

INCLUSIVE EVOLUTION 2024

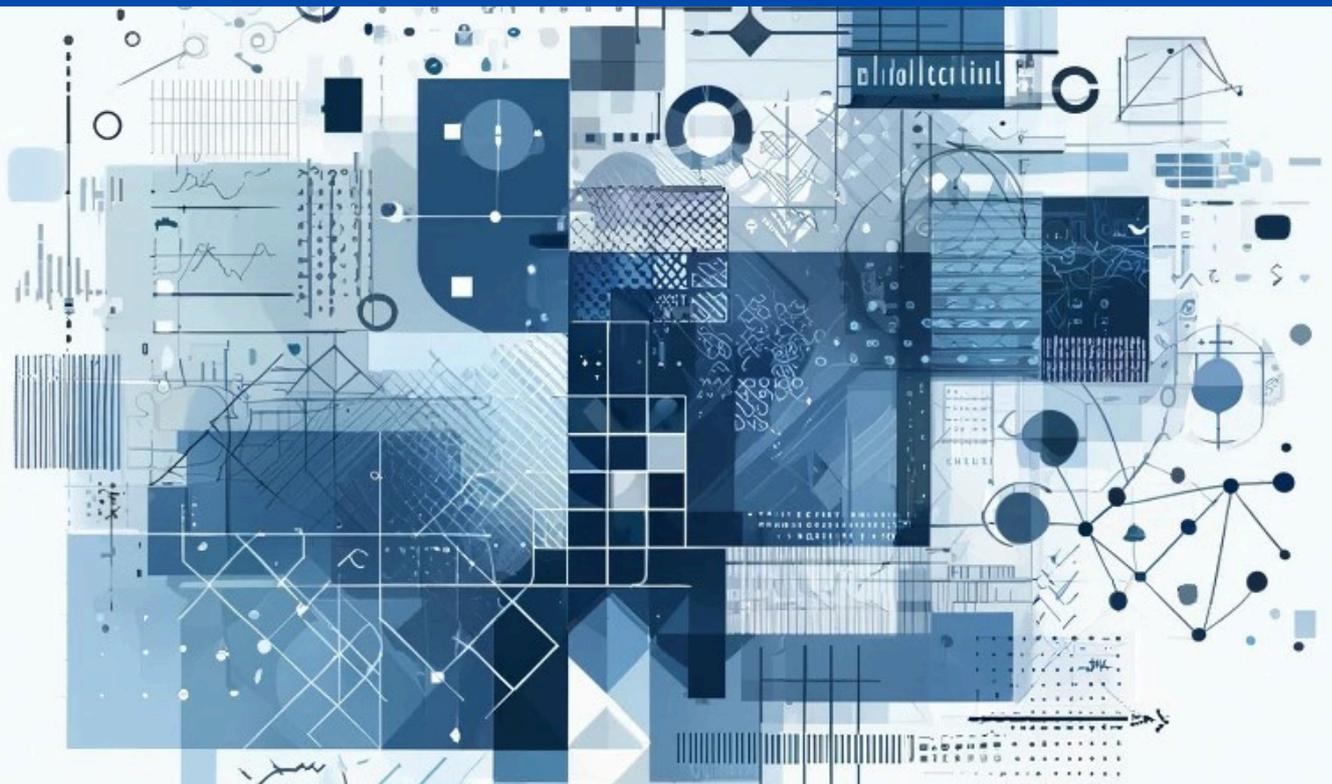


FINAL REPORT

RESEARCH ON ACCESSIBILITY BARRIERS IN DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION



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Abstract

The "Inclusive Evolution 2024" research initiative, coordinated by Babilon Travel NGO in partnership with organizations from Estonia and Belgium, systematically explores the barriers that individuals with disabilities face in democratic participation, particularly in voting. Utilizing a mixed-method approach, the research integrates quantitative and qualitative methodologies to provide a comprehensive understanding of accessibility challenges. Key findings highlight significant physical, communicational, and attitudinal barriers across Belgium, Estonia, and Romania. The study reveals common themes of inaccessible electoral materials, inadequate physical infrastructure at polling stations, and the necessity for better-trained election staff. The research highlights the importance of implementing assistive technologies and accessible voting procedures to enhance the inclusivity of democratic processes. The recommendations aim to inform policymakers and stakeholders, promoting a more inclusive and equitable democratic environment across Europe.



Introduction

The participation of all citizens in democratic processes is a fundamental principle that underpins the legitimacy and functioning of democratic societies. However, for individuals with disabilities, significant barriers often impede their full engagement, particularly in the context of voting and other forms of democratic participation. Recognizing these challenges, the Inclusive Evolution 2024 Research initiative was conceived as a collaborative effort to systematically explore and address these barriers. This initiative, coordinated by Babilon Travel NGO, Romania, in partnership with organizations from Estonia and Belgium, aims to promote a more inclusive democratic environment across Europe.

The primary focus of this research is to identify and analyze the accessibility barriers that individuals with disabilities face in exercising their voting rights. By employing a mixed-method approach that integrates both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issues. The ultimate goal is to generate actionable recommendations that can inform policy and practice, thereby enhancing the inclusivity of democratic processes.

This report is structured to provide a detailed account of the research conducted in the three partner countries, starting with an introduction to the partners involved and the overall objectives of the project. Following this, it delves into the general state of accessibility in democratic participation, highlighting existing challenges and ongoing efforts to improve the situation. The report then outlines the research methodology, including the design, target groups, research questions, and the tools used for data collection and analysis.

Democratic participation is not only a right but also a means through which individuals influence decisions that affect their lives. For individuals with disabilities, the ability to vote and engage in democratic processes is often limited by physical, communicational, and attitudinal barriers. Addressing these barriers is important for ensuring that all citizens, regardless of their physical or sensory abilities, can participate equally and meaningfully in the democratic process.

This research initiative is also driven by a deep commitment to social justice and equality. By shedding light on the experiences of individuals with disabilities and identifying the specific barriers they face, we aim to stimulate greater awareness and encourage the necessary changes to create a more inclusive society. The findings of this research will be disseminated widely, targeting policymakers, advocacy groups, and other stakeholders to ensure that the insights gained translate into tangible improvements.

In conclusion, the Inclusive Evolution 2024 research on accessibility barriers in democratic participation represents a significant step towards understanding and mitigating the obstacles faced by individuals with disabilities in exercising their democratic rights. Through collaborative efforts and comprehensive research, this initiative aspires to contribute to the ongoing efforts to build a more inclusive and equitable democratic society.



1. Research background

1.1. Project background

The Inclusive Evolution 2024 project encompasses the Research on Accessibility Barriers in Democratic Participation, an initiative coordinated by Babilon Travel NGO. This research wants to explore and address the barriers that prevent individuals with disabilities from fully participating in democratic processes, particularly voting. The initiative aligns with the overarching goals of Inclusive Evolution 2024, which seeks to promote social inclusion and equality across Europe.

Funded through the Erasmus+ program, this initiative benefits from the collaborative efforts of partners from Estonia and Belgium, who bring valuable insights and expertise to the research. The project is designed to yield actionable insights that will inform policy and practice, ensuring that democratic processes are more inclusive and accessible to all citizens.

1.2. Partners profile

Asociatia Babilon Travel (Romania)

Asociatia Babilon Travel (ABT) is a dedicated organization committed to promote social inclusion, intercultural dialogue, and adaptive sports and outdoor activities for young people, including those with special needs or fewer opportunities. Established with a vision to empower marginalized youth, ABT has played a pivotal role in numerous local and international projects. Through training programs for youth workers, educators, and volunteers, ABT equips individuals to engage marginalized youth in diverse activities, including sports, educational programs, and international exchanges. Their innovative initiatives, such as adapted tourist tracks and Braille guides for visually impaired individuals, underscore their commitment to accessibility and inclusion.

EESTI People to People (Estonia)

EESTI People to People (EPtP) is a prominent non-profit organization that has been encouraging international understanding and friendship since 1993. As a chapter of People to People International, EPtP is dedicated to enhancing cross-cultural communication and promoting tolerance and mutual understanding through educational, cultural, and humanitarian activities. With active chapters in Tallinn and Viljandi, the organization engages a broad network of members and volunteers. EPtP's commitment to inclusive civic engagement and its extensive experience in community-based initiatives make it a valuable partner in the Inclusive Evolution 2024 research project.

VIEW International (Belgium)

Visually Impaired Education and Work Support (VIEW) International is an influential organization focused on empowering visually impaired individuals across Europe. Founded in 2008, VIEW International builds on the legacy of its predecessor, Views Belgium, to enhance the social, private, and professional integration of visually impaired youth. The organization prioritizes autonomy and active participation, encouraging visually impaired individuals to contribute to and benefit from their programs.



Through a variety of transformative activities and programs, VIEW International equips young visually impaired individuals with the skills and opportunities to lead independent and fulfilling lives. Their dedication to inclusivity and collaboration is central to the success of the Inclusive Evolution 2024 initiative.

1.3 Research context

The research supports a comprehensive approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a holistic understanding of the accessibility challenges faced by individuals with disabilities. Key objectives include identifying specific barriers to democratic engagement, capturing diverse perspectives through direct engagement with young adults and individuals with disabilities, and developing informed recommendations to enhance accessibility.

Research Objectives

1. Identify accessibility challenges and explore barriers to democratic engagement, focusing on the right to vote, for individuals with various impairments
2. Engage and include young adults and individuals with disabilities as respondents to capture diverse perspectives on accessibility in democratic processes.
3. Collaborative research with organizations across different European regions to conduct research at the national level, enhancing comparative analysis.
4. Develop informed recommendations for stakeholders, including policymakers and advocacy groups, to improve accessibility in democratic participation.

Expected Outcomes

1. Informed policy recommendations aimed at enhancing democratic participation for individuals with disabilities.
2. Dissemination of the findings to the EU Parliament, local and national policymakers, and international bodies to advocate for policy improvements.
3. Enhanced accessibility by greater awareness of accessibility issues in democratic participation.
4. Promotion of more inclusive democratic practices across Europe, ensuring that all citizens, regardless of their physical or sensory abilities, can participate equally and meaningfully in the democratic process.



