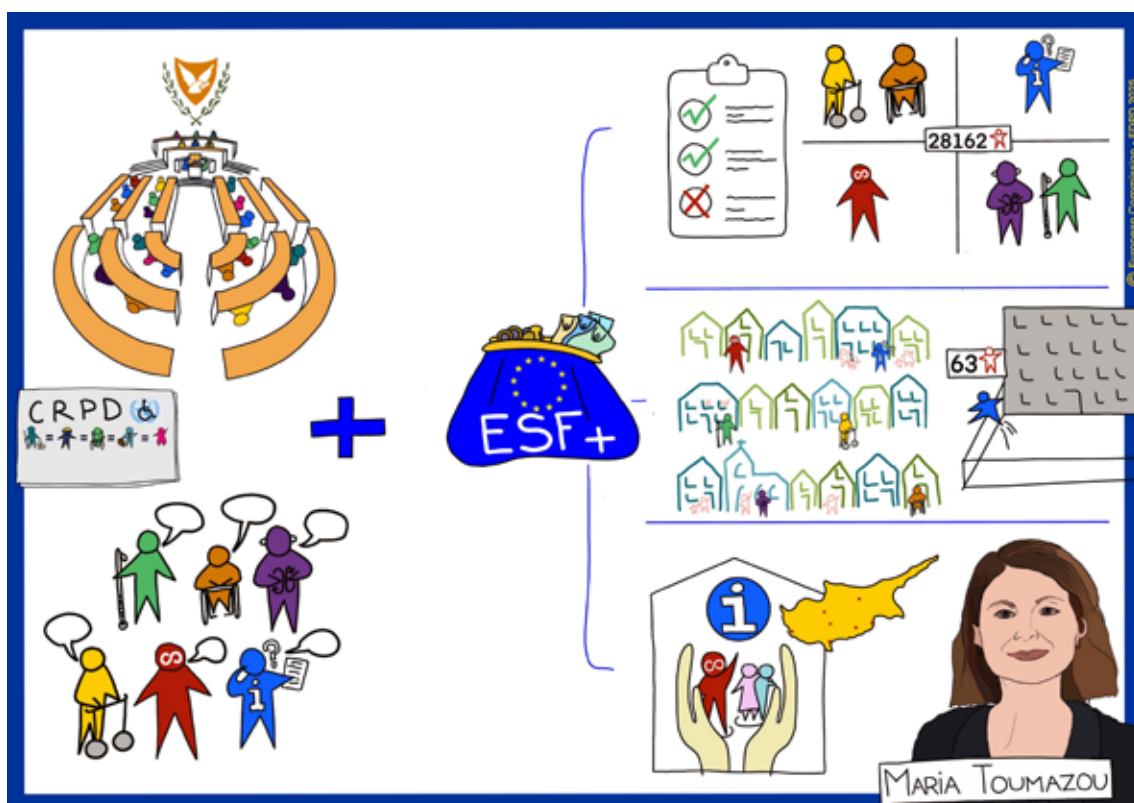
The discussion clarified that organisations such as Emino receive financing through the [European Social Fund Plus](#) (ESF+), which enables supported employment services and individual job pathways. This example illustrated how EU funding can make personalised employment trajectories possible and help translate policy objectives on inclusion into concrete opportunities for work.



Maria Toumazou, Social Attaché at the Permanent Representation of Cyprus to the EU, presented how ESF+ resources are being used to strengthen disability inclusion through structural reforms and service development. She explained that several key initiatives implemented by the Department for Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Cyprus have been made possible through EU co-financing, enabling a small administration to establish services that would otherwise not have been feasible.

She highlighted the development of a national disability assessment system based on the [WHO International Classification of Functioning \(ICF\)](#). Introduced and expanded with ESF+ support, the system provides a single, comprehensive assessment of individual support needs that is recognised across public services, reducing administrative burden and ensuring consistent access to rights, benefits and services.

