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Adapting public policies and public administration to the needs of physically challenged people

Maria Rammata*

Abstract

It is imperative that individuals with disabilities and other vulnerable social groups are afforded special consideration as citizens and especially as users of public administrations when they try to settle their cases. However, it is not always confirmed that institutions, administrative procedures and overall public policies are adapted to the needs of vulnerable people. Neither is it given that civil servants are recipients of an adequate training that enables them to deal with the various disabilities and specifications of each case. This study demonstrates that the public sector must evolve to more effectively cater to the needs of persons with disabilities and be alerted of their future requirements and specific living conditions. This necessity is attributable to a number of factors, including the prevailing systems, the policy-making process, the administrative burdens and the human resources available, which are not sufficiently qualified to support persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups. General decisions and directions have been established to clarify the necessity for immediate modifications to be implemented by the public sector in order to embrace persons with disabilities in political, economic and social life. Proposals are to be presented regarding the requisite reforms to be introduced in the administrative corpus of public administrations. These reforms will pertain to the design of public policies and services, the impact of communication policy, the physical accessibility and the environment within the administrations, the assessment method of disability (medical model) and finally, the disability awareness for the personnel in public administration.

JEL Classifications: D1, I3, I31, K0

Keywords: discrimination, disability, accessible public services, stigma, isolation, disability awareness, allowance, immigrants, equality, inclusiveness

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1 Introduction

Public administrations are conceptualized and structured to serve all members of society equally and to be as inclusive as possible. This paper aims to elucidate the significance and pervasiveness of attributing to public institutions, personnel, and their procedural working methods the importance of being more responsive, inclusive and proactive towards the special needs of a society that necessitates attention and promotion. Empirical evidence, a comprehensive review of the existing literature, and an analysis of administrative practices in the current study reveal that the Greek administration has traditionally exhibited limited capacity to address the needs of vulnerable populations. There is an urgent need to systematically incorporate the issues confronting vulnerable individuals into the formulation of policy documents and to begin to reflect on the modalities of providing public services in a more dynamic and responsive manner to the needs of special people in the initial phase of public policies. Furthermore, this empirical study underscores the failure of numerous public authorities and administrations in adequately serving special categories of the population and in conducting thorough investigations into the persistent gap that is perpetuated by methods ill-suited to the needs of these individuals. The failure to adopt inclusive public policies that take into account the specificities of people with disabilities during the design process indicates that the problem will persist and intensify in the near future, as the number of people with disabilities is substantial. In many European countries, people with disabilities often face social isolation and institutionalization as their health deteriorates. To address these concerns, the paper proposes tangible recommendations that could revitalize efforts to meet the needs of the vulnerable people. To address the issues, this paper puts forward the following research questions:

RQ1: Are there specific provisions in Greek public policy that address the needs of people with disabilities?

RQ 2: Are public services in Greek administration accessible for people with disabilities (physically, technologically)?

RQ 3: Is the personnel in public services sufficiently trained to deal with special categories of people?

In order to perform this type of analysis, information, data and knowledge has been obtained from the relevant researches from International organizations such as the OECD, the national authority for accessibility that deals with the disabled people and interviews have been contacted with relatives of people with disabilities, with PWD themselves, as well as through specific non-governmental organizations that represent fundamental rights of people with disabilities and especially those that suffer from terminal diseases, such as the ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis) in Greece. The fact that

the author also is a professional working as a scientist at the Greek Ombudsman gives her the ability to articulate an independent view on such issues from her every day close contact with relatives of people with disabilities or people with disabilities themselves that share their views and propose changes to be better served by public authorities.

2 Definition and important facts for persons with disabilities

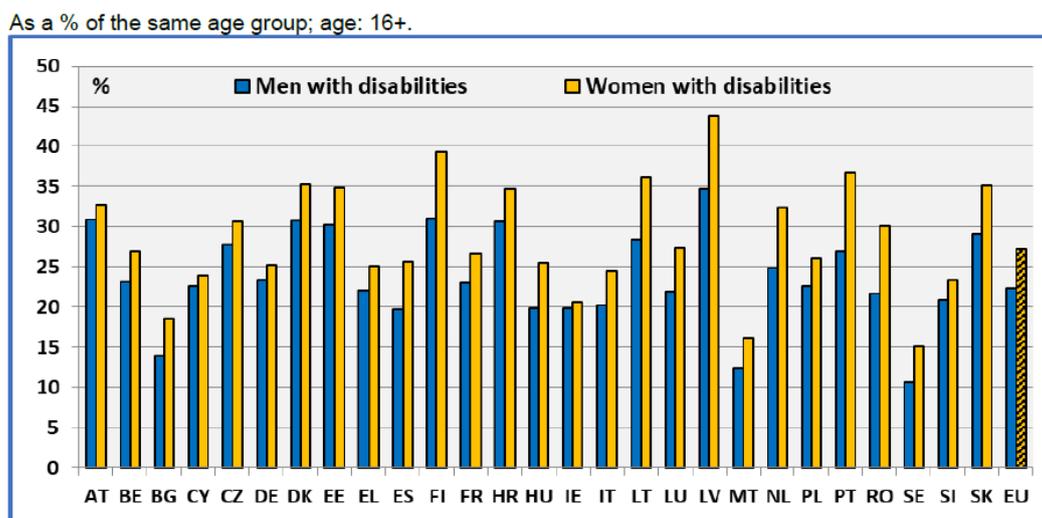
There are many definitions for disability and almost all of them refer to a certain restriction that a human encounters when he/she interacts with the environment. For the World Health Organization: “Disabilities is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. As impairment we consider a problem in body function or in a psychological state; as an activity limitation we consider a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations”. The UN Convention for persons with disabilities (2007) stresses that: “Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others”. For the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) (2001), disability refers to the interaction between individuals with a health condition (e.g. cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, depression) and personal-environmental factors (e.g. negative attitudes, inaccessible transportation and public buildings, and limited social supports). If we consider national legislation in Greece, in the introductory report of law 4443/2016, there is a specific reference to the definition of disability under law 4074/2012, which incorporates the Convention on the Protection of Persons with Disabilities into Greek public law. Furthermore, in the art. 60 of the law 4488/2017 (Greek Gazette A’137, 13/09/2017) about the protection of employees and the rights of persons with disabilities it is stated that: “Persons with disabilities (PWD) are persons with long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, in particular institutional, environmental or behavioral barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others”. Also, with art. 2(8) of law 4430/2016, vulnerable social groups are defined as those whose integration into social and economic life is hindered due to physical and mental causes or due to delinquent behavior. These include people with any form of disability (physical, mental, intellectual, and sensory), juvenile delinquents, prisoners and ex-prisoners etc.