2. General Information on Accessibility in Democratic Participation

Ideally, democratic processes should be inclusive. Decisions made democratically are considered legitimate only when those affected by them have the right, opportunity, and ability to engage in political decision-making. However, it's widely recognized that the interests of various segments of the population are often overlooked in democratic decision-making due to various exclusionary mechanisms (Gherghina, Mokre, Miscoiu, 2021).

In the past decade, the societal participation of individuals with disabilities has become increasingly important in disability policy. This participation is seen as both a right and a means to reduce social exclusion, economic hardship, and poor health outcomes. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities highlights the importance of full participation and inclusion. Despite efforts to promote inclusion, barriers like discriminatory attitudes, lack of information, and inaccessible environments persist. Therefore, investments in accessible infrastructure and supportive services are essential to ensure full participation and inclusion (Hästbacka, Nygård, Nyqvist, 2016).

In the Inclusive elections? The case of persons with disabilities in the European Union study made by Rabitsch, A., Moledo, A., & Lidauer, M. (2023), evaluated the compliance and current practices in the European Union, finding a great variety of implementation to facilitate the electoral participation of persons with disabilities. In 2006, the United Nations established international standards by adopting the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which ensures the right to vote and stand in elections for all individuals with disabilities. Following this, as inclusion norms are debated in the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), the review process led by the UN CRPD Committee for the Convention's State Parties has emphasized the necessity of including all persons with disabilities in electoral processes. It is well-documented that individuals with disabilities are significantly less likely to vote compared to other citizens, and the introduction of alternative voting methods can make a critical difference in increasing their participation. This issue is particularly important given that an estimated 1.3 billion people worldwide, or 16% of the global population, experience significant disabilities. However, there is a lack of thorough analysis on the extent to which electoral participation for voters with disabilities is supported, either through legislation or the practices of electoral management bodies (EMBs). While voting is not the only form of political participation, it is a fundamental one. Electoral inclusion requires both supportive legal frameworks and accessible voting practices. Rabitsch, et al. (2023) study, found out that even though the CRPD has been ratified by the EU and all its member states, its implementation varies significantly across the union. Only 13 member states—Austria, Germany, Denmark, Spain, Finland, France, Croatia, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Slovakia—have laws that fully support the right to vote for all persons with disabilities without restrictions in European Parliament elections. The other 14 EU member states, despite having signed the CRPD, still maintain restrictions that prevent some individuals with disabilities from voting. This particularly affects persons with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities whose legal capacity may be limited or revoked. According to the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), around 400,000 people with disabilities were denied their voting rights in the 2019 European elections due to non-compliance with CRPD obligations. In seven EU member states—Belgium, Czechia, Hungary, Lithuania, Malta, Portugal, and Slovenia—a person placed under guardianship may still retain their voting rights, although a court or authority can



choose to restrict these rights. In contrast, in another seven member states—Bulgaria, Cyprus, Estonia, Greece, Luxembourg, Poland, and Romania—individuals with disabilities who are deemed legally incapacitated are automatically denied the right to vote.

Throughout the EU, member states practice different electoral systems and voting traditions. These differences include variations in where, how, when and by what means that votes can be cast. In some countries, for example, votes are cast on electronic voting machines; this is true for some parts of Belgium and Bulgaria. In Estonia, there is also the option of internet voting, in addition to the traditional way of casting the vote with paper ballots in polling stations. Notably, in five EU member states (Belgium, Bulgaria, Luxembourg, Greece, and Cyprus) voting is compulsory.

In most EU member states, voters express their choice by marking the ballot with an ‘X’, a tick, or a circle (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Croatia, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, and Slovenia), and in the case of Romania by using a stamp. In Italy, voters who want to cast a preferential vote have to enter the name of the candidate on the ballot with their own handwriting. In Estonia, Lithuania and Finland, voters also must write by hand the number of their party or candidate in a rectangle or circle. In both Ireland and Malta, which use the single transferable voting system, the voter has the option of giving numerical preferences to as many candidates as they like, or of voting for as few as one candidate.

These different ways of voting results in different challenges and solutions for voters with disabilities.

2.1. Belgium

In terms of national context, the Belgian Interfederal Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (Stratégie Interfédérale Handicap 2022-2030) aims to progressively and structurally encourage the accessibility of Belgian society to public spaces and services so that as many people as possible can use them independently. Despite the accessibility improvements applied during the 2024 round of elections, persons with disabilities continue to encounter barriers to their equal participation in the electoral process.

Lack of accessible electoral programmes and materials in Belgium, no political party provided accessible manifestos in 2024 as stated in the Political participation of people with disabilities – New developments by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). This represents a significant obstacle for persons with disabilities in exercising their democratic rights. Ensuring access for everyone to consultations and political programmes, and creating an inclusive environment, would foster the full participation of people with disabilities in democratic processes.

There are no mandatory accessibility standards for national and local authority buildings in Belgium, although there are legal accessibility standards for polling stations (FRA, p.19). Despite this, during the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights Needs Assessment Mission (ODIHR NAM) in 2024, it was noted that not all polling stations are architecturally suitable for persons with physical disabilities or limited mobility, and national legislation does not impose accessibility standards on locations such as schools, which are often designated as polling stations (ODIHR p.6).

The Belgian Federal Public Service - Foreign Affairs informed the OSCE ODIHR that a pilot project for voting using Braille ballot papers will be carried out in two Cantons, Namur and Kerk-de Stad. However, a previous pilot of integrating audio-guide modules as assistive technologies in the voting process did not continue in the last European elections.

In Belgium, the law requires training for election authorities and officials on non-discrimination on the grounds of disability, on accessibility, and on accommodation (FRA, p.37). However, the lack of preparedness of election staff continues to be an issue.



2.2. Estonia

In Estonia, accessibility for persons with disabilities in democratic participation is a developing area, with several initiatives aimed at enhancing inclusion. Estonia has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, committing to ensure political rights and opportunities on an equal basis with others. Despite these commitments, challenges remain, including physical inaccessibility of polling stations and limited availability of accessible information formats.

Research indicates that while Estonia has made strides in legal and policy frameworks, practical implementation lags. Efforts include empowering disabled persons' organizations (DPOs) and improving governmental and electoral bodies' inclusivity (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2014). Additionally, Estonia is part of broader European efforts to improve accessibility in political participation, promoting inclusive practices and reducing barriers (SciELO, 2021).

Engagement in democratic processes is vital for the empowerment of individuals with disabilities, yet barriers persist. Enhancing participation requires not only legal provisions but also practical measures, such as accessible voting procedures and effective outreach programs. Inclusive political participation ensures that the voices of all citizens, including those with disabilities, are heard and considered in decision-making processes.

2.3. Romania

In Romania, the right to vote is constitutionally guaranteed to all citizens, including individuals with disabilities. However, significant barriers hinder their full participation in democratic processes (European Disability Forum, 2022; World Bank, 2023). Approximately 1 in 20 people in Romania, totaling nearly 900,000 individuals, holds a disability certificate (World Bank, 2023). Despite the legal framework, several barriers prevent these individuals from fully exercising their voting rights.

Physical Barriers: Many polling stations are not fully accessible to individuals with mobility impairments. Common issues include the absence of ramps, inaccessible entryways, and inadequate facilities inside polling stations (European Disability Forum, 2022).

Communication Barriers: Voters with visual or hearing impairments often face difficulties due to the lack of accessible voting materials. There is insufficient information available in Braille or through sign language interpreters, making it challenging for these individuals to understand and participate in the voting process (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024).

Attitudinal Barriers: Discriminatory attitudes and a lack of awareness among election officials can further impede the voting experience for people with disabilities. Often, there is insufficient training for election staff on how to appropriately assist voters with disabilities (Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations, 2022).

Despite these barriers, efforts to improve accessibility are underway. For instance, the European Disability Forum's Human Rights Report highlights that Romania is among the EU countries that have enacted legal obligations to ensure the accessibility of polling stations, though enforcement remains inconsistent (European Disability Forum, 2022). Additionally, alternative voting methods such as postal voting and mobile ballot boxes have been discussed to provide more accessible options for people with disabilities, though these alternatives are not yet widely implemented (Journalists Resource, 2022).

In the 2019 European Parliament elections, approximately 400,000 persons with disabilities in 14 countries, including Romania, were deprived of their right to vote due to existing legal provisions and accessibility issues (European Disability Forum, 2022). Efforts continue to address these issues, emphasizing the need for better accommodations and accessible voting options.



3. Methodology Design of the Research

3.1. Research Design

The topic of accessibility barriers in democratic participation is important for ensuring that every citizen, regardless of their physical or sensory abilities, can fully exercise their democratic rights. This research is motivated by the recognition that individuals with disabilities often encounter significant obstacles that impede their ability to vote and participate in democratic processes. Addressing these barriers is essential not only for accordance with legal standards but also for upholding principles of social justice and equity. By highlighting and seeking to overcome these challenges, the research aims to promote a more inclusive and participatory democracy, ensuring that all citizens have equal opportunities to influence decisions that affect their lives.

The research employs a mixed-methods design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the accessibility barriers faced by individuals with disabilities in democratic participation. This dual approach allows for a nuanced exploration of personal experiences while also providing broad statistical insights.

3.2. Target group

The primary target group for this research consists of individuals over the age of 18, with a focus on young adults who have voted at least once. This group includes a diverse range of individuals with various disabilities, ensuring that the research captures a wide spectrum of experiences and challenges related to voting and democratic participation.

3.3 Research questions

The research is guided by several key questions designed to uncover the specific barriers to democratic participation faced by individuals with disabilities in three countries:

1. What are the most common physical, communicational, and attitudinal barriers that individuals with disabilities encounter when voting?
2. How do these barriers vary among different types of disabilities?
3. What are the experiences of individuals with disabilities in accessing voting information and facilities?
4. What improvements do individuals with disabilities suggest to enhance the accessibility of democratic processes?

