**Freedom Drive**

**Brussels Belgium**

**22 – 25 September 2024**

**PLAIN LANGUAGE FREEDOM DRIVE REPORT**

The **Freedom Drive** is an **important event** **for disabled people**, activists, and allies from across Europe.

**It offers a time and space** to **raise awareness, share ideas, and build connections**.

This **11th edition** of the event was one of the largest of all of the Freedom Drives before.

The **Freedom Drive took place** over **three days**. Events were happening at various locations **in Brussels**, including the **Residence Palace and European Parliament**.

The event venues were located close to each other.

The theme of this year’s Freedom Drive was **“Reclaiming Our Rights NOW!”**.

The focus of it was on what we want the European Union to do for people with disabilities over the **next five years**.

During **the first day** of the Freedom Drive, we had **6 workshops** and discussions on the **important topics**, like **deinstitutionalisation, personal assistance,** and the **right to independent living**.

Deinstitutionalisation means moving people out of institutions.

During this day, many participants met with **Members of the European Parliament** to **discuss issues** related to **disability rights**.

At the same day, we had one workshop where everyone made signs for the protest.

**A Youth Café** was held after all of the workshops were finished, were young people **talked about the rise of far-right politics** and its **impact on independent living**.

Far-right politics refers to political ideas that focus on strong nationalism, traditional values, and often oppose changes like immigration or social progress.

On the second day we had the Freedom Drive march.

More than **500 people** participated in this march. It was the highlight of the whole Freedom Drive.

We marched through **Brussels** city, passing **European Commission** and finally stopped near the **European Parliament.**

During the Freedom Drive protest, we were **demanding** the attention to the **Human rights**, **independent living** and an **end the institutionalisation**.

**At the Parliament,** Many Members of the European Parliament, including Ciaran Mullooly, Katrin Langensiepen, and Tilly Metz, came to support us.

The Freedom Drive Hearing in the European Parliament happened in the afternoon of the same day. Over 200 people attended it.

The topic of the Hearing was: “What do we want to see on the European Disability **agenda** in the **next 5 years”**.

**Members of the European Parliament strongly expressed their support for independent living.**

The Hearing of the Parliament happened for over an hour and was recorded.

In the evening of the same day, participants of the Freedom Drive were invited to **celebrated ENIL’s the 35th anniversary.**

At the same evening and at the same time ENIL also organised **a memorial for the Adolf Ratzka.**

**Adolf Ratzka was a key figure** in the independent living movement. He passed away in July 2024.

During **ENIL’s 35th Anniversary** celebration, we announced the **Martin Naughton Prize.**

Martin Naughton was the one who **started the Freedom Drive** and was a leader in the independent living movement in Ireland.

**The Martin Naughton Prize** will **help young activists** join the Freedom Drive in the future.

The prize **will** also **support young people** who want to be leaders in the **Independent Living Movement.**

To celebrate ENIL’s 35th Anniversary, ENIL organized a photo competition.

**The winners were:**

**1st Prize:** Petra Stokar from Switzerland. She is an artist who shared a few photos of herself painting.

**2nd Prize:** Elif Gamze Bozo from Turkey. She is an artist who shared her artwork through photos.

**3rd Prize:** Nicole Fitzsimons from Ireland. She is an activist who shared a photo of herself with her baby.

Petra, Elif and their Personal Assistants joined us at the Freedom Drive in person.

During the final third day, we had a Freedom Drive Conference.

This year’s Freedom Drive conference was titled “Rebuilding the Independent Living Pillars.”

**The Freedom Drive conference** **focused** on two key topics: **deinstitutionalisation** and **Personal Assistance**, with a special focus on the different challenges people face.

**Deinstitutionalisation**, which means moving people out of institutions

The conference was **hosted** by **Jamie Bolling** (ENIL Co-Chair) and **Charlie Willis** (Youth Board Co-Chair).

This conference consisted of two parts, and was joined by 13 speakers from **European Commission, Belgian Government, academic** and **non-governmental sectors**.

**The European Union Commission** is the part of the European Union that suggests new laws, manages policies, and makes sure European Union laws are followed by all member countries.

**The non-governmental sector** includes groups that work on social, environmental, or humanitarian issues without being part of the government or making a profit.

During the first part of the conference, the Belgian **Minister for Mobility** Elke Van den Brandt and **European Union Commissioner for Equality** Helena Dalli and **the disability activist** and lawyerTheresia Degener, opened the conference with their speech.

The **Belgian** **Minister for Mobility** **Elke Van den Brandt**, spoke about **making Brussels** a **more accessible** city.

**Helena Dalli**, the outgoing **European Union Commissioner for Equality**, was asked why the European Union **still funds institutions for disabled people**.

**Theresia Degener**, a **human rights lawyer**, **explained** the **right to Independent Living** according to the United Nations CRPD.

CRPD is a United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

**The United Nations** is a group of countries that work together to solve global problems, promote peace, and protect human rights.

**During the first part** of the conference**, 4 speakers** talkedon **how** to help **disabled people live in the community instead of institutions.**

During the last session the final **3 speakers** talked about **how to make independent living inclusive for everyone**, including those with different needs.

**320 participants** and **90 personal assistants** met in Brussels to participate in **the tree – day long Freedom Drive event**.

Participants and their Personal Assistants came from the **33 countries** including **23 European Union** member states.

**European Union member states** are the countries that belong to the European Union and follow its rules.

10 participants came from the outside of the European Union countries, including places like Armenia, Iceland, and Sweden.

**142 participants** and Personal Assistants identified themselves as disabled people.

Most participants covered their own travel and accommodation costs.

One **Youth Network member** from Iceland **received a financial support.**

Before the start of the Freedom Drive, ENIL created a new logo, website and the color choice of the Freedom Drive.

We are planning to re-use this website in the Freedom Drive 2026.

**This Freedom Drive website** helped us to present the important information like the schedule, speakers, locations, history, sponsors, merchandise, and other details.

**After the event**, we added the photos and videos to the website.

**The website** replaced the printed participant pack, making the Freedom Drive **eco-friendlier.**

**Ecofriendly means** something that is good for the environment or causes little harm to it.

We printed more Freedom Drive **merchandise**, which we were selling during the Freedom Drive event.

We were selling T-shirts, tote bags, pens, badges, stickers, water bottles, mugs, posters, and two types of notebooks.

You can also **order** the Freedom Drive **merchandise online** in the Freedom Drive website.

After the event, we asked speakers and participants to give us their **feedback on the Freedom Drive event**.

A total of **60 people responded** and gave us their feedback.

Most of the feedback was **very positive**.

40% of people gave the Freedom Drive four stars, and 21.7% gave it five stars.

**More than half** of the respondents (56.7%) **attended the Freedom Drive for the first time.**

85% said they **would like** **to attend** again **next time**.

Most people (74%) said that the **Freedom Drive will help promote** **Independent Living** in their country.

We also received **suggestions for improvement**, mainly about making the event more **accessible.**

Some people mentioned that **Brussels overall is not very accessible**.

Others said they **wanted more breaks** and more time to **network** with others.

A few people asked for more **help with** finding **funding** for the event.

ENIL would like to thank **all the Freedom Drivers** who joined us in Brussels for another successful event.

We thank all the staff, volunteers, speakers, Board members, and Youth Board members for their contributions and the anonymous person who donated the birthday cake.

A special thank you goes to our **Co-Chair Nadia Hadad** for handling many parts of the planning and organization.

We thank the **European Union** for co-funding this Freedom Drive, and our members **Uloba** – Independent Living Norway and **STIL** from Sweden for providing the necessary financial support.