AccessibleEU Centre in support of accessibility policies in the EU internal market

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The Committee on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection adopted an own-initiative report by Katrin LANGENSIEPEN (Greens/EFA, DE) on AccessibleEU Centre in support of accessibility policies in the EU internal market.

The report welcomed the Commission's communication ‘Union of Equality: European Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030’ and the Commission's initiative, announced in the strategy, to create the AccessibleEU Centre (the Centre).

Members argued that greater accessibility outcomes in society can only be achieved if the Centre adopts the holistic approach of ‘**universal design**’, particularly with regard to the physical environment, transport, information, communication and services, but also in public procurement and tendering.

Insufficient implementation

In recent years, the European Union has approved several pieces of legislation and technical standards that have created a new accessibility ecosystem, such as the European Accessibility Act, the Web Accessibility Directive, the Audiovisual Media Services Directive and the Electronic Communications Directive, as well as technical specifications for railway stations and vehicles. In addition, accessibility requirements must be considered when allocating EU funds and awarding public contracts.

However, the implementation of this essential body of legislation at national level has not been satisfactory to date, mainly due to the lack of qualified accessibility specialists.

The report stressed the need to **improve the overall knowledge, as well as practical and theoretical specialist knowledge**, of accessibility policies within public administrations, economic operators and society in general, in order to help develop relevant, sustainable and affordable solutions in each Member State, and thus improve the implementation of current and future accessibility requirements.

Members called on the Commission to ensure that the Centre is provided with the **necessary funding and staffing** for its establishment and operation, and on Member States to guarantee the necessary resources for the implementation and enforcement of accessibility policies, including through EU funds.

Structure

The report called on the Commission to establish a **secretariat and a forum** to steer and direct the work of the Centre. They considered it necessary to have a balanced participation in the forum of relevant stakeholders from the private and public sectors and of right-holders with relevant experience in accessibility. The participation of organisations representing people with disabilities should be guaranteed as an essential part of the Centre's work.

Members believe that **sub-groups of subject matter experts** are needed for certain areas, such as the built environment, public procurement, digital accessibility, media and culture, and assistive technologies. These groups should cooperate closely with the Centre, Member States, people with disabilities and organisations representing people with disabilities.

Member States should establish **national accessibility hubs**, including contact points, and mirror groups of specialists who will work closely with the Centre to ensure the implementation, monitoring and enforcement of accessibility legislation and to facilitate exchange and coordination between relevant stakeholders and right-holders.

Mandate

Members considered that the Centre should function as a **hub for exchange**, providing regular support and expertise on accessibility policies and technical requirements to relevant EU institutions and bodies, as well as to Member States when implementing EU law.

The Centre should in particular:

- establish and coordinate a **cooperation framework** that would bring together the relevant national and Union bodies with all user groups, to support harmonised implementation and enforcement across the EU, provide guidance and training, and to inspire **policy developments and innovation** at national and EU level, including through the identification and sharing of best practices across sectors, as well as through the creation of tools aiming to facilitate the implementation of Union law;

- encourage collaboration between relevant bodies and organisations with highly innovative stakeholders to promote the development of assistive technologies, and provide advice to the relevant EU institutions and bodies and its Member States on their internal accessibility policies and practices;

- generate knowledge on accessibility through research and studies and make it available to both the Commission and the Member States, and collect specialised, comparable and fully accessible information and data, including feedback on the implementation of accessibility legislation;

- play a key role in providing the Commission and the Member States, stakeholders and right holders with knowledge and **support for the implementation, monitoring and enforcement of accessibility policies**, including through training and guidance material in all official EU languages and in accessible, understandable and easy-to-read language;

- support Member States in developing **specific educational programmes** on accessibility issues and provide training to professionals, EU and national officials, as well as relevant stakeholders and right-holders, in order to raise awareness of these issues.

Members regretted that the standardisation system does not sufficiently allow people with disabilities and their representative organisations to participate on an equal footing with other stakeholders in the activities of European and national standardisation bodies when they develop accessibility standards. They therefore called for a **better representation in the standardisation system** and a balanced representation among the appointed experts, to ensure that EU accessibility legislation and standards are fair.