3.4. Methods and tools

The research utilizes a combination of surveys, interviews, and case studies to gather data:

- **Quantitative Research:** A survey was conducted with a sample of 100 respondents to gather broad data on the experiences and challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in voting.



- **Qualitative Research:** In-depth insights were collected through 10 semi-structured interviews/country with individuals selected for their unique perspectives on accessibility issues. Additionally, 3 detailed case studies/country were developed to highlight specific barriers and adaptive strategies employed by individuals with disabilities.

We ensured informed consent and confidentiality for all participants, while making all phases of the research accessible to individuals with disabilities.

Each partner organization prepared and submitted a Country Report to the coordinating organization, Asociatia Babilon Travel. These Country Reports detailed the status of the respective countries concerning the research topic, including the evaluation and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, along with recommendations. The coordinating organization then synthesizes the findings from each country, conducts a comparative analysis, and compiles the final research report.



4. Research Findings

4.1. Quantitative findings

4.1.1. Belgium

In Belgium, the questionnaire was available in English, French, and Dutch to ensure wide reach and accessibility. It was distributed through VIEWS International's external communication channels, including social media, newsletters, official website, and targeted email campaigns aimed at specific users, educational institutions, and organisations for people with disabilities. The survey gathered responses from individuals who provided insights into the experiences and perspectives on the following topics:

Accessibility of Voting Stations

A significant portion of respondents indicated that voting stations are poorly accessible and, in some cases, completely inaccessible. Despite not receiving specific comments on this regard, polling stations across Belgium present significant challenges for visually impaired voters, reflecting a broader issue of accessibility within the electoral process.

One major concern is the lack of privacy as many polling stations do not have adequately designed booths that can accommodate individuals with visual impairments, forcing them to rely on assistance from others. This not only compromises the confidentiality of their vote but also their sense of independence. As stated by a survey participant noted, “the communication in the voting booth itself is [...] via touch screens. These are also not readable as a blind person. So you cannot cast your vote completely anonymously”. The issue is exacerbated in overcrowded polling stations, where the lack of personal space makes it difficult for visually impaired voters to cast their ballots discreetly.

Access to Voting Information

The survey results revealed that voting information still required further improvement as many respondents do not consider voting information accessible for their impairments. Providing comprehensive voting guides, programmes and materials in formats suitable for persons with disabilities is essential to ensure their full active participation and involvement in the electoral processes. A survey's respondent pointed out that “the written communication beforehand is on paper, which makes it unreadable as a blind person, so you are dependent on other people”.

Furthermore, in one reply from the French survey it was suggested “to have access to a website that would classify the names of the various candidates in my electoral district according to their political party and the place they occupy on the electoral list, as they appear on the ballot papers” to better support voters in the electoral process.

Availability of Assistive Technologies

The multilingual replies collected in the surveys reported “very poor” and “poor” as feedback for the assistive technologies available at the polling stations. It means that people with visual impairments still face inadequate voting technology that does not facilitate their independent voting procedures.



Preparedness of Election Staff

The survey respondents also reported the need for assistance as a consequence of poorly accessible polling stations. However, assistance is often provided by untrained staff who, despite their best intentions, may inadvertently compromise the voter's privacy. This lack of proper training and awareness among polling staff further highlights the need for more comprehensive measures to support visually impaired voters. Additionally, time constraints add another layer of difficulty. During peak voting hours, election staff may rush voters through the process, leaving those with visual impairments with insufficient time to make informed decisions. The complexity of ballot designs and instructions can also pose significant barriers. Visually impaired voters often need more time to complete their ballots, yet the rushed environment and extended waiting times are perceived as discouraging throughout the voting process.

4.1.2. Estonia

The respondents for this research were predominantly young adults, with a total of 100 responses collected. To gather these responses, the Eesti People to People team reached out to specialized NGOs and schools that support individuals with disabilities, including Eesti Puuetega Inimeste Koda, Tallinna Puuetega Inimeste Koda, Tallinna ja Harjumaa Puuetega Naiste Ühing, Eesti Invaspordi Liit (EIL), Sillamäe Lastekaitse Ühing, Vivere, and others. These organizations were requested to distribute the survey to their network members, who were identified as potential respondents.

Based on the collected data, the specific challenges faced by individuals with disabilities when participating in democratic processes can be categorized into several key areas:

Information Access

A significant barrier identified in the research is the limited access to voting information, including candidate profiles and issue summaries, which are often presented in inaccessible formats. For individuals with disabilities, this lack of access is compounded by the scarcity of assistive technology options. For instance, respondents noted the inadequacy of information in Braille or audio formats, which makes it challenging to stay informed about candidates and their platforms. Comments such as "Limited access to information in Braille or audio formats makes it difficult to stay informed about candidates and issues" and "Televised debates, interviews, and other forms of media coverage may lack descriptive audio, limiting the ability to fully understand the candidates' platforms" highlight the prevalent issues. Additionally, some respondents succinctly expressed these concerns with statements like "Not much information" and "Lack of info."

Respondents also highlighted a pressing need for more comprehensive and accessible materials specifically tailored for people with disabilities. This includes a demand for clearer explanations and more detailed information about the voting process and candidate platforms. Examples of these concerns include comments such as "More information," "It has to be more materials for disabled people," and "Specific information." Further, respondents suggested the need for a "Better path" to understanding the electoral process and emphasized the importance of "Explanations about voting" to facilitate a more inclusive electoral environment.



Physical Accessibility

A recurring issue identified by respondents was the difficulty in physically accessing voting places. Many participants noted challenges such as limited availability of accessible voting locations, inadequate facilities for individuals using wheelchairs, and the inconvenient distance to polling stations. Comments included "Access to voting places," "Accessibility for people in wheelchairs," "Not many voting places," "Sometimes in some places no good access to the voting places," and "Distance for physical voting."

Respondents also emphasized the need for enhanced infrastructure and facilities at polling stations to better accommodate individuals with disabilities. They pointed out the insufficiency of available amenities and the necessity for improvements in access pathways. Statements such as "Not much facilities" and "Better path" underscore the importance of developing more inclusive and accessible infrastructure at voting locations.

Assistance and Independence

A prominent theme identified by respondents was the necessity of personal assistance during the voting process, which has implications for voter independence. Many individuals expressed the need for support, as illustrated by comments such as "I need an assistant," "I need special assistance," and "People with disabilities need more assistance." These statements highlight the critical role of assistance in enabling participation for voters with disabilities.

Concerns about maintaining the confidentiality and privacy of the vote were also raised, particularly when assistance is required. Respondents expressed worries about the potential compromise of their vote's confidentiality, as they need to rely on personal assistants in the voting booth. Examples include statements like "My choice is never 100% confidential, as I need a personal assistant in the voting booth, and anonymity is lacking," and "Concerns about maintaining the privacy of my vote when I require help from another person." These concerns underscore the challenges faced by voters with disabilities in ensuring the privacy of their electoral choices.

Understanding the Voting Process

Several respondents highlighted issues related to confusion or a lack of clarity regarding voting procedures. They expressed difficulties in understanding the steps involved in casting a vote, which can hinder their ability to participate effectively. This confusion is reflected in comments such as "Not clear what to do," "Sometimes I do not understand details how to vote," and "It is not easy to vote, I have to be prepared better." These responses indicate a need for more comprehensive and accessible information about voting processes to ensure that all voters can participate with confidence and understanding.

Participation Motivation

The motivation to vote emerged as a factor influencing participation, as noted by at least one respondent. This individual indicated that their engagement in the voting process is primarily driven by their motivation at the time. The respondent commented, "I vote when have motivation to vote, mostly no," highlighting that their participation is not consistent and depends on their level of motivation.



A number of respondents reported experiencing no specific difficulties in participating in democratic processes. These individuals indicated that they did not face significant barriers or challenges when engaging in voting or other civic activities. Comments reflecting this sentiment included statements such as "I did not have problems," "I do not have challenges," "No specific challenges," "No challenges," "I don't have any specific challenges," and "No challenges for me."

Improvements for Voting Accessibility for Individuals with Disabilities

First, respondents emphasized the need for better physical access to voting locations. They suggested enhancing access at all voting sites, improving facilities, and increasing the number of polling places to reduce reliance on transportation from others. Comments such as "Better access in all places of voting" and "Create more voting places" were typical of this category.

Information access was another critical area, with respondents calling for more detailed and accessible information about the voting process and candidates. There was a strong demand for information in suitable formats, including multimedia options. This need was reflected in comments like "More accessible information in suitable formats" and "Special publications can help," highlighting the necessity for tailored materials such as Braille, descriptive audio, and online audio information.

The need for assistance was also frequently mentioned. Respondents suggested that special assistants and well-trained staff should be available at polling stations to provide necessary support. Examples included "Trained personnel who can assist a blind person if needed should be available" and "We need special assistants."

Additionally, there were calls for implementing accessible voting tools and technologies. Suggestions included tactile guiding paths, Braille-equipped ballot papers, and audio-assisted tools, as reflected in comments like "Tactile guiding paths could be installed" and "Special tools for disabled people."

Pre-election education was highlighted as an important area, with respondents advocating for training and education programs to better prepare voters with disabilities. The importance of group training sessions and comprehensive instructions available online before elections was emphasized, as seen in responses like "Group training" and "More explanations before elections."

Some respondents noted the need for a general increase in consideration for disabled individuals within the voting process, as well as a call for greater transparency. One respondent suggested, "Take into consideration disabled people," while another called for "More transparency."

The data on positive experiences in participating in democratic processes reveals several key themes:

Online and Digital Voting emerged as a particularly appreciated aspect, with many respondents noting the convenience of online voting options. Comments such as "It is possible to vote online with an ID card" and "Online voting from home" highlight the favorable reception of digital solutions that allow for remote participation.

Assistance and Support were also positively noted, with respondents valuing the help provided by election staff. Positive feedback included statements like "Personnel are always kind and happy to see me" and "Assistance from election staff," indicating that supportive interactions enhanced the voting experience.