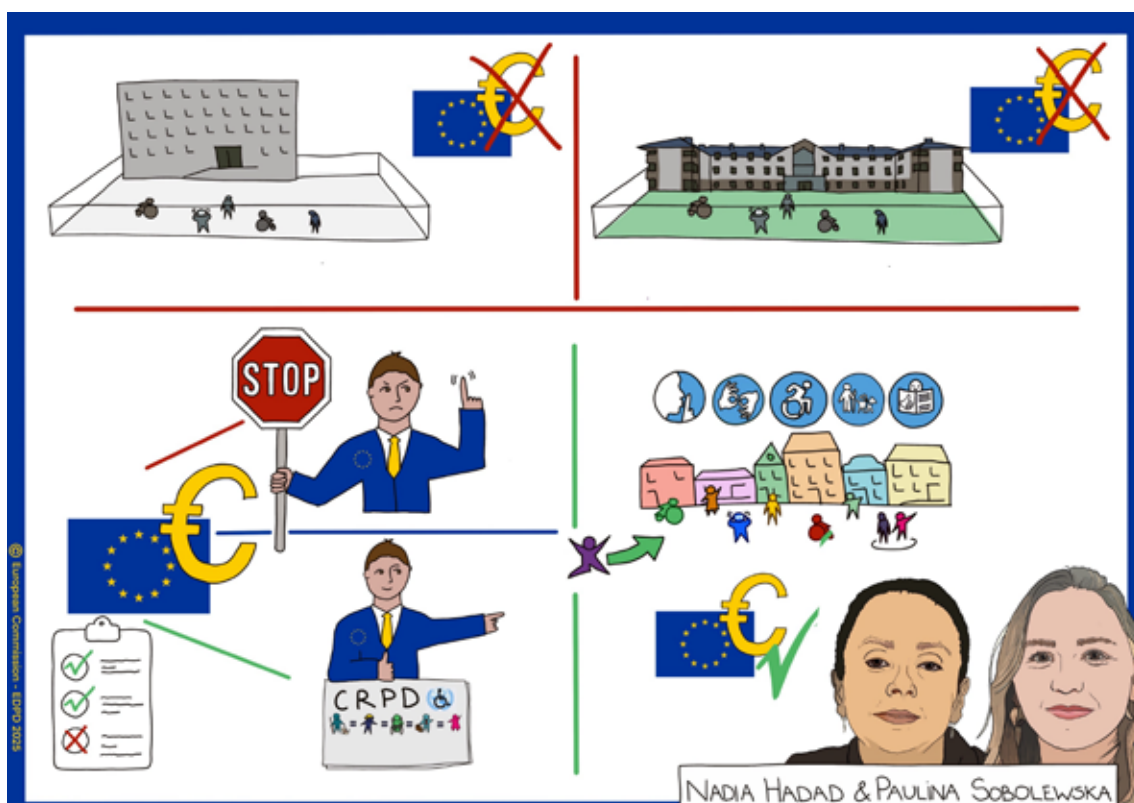
Maria Toumazou also referred to the forthcoming **2025 Law on the Social Participation, Inclusion and Independent living of Persons with Disabilities**, under preparation, which aims to strengthen the framework for disability inclusion in Cyprus. In this context, ESF+ has supported the development of a network of social inclusion services, including arrangements for supported decision-making intended to strengthen the autonomy of persons with disabilities and progressively move away from guardianship.



Nadia Hadad, Co-Chair of the [Board of the European Network on Independent Living](#) (ENIL), presented the findings of the EU Funds for Fundamental Rights (FURI) project, which examined whether EU funds under shared management are implemented in line with fundamental rights obligations. The research analysed the use of [ESF+](#), [ERDF](#) and [AMIF](#) support in six Member States – Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary and Greece – with a focus on their impact on persons with disabilities, Roma communities and persons with a migrant background.

The project identified cases where EU-funded investments contributed to or reinforced systemic rights violations, including continued institutionalisation, segregation in education and housing, temporary container accommodation and breaches of data protection. In total, 63 projects with a combined value of approximately EUR 1.3 billion were found to be associated with outcomes inconsistent with fundamental rights principles. The findings highlighted that the existence of policy commitments and regulatory requirements does not in itself prevent harmful practices at implementation level.

Nadia Hadad emphasised that governance and accountability gaps are a key risk factor. Limited awareness of fundamental rights obligations among managing authorities, weak monitoring and complaint mechanisms, and insufficient corrective action allowed problematic projects to proceed. She also underlined that limited involvement of civil society and organisations of persons with disabilities in programme design, implementation and oversight increases the likelihood of non-compliance with the principles of independent living and inclusion. While acknowledging that the [regulatory framework for 2021-2027](#) has been strengthened, she stressed the need for further guidance, capacity-building and effective enforcement to ensure that EU funding consistently supports fundamental rights and the implementation of the UNCRPD.



Paulina Sobolewska, from the **Independent Living Institute in Poland**, provided a country-specific perspective illustrating the implications of the FURI findings. Drawing on monitoring work carried out with organisations of persons with disabilities and local stakeholders, she described structural challenges affecting the transition to independent living. According to data from the 2021 national census, around 500,000 persons with disabilities live in Poland, of whom approximately 124,000 rely on institutional care, illustrating the scale of the issue.