The most recognized typology of disability is delineated by three models. The first model, the medical one was originated during the Renaissance period and initially addressed the issue of disability. The second model is the functional model, which was developed in 1965 and focuses on

the limitations a person with a disability may experience. The third typology is the social model, which was developed in Great Britain during the 1970s and 1980s as part of a movement to promote the emancipation of people with disabilities. This model focuses on the impact of disability on social life in general.

Although there are many definitions of disability, they all have the same denominator in terms of the difficulties that those people face. The World Health Organization estimates that 1.3 billion - one sixth of the world's population - live with severe disability. At European level, the number of persons with disabilities and chronic conditions is estimated at 92 million or 24.9% of the general population (over 16 years of age elderly people with moderate or severe disabilities or for prevention purposes) (European Commission, 2023). In EU elderly disabled people represent 48.6 % of the general population with disabilities. Similarly, almost one in four people in Greece (24.3%) contest they have felt “severely limited” (10.2%) or “moderately limited” (14.1%) in carrying out daily activities in at least the past six months due to health problems, while the corresponding figure for people aged over 65 years is over 60% (Presidency of the Government of Greece, 2024). At European Commission’s survey (2023) in 2020 in EU countries about 27.2 % of women aged 16 and over declared a disability (activity limitation) in comparison with 22.4 % of men in the same age group (figure 1). For Greeks, aged over 16 years old and over 25% are women that present a disability and approximately 22% are men. In a recent study out of 54 countries disability seen as severe or extreme functional or activity difficulties was measured as highly prevalent for 14% for all adults (Mitra and Sambamoorthi, 2014).

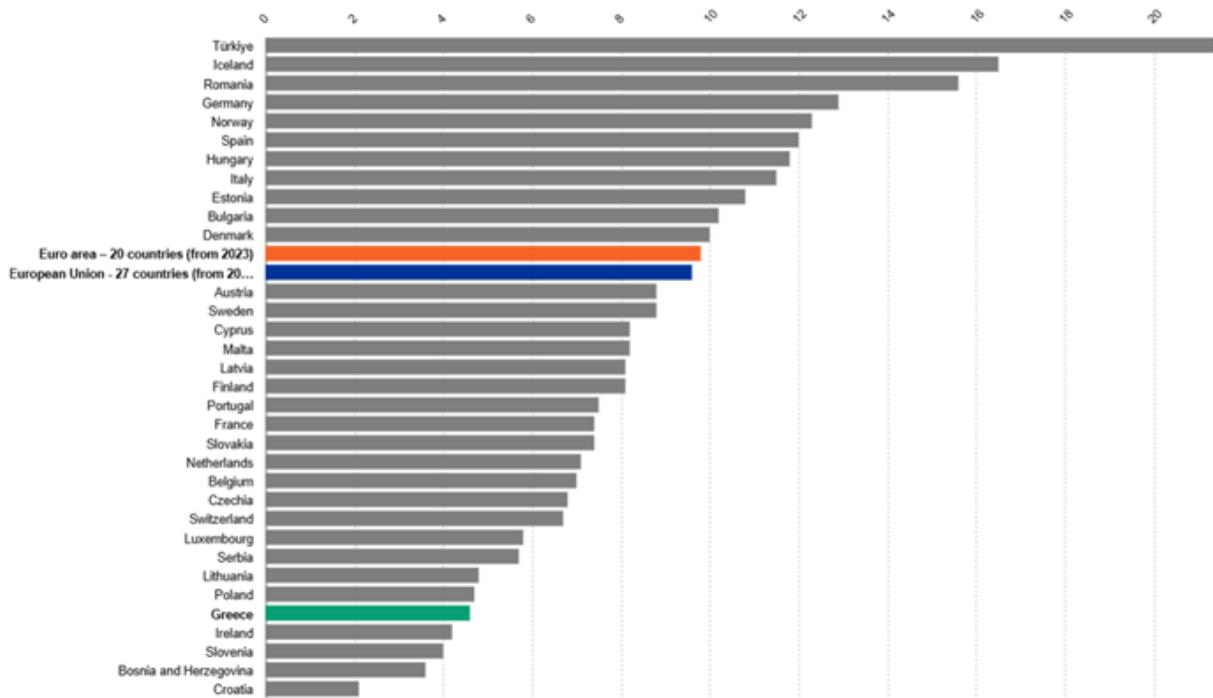
Figure 1: Percentage of people with disabilities by member state and degree of disability, 2020