Ease of Voting was another frequently mentioned positive aspect. Respondents described the voting process as "easy," "flexible," and "convenient," with comments such as "The voting process is easy" and "Flexible voting" underscoring the user-friendly nature of the system.

Successful Voting Experiences were highlighted by respondents who noted that they had consistently been able to vote when desired. Examples include "I always voted when wanted" and "I always manage with voting," reflecting a reliable and accessible voting process.

Information Availability received positive feedback regarding the quality and accessibility of information about candidates. Comments such as "Relatively good information about candidates" suggest that the information provided met respondents' needs effectively.

Engagement in Democratic Processes was also positively reported, with some respondents appreciating the opportunity to engage in both voting and volunteering activities. Statements like "Voting and volunteering" reflect a high level of involvement and satisfaction.

Finally, Overall Satisfaction with the voting system was expressed by some respondents, who characterized their experiences as positive, as evidenced by comments such as "Good voting system."

Conclusion

The survey indicates that while nearly all respondents (99%) participate in elections, only 9% do so consistently, with the majority (47%) voting occasionally. Most respondents view polling station accessibility positively, with 5% rating it as very accessible. However, there is significant room for improvement in accessing voting information tailored to disabilities, with 50% finding such access only occasional, 28% often, and 7% always.

Satisfaction with the training and awareness of election staff regarding the needs of people with disabilities is neutral for 53% of respondents. In terms of political representation, 53% feel their voices are heard, 7% strongly agree, and 1% strongly disagree. Regarding inclusivity in democratic processes, 57% are neutral, 11% disagree, and 1% strongly disagree.

Most respondents (94%) did not encounter discrimination or barriers, although 6% did. While 20% offered recommendations for making democratic participation more accessible, 45% had no suggestions.



4.1.3. Romania

The survey responses provide a comprehensive overview of the accessibility barriers faced by individuals with disabilities in Romania during the voting process. Based on the analysis of responses from 100 participants, several key findings and themes emerged, highlighting both the challenges and areas for improvement.

The survey in Romania was sent over 20 special high schools, institutions, NGOs nationwide, disseminated on social media to over 50 specific groups for persons with disabilities, and sent directly to our strategic partners, including two special high schools in Cluj-Napoca, the Department for Students with Disabilities at Babes-Bolyai University, and our beneficiaries with disabilities.

Accessibility of Voting Stations

A significant portion of respondents rated the accessibility of voting stations poorly. Many individuals with disabilities reported encountering physical barriers that hindered their ability to vote independently. For example, one respondent with a mobility impairment stated, "The voting station had steps and no ramp, making it extremely difficult to enter." This feeling was shared by others, indicating a systemic issue with the physical accessibility of polling stations across the country.

Access to Voting Information

The survey revealed that access to voting information in suitable formats for people with disabilities is severely lacking. A majority of respondents indicated that they "never" have access to voting information in formats that accommodate their disabilities. This lack of accessible information significantly impacts their ability to make informed voting decisions. One blind respondent mentioned, "There are no Braille ballots or tactile templates to help me vote independently, nor any other digital options," highlighting the critical gap in accessible voting materials.

Availability of Assistive Technologies

The responses also pointed to a lack of availability of assistive technologies at polling stations in Romania. Many participants noted the absence of essential tools that could facilitate their voting process. For instance, a visually impaired respondent shared, "There are no audio guides or tactile templates available, making it very challenging to vote without assistance."

Training of Election Staff

The survey responses highlighted a significant need for better training of election staff on how to assist voters with disabilities. Many participants reported negative experiences due to the lack of awareness and readiness among polling station staff. One respondent remarked, "The staff seemed unaware of the legal rights of disabled persons and were not trained to accommodate my needs." This indicates a widespread issue that undermines the voting experience for individuals with disabilities.



Recommendations for Improvement

Participants provided several recommendations to improve the accessibility of the voting process for individuals with disabilities. Common suggestions included:

- 1. Implementation of Online Voting:** Many respondents advocated for the introduction of online voting systems, which could offer a more accessible alternative for those unable to physically reach polling stations. One respondent stated, "Online voting, as implemented in other EU countries, would greatly benefit us."
- 2. Better Training for Election Staff:** There was a strong call for comprehensive training programs for election staff to ensure they are equipped to assist voters with disabilities effectively. One participant suggested, "Election staff need thorough training on how to assist individuals with different types of disabilities. At least have a specialized person at each polling station who could give assistance to persons with different types of disabilities, even to elderly persons who need it many times."
- 3. Improvement of Physical Accessibility:** Ensuring that all polling stations are equipped with ramps, adequate signage, and accessible voting booths was a frequently mentioned recommendation. A respondent with mobility issues suggested, "Polling stations must have proper ramps and adjustable voting booths to accommodate wheelchair users."
- 4. Provision of Accessible Voting Materials:** The need for voting materials in accessible formats, such as Braille, audio guides, and simplified text, was repeatedly highlighted. One visually impaired participant recommended, "Providing Braille ballots and tactile templates would make a significant difference."

Positive Experiences

While the overall feedback was critical of the current state of accessibility, some respondents did share positive experiences. A visually impaired respondent mentioned, "In a previous election, a staff member described each ballot paper to me, which made me feel included and supported." Another respondent said "I was assisted by the staff to lift the wheelchair up the stairs to enter the building." These positive experiences, although few, indicate that with the right measures and support, inclusive voting experiences are possible.

The survey responses underscore the urgent need for reforms in the voting process to accommodate individuals with disabilities in Romania. The consistent themes across different types of disabilities highlight systemic issues that require immediate attention. By addressing these barriers through targeted interventions and policy changes, Romania can move towards a more inclusive and equitable democratic system. The recommendations provided by the respondents offer a clear roadmap for making these necessary improvements.



Conclusion

The survey responses underscore the urgent need for reforms in the voting process to accommodate individuals with disabilities in Romania. The consistent themes across different types of disabilities highlight systemic issues that require immediate attention. By addressing these barriers through targeted interventions and policy changes, Romania can move towards a more inclusive and equitable democratic system. The recommendations provided by the respondents offer a clear roadmap for making these necessary improvements.

An in-depth analysis of the survey data reveals significant gaps in various aspects of the voting process. A notable 34.09% of respondents rated the accessibility of voting stations as poor, highlighting widespread physical barriers that prevent individuals with disabilities from voting independently.

Furthermore, access to voting information in suitable formats for people with disabilities remains severely inadequate. Half of the respondents (50%) reported that they never have access to voting information in formats that accommodate their disabilities. This lack of accessible information significantly impacts their ability to make informed voting decisions. The survey responses emphasize the necessity of providing voting materials in accessible formats, such as Braille ballots, audio guides, and simplified text, to bridge this information gap.

The availability of assistive technologies at polling stations is another area of concern, with only 4.55% of respondents noting the presence of essential tools that could facilitate their voting process. This indicates a pressing need for the implementation of assistive technologies, including audio guides and tactile templates, to support voters with visual impairments and other disabilities.

The training of election staff is also a critical issue, as highlighted by a majority of respondents who indicated that the preparedness and awareness of polling station staff are inadequate. This lack of training undermines the voting experience for individuals with disabilities. Respondents called for at least one specialized person at each polling station who could provide assistance to individuals with various disabilities, ensuring their legal rights are respected and accommodated.

4.2. Qualitative Findings

4.2.1. Belgium

Interviews

To better understand and address the barriers faced by visually impaired voters, VIEWS International has conducted a series of interviews with individuals who have firsthand experience navigating the electoral process.

The interview results aim to highlight the importance of equal access to democratic participation and advocating for policy improvements that ensure every citizen can exercise their right to vote. The interviews collected useful points of views on the following aspects:

Lack of Accessible Electoral Programmes and Materials

As mentioned in the *Access Denied: The (in)accessibility of European Political Party Websites (2024)* by the European Disability Forum, our democratic systems and political processes depend on citizens having the tools to cast an informed vote.



However, the over 100 million persons with disabilities living in Europe are largely let down by political parties in their responsibility to provide accessible and reliable political information. European political parties appear to be neglecting their obligation to deliver information to all voters, irrespective of specific access needs. As a consequence, they are not only creating a barrier for persons with disabilities but also undermining the democratic process itself.

The majority of voters rely on information supplied by national political parties through various channels, these disappointing results provide a clear snapshot of the inaccessibility of the political process, particularly during election campaigns, in addressing the needs of persons with disabilities.

The results collected by the European Disability Forum show that “all political parties’ websites have severe accessibility issues, excluding groups of users from content while making it difficult for others to access information”. Moreover, “some instances of insufficient color contrast were the worst that any of the involved experts had ever measured before” while “some website owners had actively removed code that benefits users, thereby deliberately making the interface less accessible.”

In her interview with VIEWS International, L.D. explained the importance of “efforts to increase transparency in the democratic process by facilitating public consultations and ensuring that political party programmes and debates are accessible to all, including those who are deaf or hard of hearing, would further support inclusivity.”

At the same time, C.T. shared that “as for visual disabilities, political programmes are generally not very accessible, so one has to make do as best as one can.”

At the same time, Y.M.H. mentioned that he usually prepares for “elections by reviewing party websites, news articles, and their programmes, which have become more accessible in recent years. I found voting tests helpful in making informed decisions, particularly those by the EU and VRT Flemish survey. However, accessibility remains inconsistent. Some parties are proactive in making documents accessible, while others show less interest.”

Similar experiences were reported by the interviewee D.G., who has encountered “specific challenges that highlight the need for better accessibility in electoral processes. While I found the summaries of party programmes accessible through podcasts, online articles, and TV debates, I faced barriers with receiving physical materials in a usable format. Many programmes arrived in my mailbox, which posed accessibility issues since they were not in Braille.”

As illustrated above, election programmes and materials, such as information on polling stations and electoral cards, are often sent as letters rather than via email and are not available in Braille. This limits the possibility of visually impaired individuals to access necessary information.