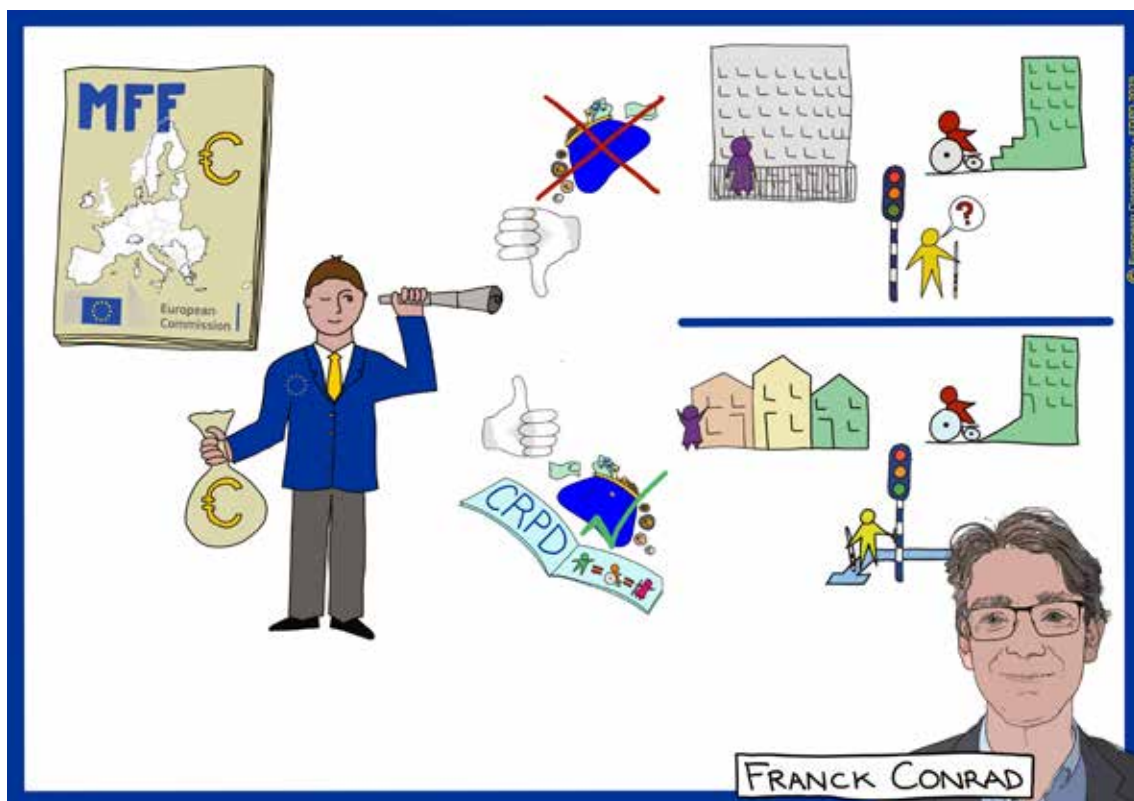
She explained that, in several regions, EU funding has been used to renovate, expand or construct residential care facilities, while the development of community-based alternatives remains limited. Personal assistance is currently delivered mainly through short-term projects and is unevenly available across municipalities. Comprehensive community support services - such as supported housing, crisis support and peer services - are insufficiently developed, limiting opportunities for persons with disabilities to exercise choice and control over where and how they live.

Looking ahead to the Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034, Paulina Sobolewska emphasised that stronger safeguards are needed to prevent investments that maintain or expand institutional models and to ensure a clear shift towards community-based support. She underlined the need for clearer criteria distinguishing institutional from community-based solutions, effective accountability mechanisms with the possibility of corrective measures where rights are not respected, and the meaningful involvement of civil society, organisations of persons with disabilities and national human rights bodies. She stated that such measures are needed to ensure that EU funds support independent living.

Franck Conrad, Head of Unit at the Directorate-General for Budget (DG BUDG), outlined how the EU budget supports the implementation of disability inclusion and fundamental rights. Referring to the next Multiannual Financial Framework, he recalled that the proposed long-term budget represents approximately 1.27% of the EU's gross national income, corresponding to around EUR 2 trillion over seven years. While national budgets remain significantly larger, he emphasised that EU spending focuses on areas where joint investment delivers greater European added value.

He explained that the Commission proposes to simplify the budget structure, reducing the number of programmes from 52 to 16, while maintaining and reinforcing key instruments such as the ESF+ under shared management. A central element of the proposal is the creation of integrated national and regional partnership plans, bringing together different funding streams to improve coherence and create synergies across EU funds. Within this framework, approximately EUR 860 billion would be made available to Member States through a national and regional partnership fund to address EU priorities, pertaining to territorial cohesion and social cohesion, including inclusion. In addition to financing investments, the future framework is intended to provide stronger support for structural reforms at national level.

