



Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

Thematic Meeting
**POLITICAL PARTIES AND PARTICIPATION OF
PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES**

Brussels

8 November 2017

OSCE/ODIHR Meeting Report



**Warsaw
January 2018**

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Thematic Meeting

POLITICAL PARTIES AND PARTICIPATION OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Brussels
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MEETING SUMMARY

On 8 November 2017, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) in co-operation with the European Parliament's (EP) Disability Intergroup and the European Disability Forum organized a Thematic Meeting *Political Parties and Participation of Persons with Disabilities*. The event was held as part of ODIHR's project, "*Our right to participate – Promoting the participation of Persons with Disabilities in political and public life*", which aims to raise awareness and promote more inclusive and participatory societies across the OSCE region.

The thematic meeting served as a platform to raise awareness about the under-representation of persons with disabilities in political life, including in different political party structures. The discussion focused on identifying potential steps and concrete actions to support stronger participation of persons with disabilities in political parties and parliaments. A number of good practice examples from various European countries were presented, such as the establishment of political party disability branches, developing accessible electoral materials and programs and making funding available to improve access to elected office.

The event was attended by 44 participants (30 women and 14 men) with diverse expertise, including members of political parties, parliamentarians, politicians with disabilities, representatives of political party support organizations, disabled people's organizations (DPOs), and other international organizations.

The opening remarks were delivered by Ms Helga Stevens, Co-Chair of the Disability Intergroup of the European Parliament, Mr Patrick Clarke, Vice-President of the European Disability Forum, and Ms Tiina Kukkamaa-Bah, Chief of the ODIHR Democratic Governance and Gender Unit. In their remarks the speakers noted the prevailing exclusion and segregation of persons with disabilities. They emphasized that politics should reflect the full diversity of society, and that political parties, as the main gate-keepers of political processes, should demonstrate concrete commitments to making political life more diverse and representative of the population.

The meeting was then structured in **two panel discussions**, focusing on challenges and good practice examples from political party structures in the OSCE region:

- Session I: What challenges and obstacles prevent stronger participation of persons with disabilities in political parties?
- Session II: What positive practices can contribute to more inclusive and representative political parties?

Session I: What challenges and obstacles prevent stronger participation of persons with disabilities in political parties?

The session focused on two main questions:

- 1) Why is wider representation of persons with disabilities in political parties important?
- 2) What are the main challenges to the engagement of persons with disabilities in political parties and in political life in general?

The first presentation was delivered by **Ms Nevena Peneva**, Research Support Officer at the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). In her remarks, Ms Peneva noted that the main challenges to political participation in EU member states are legal and administrative barriers, including deprivation of legal capacity, lack of accessibility for persons with all kinds of disabilities, and limited awareness and training among key stakeholders such as political parties, election officials or media providers. The engagement of persons with disabilities in decision-making processes remains limited. Equally, most EU member states do not collect disability-disaggregated data, especially on political representation. Ms Peneva stressed that according to European Social Survey data, persons with disabilities are equally, if not even more, interested to take part in political life in the majority of EU member states. Some of her recommendations included amending national provisions which prevent persons with disabilities from voting, establishing minimum accessibility requirements in all EU member states and developing practical guidelines for political parties and other key stakeholders on how to make their materials and communication tools more accessible. She advised that in implementing any measure, member states should ensure close co-operation with disabled people’s organizations.

The second speaker of the panel, **Ms Kostadinka Kuneva**, Co-Chair of the Disability Intergroup of the EP, shared her personal experience from taking part in politics. Ms Kuneva noted that often persons with disabilities are of no interest to political parties as voters or members. She stressed the importance of safeguarding the right to political participation in national legislation and ensuring the practical application of this right. Ms Kuneva highlighted some of the challenges to political participation in some EU member states, for example, restrictions on legal capacity for persons with mental health issues and the inaccessibility of polling stations and media for persons with various types of disabilities. Persons with disabilities should be visible in the media and public life to challenge existing stereotypes and prejudices. Exclusion of persons with disabilities creates a potential danger in undermining the democratic legitimacy of office-bearers elected and decisions adopted.

