# Transcript of the first episode of EDF Podcast: The foundation of the European Disability Forum

##### Sounding the introductory jingle of EDF Podcast (00:02)

You are listening to *For the Record*, a podcast brought to you by the European Disability Forum. We want an accessible Europe, a stronger and more inclusive society. More than 100 million persons with disabilities needs to be considered. Disability should be a principle. To make sure that not only the European Union understands the discrimination that is really faced by persons with disability. How can the European Parliament contribute to making the demand a reality for all people with disabilities? And as we say in the disability movement, nothing about us without us.

##### Catherine Naughton, EDF Director (00:47)

Welcome to this first episode of the European Disability Forum podcast. This year marks our 25th anniversary and to celebrate it, we invite you to take a journey that will take us back to the memories of the past, the disability movement in Europe, the challenges of the present, and our plans for the future. We will speak with our leaders, our members and our partners.

This is Catherine Naughton, the director of the European Disability Forum and today's episode host for this release. We wanted to have a very outstanding guest in the history of EDF. He's a distinguished trajectory in the defense of the rights of persons with disabilities. Throughout his life, he has been a human rights campaigner active at National, European and international level. His involvement in social movement started from the Greek movement. In fact, he's the President of the National Confederation of Disabled People in Greece, which is the umbrella organization of the Greek disability movement. At the end of last year, he was elected President of the International Disability Alliance. Yannis Vardakastanis, welcome and thank you very much for joining us today.

##### Yannis Vardakastanis, EDF President (01:51)

Thank you for the invitation and thank you for taking the initiative to try to describe the history of one of the most successful initiatives organized at the European level, in my opinion, for the last quarter of usage.

##### Catherine Naughton, EDF Director (02:12)

Thank you Yannis. The European Disability Forum is now marking 25 years of existence. Could you tell me a little bit about how the EDF began?

##### Yannis Vardakastanis, EDF President (02:22)

Probably, you know that before the European Disability Forum became an independent organization, there was the European Forum as a consultative body during the second Helios program of the European Union. In that body, there were representatives from national councils and various sectors of disability issues from Enzo and other organizations at the European level. In that consolidated body, we started discussing in 94 the idea to continue this consultative body at the end of 96 as an independent organization. Why at the end of 96? Because that was the end of the Helios program and therefore of that consultative in 1995, I believe in March, if my memory does not fail me, working group was agreed by that consultative body to start working on the first statute of the independent European Disability Forum. That working group prepared the first statutes which were signed at the beginning of May in 1996, and they were after submitted to the Belgium authorities for approval. That was concluded at the end of that year. So, in 1997, we started with the formal establishment of the European Disability Forum.

##### Catherine Naughton, EDF Director (04:11)

Thank you so much, Yannis. So, you've just described who was involved in drafting the statutes. And there at the beginning, could you tell me more in your own words about EDF's members and also why you have invested so much of your time and your activism in building the unity of the European movement.

##### Yannis Vardakastanis, EDF President (04:31)

I believe years before the existence even of the consultative body, the so called then European uniform. I described earlier, even in the decade of the 80s, that as the European Union was moving to a more integration, there was a need for the European citizens of all parts of the population to form organizations to represent them at the European level. In fact, I will tell something which was a joke at the time. I remember I said to my family in that in ten years I will probably be the President of the European umbrella organization. And they told me that I was somehow speaking to something that was not existing. And I said at the time I was really seeing that it was coming. And we saw it during the conservative body that the belief of the leaders who were part of that body to establish an organization to represent in a dependent way the interests and the rights of persons with disabilities at the European level was a real determination. It was not easy to put together different histories, traditions, levels of development of disability policy at national level, various levels of development of the European NGOs, and to try to create not a homogeneous because that was not the aim, the aim towards to create an organization that will make the diversity strength.

##### Yannis Vardakastanis, EDF President [(06:23)](https://www.happyscribe.com/transcriptions/97d68be4bf464e24973c57e68db3f589/edit_v2?position=383.9&utm_source=happyscribe&utm_medium=document_deep_link&utm_campaign=export_docx&utm_content=97d68be4bf464e24973c57e68db3f589)

And in my opinion, this is what we did. And for me, the involvement movement has been a tremendous part of my life. On that journey, I met people I will never forget in my life.