Source: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>

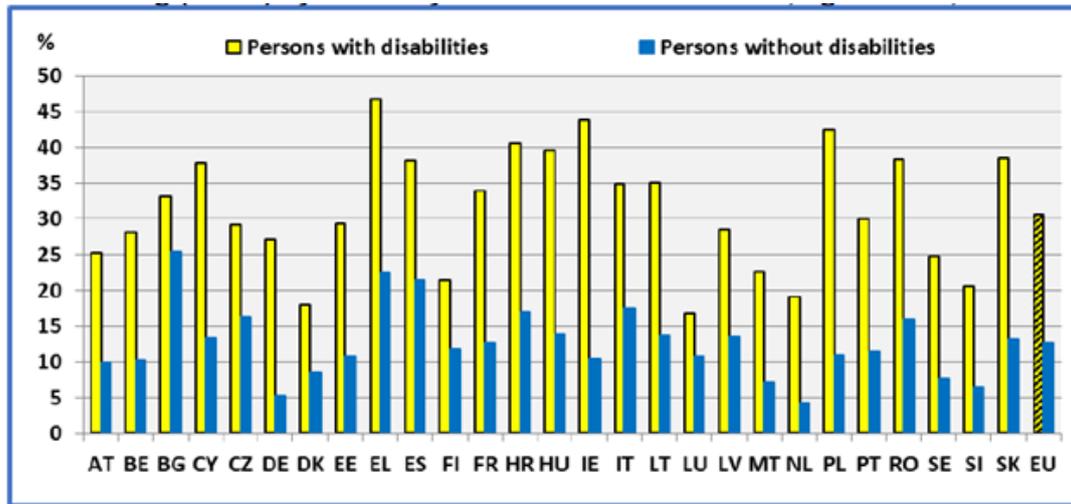
For the young people with disability in the EU member states there is evidence that a significantly amount of them between the age of 18-24 decide to drop out from school due to various obstacles: fear of negative attitudes and bullying (UN, 2014), lack of tailored made programs for their needs, architectural barriers, methods and other tools that are not sufficiently adopted to the needs of these categories of people (European Commission, June 2022, p. 47) (figure 2). Also, the EU monitors and collects data upon the percentage of people with disabilities between the ages of 16-29 and their occupation and results to the conclusion that in these age groups for 30,6% of people they are neither in employment, nor in education and training, indicating a very serious issue for almost all European countries. Indeed, as we see in the next figure (3), for Poland, Ireland and Greece this rate is very high at more than 45% for Greece, 44% for Ireland and around 40% for Poland.

Figure 2: Early leavers from education and training by sex and level of disability



Source: https://doi.org/10.2908/EDAT_LFSE_40

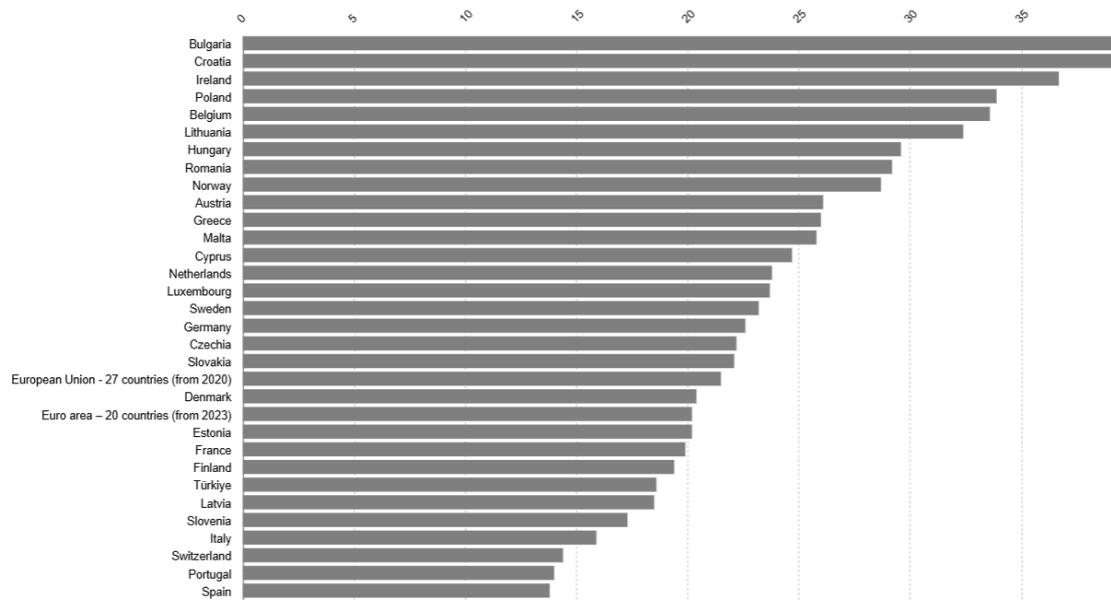
Figure 3: Percentage of young people neither in employment nor in education or training by disability status and member state, aged 16-29, 2020



Source: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>

Also, these numbers are rising as societies become aging with older people representing a large part that increases dramatically. On 1 January 2021, people aged 65 and above represented 20,8 % of the EU population. This represents an increase of 0,2 percentage points compared with 2020 (20,6 %), and an increase of 0,6 percentage points compared with 2019 (20,2 %) (European Commission b, 2023, p.11, and European Commission, 2021b). 37,6% of people with disabilities are inactive compared to 17,6% of persons without disabilities, also, more than one million children and adults with disabilities aged less than 65 and more than 2 million under the age of over 65 years live in institutions receiving mediocre health care services and being fully isolated by the society (European Commission 2021, p. 10). More specifically, the employment rate for individuals with disabilities in the EU is 50,6%, which represents a 22,5 percentage point gap in employment compared to individuals without disabilities (with 73.1 % of people without a disability being employed) (European Commission, 2023b, p. 13 and Eurostat).

Figure 4: Disability employment gap by level of activity limitation and sex



Source: https://doi.org/10.2908/HLTH_DLM200

Furthermore, there are fewer opportunities for academic and career success due to different barriers (Levitt et al., 2023, Sang, 2017).