Franck Conrad underlined that respect for fundamental rights, as enshrined in the [Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union](#), remains a horizontal condition for the use of EU funds. Under the proposed framework, compliance with the Charter will be assessed in the implementation of national plans, and funding may be suspended where obligations are not met. He also highlighted strengthened monitoring arrangements, including the involvement of organisations of persons with disabilities in oversight structures.



Summary of discussion

How can the European Union ensure that EU funding genuinely supports inclusion and does not reinforce segregation or institutionalisation?

Nadia Hadad stressed the need to strengthen safeguards throughout the entire funding cycle, from programming to implementation and monitoring. She emphasised that the findings of the FURI project demonstrate how EU funds can unintentionally finance fundamental rights violations when accountability and monitoring mechanisms are insufficient. **Paulina Sobolewska** added that investments should be assessed against their actual impact on independent living, noting that funding institutional settings, even in modernised forms, is not consistent with the objectives of the UNCRPD.

What role can conditionality and monitoring play in aligning EU funding with disability rights and fundamental rights obligations?

Franck Conrad highlighted that the EU budget includes horizontal principles and conditionality mechanisms designed to promote respect for fundamental rights. Guidance to managing authorities, reporting requirements and monitoring arrangements were identified as key tools to ensure coherence between policy objectives and funding decisions. He noted that these mechanisms support the implementation of fundamental rights commitments.

How can Member States ensure that EU funds reach persons with disabilities and deliver measurable outcomes at national and local level?

Maria Toumazou emphasised the importance of alignment between EU objectives and national implementation. Effective monitoring and evaluation were identified as necessary to assess whether funded projects achieve their intended impact and reach persons with disabilities in practice. Cooperation between public authorities, service providers and social partners was highlighted as a critical factor in ensuring effective delivery.

How can organisations of persons with disabilities and civil society be meaningfully involved in funding decisions and oversight?

Patrick Luypaert underlined that meaningful involvement must go beyond consultation and include participation throughout the design, implementation and evaluation of funded projects. Lived experience from persons with disabilities was identified as important for detecting barriers early and ensuring that investments result in concrete accessibility and participation. **Nadia Hadad** also highlighted the role of civil society in monitoring compliance and supporting accountability.



Day2

Access city award ceremony



On the second day of the EDPD 2025 conference, the ceremony for the Access City Award (ACA) 2026 took place, recognising and celebrating cities' actions to become more accessible and inclusive for persons with disabilities. The 16th edition of the Access City Award was moderated by **Lucille Werner**, expert in inclusion and media.

For this year's edition of the award, 51 applications were received from European cities. National juries preselected up to two applications per Member State, which were then assessed at EU jury level and narrowed down to five finalists: **Piacenza** (Italy), **Rennes** (France), **Salzburg** (Austria), **Valencia** (Spain) and **Zaragoza** (Spain). Accessibility was emphasised as a prerequisite for persons with disabilities to fully enjoy their rights and freedoms on an equal basis with others.

The ceremony was opened by **Ana Gallego**, **Director-General for DG JUST**, who underlined the essential role of cities in translating accessibility and inclusion into everyday reality. She stressed that local leadership is key to ensuring equal participation of persons with disabilities across all areas of life, from mobility and housing to public services and cultural participation.

The Access City Award recognises cities that demonstrate sustained commitment to accessibility across the built environment, transport, information and communication, and public services. By highlighting concrete practices at local level, the Award showcases how European values of equality and inclusion can be implemented in ways that directly contribute to people's daily lives.

ACA 2026 Winners



First place - Zaragoza, Spain

The first prize of the Access City Award 2026 was handed over by **Glenn Micallef, Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport**. The EU Jury unanimously agreed that the winner of the **Access City Award 2026** represents a model of excellence in embedding accessibility across every part of city life in **Zaragoza**. The city shows strong governance on accessibility, as well as for monitoring and continuous improvement through a dedicated Accessibility Board and Accessibility Office. A city-wide law and long-term action plan make accessibility a legal requirement for streets, transport, buildings and public services. The city delivers

fully accessible trams and buses, extensive step-free pedestrian routes, including more than 80% smart pedestrian crossings featuring tactile paving and audible traffic lights. The extensive involvement of persons with disabilities in decision-making and implementation is a defining strength, as so is the city's engagement to ensure accessibility in the private sector.



Second place - Valencia, Spain

The second prize of the Access City Award 2026 was handed over by **Ana Gallego, Director-General for DG JUST**. The EU Jury agreed that **Valencia** earns second place for presenting a mature accessibility strategy, ensuring a coherent approach, with clear budgets and sustained delivery. The city's use of cost-benefit arguments to build public support was praised as innovative. Accessibility is anchored at the highest political level, with a strong accessibility governance under the Mayor's Office, and an ombudsperson. Valencia demonstrated exemplary transport and urban access, reporting fully accessible bus and metro systems, and 96% of streets and public

areas. The city's governance is participatory, with a structured co-creation with civil society and private partners, and organisations of persons with disabilities systematically testing solutions before launch.