Finally, the third speaker **Ms Marian Harkin**, the Vice-President of the Disability Intergroup of the EP, discussed the importance of employment of persons with disabilities, including through internship programmes in the EU and national parliaments. Ms Harkin referred to the example of Scotland and noted the positive learning experience for all the parties involved in such practices. She noted that the interests of persons with disabilities cannot be efficiently ensured if they are scattered and not equally represented in decision-making processes at all levels.

The discussion focused on the underlying factors preventing persons with disabilities from participating in political life. Some participants noted that it is very difficult to find good

candidates with disabilities. However, even then, when good candidates run, voters do not vote for them. To address these issues, it is important to explore the underlying reasons and prevailing attitudes in society, including with respect to persons with mental disabilities, who face additional stigma. When we know what the real cause for this lack of support is, we can make better decisions about the steps which should be undertaken to address the problem. One of the tools to change societal perceptions is to make persons with disabilities more visible, including by providing equal internship and employment opportunities. There is a general lack of awareness about the accessibility challenges that persons with disabilities face. Increasing accessibility would be beneficial for all, not only for persons with disabilities but also for people of older age, people who are temporarily immobile, and business enterprises that would gain new customers and users of their services.

Recommendations:

- Amend national provisions which restrict the right to vote due to mental or other types of disabilities;
- Establish minimum accessibility requirements in all EU member states;
- Develop practical guidelines for political parties and other key stakeholders on how to make their materials and communication tools more accessible;
- Challenge existing stereotypes and change societal perceptions by making persons with disabilities more visible and integrated in political and public life;
- Provide internship and employment opportunities to persons with disabilities at all levels, including in the EU and national parliaments;
- Set up an accessibility desk or appoint an accessibility officer at the EP to be ready to welcome EP visitors and staff members with disabilities;
- Make education inclusive for all and provide the necessary support to students with disabilities;
- Enhance dialogue between DPOs and political parties. Disability groups could provide support to political parties in disability mainstreaming and advocate for inclusion of disability issues on the political agenda.

Session II: What positive practices can contribute to more inclusive and representative political parties?

The second session explored the following questions:

- 1) What measures could be adopted and by whom to ensure that persons with disabilities can be active members of political parties? What are the responsibilities of political parties, especially in light of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities obligations?
- 2) What are the positive practices that exist in EU member states and the broader OSCE region?

Ms Hanna Gerdes, Swedish human rights lawyer, politician and board member of the Swedish International Liberal Center, noted that disability is not an urgent political issue in

most countries, including Sweden. One of the reasons for that is that very few politicians in Sweden have personal experience of living with a disability. Similarly, most NGOs have not made disability rights a priority. Ms Gerdes noted that in order to achieve change it is important to make disability rights a human rights issue. Advocates and politicians should speak out and be loud and clear about what is wrong, but also constructive about what needs to be changed and how. Politicians with disabilities can make a significant impact on political party policies. Certain changes in the Swedish parliament were introduced only when the first politicians with disabilities were elected. She noted the importance of co-operation between different stakeholders, including with politicians without disabilities.

The second speaker of the panel, **Ms Amu Urhonen**, chairperson of the Disability Branch of the Greens of Finland, spoke about what motivated her to engage in political life. She noted that when choosing a political party, disability politics was one of the main issues that she looked at. The fact that the Greens of Finland had a thematic leaflet on disability politics, which talked about persons with disabilities not as objects of care but as decision-makers and actors, was one of the reasons why she joined the party. The party also has an independent member organization of persons with disabilities. She stressed that the Greens of Finland support their candidates with disabilities, including covering the expenses of personal assistants and transport expenses. Ms Urhonen emphasised that there is a need for an established structure to ensure that disability is an issue of priority. In the case of the city of Tampere, for example, it is the Ombudsperson who evaluates the policies and practices from a disability perspective and gives approval for the construction of all new buildings in the city. Finally, Ms Urhonen noted that a lot of politics happen in informal situations and meetings. Politicians need to be socially active and take part in various events and gatherings. Not only in national parliaments and the premises of political parties but the environment in general should be made accessible to allow politicians with disabilities to perform their roles.