2.1 Special features and challenges for persons with disabilities

Under the social model any individual with disability is confronted with an impairment that hinders his capacity to fully engage in everyday activities. Impairments affecting sight or hearing, as well as somatic or organic deficiencies, neurological impairments such as motor neurone disease, muscular atrophy, and so forth, along with dementia, autism, dyslexia, hyperactivity, learning difficulties, and mental health conditions, represent a few of the most common forms of PWD. These challenges may be visible or invisible, psychological or non-visible, and they alter the functional capabilities of these individuals, preventing them from achieving the same level of functionality as the rest of the population. In certain instances, these challenges may result in the categorisation of these individuals as members of a minority group that is subjected to discrimination on the basis of disability (PWD). This may manifest as physical, technological, digital, cultural, or informational barriers that lead to discriminative attitudes from the rest of society and impede their social interaction. Such experiences can even result in the deprivation of fundamental political (right to vote or right to be elected) and other rights, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) which all members of society are entitled to (European Commission, 2021, pp. 8-10).

The same conclusion has been reached in several studies which have demonstrated that people with disabilities (PWD) encounter a range of obstacles leading to social isolation, stigma, exclusion, unemployment and the perception of disability as a defining characteristic of the individual (International Disability Alliance, 2022). The perception of differentiation serves to create and reinforce these barriers, while there is a sense that public authorities and society at large are not making sufficient efforts to bridge the gap between the disabled and the rest of society.

Discrimination based on disability represents an even more significant challenge when individuals interact with public-sector services at the municipal level or at national administration offices. Moreover, stereotypes and discrimination are evident when people with disabilities (PWD) attempt to visit public health services, or attempt to obtain an official document, such as a certificate, allowance, or pension, that are not digitally available and relate to their disability or proceed with other applications. As the prevalence of disabilities increases with age, older people (defined as those aged 65 years and above) are required to visit public facilities with greater frequency, particularly in the health sector, in both urban and rural areas. The specific facilities visited may vary depending on the disability, with visits to health services, hospices, cancer-care treatment centers, and neurological centers being particularly common. Similar barriers to those previously outlined exist for other categories of population, including refugees, migrants and LGBTI PWD. Furthermore, individuals may fall into more than one category of disability, resulting in diversified intersectional discrimination (i.e. refugee and handicap, older and handicap, etc.).

2.2 Aspects of the European and international framework for disability

Many official documents tackle the issue of protecting people with disabilities and of stressing out the importance of building sustainable societies that will reflect upon the problems that people encounter, especially those that are more vulnerable. Some of these important international official documents that support PWD are the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959), the Convention on Human Rights (1950), the World Declaration of Education for All (1990), the Standard Rules for the Equalization of Opportunities for People with Disabilities (1993), the Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Needs Education and a Framework for Action (1994) and the Madrid Declaration (2003) that was approved in the year for disabled people in EU.

In 2007, United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) by its resolution 61/106 of 13 December 2007 that came into force on 03/05/2008 that is a legally-binding agreement between Member States who have signed the Convention to uphold, promote and protect the rights of persons with disabilities as defined in the treaty. Subsequently, it has been

regarded as a seminal example of an inclusive policy for persons with disabilities, facilitating their integration into social, political and financial life in an optimal manner (The Danish Institute for Human Rights, 2018). The purpose of the Convention is to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all people with disabilities, as well as to promote respect for their inherent dignity. It is made up of two documents, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which contains the main human rights provisions expressed as a series of Articles and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

In the context of the European Union, the issue of disability is also accorded with a high level of priority, reflecting a commitment to promoting the rights and autonomy of individuals with disabilities. Furthermore, it encompasses the fulfilment of rights and responsibilities as citizens and as full members of society. Since 2010, the European Union Disability Strategy 2010-2020 focused on eight priority areas: accessibility, participation, equality, employment, education and training, social protection, health and external action (European Commission, 2010). Fulfilment of those areas could bring a better quality of life for disabled. Also, the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union in the art. 10 pleads to mainstream disability issues into all policies and actions that might affect the lives of people in special needs. For this purpose, the Europe 2020 Strategy and the European Pillar of Social Rights raised awareness to combat inequalities and promote the development of societies with equal conditions and opportunities for their members without any stereotype and bias interfering when we deal with persons with disabilities and/or other vulnerable people, such as immigrants, refugees, people with chronic pain, with intellectual disabilities and other impairments. The objectives of this mission are explicitly delineated in the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), where disability constitutes a significant focus, underscoring the necessity for development that is respectful of and responsive to the needs of individuals with special requirements and vulnerabilities. The 8th goal places particular emphasis on the empowerment of people with special needs, alongside the stipulation that growth must be sustainable, inclusive and promote the holistic development of all areas. Furthermore, the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2021-2030) emphasizes the necessity to cultivate new competencies amongst people with disabilities, thereby facilitating their integration into the labor market and enhancing their overall quality of life. In order to address stereotypes and facilitate the integration of disability-related considerations into all aspects of public service provision and policy formulation, the EU has also adopted : the European Accessibility Act covering products and services, the Web Accessibility Directive, the Electronic Communications Code, the Audiovisual Media Services

Directive and copyright legislation, hoping that way to promote specific policies that facilitate the lives of persons with disabilities as this domain of competence is reserved to Member States (MS).

The European policy for equity and human rights for persons with disabilities is furthermore thoroughly stated in research papers of the Centre for European Social and Economic Policy that focuses on the participation of PWD and their right to be integrated in the social and economic life of the Member State where they live.

The aforementioned institutional agreements provide further clarification regarding the mission of the European Union to expand positive measures and promote the implementation of national policies that are specifically designed to combat the restrictions of the rights of people with disabilities (PWD). Additionally, the agreements aim to establish equality and inclusiveness as tangible realities and to facilitate their full integration into the social (Rimmerman, 2013) and political life of each member state. Indeed, there is a robust European commitment to advance the autonomy of persons with disabilities (PWD), to deter their institutionalization, and to facilitate the attainment of personal and professional objectives (Heymann et al., 2014). To this end, the EU is committed to providing comprehensive support to its member states with the objective of eliminating restrictions and facilitating the freedom of movement of people with disabilities (PWD). It is imperative that national policies align with these guidelines and facilitate the exercise of political rights by people with disabilities (PWD), including the right to vote. Moreover, the EU strives to guarantee that national legislation is aligned regarding accessibility standards for the built environment, encompassing both private and public spaces, as well as workplaces. Also, the EU advocates for the establishment of minimum standards for the levels of disability benefits, for education and equal access to it, for the quality of standards for the provision of accessible goods and services, including support for independent living, and, where possible, the provision of personal assistance in the MS.