Third place - Rennes, France

The third prize of the Access City Award 2026 was handed over by **Irena Moozova, Deputy Director-General for the International Dimension of Justice Policies, Rule of Law and Equality (DG JUST)**. The EU Jury awarded third prize to **Rennes** for demonstrating a city-wide strategy that anchors accessibility in everyday services and the built environment. Bus and metro lines are fully accessible, supported by specific mobility services for persons with disabilities and digital tools that help passengers plan routes and travel with confidence. Public spaces and buildings are improving under a scheduled accessibility agenda, with specific budgets. Public services include

specific pathways and adjustments to address the needs of persons with diverse disabilities while ensuring inclusion and equal participation. The city's decision-making on accessibility is participatory, and partnerships with organisations of persons with disabilities and seniors' citizens' group are active.



ACA 2026 Special Mentions



Accessibility in Housing Salzburg, Austria

The Special Mention on Accessibility in Housing was handed over by **Matthew Baldwin, Deputy Director-General of DG ENER and Head of the European Commission's Housing Task Force**. The city of **Salzburg** is recognised for its structural, rights-based model ensuring that all new social housing is fully accessible, making accessibility a priority in all renovations. A free advisory service supports residents, architects, planner, construction company and associations in designing or adapting homes for independent living. Housing allocation guidelines are specifically tailored to the needs of persons with disabilities, with priority access

to accessible dwellings in urgent cases. The city's Disability Advisory Council plays an active role ensuring that housing policy reflects real experiences.



Accessibility in Emergency Preparedness Valencia, Spain

The Special Mention on Accessibility in Emergency Preparedness was handed over by **Agnes Kojc, member of the European Disability Forum's Youth Committee**. The city of **Valencia** is awarded a Special Mention for embedding accessibility in emergency preparedness through a comprehensive, co-designed approach. Emergency protocols and drills are developed with organisations of persons with disabilities, trainings for firefighters, police and municipal staff. An Inclusive Emergency Alert System delivers warnings in sign language, easy-to-read and pictogram formats, while

REDI enables SMS with local police; a civil-protection database supports rapid identification of vulnerable residents.



Accessible Information and Communication Technologies Piacenza, Italy

The Special Mention on Information and Communication Technologies was handed over by **Inmaculada Placencia Porrero, Senior Disability Expert of the European Commission and member of the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**. The city of **Piacenza** earns a Special Mention for an inclusive, technology-led approach to accessibility. Piacenza uses Geographical Information Systems GIS and digital planning tools to map more than 3,000 accessibility issues, guiding targeted upgrades across streets and buildings. A municipal virtual

assistant and facilitation points simplify access to services, and home automation is integrated into programmes to enhance independent living for persons with disabilities and older persons.

Panel3

Preparedness and crisis management inclusive of persons with disabilities



MODERATORS

Inmaculada Placencia Porrero, Senior Expert, DG JUST, European Commission
Alejandro Moledo, Deputy Director EDF

SPEAKERS

Personal testimony of **Ruslan Topchan**,
 Veteran of the Armed Forces of Ukraine
Hans Das,
 Deputy Director-General, DG ECHO, European Commission
Jari Honkanen,
 Senior Officer, Department for Rescue Services of the Government of Finland and
Veera Florica Rajala,
 President of the Finnish Disability Forum
Delphine Le Maire,
 Policy Officer, European Union of the Deaf (EUD)
Lidia Best,
 President at European Federation of Hard of Hearing People (EFHOH)

The panel opened with a personal testimony by **Ruslan Topchan, Veteran of the Armed Forces of Ukraine**. Drawing on his experience of armed conflict and acquired disability, he highlighted that persons with disabilities should not be considered only as recipients of emergency measures, but also as actors whose experience and expertise are relevant to the design and implementation of inclusive preparedness and crisis response systems.

Ruslan Topchan framed preparedness and crisis management through lived experience of war and disability. He described how the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 abruptly transformed his life, from that of a student to a soldier, and later to a person with a disability after losing both legs in combat. Drawing on Ukraine's experience, he highlighted how war has exposed gaps in preparedness systems, including the lack of accessible shelters, inclusive early warning systems, community-based support and adequate medical and rehabilitation services.

He underlined that thousands of veterans returning with injuries bring not only new support needs, but also experience, leadership and a strong commitment to contribute to recovery and decision-making processes. He illustrated how, out of necessity, Ukraine has developed inclusive solutions, such as adapted alert systems, accessible communication tools, peer training, and innovative evacuation and medical response methods, including rapid transport solutions that improve survival rates. Ruslan Topchan emphasised the central role played by organisations of persons with disabilities in education, peer support and the development of response tools.

