

THE EUROPEAN WEEKLY
NEW EUROPE
www.neurope.eu

Disability in Europe: Improvements changes and proposals from the AER



Murat Ellialti has been a member of the Istanbul Provincial Council since 2004 and the Chairman of EU and Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Assembly of Regions for two years. Thanks to his role he has come up with a proposal on improving disability infrastructure in the wider European Regions, New Europe talked to him about these proposals.

Coming from a Turkish background how would you describe the facilities and the everyday life of a Turkish person with disabilities?

Our Council is the democratic decision-making body of Istanbul Special Provincial Administration which is mainly responsible with education, health, culture, tourism, environment, and many other things except water supply, transportation and road construction. All these public policy areas involve disabled people. We have special schools for disabled residents e.g. for blind pupils or deaf children. Our Social Service Department deals with disabled people in need of special care. With the introduction of Law on Disability, we revised the construction plans for schools for physically disabled students.

On the other hand, there are municipalities in Istanbul, which are highly autonomous local authorities. They are responsible with building roads, transportation and infrastructure. With the growing sensitivity on disability in the society, every institution has been doing some thing to improve the conditions for disabled people. Yet, we observed that sometimes there are conflicts in services provided for disabled people. Therefore we decided to create a coordination unit to coordinate all activities among all the institutions and tried get them together and establish coordination. Beside all these, in 2004 elections, 16 disabled politicians were elected to regional and local parliaments. In the Provincial Council, a special committee on disability was created for the first time since the council came in to existence in 1913

Is this what prompted this proposal and if not, what did?

Personally I have been involved in disability matters for over 15 years. When I started my university education, I met some blind friends and then we founded an association for the blind people and brought computer technology related to blindness. This personal background made me deal with disability issues when I became a politician. The triggering incident for the proposal took place during a study visit made to AER's head office in Strasbourg where AER staff made presentations about the work of the Assembly to our delegation. During the presentation on Committee II (Social Policy and Public Health) a colleague, who was a mobility trainer for adult blinds, asked why AER doesn't deal with disability issues in its work. However, I had already known that this issue was already written in the committee's work. Therefore we decided to create working group under this committee and asked our colleagues whether we could do it or not. The idea was welcomed by everybody in the AER and then put into practice.

What would you say are the widest differences between the regions on this issue?

If you talk about Turkey as a country, there is a big gap between my region and the others since Istanbul is one of the biggest cities in the world. In comparison with the rest of Europe, many regions have different activities about disabled people. For example, Ile de France has a commission formed by various sectors, like doctors, lawyers engineers etc. In UK, a region has a "Disabled Right Commission". Every region has different structures and policies depending on the overall socio-economic development level, political awareness and strong civil society presence.

Do you think that town planners and local councils will be very open to these ideas?

If you look around Europe from a disability point of view, you will notice that there are many things that are done according to the needs of disabled people. When you see a traffic light, you hear that it sounds for people who has visual problem, or you see some points adjusted for a wheel-chaired persons. Even for car parks, there are places specially allocated for disabled people. Thus, the policy-makers already have a view on disability needs and rights within Europe. Yet, our initiative intends to do two things. Firstly, it will push disability issue on the agenda and work of regions that lacks any policy on the matter. Secondly, and more importantly, it aspires

contributing in establishing a transnational European area for disabled citizens, where disabled persons can enjoy their lives as equal citizens through both removing the barriers and enabling measures. The Working Group can facilitate a cooperation and coordination between the European regions while feeding the EU policy process in accordance with the subsidiarity principle and possibly more.

It's such a massive project - but it is something that can only be pushed at a regional level - could you describe for our readers the power of working at a regional level and how effective it really is?

At regional level, you are close to both the central policy-makers but also to the citizens as well. Also, being elected directly by the residents of a region gives you extra power in representing their interest and concerns. At the EU level, because of the multilevel governance structure, the regions have multiple channels to advance their policy preferences.

Is educating the regions on the disability issue through bottom-up an appropriate approach? Of course my answer will be yes, but yes will is not sufficient to this question. As European societies, we are bound by some important values and policies like equality, human rights, sustainable development etc. We shouldn't have the mission to educate regions, but should draw their attentions to this subject. Actually they are already aware of the importance of the matter but what we need to do is to create a common understanding and share our experiences.

Interview by Alia Papageorgiou