Lack of Accessible Polling Stations

Some interviewees highlighted the need for improved accessibility in polling stations to ensure that all citizens can participate in the democratic process without barriers: “Clearer signage would greatly improve the voting experience for individuals who vote alone. Introducing braille labels in rooms could make information more accessible and user-friendly,” said Y.M.H.

D.G. shared a similar experience stating, “During an EU election, I witnessed a person in a wheelchair unable to vote because the voting screen was positioned too high. Such physical barriers highlight the urgent need for better accessibility measures in polling stations to ensure that all individuals can exercise their right to vote independently and confidentially.”

In June 2024, common experiences in Belgium, Hungary, Ireland, Portugal, Netherlands, Spain, France and Italy were also collected in the Unequal voting: persons with disabilities face barriers during EU elections by the European Disability Forum.



Lack of Privacy and Independence While Voting

Regarding this topic, visually impaired interviewees explained that they do not have the opportunity to cast their vote independently and, in some cases, to choose or be aware of who is going to assist them, as in C.T.'s case: "When I arrived at the polling station for the last European elections, I could not read the ballot paper and vote on my own. I was approached by a lady who said she could assist me in exercising my right to vote, but only later did she inform me that she was the chairperson of the polling station."

In Belgium, persons with visual disabilities can in fact vote by proxy or be accompanied at the polling station by an assistant. However, this option is not particularly appreciated, as many feel it hinders their independence and their right to vote anonymously.

E.M. explained in her interview: "I received assistance from election staff, who helped me cast my vote, but I prefer to independently choose my preferred candidates."

This applies also to those municipalities where the electronic voting has been implemented.

At the same time, G.V. also testified in her interview that "voting in Brussels is done on a computer, but it works with a touch screen and there is no adaptation for people who are blind. This means that voting can only be done with assistance."

The consensus among participants in the national research process was that more attention should be placed on assistive technologies to enhance the accessibility of voting procedures - which vary between electronic and analogical in different provinces - and to protect their right to privacy and autonomy while voting.

The interviewee I.T. expressed his interest in "The upcoming 2025 rule under the European Accessibility Act [that] mandates that public tools must be accessible. I am curious to see how this will be implemented and hope that the right people will ensure its enforcement. In Belgium, national implementation of this act should be strictly respected, possibly with incentives or penalties to support compliance."

Lack of Trained Election Staff

In Belgium, the law requires training for election authorities and officials on non-discrimination on the grounds of disability, on accessibility, and on accommodation (FRA, p.37). However, the lack of preparedness of election staff continues to be an issue.

As stated by Y.M.H. in his interview, "When I needed assistance to vote, my friend stepped in to help, as I did not feel comfortable relying solely on election staff. While my friend's assistance was helpful, it highlighted the need for better training and support from election officials to ensure all voters can participate confidently and independently."

Similar experience was shared by D.G. who considered that "election staff at the local level have not been well-trained to accommodate the needs of individuals with disabilities. I have often found them unprepared, which has necessitated having someone accompany me to assist."

In terms of specific training for election staff, L.D. shared that, in her experience, "election staff have not been particularly well-trained in meeting the needs of individuals with disabilities. Before the EU election, it was challenging to ascertain their level of preparedness."

However, it is important to highlight that many interviewees also shared positive experiences with the election staff members even if the feedback focused more on their personal attitude rather than on their professional preparedness.

For instance, G.V. reported that "I do not think they are trained for it. However, I was always treated very nicely and friendly, and the staff always did their very best to help. They were listening to my needs and the help I needed. For example, I always went to the voting very well prepared. I was always very well



informed about the political parties and the people, so I knew who I wanted to vote for. I did not want to lose too much time, and have the staff member read everything for me. But, sometimes, when I would forget the name of someone, or if I was doubting something, I would ask them to read names for me, and they always did. They also always told me exactly what they were doing.”

At the same time, E.M. shared that “I had a positive impression of the election staff. One member was immediately helpful, guiding me to the polling station and offering a private space. He even asked if I needed him to read out the candidates and parties aloud, which was very considerate. He checked my ID card and invitation, and his approach was natural, professional, and courteous. The assistance provided was both helpful and reassuring, making the voting experience much smoother.”

By addressing these barriers, Belgium can better ensure that persons with disabilities can fully participate in democratic processes, promoting inclusivity and equal rights for all.

Case studies

Case Study 1: Lack of Accessible Electoral Programmes, Material, and Polling Stations

In the context of Belgium's electoral system, significant barriers persist for individuals with visual impairments. The first case study delves into the experiences of C. T., Y. M. H., and I. T., who face substantial challenges in accessing electoral programmes, materials, and polling stations.

C. T., a visually impaired ICT professional, has been residing in Belgium for 13 years. Despite her background in European and international relations and her role as an accessibility consultant for the European Commission, she encountered considerable obstacles during elections. Similarly, Y. M. H., a museum employee and music producer, along with I. T., an accessibility tester and audio description consultant, reported frequent difficulties in accessing essential voting information and resources.

A critical issue identified in this case study is the lack of accessible electoral materials. The absence of ballots, candidate information, and voting instructions in accessible formats such as Braille, large print, and audio, severely limits the ability of visually impaired individuals to make informed decisions. This lack of approachability not only undermines their confidence in participating in the electoral process but also affects their trust in its integrity.

The utilization of assistive technologies plays a vital role in overcoming some of these barriers. However, these technologies are not uniformly available, necessitating that visually impaired voters often arrange their own methods to convert inaccessible resources into accessible formats. While tactile screens and voice-over aids have proven effective, the inconsistency in their availability remains a significant concern.

Accessibility at polling stations presents another substantial hurdle. C. T. noted varying degrees of accessibility at different locations, highlighting the need for consistent and comprehensive accessibility measures. Y. M. H. encountered architectural barriers, such as small spaces and inadequate signage, which further complicated his voting experience. I. T. reported similar challenges, particularly regarding the accessibility of school buildings used as polling stations.



Case Study 2: Lack of Privacy, Independence, and Time While Voting

The second case study examines the experiences of L. D., D. G., and C. T., focusing on the lack of privacy, independence, and adequate time afforded to visually impaired voters in Belgium.

L. D., originally from Romania, moved to Belgium in 2005 and has since faced numerous challenges during elections. Despite her educational background in psychology and her professional involvement in youth policy and disability rights, she reported significant obstacles in achieving a private and independent voting experience. D. G., a radio student and museum employee, and C. T., who also participated in the first case study, echoed similar concerns.

A major issue identified is the lack of privacy in polling stations. Many polling booths are not designed to accommodate individuals with disabilities, compromising the confidentiality of their vote. Overcrowded polling stations exacerbate this problem, as voters often lack the personal space needed to cast their ballots privately. The need for assistance from untrained staff further undermines their privacy, as it often results in unintentional disclosure of their voting choices.

Additionally, the time allocated for visually impaired voters to complete their ballots is often insufficient. Election staff, particularly during peak hours, tend to rush voters, limiting their ability to make informed decisions. The complexity of ballot designs and instructions disproportionately affects individuals with visual impairments, who require more time to understand and complete their ballots. Long queues and waiting times present additional physical strain, discouraging thorough and unhurried voting.

The dependence on assistants, due to the lack of accessible voting options, severely restricts the independence of visually impaired voters. The absence of voting machines with features such as audio output, Braille, and large print options forces voters to rely on others, compromising their autonomy.

Case Study 3: Limited Presence of Trained and Prepared Election Staff

The third case study explores the impact of inadequately trained and prepared election staff on the voting experiences of visually impaired individuals. The participants, E. M., G. V., D. G., and L. D., reported significant challenges stemming from the limited presence of knowledgeable and capable election personnel.

E. M., a digital accessibility expert for the European Commission, emphasized the importance of recognizing the hard-fought right to vote and the necessity of exercising this right to participate meaningfully in democratic societies. G. V., an HR recruiter in Brussels, and D. G., previously described in the second case study, both highlighted their struggles with the current voting system in Belgium, which does not facilitate full autonomy for voters with disabilities. L. D., also mentioned in the second case study, shared similar sentiments regarding the lack of proper support at polling stations.

A predominant issue is the lack of specific training for election staff on assisting voters with disabilities. This deficiency results in a lack of confidence and competence among staff, impeding their ability to provide necessary support. Many staff members are unfamiliar with assistive technologies such as screen readers, Braille devices, and audio ballots, further complicating the voting process for visually impaired individuals.

Communication barriers also play a significant role in the challenges faced by visually impaired voters. Election staff often provide unclear or overly complex instructions, making it difficult for voters to follow without additional support. Inconsistent communication and the absence of comprehensive sensitivity training contribute to a lack of empathy and understanding, exacerbating the difficulties encountered by these voters.



4.2.2. Estonia

Interviews

Eesti People to People conducted interviews with ten individuals from various organizations working with people with special needs, aiming to gather insights into their voting experiences.

In addressing the accessibility of voting materials and information, respondents highlighted the importance of having all election-related information, including candidate introductions and election manuals, available well before election day. This allows voters ample time to familiarize themselves with candidate programs and make informed decisions. Participants generally found the existing materials sufficient, noting that candidates provide many brochures and participate in radio and television interviews, with additional information readily available online.

Regarding the role and effectiveness of assistive technologies in voting, respondents emphasized the significance of internet voting in Estonia. One participant remarked, "Technology is very important in voting in our country. Many people vote only online using their ID card," while another stated, "Online voting allows you to change your mind in the days leading up to the official election day." These comments reflect a broad consensus that online voting has made the election process more convenient and accessible for many people.

Participants also mentioned physical obstacles, particularly the challenges of accessing polling stations located on the second floors of schools, which can be difficult for individuals using trolleys or wheelchairs without assistance from polling station staff. Despite these challenges, respondents were generally satisfied with the training and preparedness of election workers, who were described as ready to help people with disabilities, providing necessary instructions and support.

Family members and friends also played a crucial role in assisting with the voting process, especially with online voting. However, some respondents expressed skepticism about the impact of their participation on political decisions. Comments included, "Those I voted for were never elected to parliament or local government," and "I am skeptical of election results, but I always vote." Despite this skepticism, others maintained that their participation was important, even if it had not directly affected election outcomes, "Although my vote has not directly affected the election results so far, my participation is still important", "Voting is my way of expressing my opinion and standing up for the values that are important to me".