##### Catherine Naughton, EDF Director [(06:41)](https://www.happyscribe.com/transcriptions/97d68be4bf464e24973c57e68db3f589/edit_v2?position=401.58&utm_source=happyscribe&utm_medium=document_deep_link&utm_campaign=export_docx&utm_content=97d68be4bf464e24973c57e68db3f589)

Thank you so much, Yannis, for that look back. And also, it's something which always strikes me as well within the European disability movement, the diversity of the members and also this commitment to work together from all the different countries and organizations that are included. So that's one of those key moments in history of ADF as this expansion and how ADF reached out to what we're then called new member States and now we're core members of the 27 countries of the EU. What for you have been other important formative moments in EDF history.

##### Yannis Vardakastanis, EDF President [(07:17)](https://www.happyscribe.com/transcriptions/97d68be4bf464e24973c57e68db3f589/edit_v2?position=437.81&utm_source=happyscribe&utm_medium=document_deep_link&utm_campaign=export_docx&utm_content=97d68be4bf464e24973c57e68db3f589)

I will just name them. I will not analyze them.

##### Catherine Naughton, EDF Director [(07:22)](https://www.happyscribe.com/transcriptions/97d68be4bf464e24973c57e68db3f589/edit_v2?position=442.14&utm_source=happyscribe&utm_medium=document_deep_link&utm_campaign=export_docx&utm_content=97d68be4bf464e24973c57e68db3f589)

Thank you.

##### Yannis Vardakastanis, EDF President [(07:23)](https://www.happyscribe.com/transcriptions/97d68be4bf464e24973c57e68db3f589/edit_v2?position=443.14&utm_source=happyscribe&utm_medium=document_deep_link&utm_campaign=export_docx&utm_content=97d68be4bf464e24973c57e68db3f589)

But let me first start with the year that EDF became operational, functional. What happened that year? We had June 97, the Amsterdam treaty. Why we remember so much the Amsterdam Treaty in disability movement? Because for the first time in the 40 years history of the European Union, the term “disability” appears in Article 13, the non-discrimination article of the Amsterdam treaty. Therefore, for me the 97 is a very important year in the history of EDF and disability rights in the European Union which was, by the way, the conclusion of the campaign of invisible citizens that started in 95 to try to include disability in Article 13 of the absent therapy because if we go back now and look at what happened after this, we are going to see that Article 13 created a very important legal base in the European Union to take initiatives to establish policies, etcetera and I moved to the second very important discrimination package and the directive on equal treatment in employment and vocational training at the workplace which was formally adopted in 2000 and then I would like to mention the 2003 the European Year of persons with disabilities. It was a very important year which mobilized the member States and our members in the 15 member States of the European Union at that time.

##### Yannis Vardakastanis, EDF President (09:28)

It started in Athens in January 2003 and it was concluded in Rome in December 2003. Then I would like to mention our very strong participation in the negotiations for the CRPD It was a period that EDF really played a very instrumental role to influence the position of the European Union during the negotiations for the CRPD in the ad-hoc committee and of course we represented, we had that honored, to represent the Europeans with disabilities in the working group that in January 2004 drafted the first draft of the CRPD.

Then, I would like to mention 2007 1million4disability campaign and I would like to remember what we were discussing in 2006 when we were thinking how to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the CRPD. We were discussing to had a conference, to do other traditional, conventional things and I made the proposal to go out, to reach out the European citizens and I remembered that we were very – even myself when I proposed it – we were very afraid of failing. I remembered what I said. I said “If we succeed that is going to be remember for years. It we fail it will be regarded as normal.” And on October 4, 2007 in the Place the roundabout, we delivered to the EU institutions more than one million three hundred thousand signatures. In the presence of more than three hundred thousand people. For me that was the year of mesurity of EDF.

And then of course, 2010 the conclusion by the EU of the CRPD, then the first European Disability Strategy. Now we have the second.

And then we can name all the legislations that have been put in place throughout these years from the passenger’s rights legislations to the structural funds regulations, the accessibility, the European Accessibility Act… So many that one can mention.

**Catherine Naughton, EDF Director (12:07)**

Yeah

**Yannis Vardakastanis, EDF President (12:08)**

EDF has been a real success.

**Catherine Naughton, EDF Director (12:11)**

What do you think hasn´t been achieve? What are the things that the movement have been fighting for till now but, you know, what are the problems that remain within the European Union for people with disabilities?