The following section of this paper analyses the need to further explain and cultivate a culture of inclusion for people with disabilities who are not yet sufficiently integrated into the social and economic life of all Member States. In particular, the need to design robust and accessible public policies that anticipate the specific needs of people with disabilities will be addressed.

2.2.1 The design of robust public policies that support Persons with disabilities (PWD) and the leading role of European Union institutions

People with disabilities have the right to participate in the political and societal context and live independently while leveraging the available political and societal opportunities that protect and

support them with their vulnerability. For governments to reciprocate to this urgent demand they should be committed to create a society where everyone can take part as a full membership, to provide persons with disabilities the requisite opportunities to pursue education and employment, to actualise their abilities, or to engage in creative activities during their leisure time (such as participation in sports, creation of open playgrounds for children with disabilities, etc.). Public authorities, in accordance with European and international organisations, acknowledge the necessity for States to establish a favorable legislative framework to reinforce the rights of persons with disabilities (PWD) and to do so with immediate effect. It is therefore incumbent upon public authorities to align and coordinate their legal framework, institutional framework and administrative procedures at the national, European and international levels in order to create equal opportunities for all, irrespective of whether an individual has a physical, functional, mental or other kind of disability or impairment.

In this endeavor, in the United Kingdom, an update to the National Disability Plan led to over 1,000 consultations with the target group of persons with disabilities (PWD), culminating in the adoption of the new Disability Action Plan for 2023-2024. In the United Kingdom, it is estimated that over one in five individuals are living with a disability (Ministerial Forward of the Disability Plan, 2024). It is asserted that the government is committed to making this country the most accessible place in the world for disabled people to live, work, and flourish, addressing and removing the barriers. The Disability Action Plan in the UK (2024) is supplementary to the National Disability Strategy, which outlines a long-term vision to enhance the lives of disabled individuals and other significant UK government reform programs. It is also aligned with specific initiatives aimed at continuously improving equal access to opportunities, in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). As evidenced by the responses of those who participated in the consultation for the UK's 2023-2024 Disability Action Plan, there is a pressing need for inclusion and accessibility to be incorporated from the outset (UK, 2023-2024).

An accompanying comprehensive legislative framework could be a sufficient first step to address all forms of disability discrimination through a directive that harmonizes the recognition of disability assessments across the EU, with the aim of facilitating the free movement of persons with disabilities (PWD) within and between EU Member States. Additionally, measures should be put in place to guarantee the rights of PWD to political participation at the EU level. Furthermore, guidance should be provided to Member States to ensure that the same standards are upheld at the national level. Binding legislation should be enacted to harmonize accessibility standards for the built environment. Additionally, measures should be implemented to propose minimum standards for reasonable accommodation in the workplace and to establish guidelines on minimum standards for the levels of

disability benefits and the provision of services, including support for independent living and, where possible, the provision of personal assistance in the Member States (European Economic and Social Committee, 2019).

3 Drafting a public policy to better accommodate people with disabilities: the catalyst role of public administration

As was demonstrated above, individuals with disabilities encounter a multitude of restrictions pertaining to their private lives in many countries. Furthermore, they face considerable challenges when attempting to navigate administrative offices or private sector venues. The restrictions vary depending on the specific type of disability, the individual's socioeconomic background, their employment status, their access to education, the level of digital literacy as well as their proficiency with digital technologies.

About the risk of isolation of people with disabilities in 2012, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights has explained : “This right (to participate in the community) is violated when persons with disabilities who need some form of support in their everyday lives are required to relinquish living in the community in order to receive that support; when support is provided in a way that takes away people’s control from their own lives; when support is altogether withheld, thus confining a person to the margins of the family or society; or when the burden is placed on people with disabilities to fit into public services and structures rather than these services and structures being designed to accommodate the diversity of the human condition”.

To address the issue of isolation of PWD it is essential to develop a targeted public policy that anticipates and facilitates the integration of individuals with disabilities into social and economic life. It is imperative that public administration and its personnel reorient their efforts towards a more structured, equipped, and managed organization, with the objective of providing more effective services to individuals with disabilities while simultaneously addressing the significant barriers that impede their lives and isolate them.

To achieve these objectives, a detailed examination has been conducted, which identifies five key factors that are essential for the more effective accommodation of people with disabilities:

- 1) The design of public policies and services.
- 2) The impact of communication policy and access of information for people with disabilities.
- 3) Physical accessibility: The urban planning around public offices and the environment within the administrations.

4) The assessment method of disability (medical model) and the final decision about the percentage of disability.

5) Disability awareness for the personnel

3.1 The design of public policies and services

The design of public policies and the procedures that accompany them require citizens to comply with a number of obligations that result in significant administrative burdens. When public authorities are drafting a new public policy, they do not always consider the specific circumstances of users with disabilities. These circumstances include limited time, effort, and courage, as well as expectations to be fully supported and acknowledged for their difficulties. Furthermore, the impact that the new policy may have on diverse dimensions of disabilities, for instance if it is perceived as overly complex and unfriendly, is not adequately a priori considered. This could potentially cause harm, lead to bullying, discrimination, bias, inferiority, stress due to incapacity, and more. In the majority of cases, there is no substantive consultation with representatives of people with disabilities (PWD), as it is very difficult for them to organize themselves for those purposes. Moreover, even when such consultations do occur, it is challenging to identify a single representative who can adequately represent the diverse needs and perspectives of the entire PWD community. To conclude, the perspective of disabled people is not considered at the outset of the policy-making process (Woodburn, 2013). The design of public policies is not conducive to the needs of persons with disabilities, resulting in a failure to provide reasonable accommodation for such individuals and their relatives. The prevailing assumption remains that people with disabilities will have to adapt their approach to public services, rather than expecting the public sector to modify its practices or adopt a tailored approach to support them.