In response, the moderator, Inmaculada Placencia Porrero, expressed appreciation for the personal testimony and underlined the honour of having Ruslan Topchan present his experience. She noted that his intervention provided a vivid description of the horror of the war, as well as of recovery and support for others in similar situations. The audience also demonstrated empathy and appreciation for the testimony of the veteran.

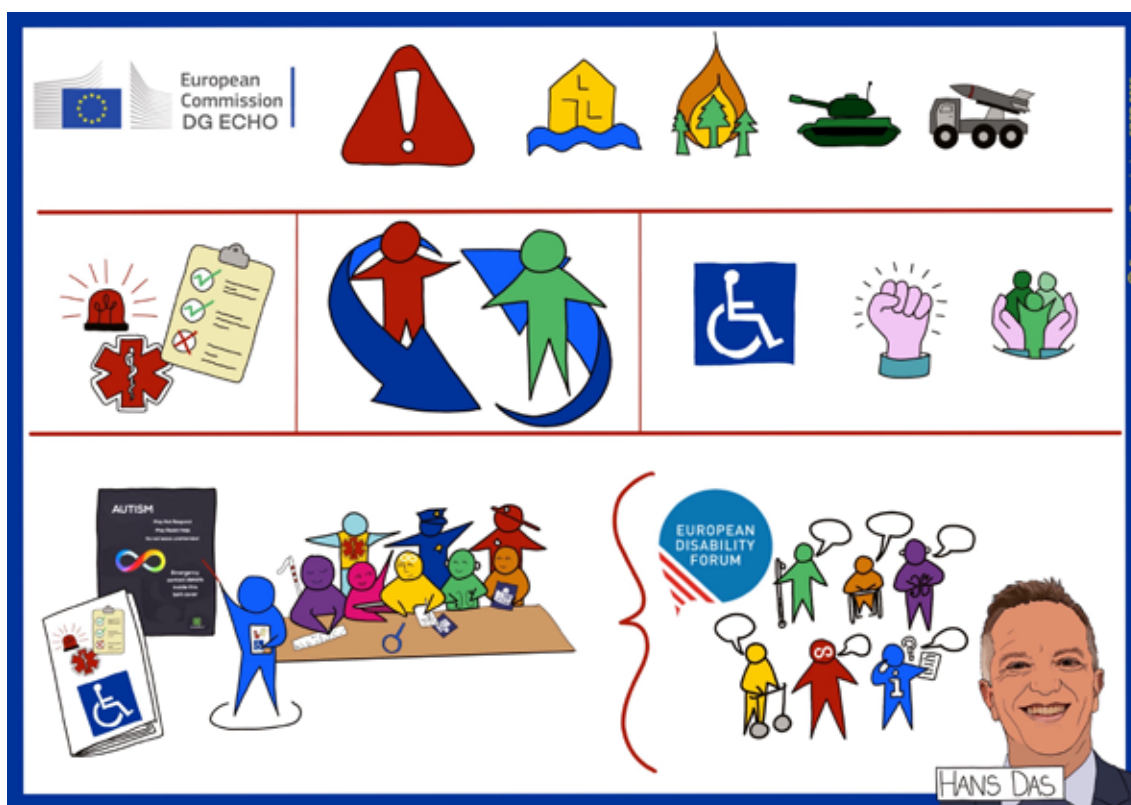


Hans Das, Deputy Director-General at the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO), opened his intervention by referring to the testimony of Ukrainian representatives. Reaffirming the European Union's solidarity, he stated that Ukraine can count on the EU's full support for as long as it takes. He also highlighted Ukraine's experience in disability-inclusive preparedness.

He then addressed preparedness from a European civil protection perspective. He stressed that ensuring everyone has the tools and resources to remain resilient is at the core of the [Preparedness Union Strategy](#), which includes a dedicated action on the inclusion of persons with disabilities.

He explained that this action focuses on the development of guidelines on how to act in emergencies, adapted to different types of disabilities, including sensory, physical and intellectual disabilities. The guidelines, currently under development, are expected to be delivered by the end of 2026 and will target both persons with disabilities and emergency responders. In parallel, a framework for training is being developed to support effective and appropriate responses in disaster situations.

Hans Das underlined that DG ECHO's work on inclusion builds on more than a decade of experience under the [Union Civil Protection Mechanism](#). Over the past ten years, the Commission has co-funded 23 cross-border preparedness projects supporting people with particular vulnerabilities, with a total investment of over EUR 12 million, including EUR 1 million awarded to the European Disability Forum for a Baltic regional project.