Ms Hilary Third, Equality Policy Manager, Scottish Government Equality Unit, noted that the Scottish Governments’ inclusion and equality commitment is broad and covers various under-represented groups who often face common challenges to their inclusion in political and public life. To this end, the Scottish Government has funded the Coalition of Equality Organizations to create a toolkit for political parties to carry out a self-assessment to look at how inclusive and representative they are. Ms Third informed participants that in 2014-2016 the Scottish Government funded an ‘Access to Politics’ Project, which was delivered by Inclusion Scotland. The project activities consisted of programmes for disabled interns in the Scottish Parliament (year 1) and political parties (year 2) with more to follow in 2017-18, as well as the provision of information, advice and (non-financial) support to prospective candidates and establishment of an Access to Elected Office Fund to provide financial support to candidates with disabilities. Decision-making on grant recipients is undertaken by a panel made up of persons with disabilities, some of whom were elected with assistance received through earlier rounds of the fund. She noted that creating the fund sent a strong message to the community that candidates with disabilities are encouraged to stand for elections and be active in political life. In conclusion, Ms Third noted that the Scottish Government works to promote participation and address under-representation of disabled people also in the wider society which can impact a career in politics.

During the discussion, participants reiterated the importance of accessibility as a key issue, especially access to information, in order to allow persons with disabilities to take a more

active role in public and political life. The successful example of the Scottish Access to Elected Office Fund was discussed in light of a similar fund in the UK, which was closed soon after its establishment due to its underuse. It was noted that providing financial support is only part of the answer. To ensure that the fund reaches its objectives, it should be established well in advance, adequately publicized through the right networks and accompanied by non-financial support, for example, mentoring and guidance. Finally, the participants stressed that societal attitudes to persons with disabilities must change. Often children with disabilities are seen as a burden, rather than potentially active members of the society with a role to play. A person who is raised with a low self-esteem will not become an active politician in the future. Efforts should be put in place to change such medical-based approaches to disability and challenge prevailing stereotypes.

Recommendations:

- Politicians, NGOs and civil society should undertake greater advocacy to bring disability on the political agenda as a human rights issue;
- Political parties should increase awareness and understanding of issues affecting disabled people;
- Mentoring and role models for disabled people in party politics should be developed and promoted;
- Political parties should engage with voters and candidates with disabilities including by preparing and disseminating information in accessible formats;
- Party membership should be accessible and political parties could introduce a reduced or waived fee for disabled members;
- The rules around election expenditure should be changed so that they do not disadvantage disabled people with additional costs, for example, those related to providing accessibility or meeting any additional disability-related costs faced by candidates with disabilities;
- Advice and support, including financial and non-financial, should be provided to candidates with disabilities;
- Close co-operation and alliances should be established between different stakeholders, including politicians with and without disabilities;
- Ensuring accessibility of the physical environment and key infrastructure for persons with various types of disabilities.

ANNEX 1: AGENDA

Thematic meeting

Political parties and participation of persons with disabilities

AGENDA

- 8:30 – 9:30** **Registration and welcoming coffee**
- 9:30 -9:50** **Opening remarks**
- Helga Stevens, Co-Chair of the Disability Intergroup of the European Parliament, ECR, Belgium
 - Patrick Clarke, Vice-President of the European Disability Forum
 - Tiina Kukkamaa-Bah, Chief of Democratic Governance and Gender Unit, ODIHR
- 9:50 – 11:20** **Session I: What challenges and obstacles prevent stronger participation of persons with disabilities in political parties?**
- Political parties are often referred to as the gate-keepers for participation in political life, including in parliaments and municipal assemblies. At the same time, the representation of persons with disabilities remains noticeably low in all political party structures across the OSCE region. The panel will focus on the need to ensure that political parties reflect the diversity of the society they represent, and discuss the role of political parties in advancing the political participation of persons with disabilities.*
- Panel speakers:*
- Nevena Peneva, Research Support Officer, EU Agency for Fundamental Rights
 - Kostadinka Kuneva, Co-Chair of the Disability Intergroup of the European Parliament, GUE/NGL, Greece
 - Marian Harkin, Vice-President of the Disability Intergroup of the European Parliament, ALDE, Ireland
- Moderator:* Etienne Cuche, European Parliament Liaison Officer, European Disability Forum
- 11:20 – 11:40** **Coffee break**