For example, recruitment announcements in the Greek public sector may not include flexible specifications for persons with disabilities (PWD) or, in the event that such specifications are included, they may lack specific provisions for applicants who are PWD. Also, in the implementation of public policies (in employment, transportation, tourism, civil protection, emergency plans and infrastructure sectors, among others), it is far more probable to observe that disability is overlooked as a critical success factor for public policies!

Recommendation: In order to address the aforementioned issues, it is imperative that public policies are developed with the specific requirements of persons with disabilities (PWD) in mind, considering the diverse range of disabilities and target groups from the stage of the design of policies. For instance, when drafting a civil protection emergency evacuation plan to deliver specific measures for

the disabled and other vulnerable people. It is also essential that policies are implemented in a manner that facilitates their effective implementation for PWD. In this regard, it is necessary to streamline administrative procedures replacing outdated and complex administrative methods that fail to respond to the needs of PWD and other special categories of people.

3.2 The impact of communication policy and access of information for people with disabilities

The quality of public services provided to people with disabilities is contingent upon the manner in which these services are delivered, the administrative practices that underpin them, and the communication policy that informs the public about them. Typically, people with disabilities (PWD) are individuals who may apply for certification or financial assistance (e.g., disability allowances, invalidity pensions, other benefits, etc.). They may also engage in other transactions related to healthcare, education, or other social services. Additionally, they often seek access to goods and services (e.g., hearing or visual devices, specialized home services, rehabilitation services, etc.), including housing.

It is uncommon for people with disabilities and other minority groups to have adequate access to official information, whether in tangible or online formats. This is largely due to the fact that the majority of services are not designed with their specific needs in mind. Consequently, there are few systems in place to address the needs of individuals with hearing loss, speech impairments or intellectual disabilities in terms of the dissemination of information. Furthermore, there is a lack of accessible information boards and properly marked lines to indicate specific administration offices. Additionally, there is a dearth of accessible manuals that explain the functions and services of these offices to disabled people. A similar observation can be made with regard to the websites of central public administrations (ministries), which typically lack web-based applications and accessible forms for people with disabilities. Furthermore, these websites often fail to provide accessible formats such as large print, screen readers, system braille, and audio format.

Recommendation: It is recommended that a specific communication policy be implemented to address the unique information needs of individuals with disabilities. Information that is useful to the reader includes data, forms, prerequisites, and knowledge that should be presented in text, audio, digital, or image formats. In this regard, public policies should reinforce the digital government strategy, which aims to promote accessibility and inclusiveness. This strategy focuses on the provision of human-centric and user-friendly digital public services that respond to the needs and preferences of European citizens, including those of people with disabilities. In addition, websites and web

content must be adapted to ensure accessibility for individuals with disabilities. The French administration opted for a sanction that may rise up to 50.000€ for those sites that are not accessible for handicaps (law n. 2023-171 of 09/03/2023), and this could mark a new strong measure to apply for public authorities so as to oblige all stakeholders for more accessible on-line information policy and provision of services. It may be beneficial to consider hiring individuals with disabilities at each point of contact with public services, thereby facilitating their inclusion in the marketplace.

3.3 Physical accessibility: The urban planning around public offices and the environment within the administrations

In examining the logistical barriers faced by people with disabilities (PWD) when accessing public administration offices, it becomes evident that the itinerary they must follow, the transportation options available to them and their ability to move autonomously are just a few of the many factors that contribute to the overall challenge. The environment surrounding Greek public administration premises is not adequately adapted to the needs of disabled people i.e. parking spaces are often insufficient in size (or they do not exist) or there is lack of adequate lighting that makes it difficult for people with low vision to navigate the parking area. In some cases, in our research it has been indicated by our interviewer who was a PWD that they were concerned about their personal safety when travelling independently or utilizing public transportation. When entering the public building it is frequently the case that reception and administrative offices at the entrance are inaccessible and not adequately organized to facilitate access to information for disabled people: absence of letter templates or building plans, lack of assistance for people with disabilities, absence of a dedicated point of contact trained to provide help and support, and absence of an action plan outlining how services are being made accessible for all. Consequently, accessing public spaces becomes a challenging endeavor that necessitates the involvement of numerous public authorities in a unified effort to support the vulnerable segment of society (including the transportation department, urban administration, outdoor spaces, entrance halls, help centers and information desks, among others).

Some examples of features of buildings or spaces that become the root cause of problems for people with disabilities to move forward and exercise their rights are:

- Hallways and doorways too narrow for a person using a wheelchair, electric scooter or walker.
- There are not appropriately wide transportation routes and corridors do not have thresholds in buildings.
- Toilets not adapted for disabled people.
- Customer service offices not suitably adapted for people with various disabilities.

- Handrails not installed at the appropriate height.
- Blind people that are not sufficiently directed through specific technical assistant devices to orient themselves and detect the environment.
- Counters too high for a person of short stature or a person who sits in a wheelchair.
- Poor lighting does not help people with low vision to orientate themselves.
- Parking spaces too narrow for wheelchair users.
- Telephones that are not equipped with telecommunications devices for people who are Deaf, deafened or hard of hearing, etc.. (Ontario Education Services Corporation, 2019, p. 16).