Training and exercises were highlighted as a key pillar of preparedness. DG ECHO regularly brings together rescue teams from different EU countries, integrating the needs of persons with disabilities into joint exercises. He also referred to concrete operational capacities, such as rescue shelter units, for which a requirement is in place that 15% must be accessible for persons with disabilities.

He further pointed to the 112 emergency number as a vital lifeline, available to more than 415 million people across the EU, and to the role of the European Emergency Response Coordination Centre in coordinating disaster response and medical evacuations.

As a humanitarian donor, DG ECHO ensures that EU-funded aid worldwide is inclusive and accessible. He highlighted progress in disability-inclusive humanitarian action, noting that disability inclusion has been mainstreamed in 24% of EU-funded projects, with 8% specifically targeting persons with disabilities. While further efforts are needed, he underlined that systematic measurement and sustained investment demonstrate the Commission's commitment.

Hans Das stressed that preparedness is a continuous process. A prepared society, he concluded, is one where no one is left behind and where every individual has the opportunity to be protected, participate and be safe.



Jari Honkanen, representing the **Department for Rescue Services of the Government of Finland**, presented a national perspective on inclusive preparedness. He described preparedness as a whole-of-society responsibility that must be built in so-called normal times, through continuous cooperation across sectors and levels of governance.

He explained that Finland operates a single, integrated system for accidents, crises, societal disruptions and civil defence, coordinated by the rescue service authorities. Preparedness developed under normal conditions, he noted, simultaneously strengthens civil defence capacities for wartime, ensuring coherence across different risk scenarios.

Jari Honkanen emphasised that authorities may have an incomplete understanding of disability and vulnerability, particularly when solutions are designed without considering the full chain of accessibility. To address this, Finland has established a permanent multi-stakeholder network bringing together public authorities, civil society organisations, research institutions and other partners. Structured cooperation with organisations of persons with disabilities was presented as essential for identifying practical gaps and improving preparedness measures.

He highlighted that the network is being updated to reflect the changed security environment, including lessons learned from Ukraine, and to strengthen links with research, health authorities and the private sector. This approach supports practical implementation rather than purely procedural planning.

Jari Honkanen also referred to the Finnish Sendai national network, established in the context of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, which brings together authorities, civil society and research institutions to strengthen inclusive preparedness. The network also supports efforts to improve people's self-preparedness and contributes to the development of rescue services education and training, helping emergency personnel better address the needs of persons with disabilities.



Veera Florica Rajala, President of the [Finnish Disability Forum](#), complemented the panel by focusing on preparedness from the perspective of persons with disabilities and their organisations. She stressed that preparedness is not only a matter of public systems, but also of individual knowledge and capacity. Drawing on recent experiences, she highlighted that many persons with disabilities lack access to practical information and training on how to prepare for disruptions such as power outages, shortages of basic services or evacuation situations.

She underlined that preparedness requires accessible, practical guidance that goes beyond abstract instructions. According to her, knowing what to do is not sufficient if people have never had the opportunity to test or practice preparedness measures in an accessible way. She pointed to gaps in existing training and education programmes that are not fully accessible to persons with disabilities.

Veera Florica Rajala emphasised that inclusive preparedness must address both individual and systemic dimensions. While persons with disabilities can and do take responsibility for preparing where possible, she underlined that this depends on being given equal access to information, training and support. She concluded that preparedness planning should be developed in cooperation with organisations of persons with disabilities, to ensure that measures are realistic, accessible and effective in situations of crisis.



She underlined that for many deaf people, national sign languages are their first language, and that access to information in sign language is therefore essential for equal access to information. Preparedness systems that rely primarily on written or spoken communication risk excluding deaf persons, particularly in high-stress emergency situations. While progress was observed during the COVID-19 pandemic, when sign language interpretation was provided more systematically, she noted that such practices often remain ad hoc and are not anchored in binding legal or regulatory frameworks.

Delphine Le Maire highlighted persistent barriers in emergency warning systems, emergency call centres and communication with first responders. Early warning messages are predominantly text-based and do not provide information in national sign languages, and access to the European emergency number 112 remains uneven for deaf users across Member States. She stressed that reliance on voluntary solutions or third-party interpretation creates risks in situations where speed, clarity and reliability are essential. National and EU-level crisis management frameworks should explicitly guarantee linguistic accessibility. This requires clearer legal obligations, structured involvement of representative organisations of deaf people, so that deaf persons are recognised not only as recipients of assistance, but as active participants in preparedness and response systems.



Lidia Best, President of the [European Federation of Hard of Hearing People](#) (EFHOH), addressed emergency preparedness from the perspective of persons with hearing loss. She highlighted that many emergency communication and response systems are still primarily designed around auditory signals, which can exclude hard of hearing persons and increase risks during crisis situations.

