

# Political participation of persons with disabilities

## Council of Europe, 07 October 2016, 9:30h

### Introduction: Who am I?

- Deaf sign language user
- Born in Flanders, Belgium
- First deaf lawyer and attorney in Belgium
- First deaf Member of Parliament in Belgium (Flemish Parliament and Senate) but not the first one with a disability
- Member of the European Parliament
- Now also: Presidential candidate
- Previous experience in NGO sector (EUD, EDF)

### Political participation

- Maybe I am an example of political participation
- Politicians must remember and realise that pwd constitute 10-15% of the population. And we should not forget about their families and friends -> large group & important part of electorate! Not clever to ignore them! But often ignored.
- Political participation is wider than just taking part in elections, it includes:
  - Standing as a candidate (at ALL levels!)
  - Having accessible information about campaigns/legislation/etc
  - Taking part in the full political process, including hearings and consultations
  - Meeting with your representative(s)
  - (active) participation in the party of your choice (grass roots level/local level and higher) - this allows for input into your party's programme and viewpoints
  - Accessibility is/can be a problem for pwd - politicians & parties not always aware of the hurdles

### CRPD Implementation report

- Some background first:
  - Review of the EU as part of CRPD implementation/post ratification process
  - EP part of CRPD Framework to implement Convention
  - Commission formally responsible to answer to CRPD Committee
- As rapporteur I was highly inclusive of persons with disabilities and their representative organisations
- I organised hearings that were accessible throughout the drafting process, not only in the last stages (BIG part of political participation)
- Result is a report that received overwhelming support across political spectrum

- Large part is on the EU institutions themselves (best practice):
  - Calls to make more Committee meetings accessible (including public events in general)
  - Accessible communication with petitioners and in consultation procedures (SL, Braille, easy-to-read)
  - European schools: inclusive quality education that must be in accordance with CRPD requirements
  - JSIS (Joint Sickness Insurance Scheme): call to recognise disability-related health needs as being distinct from an illness
  - Staff regulations: to be fully in line with CRPD - reasonable accommodation
  - Accessibility of own websites (not fully accessible at the moment)

### Best practice examples EP

- Note that these were all initiated by me/Disability Intergroup/Other MEPs with a disability
- Also note that most of these are one-off, not structural changes - very frustrating - we need structural, sustainable changes while allowing for flexibility to suit individual needs. But there should be a general, basic principle of inclusiveness and accessibility - this is still lacking
- EMPL Committee
  - Accessibility of meetings related to disability
    - Sign Language
    - Speech-to-text
    - Accessibility cards
  - Note that it is ad hoc and not for topics that are not disability related
  - Supports awareness raising among MEPs & Committee secretariat, but must be more promoted on and offline, so citizens are aware
- Sign language event in hemicycle
  - 1,000 people
  - 146 interpreters
  - 55 languages = 24 spoken + 31 signed (addition: Japanese SL)
  - First time EVER all SLs in EP

### Personal experience

- Explain that you have sign language interpreters from EP to match your linguistic profile
  - 1 NL
  - 1 EN
- EP still a long way to go
- No fixed structured in place (examples of MEPs Plura, Kosa, Kuneva & Crowley)
- One way you are working on this is the Sign Language Resolution

- Explain that from a personal experience SL interpreters are crucial for participation for deaf people, just like a personal assistant or a screen reader for other PwD
- Imbalance between recognition of SL interpreter profession & spoken language interpreter profession
- Importance of cross-party support and alliances

### Conclusion

- EP might still have a long way to go but you are pushing as hard as you can and you are willing to make structural changes that will make life easier for the next person/citizen
- Close by saying that EP MUST be a positive example so national and regional level can learn and improve ('spill over effect')