European Network on Independent Living

30 October 2026

Stop de-prioritising us! For an EU policy agenda of equality and inclusion

Statement on the State of the Union speech

On the 16th of September, the president of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen delivered her 2026 speech on the State of the Union. A key purpose of State of the Union speeches is the announcement of new policy initiatives.

Barriers and challenges

In the EU 90 million people are disabled and face many crucial barriers and challenges:

- Increases in institutionalisation
- Isolation in their apartments due to cuts to personal budget and personal assistance schemes
- Homelessness due to insufficient access to affordable and accessible housing
- Widespread deprivation of legal capacity due to the endurance of guardianship regimes
- Reinforced discrimination due to their belonging to various excluded groups
- Systemic exclusion from employment in the open labour market
- High rates of early school leaving

An ENIL monitoring report confirmed that the implementation of the UN CRPD in the EU is stagnating.

Actions which would be needed
There is a pressing need for new EU-level legislative initiatives and reinforced action to have pending legislation adopted.

ENIL has been asking the EU to:

- Redirect EU funding away from institutions and into Independent Living Services
- Ensure widespread access to Independent Living Services through an EU directive
- Coordinate the abolishment of guardianship in favour of supported decision-making

- Adopt the Equal Treatment Directive to lift the fight against discrimination to a new level

An EU that delivers, but not for disabled citizens

Despite these urgent needs, the EU is not adopting new decisive actions to ensure equal rights for its disabled citizens.

ENIL criticises President von der Leyen due to the fact that:

- The State of the Union speech did not announce new initiatives that directly benefit disabled citizens
- There was no commitment to the implementation of the UN CRPD in the EU or for aligned spending in the MFF
- There was no commitment to ensure that the Equal Treatment Directive will be adopted
- No new initiatives to reinforce equal treatment in general were announced

Taken together with the appointment letter to the Commissioner for Equality Lahbib and the recently adopted enhanced European Disability Strategy, the State of the Union speech is the continuation of a trend to de-prioritise equal treatment and inclusion of dis-criminated against groups. Also, among the national governments the political will to find joint European solutions to common problems in this area is fleeting,

ENIL calls on the president to reverse course! Equal treatment is not a luxury topic but at the heart of European values which were invoked so strongly in the speech.

Policy Initiatives with an intersectional dimension

A range of policy initiatives were announced which strongly affect disabled citizens in the EU as strongly as others and often more.

It is essential to ensure that the new approaches announced do not reinforce exclusion and discrimination. ENIL urges the EU to recognise the intersectional dimension and adopt disability inclusive approaches:

1. The Affordable Housing Act

The European Commissioner for housing stated that “normal people” can`t afford housing anymore. Disadvantaged groups have been excluded from housing for a long time and would like to have a roof over their head too. The housing crisis does not affect everyone equally: disability intersects with poverty, gender, race, migration status and age, creating additional barriers to accessing safe, affordable and accessible housing. Disabled women, particularly single mothers, survivors of domestic violence and racialised and migrant women, face additional barriers to accessing safe, affordable and accessible housing.

We know that:

- Homelessness is linked to structural exclusion from housing, especially for people with psychosocial impairments
- Deinstitutionalisation is blocked also because insufficiently affordable and accessible housing is available for disabled people
- Increasing the housing supply alone will not address the housing crisis for disabled people if homes remain inaccessible
- Inaccessible women's shelters and emergency accommodation can prevent disa-bled women experiencing domestic violence from escaping abusive situations.

We are calling on the EU to:

- Adopt an Affordable Housing act which ensures an expansion of affordable social and non-profit housing
- Ensure that affordability and accessibility go hand in hand, including by promoting the availability of accessible housing in both new and existing housing stock.
- Integrate an intersectional gender perspective into housing policies, ensuring accessible emergency accommodation and shelters and addressing the specific barriers faced by disabled women, single parents and racialised and migrant disabled people.