Drawing on lessons from recent crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, she illustrated how inconsistent provision of subtitling, sign language interpretation and readable visual information limited access to vital public announcements in several countries. Lidia Best emphasised that preparedness systems must systematically offer multiple ways to access emergency information and services, including text-based alerts and accessible contact with emergency services such as the single European emergency number 112. She underlined that accessibility should be available by default, without prior registration, to avoid delays when urgent assistance is needed.



Summary of discussion

How can preparedness and crisis management systems systematically include persons with disabilities as experts, drawing on lived experience rather than treating them solely as beneficiaries of protection?

Ruslan Topchan emphasised that persons with lived experience of disability and crisis situations possess practical knowledge that is indispensable for preparedness. Peer-to-peer training, mentoring and leadership by veterans and other persons with disabilities were identified as key factors in strengthening readiness and resilience. **Veera Florica Rajala** echoed this perspective, stressing that co-design with organisations of persons with disabilities leads to more realistic and effective preparedness measures.

How can inclusive preparedness be embedded across all stages of crisis management, from planning and training to response and recovery?

Hans Das underlined that preparedness must be embedded as a horizontal principle within civil protection policies and operations. Training, simulation exercises and coordination mechanisms that explicitly account for accessibility and inclusion were identified as essential, noting that inclusive systems strengthen overall preparedness.

How can national authorities ensure that emergency response services are equipped to address the diverse needs of persons with disabilities in practice?

Jari Honkanen highlighted the importance of whole-of-society approaches to preparedness, combining coordination across public authorities with regular testing and evaluation. Cooperation with organisations of persons with disabilities was identified as crucial for identifying gaps in evacuation, sheltering and communication, and for improving the operational capacity of rescue services.

How can emergency communication be made fully accessible for deaf and hard of hearing persons, particularly in situations where rapid response is critical?

Delphine Le Maire stressed that access to emergency information and services must be guaranteed in national sign languages and through accessible, two-way communication channels. Reliance on inaccessible formats was identified as a direct safety risk. **Lidia Best** emphasised that access to the single European emergency number 112 must be ensured for deaf and hard of hearing persons, underlining that there are no alternative emergency numbers and that lack of accessibility can have serious consequences.

How can lessons from recent crises be translated into lasting improvements in preparedness policies?

Hans Das and **Veera Florica Rajala** stressed the importance of systematically incorporating lessons learned into future planning. Regular reviews, inclusive evaluations and continued dialogue with persons with disabilities and their representative organisations were identified as essential to ensure that preparedness systems evolve and remain responsive over time.

Closing session

SPEAKERS

Pat Clarke, Vice-President, European Disability Forum (EDF)

Ana Carla Pereira, Director “Equality and Non-Discrimination”,
DG Justice, European Commission



Pat Clarke, Vice-President of the European Disability Forum (EDF), reflected on the key themes discussed over the two days and their implications for the coming years. He highlighted the importance of the EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the next Multiannual Financial Framework and preparedness and crisis management as initiatives that will have a significant impact on the lives of persons with disabilities.

Regarding the Strategy, he stressed that full implementation of the actions already adopted remains essential, but that important gaps persist. He called for new and ambitious actions for the second half of the Strategy and for a stronger commitment from Member States to deliver concrete results. On the EU budget, he emphasised the need for clearer safeguards to ensure that EU funds fully comply with the UNCRPD and do not further segregate persons with disabilities.

He underlined the value of the conference as a forum bringing together policymakers and persons with disabilities, and called on both participants and institutions to maintain dialogue and translate the concerns and lived experiences shared during the event into concrete action. Pat Clarke concluded by noting that organisations of persons with disabilities will continue to closely follow the outcomes of future policy and funding decisions, while reaffirming a shared objective of advancing rights and reducing inequalities.



Ana Carla Pereira, Director for “Equality and Non-Discrimination” at the European Commission, delivered the closing remarks of the conference. She thanked participants for their engagement and contributions to the discussions. She reaffirmed the EU’s commitment to advancing disability rights and emphasised that effective implementation requires resources, legislation, enforcement mechanisms and sustained political engagement. She also acknowledged that the political context has become more challenging, with narratives of division and exclusion gaining ground, but affirmed the Commission’s continued commitment.

Reflecting on the discussions, she highlighted key messages from the three panels: the need to translate rights into practice through stronger implementation, including in the areas of accessibility, employment and independent living; the importance of ensuring that EU funding supports inclusion and the UNCRPD; and the role of inclusive preparedness in responding to increasingly complex crises. She concluded that building a resilient and inclusive society requires the active involvement of persons with disabilities and their representative organisations.

She thanked all speakers, participants and organisers for their contributions and expressed her hope to continue the dialogue at the next European Day of Persons with Disabilities.

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