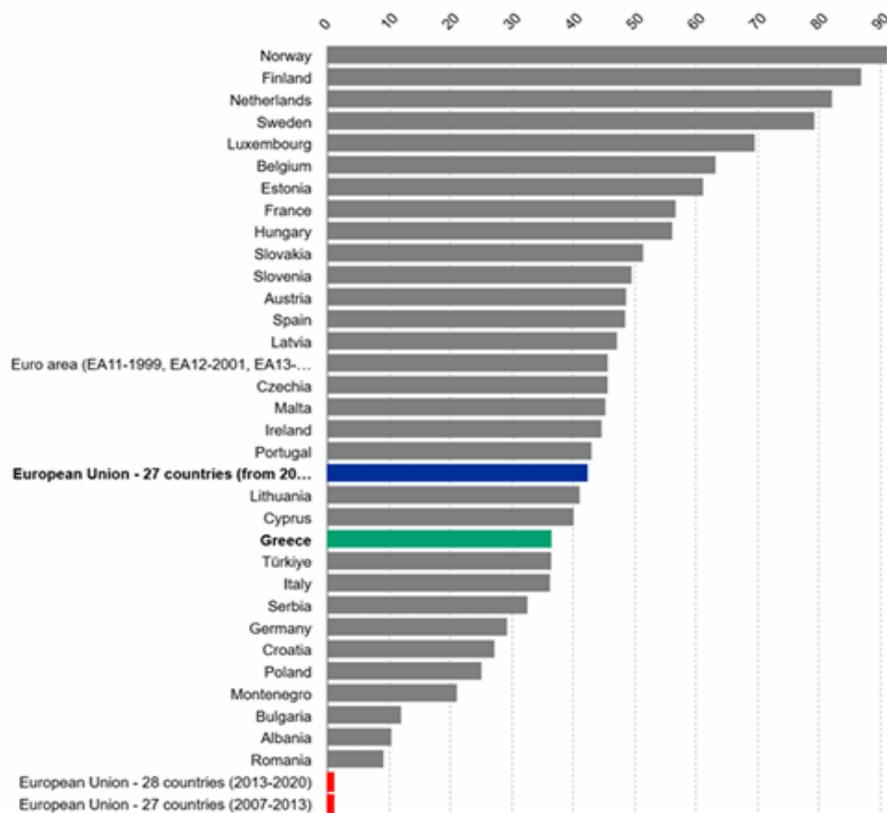
3.3.1 The physical accessibility of public institutions

In order to address the aforementioned critical issues, it is of the utmost importance to ascertain whether public administration offices are physically accessible for individuals with disabilities and can be easily visited by vulnerable people. This is particularly relevant when considering public venues that cater to the elderly, which often lack the requisite accessibility for their needs. It is of the utmost importance that all public administrations are structured in an appropriate manner, with the aim of making them accessible and welcoming for vulnerable individuals, who are the primary users of the services in question.

3.3.2 The digital – technological accessibility of public services

A plethora of technological barriers prevent a considerable number of people with disabilities (PWD) from being able to have access to administration services and fulfill their special obligations (health services, tax offices, social security services, municipality services, etc.). It is known by international literature that the level of use of Information, Communications and Technology (ICT) by persons with disabilities for purposes related to the public sector is significantly lower than among persons without a disability (figure 5 and Khetarpal, 2015). This assertion is particularly salient when one considers the dearth of accessible assistive devices and cutting-edge technology to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities.

Figure 5: Persons using the internet for interaction with public authorities by level of disability (activity limitation)



Source: https://doi.org/10.2908/DSB_ICTEG01

Recommendation: In order to address the issue of physical accessibility for people with disabilities, it is necessary to implement specific requirements to guarantee that all public premises are accessible, as well as the entrance spaces and the rest of public areas (i.e. public parks, etc.). It is further proposed that alternative digital methods be implemented to facilitate the completion of administrative tasks by PWD within public administration premises, such as web facilities should allow people to navigate websites with ease, thus enabling them to complete all the formalities for various administrative tasks.

3.4 The assessment method of disability (medical model) and the final decision about the percentage of disability

In every state, a recognized procedure exists for determining the percentage of disability in individuals with a range of disabilities. The process in Greek public administration, from initial application to final decision and subsequent appeal, the various administrative bodies involved (including private medicines) and their respective responsibilities all relate to several persisting obstacles that do not align with the vulnerable situation that PWD are in. The more complex and multi-sectorial the administrative arrangements and the roles of the different institutions involved in

the process, the more they create burdens and pressure upon the claimant, who is a person with disabilities or their family.

This assessment should gather official information from databases or other uploaded evaluations, studies etc., to diminish the procedures and the intervention of human factor. For example, there could be included a balance of medical and non-medical input, cost-effectiveness, administrative burden, claimant experience, compatibility with the CRPD.

Recommendation: The administrative processes associated with the assessment of disability should be streamlined and accessible to align with the expectations of individuals with disabilities. Distance practices, interoperability, and disengagement of the relevant parties wherever feasible are potential strategies for mitigating the administrative burdens.

3.5 Disability awareness for the personnel

The lack of adequately trained personnel represents a significant challenge that states must address in order to provide effective care for individuals with disabilities. The current systems are (in most cases) inadequate to address the needs of individuals with hearing loss, speech impairments, or intellectual disabilities. Furthermore, it is uncertain whether the appropriate treatment will be provided, as it is uncertain if the necessary personnel are in place or if the relevant training is available. Serving disabled individuals with dignity and professionalism entails prioritizing the human aspect and addressing them in a manner that is respectful and conducive. It is essential to ensure that PWD do not feel inferior or stigmatized. In many cases, personnel at the front desk lack the requisite training to provide effective support and assistance to individuals with disabilities. In most cases, during our research, PWD complain that personnel training is oriented towards serving the general public when different categories of PWD demand a different treatment, for example, should always use the word “disability” instead of “handicap” for specific disabilities, should say “person with epilepsy” or “person who uses a wheelchair”, etc., (Ontario Education Services Corporation, 2019). In light of the numerous challenges that individuals with disabilities (PWD) face in their personal lives, it is imperative that public authorities recognize the limitations they face in accessing various services for different purposes related to their disability.