2. The European Care Deal

The European Care Strategy crucially neglected the right of disabled recipients of care and disabled carers, including female recipients of care and carers, to have access to person-centred services and to life in the community. Migrant and refugee disabled people, in-cluding those with insecure or undocumented status, can face additional barriers to ac-cessing care and support due to restrictive eligibility criteria, language barriers, lack of in-formation and fear of interacting with public authorities. Migrant women with disabilities may also face intersecting forms of discrimination and increased dependence on family members or informal carers.

We know that:

- Migrant and refugee disabled people may be excluded from personal assistance and community-based support because of their residence status, creating additional risks of isolation, institutionalisation and dependence.
- Disabled women are not only recipients of care but also provide care to children, partners and family members, often without adequate support or recognition.

We are calling for a care deal which:

- Commits to deinstitutionalisation and calls for funding cuts to institutional settings
- Enhances investments into person-centred services, especially personal assis-tance delivered through personal budgets
- Ensures disabled people led Centres for Independent Living will be introduced in every member state
- Improves the access to support services, including childcare, for disabled parents
- Ensure that access to essential care, personal assistance and community-based support is not undermined by migration or residence status, and that fundamental services are accessible regardless of nationality, language or legal status.

3. Climate change and preparedness

he Commissioner stated correctly that during the heatwaves this summer at least 35.000 people died in Europe. Evidence is emerging that institutions, older people and disabled people were more strongly affected by heat related constraints. A European Heatwave Plan was announced. The European Commission has proposed a new climate resilience plan.
Climate emergencies do not affect all disabled people equally. Rural and remote location, gender, chronic conditions, age and migration status can create additional barriers to ac-cessing safety, healthcare and emergency assistance. These inequalities can increase the risk of exclusion, neglect and institutionalisation during crises.

We know that:

- Inaccessible evacuation routes, emergency shelters and warning systems can p revent disabled people from reaching safety. People in rural and remote areas may also have limited access to emergency services, evacuation transport and cooling facilities.
- People with chronic conditions may face heightened risks when extreme heat worsens symptoms or emergencies disrupt access to medication, treatment, med-ical equipment and regular care.
- Menstrual health needs may be overlooked in emergency settings, where access to menstrual products, clean water, sanitation and privacy is limited.
- Migrant and racialised disabled people may face additional language, information and administrative barriers when accessing emergency assistance.

ENIL is calling on the EU and national governments to:

- Reinforce the fight against climate change
- Recognise extreme heatwaves as natural disasters and permit the activation of civ-il protection measures, including the EU civil protection mechanism
- Ensure that disabled people are a group that is specifically taken into account in climate risks assessments, climate change mitigation plans and preparedness planning
- Ensure that disabled people have access to climate devices. Provide financial support if needed, for example through the Citizen Energy Package.
- Guarantee continuity of personal assistance, support services and access to essential assistive technology during emergencies
- Prevent any form of segregation and institutionalisation in the name of climate response
- Involve organisations of persons with disabilities in designing and implementing climate adaptation measures

- Ensure that climate risk assessments and emergency preparedness plans adopt an intersectional approach, addressing the needs of disabled people in rural and re-mote areas, people with chronic conditions, disabled women and girls, and migrant and racialised disabled people, including access to healthcare, menstrual pro-ducts and accessible emergency facilities

4. AI and Technology

The President described Artificial Intelligence as one of Europe's two major “tipping points” and announced further initiatives to be presented in November.

As analysed by ENIL, AI has the potential to increase autonomy, accessibility and partici-pation for disabled people, including through assistive technologies.

However, AI can also reinforce existing inequalities when systems reproduce ableist, sex-ist and racist biases, particularly affecting disabled women, children and racialised disa-bled people. Digital exclusion may also affect disabled people in rural areas with limited access to infrastructure and accessible technologies.

