

# SPECIAL OLYMPICS 2014

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## Contents

European 'Special Olympics' kick off in Belgium.....p.1  
 Special Olympics torch stops in Brussels EU's district .....p.2  
 Athletes unite for European Special Olympics opening.....p.2

Commissioner Vassiliou: Sport is a crucial means of encouraging social inclusion ..p.3  
 Including people with intellectual disabilities in the workplace.....p.4  
 How sport can end discrimination against Europeans with intellectual disabilities ...p.5

## European 'Special Olympics' kick off in Belgium

Athletes with intellectual disabilities will be able to compete in different sports for the next ten days, at the Special Olympics European summer games in Belgium.

The event will host two thousands athletes from Europe and Eurasia between 2 and 20 September in Antwerp.

The games use sports to help those with intellectual disabilities better integrate in society, and give them the opportunity to interact with others.

Athletes with intellectual disabilities will compete in ten sports, including football, judo, or swimming. But basketball and table tennis teams will be consist of persons with and without intellectual disabilities.

The arrival of the Olympic flame from Olympia, Greece, kicks off the event on Tuesday (9 September). The torch will be carried through Belgium for four days until it arrives at the opening ceremony on Saturday (13 September) in Antwerp.

The Special Olympics event is officially recognised by the International Olympic Committee. It has been dubbed the "games of the heart" because it is meant to be more than just a sports event.



Swimming Day 2 of the Special Olympics Asia Pacific Games. The Forum, Newcastle University, Callaghan. [Stephen Tylek / Newcastle Sundance]

Apart from sport, the contestants will take part in a number of other activities. The host town program allows the athletes to spend a few days in a local Belgian town and meet other contestants and their community.

A Special Olympics art exhibition will help showcase the work of artists with intellectual disabilities during the games. The artwork is then sold to raise money.

Participants will also receive a free health screening before the games.

The European Special Olympics games

are organised every four years, with the help of the European Commission.

"Sport is a crucial means of encouraging social inclusion; it can help people to develop social skills, friendships and to feel valued," said Androulla Vassiliou, European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth.

The EU has been a supporter of the event for over a decade. At the last Special Olympics in Greece in 2011, the Commission provided the European Special Olympics with €10 million in financing.



VIDEO: EU funds Special Olympics with €1.7 million

## Special Olympics torch stops in Brussels EU's district

The Olympic flame arrived for the first time in Belgium as part of the Special Olympics European summer games on Tuesday (9 September), turning attention to an event few people in the EU sphere had heard of until now.



*Julie Bourgeois, Special Olympics Athlete from Belgium. [etasinge]*



The torch carried by intellectually disabled athletes stopped in front of the European Parliament, where EU Council President Herman Van Rompuy and a dozens of parliamentarians met the participants.

The EU's €1.7 million contribution to the event came under question because of cuts in the EU budget due to the crisis.

But Katherleen Van Brempt, a Belgian member of the European Parliament, campaigned against the reduction of the budget and managed to maintain it intact.

"This is an event that for many is nice to have instead of must have," she said before the torch arrived.

Van Brempt also said that while there is a big awareness campaign with many celebrities promoting the event, it is not enough to achieve social inclusion for people

with intellectual disabilities.

Jens Nilsson, another member of the European Parliament present at the arrival of the torch, said it is a matter of showing solidarity for such causes. Nilsson, a former mayor in Sweden, tried to bring the Olympics to his town many times.

He said politicians should do their job at local and European levels, in order "to support activities where people come and work together for social inclusion".

While financing social inclusion activities could prove challenging, the Italian MEP, Brando Benifei said "we can find the money". Benifei referred to the new Commission President-elect promise to find €300 billion from public and private investments to restart growth and rebuild the communities.

## Athletes unite for European Special Olympics opening

More than ten thousand people gathered at the Special Olympics' opening ceremony to watch athletes with intellectual disabilities launch the games, in Heizel, on 13 September.



Two thousand contestants representing 58 countries are competing in ten different sports this week. Mark Vanlombeek, the spokesperson for the European Special Olympics said the number of people present was "a terrific boost for our athletes as they begin competition".

The event aims at giving the opportunity to people with intellectual disabilities to train, participate and meet other contestants through sports. It is also a way to raise awareness and change discriminatory attitudes in the society towards people with intellectual disabilities.

Anne-Marie Reid, a Special Olympics

Continued on Page 3



Continued from Page 2

athlete from the UK who is competing in swimming, said that the international character of the event makes other people aware “that even if we have a disability, others shouldn’t see us different”.

“We are no different,” Reid continued. “We should be able to do what they all do just with what we have.”

Iulia Frunză, a tennis table player from the Republic of Moldova said she doesn’t feel different compared to the others.

“I only feel different because while having a disability, I still manage to integrate very quickly in a new group,” Frunză said. “The disability made me more active and turned me into an extrovert.”

