

**Remarks by ambassador Ole Egberg Mikkelsen, Denmark, at the conference held by the Council for Human Rights, Gender Equality and Diversity Council of the MFA of Ukraine in Kyiv 17 July 2024**

Madam First Lady, ministers, madam commissioner, dear participants

Let me first of all thank the Council for Human Rights, Gender Equality and Diversity for inviting me to address you today at. It is a great honor for me to share the Danish experience on inclusiveness and accessibility with you.

**The Danish-Ukrainian partnership is very close** and it has grown even closer since the full scale Russian aggression. And what are we doing? The simple answer is weapons. More than 90 percent of our support for Ukraine is weapons and defense equipment. There however are also important civilian components in our support. On the request of president Zelensky Denmark has assumed the patronage for the rebuilding of the city and the oblast of Mykolaiv. Work started already back in 2022 because reconstruction and recovery cannot wait until there is peace.

However, Denmark's participation in today's conference is a sign that the Danish-Ukrainian partnership is not only about weapons and reconstruction – it is just as much about values. Danes and Ukrainians share the same fundamental values – freedom, liberty, democracy and human rights. And we want our societies to be inclusive for all groups, including people with disabilities. Today's conference with the participation of the First Lady and a strong team of ministers is clear sign of Ukraine's commitment to inclusiveness for all groups in society – also in times of war.

**But what is that Denmark can bring to the table in terms of inclusiveness and a barrier-free society for persons with disabilities?**

Is Denmark a success story and is our example something to emulate?

One way of measuring the inclusiveness of Danish society is to look at **the labor market participation of persons with disabilities**. It is quite high in Denmark. Around sixty percent of persons with disabilities are actually working. Not necessarily full time, but they do work. It means that they are part of a workplace, they have colleagues, they are not sitting in isolation in their apartments and they are earning a salary. This is what most people want if they are able to do so. They want to earn their own money and not to be dependent on public financial support from the state or the municipality. That is good for peoples' self-esteem and their self-confidence. It is also good for our labor market. We have full employment and in many sectors there is a lack of labor. So a high labor market participation for people with disabilities is a win-win.

Even though Denmark is doing well when it comes to inclusiveness there is no room for complacency. Denmark is still striving to increase the labor market participation even more. And people with disabilities are still facing challenges in their daily life. That applies in particular to persons with major mental handicaps. In August this year Denmark will be examined by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Geneva, which monitors implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on that occasion there will be focus on where we can improve even further. But by and large there is a consensus Denmark has been doing quite well when it comes to conditions for and the inclusiveness of Danish society for persons with disabilities.

**How have we achieved this? What are the steps that Denmark has taken?**

The most important factor was to give persons with disabilities **the right to an independent life**. That means living in their own residence instead of living in a care home. This development started

many years ago in the seventies and a major reform in the nineties strengthened this fundamental principle even further. A citizen with a disability is a fellow citizen – not a patient. He or she might need special assistance to live a normal life and this is what Denmark offers to make that possible.

For many years we have had system where local communities are required by law to provide support persons to people with physical or mental impairments so they can achieve their full potential. Local communities are also offering technical assistive devices that can facilitate daily life in the home significantly or is necessary to enable the person to pursue an occupation. This can be walking aids, wheelchairs, special beds or special adaptations of bathrooms. It can also be wigs in case of permanent hair loss, ostomy aids, hearing aids or vision aids. The income of the person with disability has no bearing on whether you can obtain support. It is simply a right that you have as a citizen. People with disabilities can also receive support for assistive devices for their workplace, for instance an access ramp or an ergonomic chair.

### **But what about transportation and commuting to your workplace?**

If a person's mobility is severely restricted citizens are entitled to a subsidy for a car and if necessary special adaptations of the vehicle. In general, public transportation is well adapted to people with disabilities. The Copenhagen metro is a good example of barrier-free access and all public buildings are required to have easy access for persons with disabilities.