We know that:

- AI and assistive technologies can increase independence, accessibility and partic-ipation in areas such as communication, education, employment and access to public services.
- Biased AI systems can reproduce discrimination in recruitment, welfare assess-ments, healthcare and other services, with compounded impacts on disabled women, children and racialised disabled people.
- Limited digital infrastructure and access to accessible technologies can further exclude disabled people in rural and remote areas.

ENIL calls on the European Commission to present legislative initiatives which:

- Integrate accessibility and non-discrimination into AI systems from the beginning, particularly where AI is used in independent living, health, employment, transport and public services.
- AI systems must not reproduce or amplify discrimination against disabled people and AI legislation must address intersecting forms of discrimination, including able-ism, sexism and racism, guaranteeing safe and non-discriminatory AI.

- Introduce safeguards to ensure AI systems do not reproduce or amplify discrimina-tion against disabled people.
- Are designed and implemented in collaboration with organizations of disabled peo-ple.
- Respect the principle of “human agency”, including the agency of disabled people and protects our right to make decisions about our own lives and support.
- Ensure the meaningful involvement of disabled people with diverse and intersecting iden-tities, particularly those facing multiple forms of discrimination, and their rep-resentative organisations in the development and testing of AI, so that technology supports independ-ent living rather than surveillance or control.

5. Hate, online safety and disability

Online bullying and harm in the digital environment are significant problems, strongly af-fecting young people. The President announced an EU KIDS Act, including age-specific protections and obligations for platforms, and a broader Digital Fairness Act. Online vio-lence can be both gender-based and disability-based. Disabled women and girls, particu-larly those who are racialised or LGBTQI+, may face intersecting forms of harassment, sexualised abuse and hate speech. Disabled children and young people may also be par-ticularly exposed to disability-based cyberbullying.

We know that:

- Disabled children and young people may face bullying and harassment linked to their dis-ability, with further risks for those experiencing other forms of discrimina-tion.
- Disabled women and girls can experience online harassment, sexualised abuse, non-con-sensual sharing of intimate images and deepfakes.
- Online hate and abuse can reinforce existing inequalities and contribute to exclu-sion and violence offline.

ENIL calls on the European Commission to design these initiatives in a way that:

- Directly recognises disability-based hate speech and hate crime
- Ensures that reporting mechanisms and access to justice are accessible to disab-led people and online safety measures and moderation take into account intersect-ing discrimination, including ableism, sexism, racism, and anti-LGBTQI+ hatred
- Improves the collection and recording of data on disability-motivated hate incidents, in-cluding where it intersects with other forms of discrimination..
- Addresses the links between online hate, harassment, discrimination

- Addresses the links between online hate, harassment, discrimination and offline violence
- Strengthen platform obligations to prevent and address disability-based online hate, gender-based online violence and cyberbullying targeting disabled children and young people.

Beyond the “inspiration” narrative

It is notable that the only direct reference to disability in the speech was through Sasha, a young disabled Ukrainian athlete who was presented as an inspirational symbol of resili-ence. While her story deserves recognition, disabled people should not only appear in po-litical speeches as inspirational figures overcoming personal adversity.

Instead of reducing disability equality to inspiration narratives, the European Commission should propose legislation than actively tackles the structural barriers and discrimination that disabled people face everyday.

Design these policies with us, not about us.

You know where to find us!

About the European Network on Independent Living

The European Network on Independent Living (ENIL) is a disabled-led, cross-disability net-work of disabled people and their representative organisations. ENIL promotes the right to independ-ent living, as set out in Article 19 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), its General Comments and the Guidelines on deinstitutionalisa-tion, including in emer-gencies. ENIL's work is guided by the CRPD and the Independent Living principles, enshrined in the Independent Living Pillars. ENIL is active at the Europe-an level, and internationally, through cooperation with Centres for Independent Living from around the globe. ENIL's actions and activ-ities are based on the social and the human rights models of disability, and on the principles of inclusive equality, self-determination, solidarity and intersectionality.

ENIL has participatory status with the Council of Europe (i.e. is a member of the Confer-ence of INGOs) and consultative status with ECOSOC.

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