Recommendation: Staff of public entities that serve users recognized as vulnerable/disabled people should participate in training dedicated to the provision of services that respond to the needs of people with disabilities. Staff attitude can overcome other barriers and change the framework that is still not in favor for the PWD and the support they need.

3.5.1 Special skills for the dedicated personnel that deals with PWD

As has been clearly demonstrated, Greek public administration is not adequately prepared to welcome and serve people with disabilities. The policy making, systems, and procedures that are applied are often unsuitable for these special categories of people. This is why it is essential to train the dedicated personnel in public services that deal with people with disabilities. This will enable them to overcome system failures and other deficiencies.

First of all, it is imperative that personnel in front-line services possess a comprehensive understanding of disabilities and familiarity with the full spectrum of disabilities. As was explained in the first section disabilities may be inherent, acquired, temporal, progressive or terminal, visible or invisible. It is therefore essential to recognize and treat them as soon as possible, as a delay in diagnosis may have a significant impact on quality-of-service delivery. Some individuals are born with a disability, while others develop it because of illness or accident. Different types of disabilities can vary significantly in their characteristics, for instance, hearing impairment differs from deafness, while low vision differs from legal blindness. In each of these cases, it is essential that civil servants adopt an appropriate attitude.

In addition to recognizing and understanding the distinctive characteristics of each disability, civil servants must adopt an appropriate code of conduct when communicating with and serving PWD. It is imperative that they recognize the additional challenges that disability presents in daily life, which can lead to feelings of frustration, confusion, and sensory overload. Therefore, these users of public services typically arrive at the administration with a high level of stress and frustration, and thus require a high level of attention, kindness, perseverance, flexibility, and patience. It is of the utmost importance for the staff to cultivate an attitude that demonstrates care, understanding, and empathy towards the profile and case in question, as well as a willingness to assist regardless of the complexity of the case. In particular, when interacting with individuals who have a psychological or other intellectual or developmental impairment, it is imperative that the personnel demonstrate a profound degree of kindness, patience, and clarity in communication. They must utilize straightforward language and convey the administration's expectations in a manner that is easily comprehensible to the user.

Communication skills such as speaking normally, clearly, and directly to the citizen, with respect and empathy are also very important factors. Also, taking the time needed to understand the disability and respond appropriately is very precious for a better service delivery. Seeking the right information for the person with disability and not postponing their affair should also not be neglected. For example: a) they should speak directly to the person as normally and not to the intervener (the assistant or the family member), b) they should identify his/her self to the intervener when they

approach the customer who is deaf-blind, c) they should never touch a person that is deaf-blind suddenly or without permission unless it's an emergency, etc.. (Ontario Education Services Corporation, 2019).

Recommendation: When individuals with disabilities visit administrative offices or other public sector services in search of specialized assistance, it is the responsibility of the front office personnel to recognize their needs and provide them with the appropriate attention and care. To serve them optimally, personnel must be trained and possess a combination of competences such as practicality, communication skills, empathy, and compassion. They must also demonstrate respect for the individuals' personalities, independence, desire to be treated equally, and individuality.

4 Discussion & Conclusion

It is of paramount importance for public authorities to recognize the significance of making the public sector an inclusive and welcoming environment that effectively and professionally serves all members of society and that attributes a particular focus on people with disabilities. To this end, civil service structures, public policies (including transportation, social welfare, tourism, education, and other sectors), administrative procedures, systems, and personnel must be reformed in accordance with the content of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2007) and the other official declarations of European institutions. These three areas of intervention have attracted the interest of our study: the special needs of people with disabilities and their particular care, the level of accessibility and inclusiveness of public services and the personnel dedicated to serve users that are PWD. In most of the international working papers, ratified agreements and international literature as well as it has been observed during our research with Non-governmental organisations and contacts with PWD, their special needs do not attract the adequate interest and there is an urgent need to take into account their voices whenever initiating any reform or public policy (Research question 1).

Furthermore, the harmonization of legislation between EU member states is an essential element in the effort to enhance the performance of all states with regard to improving the quality of life of persons with disabilities. For example, a streamlined procedure should be implemented to approve the percentage of disability in a combined method that will incorporate all three dimensions of disability (medical, functional, and social) in all member states of the EU.

Furthermore, a greater investment is required to address the comprehensive and integrated needs of individuals with disabilities. Research conducted that included interviews and written complaints filed in the Greek Ombudsman, has demonstrated that the majority of these individuals express a

preference to remain at home or their families opt to place them in a special institution. These preferences are in direct opposition to the institutionalization of disabled persons, a policy which has been deemed ineffective within the European Union. Also, this solution contrasts with the potential benefits of integration in the local community, which would facilitate access to resources, goods, and services tailored to their specific needs such as medical and paramedical services, administrative support, transportation, technological assistance devices, and more. Other factors as to better meet the needs of people with disabilities that were analyzed in this study are: the design of public policies, the communication and information policy, the physical accessibility and the assessment of disability as all these parameters show that there is a gap to fill in when it comes to overcome obstacles and isolation of PWD. These factors, along with the personnel dedicated to serving people with disabilities, require further attention by national authorities (Research questions 2 and 3). In this regard, the Greek Ombudsman (2024) has established a specialized Committee with the objective of producing a comprehensive guide and code of conduct for civil servants serving individuals with disabilities. The guide will serve to educate these officials on the appropriate treatment of persons with disabilities.

Overall, in this short study attention is drawn to the need to establish coherent and efficient public policies that should be oriented towards the needs of PWD. It is imperative that a robust public strategy facilitates the reintegration of persons with disabilities (PWD) into society. This can be achieved by providing assistance to individuals and their families through inclusive public services and policies, thereby enabling them to overcome adversities and exercise their full rights as members of society. The personnel of public administration represent a significant factor in this process that could have a substantial positive impact on the level of satisfaction of people with disabilities and on the implementation of positive public policies that enforce the principles of equity, inclusiveness, impartiality, and democracy.

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