11:40 – 13:10

Session II: What positive practices can contribute to more inclusive and representative political parties?

Positive practice measures, such as disability branches or committees within political party structures, support for candidates, including funds for accessibility related expenses, financial incentives or sanctions, can all contribute to the increased participation of persons with disabilities. The session will explore some of these practices, draw on the lessons learned and identify initiatives which could be used in different national contexts.

Panel speakers:

- Hanna Gerdes, Swedish human rights lawyer, politician and board member of the Swedish International Liberal Center
- Hilary Third, Equality Policy Manager, Scottish Government Equality Unit
- Amu Urhonen, chairperson of the Disability branch of the Greens of Finland

Moderator: Anete Erdmane, Associate Democratic Governance Officer, ODIHR

13:10 – 13:30

Closing remarks

13:30

Lunch

ABOUT THE OSCE/ODIHR

The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) is the OSCE’s principal institution to assist participating States “to ensure full respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, to abide by the rule of law, to promote principles of democracy and (...) to build, strengthen and protect democratic institutions, as well as promote tolerance throughout society” (1992 Helsinki Summit Document). This is referred to as the OSCE human dimension.

The OSCE/ODIHR, based in Warsaw (Poland) was created as the Office for Free Elections at the 1990 Paris Summit and started operating in May 1991. One year later, the name of the Office was changed to reflect an expanded mandate to include human rights and democratization. Today it employs over 130 staff.

The OSCE/ODIHR is the lead agency in Europe in the field of **election observation**. Every year, it co-ordinates and organizes the deployment of thousands of observers to assess whether elections in the OSCE region are conducted in line with OSCE Commitments, other international obligations and standards for democratic elections and with national legislation. Its unique methodology provides an in-depth insight into the electoral process in its entirety. Through assistance projects, the OSCE/ODIHR helps participating States to improve their electoral framework.

The Office’s **democratization** activities include: rule of law, legislative support, democratic governance, migration and freedom of movement, and gender equality. The OSCE/ODIHR implements a number of targeted assistance programs annually, seeking to develop democratic structures.

The OSCE/ODIHR also assists participating States’ in fulfilling their obligations to promote and protect **human rights** and fundamental freedoms consistent with OSCE human dimension commitments. This is achieved by working with a variety of partners to foster collaboration, build capacity and provide expertise in thematic areas including human rights in the fight against terrorism, enhancing the human rights protection of trafficked persons, human rights education and training, human rights monitoring and reporting, and women’s human rights and security.

Within the field of **tolerance** and **non-discrimination**, the OSCE/ODIHR provides support to the participating States in strengthening their response to hate crimes and incidents of racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and other forms of intolerance. The OSCE/ODIHR's activities related to tolerance and non-discrimination are focused on the following areas: legislation; law enforcement training; monitoring, reporting on, and following up on responses to hate-motivated crimes and incidents; as well as educational activities to promote tolerance, respect, and mutual understanding.

The OSCE/ODIHR provides advice to participating States on their policies on **Roma and Sinti**. It promotes capacity-building and networking among Roma and Sinti communities, and encourages the participation of Roma and Sinti representatives in policy-making bodies.

All ODIHR activities are carried out in close co-ordination and co-operation with OSCE participating States, OSCE institutions and field operations, as well as with other international organizations.

More information is available on the ODIHR website (www.osce.org/odihhr).