None of the respondents reported experiencing discrimination or related obstacles, underscoring the inclusivity of the Estonian election system, which ensures that all citizens can cast their vote equally.

Common Barriers

Physical Barriers: Many participants reported significant physical barriers at polling stations. For example, individuals with physical disabilities highlighted the challenge of inaccessible polling stations, particularly those located on the second floor of schools. These voters often required assistance from polling station staff to enter the buildings, and narrow doorways and cramped voting booths further exacerbated the physical challenges faced.

Communication Barriers: Participants with visual impairments emphasized the lack of sign language interpreters and clear written instructions. One visually impaired participant stated that the absence of Braille ballots or audio guides made it almost impossible to vote independently, often relying on others for assistance.



Attitudinal Barriers: Some respondents noted that staff members were unsure of how to assist them during the elections. The need for comprehensive training programs for election staff to address these attitudinal barriers was a recurrent theme in the interviews. Despite these barriers, participants expressed a strong desire to participate in democratic processes, even in the face of significant obstacles.

Specific Issues Highlighted: Participants with cognitive impairments highlighted the challenges they faced due to the lack of easy-to-understand voting materials. Complex language and instructions made it difficult for them to navigate the voting process without assistance. Simplified voting materials and clearer instructions were among the key recommendations from these participants.

The participants provided several recommendations to improve the accessibility of voting processes in Estonia:

Better Training for Election Staff: Training programs should be implemented to educate election staff on the specific needs of voters with disabilities. This training should cover how to assist voters with various types of disabilities and ensure that election staff are aware of the accommodations required. By increasing the awareness and preparedness of election staff, many of the attitudinal barriers identified in the interviews could be mitigated.

Provision of Assistive Technologies: To address the technological barriers, participants recommended the provision of assistive technologies such as Braille ballots, audio guides, and accessible electronic voting machines. These technologies would enable voters with visual impairments to vote independently and maintain the privacy of their vote. Additionally, the use of tactile voting aids could benefit voters with both visual and cognitive impairments.

Improved Physical Accessibility: Ensuring that all polling stations are physically accessible is crucial. This includes the installation of ramps, elevators, and wide doorways, as well as ensuring that voting booths are spacious enough to accommodate wheelchairs. By making these changes, physical barriers at polling stations can be significantly reduced, enabling voters with physical disabilities to participate more easily in the voting process.

Accessible Voting Materials: Providing voting materials in accessible formats, such as Braille, large print, and easy-to-read language, would help to ensure that all voters can understand and complete their ballots independently. Clear signage and instructions in multiple formats would also aid voters with visual and cognitive impairments.

Quotes for changes and recommendations to improve the inclusion of people with disabilities in democratic processes:

“We need to better prepare both voters and poll workers to deal with people with special needs. It is important that they understand each other, respect, understand and help each other”.

“Accessibility is a critical issue. All voters, regardless of their physical condition, must be able to cast their vote. Therefore, it is important that all places for voting are accessible to people with wheelchairs or strollers”.

“Election commission staff play an important role in ensuring a smooth election process. Their task is not only to monitor the voting process, but also to assist and guide the voters”.



“We need to teach everyone to vote online, then we will have virtually no problems with voting”.

“It is important to prepare more materials about candidates' programs and specific activities, not just about party programs. It is important that such materials are accessible to people with hearing and vision problems”.

“People need to be motivated, explained why to vote”.

“Cooperation between voters, their families and friends as well as election commission employees is necessary. This is the only way we can ensure that every vote counts and that the election process is fair and transparent”.

“We should consider how to make candidates' programs and election materials easier to understand for all voters”.

Case studies

Estonian case studies provided examination of the experiences of young individuals with different types of disabilities in Estonia.

Case studies are a valuable method for exploring the real-life implications of accessibility and highlight the specific challenges faced by individuals with disabilities. They offer nuanced insights allowing for a deeper understanding of the personal and systemic obstacles to democratic participation.

Furthermore, case studies emphasized the necessity for better training of youth workers, teachers and election staff on the legal rights of individuals with disabilities and the importance of accessibility in the voting process.

As many people with special needs in Estonia can use computers and smartphones, the information in electronic format is easily accessible for them. More and more disable people are preferring to use i-voting via the Internet at their homes or organisations. However, if someone asked, the materials and guidelines could be provided in Braille but this is not common in Estonia because i-voting is popular since 2007, in 2024 more than half of votes were from i-voting.

Case Study 1: Daniel's Experience with Internet Voting – wheelchair user

Daniel, a 28-year-old ICT worker with a lifelong motor disability, primarily votes online using Estonia's i-voting system. Since 2014, Daniel has participated in all elections, including municipal, parliamentary, and European Parliament elections, without visiting physical polling stations. He finds the online voting platform straightforward and accessible, with comprehensive instructions available in multiple languages. Despite occasional technical issues with devices, Daniel resolves these independently. His experience highlights the efficiency and accessibility of internet voting for individuals with mobility impairments.

Case Study 2: Olga's Experience as a Visually Impaired Voter

Olga, a 30-year-old educator who has been visually impaired for the past decade, initially faced significant challenges when voting at physical polling stations. The stations were not equipped with accessible entrances or Braille ballots. After experiencing these barriers, Olga transitioned to online voting, which she finds more accessible. She appreciates the ability to adjust text size and contrast on her screen, making the process manageable without assistance.



Case Study 3: Sten's Experience as a Deaf Voter

Sten, a 19-year-old student, voted for the first time in the 2024 European Parliament elections using the online system. He encountered no challenges and found the online guidelines clear and helpful. Sten's case underscores the effectiveness of internet voting for young people with disabilities, especially those who are deaf, as it allows for independent voting without the need for on-site assistance.

4.2.3. Romania

Interviews

The following interviews provide a detailed exploration of the experiences of individuals with various disabilities as they participate in the voting process in Romania. They offer rich, qualitative insights into the unique challenges and barriers faced by disabled individuals, highlighting areas that require attention and improvement. The interviews conducted as part of the Research on Accessibility Barriers in Democratic Participation reveal a consistent pattern of barriers faced by individuals with disabilities in Romania. Through ten detailed interviews with participants from diverse backgrounds, including those with visual, auditory, cognitive, and physical impairments, several key themes and issues emerged.

Physical Barriers

Many participants reported significant physical barriers at polling stations. C.M., who has a physical disability, highlighted the challenge of inaccessible polling stations: "The voting station had steps and no ramp, making it extremely difficult to enter." Similarly, A.M., who uses a wheelchair, noted the irony of having a ramp that was too steep to use safely: "The ramp was too steep, which made the whole process complicated."

Communication Barriers

Participants with auditory impairments, such as A.L. and T.S., emphasized the lack of sign language interpreters and clear written instructions. A.L. stated, "There were no interpreters or clear written guides for each step," while T.S. noted, "The absence of interpreters made me feel ignored and marginalized."

Attitudinal Barriers

The interviews also revealed a lack of awareness and training among election staff regarding the needs of voters with disabilities. F.I., who is visually impaired, shared an incident where he was denied assistance in the voting booth until intervention from higher authorities: "I was told I couldn't be accompanied into the voting booth despite needing assistance."

Despite these barriers, participants expressed a strong desire to participate in democratic processes. However, the lack of accessible voting materials and supportive technologies significantly hindered their ability to vote independently. R.G., who has low vision, mentioned, "I had to use the flashlight on my phone to see the ballot paper in the dark voting booth."

Absence of Assistive Technologies

The absence of assistive technologies was a recurrent issue. Participants like C.R. and D.C., both visually impaired, pointed out the nonexistence of Braille ballots or audio guides. C.R. mentioned, "There are no Braille ballots or tactile templates to help me vote independently."



Participants provided several recommendations to improve the accessibility of voting processes:

Better Training for Election Staff

Training election staff to be more aware and supportive of the needs of voters with disabilities was a common suggestion. F.I. observed, "The staff seemed unaware of the legal rights of disabled persons and were not trained to accommodate my needs."

Provision of Assistive Technologies

Introducing assistive technologies such as audio guides, tactile templates, and mobile applications could greatly enhance the voting experience for individuals with disabilities. D.C. recommended, "It would be very helpful to have audio devices or tactile templates to guide visually impaired voters."

Improved Physical Accessibility

Ensuring that polling stations are physically accessible, with appropriate ramps and clear signage, was emphasized by participants with mobility issues. A.M. suggested, "If ramps are installed, they need to be correctly designed to be useful."

Accessible Voting Materials

Making voting materials available in accessible formats, such as Braille or simple, clear written instructions, was another key recommendation. A.L. stressed, "Having sign language interpreters and clear written instructions would make a big difference."

The experiences provided by the interviewees offer a comprehensive picture of the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in Romania's democratic processes. Here are some detailed insights from the interviews:

R.G. (Low Vision)

R.G. found the voting booth poorly lit, making it difficult to see the ballot. She had to use her phone's flashlight to vote. "In the dark voting booth, I had to use the flashlight on my phone to see the ballot paper," she recounted.

E.V. (Cognitive Disability - Autism)

E.V. found the voting process overwhelming due to complex instructions and the crowded environment. He emphasized the need for simplified materials and a quieter voting environment. "The instructions were hard to understand, and the crowded environment made the process overwhelming," he said.

D.C. (Visually Impaired)

D.C. highlighted the lack of assistive technologies, such as Braille ballots and audio guides, making the voting process challenging. He stated, "There are no Braille ballots or tactile templates to help me vote independently."

A.M. (Mobility Impairment)

A.M. found the ramp at the voting station too steep, making it unusable for wheelchair users. He suggested proper design and installation of ramps. "The ramp was too steep, which made the whole process complicated," he mentioned.

L.D. (Autism)

L.D. struggled with the noisy and crowded voting environment, which made him feel overwhelmed. He recommended providing a quiet space and clear visual guides. "The noise and crowd at the voting station were overwhelming," he shared.