**This must be hugely expensive you might think.** And yes, it comes with a price tag, but it is an integral part of our welfare system. All political parties support this principle.

The principle that you have the right to assistance to live a normal life is of course a fundamental reason why Denmark is doing quite well when it comes to inclusiveness of Danish society for persons with disabilities.

But is not the only reason. **Important developments in our labor market policies have also been important in strengthening inclusiveness.**

Unlike many other countries Denmark does not use employment quotas, tax relief or reduced social security contributions to further the inclusiveness of the labor market. Instead we use permanent wage subsidies to stimulate the employment of people with disabilities.

The most important tool is the so-called call **flex job scheme**. It is basically a **wage subsidy** that compensates employer for possible costs and less productivity when employing people with disabilities. It was part of a major reform of the disability pension scheme back in 1998. The basic idea was to limit the granting of disability pensions and create flexible types of jobs instead for those who are able to work. Flex jobs are jobs that are created for a private company or a public entity of any kind to employ persons with disability. The public sector pays the wage subsidy to the company, and the company pays a wage to the employee equal to the value of the work done.

The flex job scheme has been highly successful in creating flexible and profitable jobs for people with disabilities. The scheme now covers a total of over 112 000 persons. People in flex jobs occupy around 3 percent (full-time equivalent) of the labor market.

People in a flex job don't need to work full time. It can be five hours, ten hours or twenty hours per week. It all depends on the person in question and the preference of the employer. And it is a win-win for both the employee and the employer and it is also good for the state budget. Because people in employment pay taxes and contribute to the economy.

Thus giving persons with disabilities the right to get the help they need to live a normal life and creating incentives for employers to hire them have been important and very effective tools in the toolbox.

**But there is a third factor that is perhaps the most important one: The empowerment of people with disabilities.**

People with disabilities have established an umbrella organization, Disabled People's Organizations Denmark, consisting of 36 member organizations. They represent people with all types of disabilities, visible and non-visible, from brain damage and arthritis to developmental disabilities and mental illness. They have a total of around 400.000 members. That is quite high in country of almost 6 million inhabitants. They work closely with Danish ministries and politicians, decision-makers, the private sectors and other stakeholders. Furthermore, they promote the knowledge of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Thus, people with disabilities in Denmark are well organized, they have a political voice, they are active voters and politicians listen to them very carefully. They are simply a formidable political force.

The same applies to elderly people in Denmark. They are also well organized. Their organization has about 1 million members and they are also a strong political force. A lot of the progress that has been achieved for elderly people in Denmark has happened thanks to the efforts of the national organization of elderly people. That includes inter alia a more flexible labor market, where elderly people can stay in the workforce longer and have flexible working hours. This has been very successful and again a win-win for both employers and employees and ultimately for the state as elderly people pays taxes like everybody else.

**But to what extent is the Danish experience relevant for Ukraine?**

First and foremost, it is up to Ukrainians to decide how they will create a barrier-free and more inclusive society and as this conference today clearly demonstrates, there is a strong commitment to do so.

However, based on the Danish experience I would point to **empowerment of people with disabilities and elderly people as one of the most important things Ukraine can strive for.** Ukraine already has a strong and vibrant civil society that has been a driving force in Ukraine's dynamic transformation since the Revolution of Dignity. And unfortunately the number of people with disabilities will increase as many veterans will return from the battlefield with both physical and mental traumas. So there is a strong need that people with disabilities have a strong political voice if you want to create a barrier free society.

Denmark is ready to assist in this. Disabled People's Organizations Denmark is already active in Ukraine. They are working closely with Ukrainian counterparts not least on advocacy in order for Ukraine to meet the EU-accession requirements relating to people with disabilities. They are also working closely with local counterparts in our partner city Mykolaiv.

Thus Danish-Ukrainian cooperation on inclusiveness is well on track already. I hope this conference can stimulate it even further. Thank you for your attention and I wish you a productive conference.