

Disability: EU Promises 'Accessibility Act' in 2012

European Commission Vice-President Viviane Reding told MEPs at the beginning of January that she will present a proposal for a 'European Accessibility Act' before the end of 2012. This new legislation is seen by the Commission as a key element of the European Disability Strategy, which was unveiled last year.

The EU executive is getting ready to launch a major study that will identify and analyse the barriers which prevent people with disabilities from making full use of public buildings, transport and all kinds of services. The results of this study will provide the basis for developing new EU legislation on accessibility standards.

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Vice-President Reding spoke about the overall goals and scope of the 'European Accessibility Act' when she addressed a special meeting of the Disability Intergroup in the European Parliament, which took place in Brussels. The meeting was attended by MEPs and by organisations representing people with disabilities.

"I will work hard to get all the actors on board to make sure that products and services, public buildings and spaces become more accessible to all our citizens, and to this end we will launch a study to identify the issues at stake," promised Reding.

"Based on this study I will propose an accessibility act in 2012. I know that I can count on the European Parliament to support this crucial issue," she said.

Challenges and Opportunities

Currently there are some 80 million people with various kinds of disabilities in the European Union, but this number is expected to increase in the coming years, mainly as a result of the growing proportion of older citizens in the population.

Reding is determined that the EU should try to be a world leader in developing products and services that are accessible to people with disabilities. "Europe should become an exporter of those goods and services," she said.

The vice-president believes this is important not just for ensuring fundamental rights and equal opportunities, but also as a way of creating jobs and growth by taking advantage of growing market

opportunities.

To make the most of these opportunities, the Commission will develop common standards for ICT (information and communication technologies), the built environment and product design.

Reding hopes that it will be possible to agree on common standards not only at European level, but also in cooperation with other major players in the global economy.



"We should work with our partners on other continents in order to get global standards being put in place," said Reding. "We have already started to do so with the United States, and with other partners at international level, and in the end we hope that will bring coherence into our standards."

The Commission vice-president cited progress made in the USA under the provisions of the 'Americans with Disabilities Act', which has been in force since 1990. "I think we should learn from this positive experience and go ahead in Europe too," she said.

New Legal Framework

Reding noted that the Lisbon Treaty provides a legal basis for main-streaming disability issues into other policies, and also gives a legal status to the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights. In this new framework, the Commission is obliged to make sure that the needs of people with disabilities are taken into account during the development and implementation of all EU policies and legislation.

Another important development is that the European Union has recently concluded the process of ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This is the first comprehensive human rights treaty to be ratified by the EU as a whole.

Reding explained that the Commission will be responsible for coordinating and monitoring the implementation of the UN Convention at the level of the European Union, in cooperation with the other EU institutions and also with the member states.

All the EU's 27 member states have signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and most of them (16) have already ratified it.

Background

According to official statistics, 80 million people in the European Union (or one out of every six citizens) are affected by some kind of disability. The EU Directive on 'equal treatment in employment and occupation' entered into force on 2 December 2000, and makes it illegal for employers to discriminate against people with disabilities.

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