Case studies

The following case studies provide a detailed examination of the experiences of individuals with different types of disabilities as they navigate the voting process in Romania. Case studies are a valuable method for exploring the real-life implications of accessibility barriers and highlight the specific challenges faced by individuals with disabilities. They offer nuanced insights that quantitative data alone cannot provide, allowing for a deeper understanding of the personal and systemic obstacles to democratic participation.

Case Study 1: Challenges in Voting for a Blind Individual in Rural Romania

F.I., a blind individual living in a rural village, faced significant challenges during his voting experience. Despite the legal provisions allowing assisted voting, he encountered resistance from a voting section member who insisted that he must vote unaided. This situation was only resolved after the intervention of the section president, who confirmed the legality of assisted voting. The primary barriers highlighted in this case included the lack of Braille ballots and tactile templates, as well as a lack of understanding and training among election staff. F.I. stated, "A blind person cannot vote alone because the ballots are not accessible for us." This case underscores the need for standardized accessible voting materials and better training for election officials to accommodate the needs of blind voters effectively.

Case Study 2: The Voting Experience of a Deaf Individual in Romania

A.L., a 19-year-old deaf individual from Cluj-Napoca, encountered substantial communication barriers during his first voting experience. The absence of sign language interpreters and accessible written instructions made it difficult for him to understand and participate in the voting process. Despite his efforts to communicate through written notes, the election staff were not adequately trained to assist deaf voters, leading to frustration and anxiety. A.L. emphasized, "There were no interpreters or clear written guides for each step." This case highlights the critical importance of providing sign language interpreters at polling stations and training election staff to communicate effectively with deaf voters.

Case Study 3: The Voting Experience of an Individual with a Physical Disability in Romania

C.M., a 28-year-old individual with a spinal cord injury who uses a wheelchair, faced significant physical barriers at the polling station. Located in a building without a ramp and with steps at the entrance, C.M. had to rely on bystanders for assistance. Inside, the voting booths were not wheelchair-friendly, further complicating his voting process. C.M. noted, "The ramp was too steep, which made the whole process complicated." This case illustrates the urgent need for accessible infrastructure at polling stations, including ramps and adjustable voting booths, and better training for election staff to assist individuals with mobility impairments.



5. Comparative Analysis

5.1. Cross-Country Comparison of Quantitative Findings

Across Belgium, Estonia, and Romania, the survey responses reveal common themes of significant barriers faced by individuals with disabilities in the voting process. Key issues include the lack of physical accessibility at polling stations, inadequate access to voting information in suitable formats, insufficient availability of assistive technologies, and the need for better-trained election staff.

In Belgium, the primary focus is on the poor design of voting booths and the lack of accessible voting information. Estonia's challenges center around information access and physical accessibility, with a strong emphasis on the need for personal assistance and clear voting procedures. Romania's findings highlight systemic issues in accessibility, both in physical terms and in the availability of assistive technologies and trained staff.

Despite these challenges, there are positive experiences and best practices identified in each country. Estonia's use of online voting is particularly appreciated, offering a convenient and accessible option for voters with disabilities. In Romania, some respondents reported positive interactions with supportive election staff.

The findings underscore the urgent need for reforms across all three countries to ensure a more inclusive and accessible voting process for individuals with disabilities. By addressing these barriers through targeted interventions and policy changes, each country can move towards a more equitable democratic system, ensuring that every citizen can exercise their right to vote independently and with dignity.

5.2. Cross-Country Comparison of Qualitative Findings

Across Belgium, Estonia, and Romania, the interviews reveal a consistent issue of inaccessible electoral programmes and materials for individuals with disabilities. In Belgium, visually impaired voters highlighted the difficulty in accessing political information, with C.T. mentioning, "political programmes are generally not very accessible." Similarly, Estonian respondents emphasized the need for more comprehensive and accessible materials tailored for people with disabilities. In Romania, the lack of accessible voting materials in formats like Braille and audio guides was a recurrent theme, with D.C. stating, "There are no Braille ballots or tactile templates to help me vote independently." This consistent lack of accessible materials undermines the ability of individuals with disabilities to make informed voting decisions and fully participate in the democratic process.

Physical barriers at polling stations are a common challenge identified in all three countries. In Belgium, D.G. reported seeing a person in a wheelchair unable to vote due to the high positioning of the voting screen, while C.M. in Romania shared that "the voting station had steps and no ramp, making it extremely difficult to enter." Estonian participants also noted the challenges of accessing polling stations located on the second floors of schools, highlighting the need for improved physical infrastructure such as ramps and elevators. These physical barriers prevent individuals with mobility impairments from voting independently and safely.

Communication barriers were frequently mentioned by participants in Belgium and Romania. In Belgium, L.D. and Y.M.H. emphasized the lack of accessible written instructions and the importance of efforts to increase transparency in the democratic process. In Romania, participants with auditory impairments, like A.L., stressed the absence of sign language interpreters and clear written guides, making



it difficult for them to understand and participate in the voting process. This highlights the need for more inclusive communication strategies, including sign language interpreters and accessible written materials.

The need for better-trained election staff was a recurrent theme in Belgium, Estonia, and Romania. Belgian interviewees like Y.M.H. and D.G. pointed out that election staff often lacked the training to accommodate the needs of voters with disabilities, leading to reliance on personal assistants. In Estonia, respondents emphasized that while election workers were generally ready to help, there was still a need for comprehensive training programs to address attitudinal barriers. Similarly, Romanian participants, such as F.I., highlighted the lack of awareness and preparedness among polling station staff, underscoring the importance of training election officials to assist voters with disabilities effectively.

Ensuring privacy and independence while voting is a significant concern for individuals with disabilities in all three countries. In Belgium, C.T. and G.V. expressed frustration with the lack of adaptations for blind voters, which compromised their ability to vote privately. Romanian respondents echoed these concerns, with E.M. explaining her preference to independently choose her candidates, despite needing assistance. Estonian respondents, while finding online voting more accessible, also pointed out the need for improvements to ensure privacy and independence in the voting process. These findings highlight the critical need for assistive technologies and accessible voting procedures to protect the privacy and autonomy of voters with disabilities.

5.3. Key Similarities and Differences

Key Similarities

Across Belgium, Estonia, and Romania, several common themes emerged regarding the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in the voting process.

In all three countries, there is a significant issue with the accessibility of electoral programmes and materials. Visually impaired voters in Belgium highlighted their difficulties in accessing political information, with statements like C.T.'s noting that "political programmes are generally not very accessible." Estonian respondents echoed this sentiment, emphasizing the need for comprehensive and accessible materials tailored for people with disabilities. Similarly, in Romania, the lack of accessible voting materials, such as Braille ballots or audio guides, was a recurrent theme. D.C. pointed out, "There are no Braille ballots or tactile templates to help me vote independently." This widespread inaccessibility undermines the ability of individuals with disabilities to make informed voting decisions and fully participate in the democratic process.

Physical barriers at polling stations are a prevalent challenge in Belgium, Estonia, and Romania. In Belgium, D.G. reported witnessing a person in a wheelchair unable to vote due to the high positioning of the voting screen. Estonian participants noted challenges accessing polling stations located on the second floors of schools, which pose significant issues for individuals with mobility impairments. In Romania, physical barriers such as steps without ramps were commonly reported, hindering access for wheelchair users, as noted by C.M. These barriers prevent individuals with disabilities from voting independently and safely.

Communication barriers also emerged as a significant issue, particularly in Belgium and Romania. In Belgium, respondents like L.D. and Y.M.H. emphasized the lack of accessible written instructions and the importance of improving transparency in political processes. Romanian participants, such as A.L., highlighted the absence of sign language interpreters and clear written guides, making it difficult for auditory impaired voters to understand and participate in the voting process. Estonian respondents also recognized the need for more inclusive communication strategies, although this issue was less emphasized compared to Belgium and Romania.



The need for better-trained election staff was a common theme in the interviews from all three countries. In Belgium, interviewees like Y.M.H. and D.G. pointed out that election staff often lacked the training to accommodate the needs of voters with disabilities, leading to reliance on personal assistants. Estonian respondents noted that while election workers were generally helpful, comprehensive training programs are needed to address attitudinal barriers. Similarly, Romanian participants, such as F.I., highlighted the lack of awareness and preparedness among polling station staff, underscoring the importance of training election officials to assist voters with disabilities effectively.

Ensuring privacy and independence while voting is a significant concern for individuals with disabilities in all three countries. In Belgium, visually impaired voters expressed frustration with the lack of adaptations that compromised their ability to vote privately, as shared by G.V. Romanian respondents echoed these concerns, with E.M. explaining her preference to independently choose her candidates despite needing assistance. Estonian respondents, while finding online voting more accessible, also pointed out the need for improvements to ensure privacy and independence in the voting process. These findings highlight the critical need for assistive technologies and accessible voting procedures to protect the privacy and autonomy of voters with disabilities.

Key Differences

While the similarities highlight common challenges, there are also notable differences in the experiences of individuals with disabilities across the three countries.

The implementation and effectiveness of online voting vary significantly among the countries. In Belgium, there was limited mention of online voting, with the focus remaining on physical polling stations and their accessibility issues. In contrast, Estonia has a high reliance on online voting, which is widely used and appreciated for its accessibility and convenience. As one Estonian participant remarked, "Technology is very important in voting in our country. Many people vote only online using their ID card." In Romania, respondents suggested implementing online voting as a potential solution to improve accessibility, indicating that it is not yet widely available.

The availability of assistive technologies also differs among the countries. In Belgium, assistive technologies at polling stations are rated poorly, indicating significant inadequacy. Estonian respondents did not emphasize the need for assistive technologies at physical polling stations as much, likely due to the prevalent use of online voting. In Romania, there is a critical lack of assistive technologies, such as Braille ballots and audio guides, highlighting a pressing need for their implementation.