**Yannis Vardakastanis, EDF President (12:22)**

I will mention the following, that would be possible need more examination.

The first is the failure to achieve – which is not our failure. Is the failure of the European Union itself – to enact non-discrimination legislation. With the Horizontal Directive blocking the Council for almost 14 years now.

The second very important that is fully connected with the “nothing about us without us” is the lack of the structure dialogue of the European Union institutions with EDF and our members. For example, in the 25 years history of EDF, we were able only once – in December 6th 2011 – to bring together the three presidents of the Council, the Commission and the Parliament to discuss with us, with EDF disability issues and how to implemented CRPD at that time.

And also, I would say, although we have campaigned, we have not been able to achieve real progress on three areas. First, I would like to mention gender issues. We have too much talk and too little done. Secondly, I would like to mention de deinstitutionalization, living in the community. We have seen the resistance of the Member States. And third, I would like to mention the work that has not happened as much as we – I believe – would like to. To see persons with disabilities that need more support: persons with intellectual disabilities, persons with autism, etc.

**Catherine Naughton, EDF Director** **(14:14)**

I wanted to now look a little bit at the future. How do you see young activists within the European disability movement. Do you have a message you would like to send to young Europeans with disabilities?

**Yannis Vardakastanis, EDF President (14:24)**

The message I would like to share with young persons with disabilities, the young leaders, in the disability movement is that they should try to be active citizens, to fulfill their personal other aspirations but also to invest in the collective advocacy for the rights of their people. The young leaders of our movement should be ready to take this movement forward and specially this year that is the European Year of Youth. We should be very active to make an inclusive European year of Youth. So if we do not speak, others will not speak for us.

**Catherine Naughton, EDF Director** **(15:12)**

Yeah. Thanks so much Yannis. It is true that we have an opportunity this year with the European Year of Youth. Now I think we are coming to the end of our time together today. I’d ask you to cast your mind again at any memory that thought you the most important lesson about fighting for disability rights in Europe. Is any key figure of the organization that you would like to highlight or a key moment in EDF history that you would like to share?

**Yannis Vardakastanis, EDF President (15:36)**

First of all, I would like to pay tribute to all those who started or came together with us on this journey and we are not with us today. Secondly, I would like to say that in this period of 25 years there are personal and public moments that we should take into consideration. You know Catherine, I never talk about myself. But coming from a poor family, from Zakynthos, Greece, to lead the disability movement and now the global disability movement is something that always keeps me routed from where I started.

I would say that the signing of the CRPD at the end of March 2006 in the United Nations in New York was one. Another one I would like to mention has been the conclusion of the CRPD by the European Union. And last but not least I would like to remember one of the meetings of the Board of the European Disability Forum that – for me- has played a role in the work I have been doing in EDF. It was in Vienna in 98 – if I remember correctly – when we took the decision to strongly support the extension of EDF. But not the dispersion. The inclusion of our colleague of the new members into the European disability movement. Because that was the message, we were sending that this movement is a movement of solidarity, a movement of thinking about the most weak, about the most needing support. That is why I would like to mention this.

I could mention many. But this for me was the prove that the disability movement is the movement of solidarity.

**Catherine Naughton, EDF Director (15:12)**

Thanks so much Yannis. And I think that the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, this human right standard that brings together people across around the world. So we definitely go into that in more details in future podcast and of course the inclusion of the new member states. It is hard to imagine EDF today without our colleagues across the union. So that is something that we will explore more in the future.

It has been a great pleasure to have you with us today. And thank you for joining me and for the great conversation.

Do you have any final words Yannis you would like to share with us?

**Yannis Vardakastanis, EDF President (18:35)**

Catherine I would like to say something that I have say so many times. Let me say it again: I don´t believe so much in words, I believe in this. I have been used throughout many times what the President of Kenia said once – Kenyata- he said: “When the missionaries came, we had the land, and they had the bible and they thought us to pray with closed eyes. When we opened our eyes, they had the land, and we had the bible”

**Catherine Naughton, EDF Director** **(19:12)**

Thank you very much Yannis.

That’s all we have in our first episode. We hope you enjoyed hearing about the beginnings of the disability movement, the beginning of EDF in Europe and we look forward to seeing you in our next episode.