ANEC position paper on accessibility of voting and the role of standards

For many European voters, the question is which party to vote for. But for others, it is how to vote.

From 22 to 25 May 2014, millions of citizens will have the chance to vote in the elections to the European Parliament. Most will be able to cast their votes without problem. But others will experience barriers because of older age or disability. And they constitute more than 10% of voters[1].

ANEC believes all those entitled to vote should be able to do so. And in secret. Modern solutions and standards should be used to help everyone exercise the democratic choice.

Access to on-line information material

There is no unified European electoral law as many details are decided at the national level. However, access to electoral material and information is challenging for people with disabilities such as people with visual impairments or learning disabilities. While in some countries blind people are now offered the possibility to request a complete set of ballot papers in Braille with all the list of parties and candidates to be available in the corresponding polling station[2], the use of Internet and social media in the electoral campaign is increasing.

People with visual impairments encounter problems in accessing on-line information material and using social media to take part in the electoral campaign if the websites are not designed according to accessibility standards. Only 10 European

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[1] European Disability Forum press release 9 May 2014, http://www.edf-feph.org/
[2] People with visual disabilities may make use of the procedure regulated by Spanish Royal Decree 1612/2007, of 7 December, which consists of documentation in Braille which will be given by the table to voters who have requested this in advance, allowing them to cast their votes independently.

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Member States out of 28 provide on-line information about voting and political candidates in an accessible way[3].

Of thirteen European political parties, none declared their website to be compliant with the web accessibility standards (WCAG 0.1-0.2)[4]. The web-sites were set up with the financial support of the European Parliament.

Today's technology allows votes to be cast through the internet, portable devices, even interactive television and mobile phones[5]. However, the use of electronic voting systems, based on internet or on touch screens, can be particularly challenging for people with visual impairments. If the colour contrast of the screen is not good, or the web page cannot be read by the special software used by blind people (known as the screen reader), a person with visual impairment cannot vote independently.

How can standards help?

Public Authorities' web-sites and eVoting systems are generally bought by authorities through public procurement procedures. According to the European Public Procurement Directives, it is possible to integrate social considerations - and specifically Design for All and Accessibility requirements - in the contracts for public bids[6]. And according to the revised Public Procurement Directives[7], to enter into force in the coming years, the technical specifications of the tender shall "be drawn up so as to take into account accessibility criteria for persons with disabilities or design for all users". In addition, a Directive on mandatory accessibility requirements for the websites of public sector bodies has recently been approved by the European Parliament and should be approved by the Council of Ministers by end of the year[8].

In line with ANEC's position and long-term lobbying, a set of standards on accessibility requirements for ICT public procurement has recently been adopted[9]. In addition, work, to which we contribute, is on-going for the revision of standards

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[3]   http://fra.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/data-and-maps/comparative-data/political-participation/accessible-websites

[4] Web-sites checked on 13 May 2014

[5] For example, Estonia was the first European country to permit internet voting in October 2005 for local elections. This was possible through most of the population having an electronic identity card so facilitating voter identification and security of the vote.

[6] Directive 2004/18/EC of 31 March 2004 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 31 March 2004 on the coordination of procedures for the award of public works contracts, public supply contracts and public service contracts, OJ L 134/114 of 30 April 2004.

[7]Art. 42 Directive 2014/24/EU replacing directive 2004/18/EC, Directive 2014/25/EU replacing directive 2004/17/EC

[8] European Commission Proposal for a Directive on 'the accessibility of public sector bodies' websites' COM (2012) 721 final, December 2012

[9] EN 301 549 "Accessibility requirements for public procurement of ICT products and services in Europe", TR 101 550 'Documents relevant to EN 301 549 Accessibility requirements suitable for public procurement of ICT products and services in Europe' ; TR 101 551 'Guidelines on the use of accessibility award criteria suitable for public procurement of ICT products and services in Europe'; TR 101 552 'Guidance for the application of conformity assessment to accessibility requirements for public procurement of ICT products and services in Europe'.

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about the user-interface, which could improve the accessibility of eVoting systems.[10]

> *ANEC urges public authorities and web-developers to use the recently approved European standards on ICT accessibility to make on-line electoral information accessible to all.*

> *ANEC calls on standards-makers to quickly finalise the revision on the standards on user-interface to make eVoting systems accessible.*

> *ANEC calls on the Council of Ministers to speed up the approval of the Web Accessibility Directive.*

Access to voting premises

It should not be forgotten that, in order to exercise their right to vote through physical presence, citizens need to be able to access the premises where elections take place, generally public buildings such as schools and town halls. In nearly two-thirds of EU Member States there is a legal requirement for some or all polling stations to be accessible to persons with disabilities. The criteria for determining whether a polling station is accessible vary widely. However, they mostly refer to the wheelchair accessibility of the building, and do not take into account the accessibility needs of people with other types of impairment[11].

Accessibility to the built environment is one of ANEC's main priorities. We contributed to the development of an International Standard on access to the built environment[12]. However, at the European level, only preparatory work took place some years ago to assess the need for European standards and at the time this did not proceed further. We believe it is important to have common and broad-ranging criteria to determine the accessibility features of polling stations.

How can standards help?

> *ANEC calls for work on access to the built environment to start as soon as possible at the European level[13]. Standards are needed in the framework of public procurement procedures in order to help public authorities define accessibility criteria in their public tenders. How to assess if a ramp is not too steep? At which height should the handle be placed on a door for a wheelchair user to be able to use it? And how to assess whether the lighting conditions of the voting booth are adequate?*

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[10] EN 1332-4: Identification card systems. Man-machine interface. Coding of user requirements for people with special needs.
[11] http://fra.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/data-and-maps/comparative-data/political-participation/polling-stations
[12] ISO/CD 21542: 2011 Building construction -- Accessibility and usability of the built environment
[13] Second phase of Standardisation mandate M420 in support of accessibility requirements for public procurement in the built environment.

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ANEC in Brief

ANEC is the European consumer voice in standardisation, representing and defending consumer interests in the development of technical standards, in the application of certification schemes to standards, and in the creation or revision of legislation on products and services. ANEC brings together national consumer organisations from the EU Member States and EFTA countries in order to define European positions on matters affecting consumer protection and welfare. ANEC receives funding from the European Union and the EFTA Secretariat. It relies too on the participation of volunteer experts which is considered a contribution in kind. Consumer participation in standardisation is crucial. Consumer representation complements the business view, and goods and services based on standards developed with effective consumer participation can be more easily accepted in the market place. In the EU context, consumers ensure that the public interest is represented in the standardisation work that complements European legislation and broader public policy initiative. **www.anec.eu**

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