Specific physical accessibility issues also vary among the countries. In Belgium, specific issues such as high-positioned voting screens were highlighted. Estonian respondents primarily reported problems related to polling stations being located on upper floors of buildings. Romanian participants commonly reported general physical barriers, such as steps without ramps, making polling stations inaccessible.

The overall experience and satisfaction with election staff varied among the countries. In Belgium, experiences with election staff were mixed, with some positive interactions highlighting personal attitudes rather than professional preparedness. Estonian respondents generally had positive feedback about election workers' readiness to assist, though comprehensive training is still needed. In Romania, respondents predominantly had negative experiences due to the lack of training and awareness among election staff, necessitating better preparedness.



6. Recommendations

Based on the findings from the comparative analysis of voting experiences in Belgium, Estonia, and Romania, several key recommendations have emerged to enhance the accessibility and inclusivity of the electoral process for individuals with disabilities.

1. Enhance Accessibility of Electoral Materials and Programmes

- **Provide Accessible Formats:** Electoral information, including party programmes and candidate profiles, should be made available in accessible formats such as Braille, large print, audio guides, and easy-to-read language. This will ensure that all voters, including those with visual and auditory impairments, can access the information they need to make informed decisions.
- **Improve Online Resources:** Websites and online platforms should be designed to meet accessibility standards, providing clear, navigable, and user-friendly interfaces for all users, including those with disabilities.

2. Improve Physical Accessibility of Polling Stations

- **Install Ramps and Elevators:** Ensure that all polling stations are equipped with ramps, elevators, and other necessary infrastructure to accommodate individuals with mobility impairments. Polling stations should be located on accessible floors, with clear pathways to voting booths.
- **Adjust Voting Booths:** Voting booths should be adjustable and designed to be accessible for wheelchair users and other individuals with physical disabilities, and to have bright light for individuals with low vision.

3. Address Communication Barriers

- **Provide Sign Language Interpreters:** Ensure the availability of sign language interpreters at polling stations to assist voters with auditory impairments. This will facilitate better communication and understanding of the voting process.
- **Offer Clear Written Instructions:** Provide clear, concise, and accessible written instructions for the voting process. These instructions should be available in multiple formats to cater to different disabilities.

4. Train Election Staff on Disability Awareness

- **Comprehensive Training Programs:** Implement comprehensive training programs for election staff to educate them on the specific needs and rights of voters with disabilities. This training should cover how to assist voters with various types of disabilities and ensure that staff are aware of the accommodations required.
- **Empathy and Patience:** Encourage election staff to approach their duties with empathy and patience, understanding that voters with disabilities may need more time and assistance to complete the voting process.



5. Ensure Privacy and Independence in Voting

- **Introduce Assistive Technologies:** Implement assistive technologies such as tactile templates, audio guides, and electronic voting machines that cater to the needs of voters with disabilities. These technologies should allow for independent and private voting.
- **Design Confidential Voting Processes:** Ensure that the voting process is designed to protect the privacy and independence of voters with disabilities. This includes ensuring that assistance is provided in a way that does not compromise the confidentiality of their vote.

6. Promote Online Voting Options

- **Expand Online Voting:** Expand and improve online voting systems to provide a convenient and accessible voting option for individuals with disabilities. Ensure that online voting platforms are secure, reliable, and easy to use.
- **Educate Voters on Online Voting:** Provide clear instructions and support to help voters understand how to use online voting systems effectively. This includes offering technical support and troubleshooting assistance during the voting period.

7. Increase Public Awareness and Advocacy

- **Raise Awareness:** Conduct public awareness campaigns to highlight the importance of accessible voting and the rights of individuals with disabilities. This can help to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for all voters.
- **Advocate for Policy Changes:** Work with policymakers and advocacy groups to push for legislative and policy changes that promote accessibility in the voting process. This includes advocating for the implementation of international standards and best practices in electoral accessibility.

By implementing these recommendations, Belgium, Estonia, and Romania can make significant strides towards creating a more inclusive and accessible voting environment for all citizens, ensuring that individuals with disabilities can fully participate in the democratic process.



7. Conclusions

The "Research on Accessibility Barriers in Democratic Participation" aimed to uncover and address the significant challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in exercising their voting rights across Belgium, Estonia, and Romania. Through a rigorous methodology combining both quantitative and qualitative research, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the accessibility barriers that hinder full democratic participation for these individuals.

The findings from the surveys and interviews conducted in these three countries reveal common themes, such as the lack of accessible electoral programmes and materials, physical barriers at polling stations, communication barriers, and the need for better-trained election staff. Despite these similarities, there are also notable differences in the implementation of solutions, particularly in the use of online voting, which is highly effective in Estonia but less emphasized in Belgium and Romania.

The quantitative research, which included surveys distributed to at least 100 respondents in each country, highlighted prevalent trends and barriers through statistical analysis. This data was seamlessly integrated into the narrative to provide a clear picture of the accessibility issues. The qualitative research, consisting of semi-structured interviews and detailed case studies, offered deeper insights into individual experiences and highlighted specific challenges and adaptive strategies used by voters with disabilities.

One of the key strengths of this research is its cross-country comparative analysis, which allows for the identification of regional variations and similarities in accessibility barriers. This comparative perspective is crucial for developing targeted strategies that can be adapted and implemented across different European contexts.

This research underline the importance of collaborative efforts and knowledge sharing among European countries to ensure that individuals with disabilities can fully participate in the democratic process, exercising their rights independently and with dignity. The findings and recommendations from this research will be disseminated to national institutions, the European Parliament, and other European bodies to advocate for the necessary policy improvements and foster a more inclusive democratic system across Europe.



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9. Appendices

Appendices 1

Survey

This survey is part of the research on "Accessibility Barriers in Democratic Participation" conducted within the Inclusive Evolution 2024 project. This project is financed by the European Union and aims to identify and address the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in exercising their democratic rights. Your responses will help us understand your needs and improve services to ensure more inclusive democratic processes.

This survey aims to gather information on the experiences and challenges faced by individuals with various disabilities (hearing, visual, and motoric) in participating in democratic processes. Your responses will help us understand your needs and improve services. Please answer the following questions honestly. The survey includes both closed and open-ended questions to capture a comprehensive view of your experiences and is confidential.

IMPORTANT: This survey is for individuals who already took part in the process of voting.

By completing this survey, you consent to the collection and processing of your personal data in accordance with GDPR for the purposes of this research within Inclusive Evolution 2024 project. Your data will be stored securely, used only for research purposes, and will not be shared with third parties. You have the right to access, rectify, or erase your data at any time by contacting office@babelontravel.eu.

Country:

Estonia

Belgium

Romania

What is your primary type of disability?

Hearing

Visual

Motoric

Multiple

Other

How often do you participate in local or national elections?

Always

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

Never



How would you rate the accessibility of polling stations in your area?

1 - Very inaccessible

5 - Very accessible

Do you have access to voting information in a format that is suitable for your disability?

Always

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

Never

How would you rate the availability of assistive technologies at polling stations?

1 - Very poor

5 - Excellent

Do you feel that your disability impacts your ability to participate in democratic processes?

Strongly agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Do you receive any assistance when voting?

Yes, from family/friends

Yes, from election staff

No, I do not receive any assistance

How satisfied are you with the training and awareness of election staff regarding the needs of people with disabilities?

Very satisfied

Satisfied

Neutral

Dissatisfied

Very dissatisfied

Do you feel that your voice is heard and considered in political decisions?

Strongly agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly disagree



Do you believe that current democratic processes are inclusive for individuals with disabilities?

Strongly agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Have you ever faced discrimination or barriers when participating in democratic processes?

Yes

No

Would you recommend any changes to make democratic participation more accessible for individuals with disabilities?

Yes

No

Maybe

What are the specific challenges you face when participating in democratic processes due to your disability?

.....

Can you suggest any improvements that could make voting more accessible for individuals with your type of disability?

.....

Please share any positive experiences you have had in participating in democratic processes.

.....



Appendices 2

Semi-structured Interview Questions

1. Can you describe your experience with participating in elections? What specific challenges have you encountered?
2. How accessible are the voting materials and information provided to you? Are they suitable for your disability?
3. What role do assistive technologies play in your voting experience, and how effective are they?
4. Can you discuss any barriers you have faced at polling stations and how they were addressed (if at all)?
5. In your opinion, how well-trained are election staff in accommodating the needs of individuals with disabilities?
6. Have you ever needed assistance to vote? If so, who provided it, and was it helpful?
7. Do you feel that your participation in elections impacts political decisions? Why or why not?
8. Can you describe any instances of discrimination or barriers that have prevented you from fully participating in democratic processes?
9. What changes would you recommend to improve the inclusivity of democratic processes for individuals with disabilities?
10. Can you share any positive experiences where you felt fully included and supported in your democratic participation?



Appendices 3

Case Study Guide

Title:

[Case Study Title]

Background Information:

Participant Information:

- Name (or pseudonym)
- Age
- Type of disability
- Duration of living with the disability

Context:

- Living environment (urban/rural)
- Socioeconomic status
- Educational background

Objectives:

To understand the daily experiences and challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in democratic participation.

To identify specific needs and areas for improvement in public and private services related to voting.

To highlight positive experiences and best practices for inclusion.

Data Collection:

Methods:

- Interviews
- Observations
- Document review (e.g., voting records, accessibility reports)

Case Description:

Participant's Voting Experience:

- Frequency of participation in elections and/or in other democratic processes
- Challenges faced during voting
- Use of assistive technologies

Access to Voting Services:

- Accessibility of polling stations
- Availability of voting information in suitable formats
- Assistance received when voting

Barriers Encountered:

- Physical barriers (e.g., inaccessible polling stations)
- Communication barriers (e.g., lack of information in accessible formats)
- Attitudinal barriers (e.g., discrimination by election staff)



Analysis:

Themes Identified:

- Major challenges
- Effective strategies and supports
- Areas needing improvement

Quotes from Participant:

- Direct quotes that illustrate key points

Conclusion:

Summary of Findings:

- Key insights from the case study

Recommendations:

- Suggested improvements for voting services and supports
- Recommendations for policy changes