Both, Reid and Frunză trained for over a year in order to prepare for the competition. Asked how they feel when they play their chosen sports, Frunză replied she feels strong. Reid said even if she has a disability, she feels accomplished because she has achieved in sports more than she ever thought.

Apart from the athletes and their



families, almost four thousand volunteers joined the special Olympics to offer support in organising the event. Annick Van Alsenoy from Belgium said it was an honour for her to help the athletes.

Van Alsenoy was responsible to guide and transport a Serbian athlete during the opening ceremony. She said she admires the courage of the contestants because of their strength. She also convinced her children to volunteer.

The European Union funded the event with €1.7 million, becoming one of the

biggest contributors. In an interview with EurActiv, Androulla Vassiliou, the EU Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth said that starting from 2015, the EU will have a dedicated European week of sports. It will also allocate funds for projects for people with intellectual disabilities through Erasmus+ programme.

“The event was absolutely amazing,” said Reid. “I wouldn’t change the experience of being here for anything in the world.”

## Commissioner Vassiliou: Sport is a crucial means of encouraging social inclusion

Commissioner Vassiliou said the lack of exercise is a problem affecting all social groups that is why the Commission will have a dedicated budget for sports activities as part of the new Erasmus+ programme. The European Commission is also

a partner in the special Olympics European summer games 2014 that are taking place in Belgium from 2-20 September.



Androulla Vassiliou, Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth [European Commission.]

*Androulla Vassiliou is the EU Commissioner for education, culture, multilingualism and youth. EurActiv interviewed the Commissioner in writing.*

**The European Commission is a partner of the Special Olympics, and has been one for more than a decade. What is the role of the EU in the event? And how does it contribute?**

Indeed, the European Commission has awarded grants for the organisation of the Special Olympics for several years and we are pleased to have played our part in the success of the Games. The aims of the Special Olympics correspond to objectives in the Commission’s Communication on Sport (2011) and the EU Work Plan for Sport (2014-2017), especially regarding sport as a tool for social inclusion and equal opportunities.

**The EU and its member countries have signed the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, which includes the obligation to take appropriate**

Continued on Page 4

Continued from Page 3



**measures to make social inclusion in and through sports effective. What measures has the EU and its Member States taken so far? How relevant are those for people with intellectual disability?**

The European Commission has always taken account of people with disabilities when adopting new policies and programmes. Together with the Member States, we promote the participation of people with disabilities in European sporting events as well as the organisation of disability-specific events,

in particular by supporting transnational projects and networks. Since 2009, this financial support has been channelled via the so-called Sport Preparatory Actions, paving the way for a dedicated EU sport budget as part of the new Erasmus+ programme, which will increase the funding available for transnational initiatives that support social inclusion through sport. We want to build on the success of projects like 'Youth Unified Sports' which received backing from the Preparatory Actions. The main aim of Youth Unified Sports® was to bring together young people aged 12-25, with and without intellectual disabilities, as teammates. Nearly 3000 youngsters from 10 countries were involved.

**How do such events shape the EU sports and inclusion policy on people with intellectual disability? And how does sport benefit the mentally disabled?**

Such events should above all raise public awareness about the situation of people with a disability in our communities and improve integration. Sport is a crucial means of encouraging social inclusion; it

can help people to develop developing social skills, friendships and to feel valued.

**According to Eurostat, almost half of the EU population on average does not exercise. How is the EC addressing the challenge of motivating and promoting sports activities for the mentally disabled?**

Lack of exercise is a global problem and challenge for all social groups, in all parts of society. The Commission is promoting sport and physical activity by supporting various cross-border projects. One of the priorities of 'Erasmus+: Sport' over the next seven years is defined as 'awareness of the importance of health-enhancing physical activity'. In 2014, 50% of the planned budget for sport is dedicated to projects addressing objectives for which EU guidelines already exist and have to be implemented, namely Physical Activity and Dual Careers of Athletes (ensuring sportspeople do not neglect their studies or training to prepare for life after their sport career ends). This financing can also be directed to projects concerning people with intellectual disabilities.

**The EU adopted a pact for mental health and well-being in 2008. How is sport contributing to the implementation of the mental health agenda? What have been the main achievements so far and what are the remaining big challenges?**

At the time when the pact was being prepared the EU did not have competences in the area of sport. It is only since December 2009, when the Treaty of Lisbon

entered into force, that the EU has had limited powers in the sport context. (Article 165 of the Treaty gave the EU the possibility to carry out actions to support, coordinate or supplement the actions of the Member States). However, actions foreseen by the pact include the promotion of participation of young people in sport. De facto, this will be implemented through incentive measures like the Erasmus+ programme.

**How the EC is raising awareness of its sports programmes for people with intellectual disability and what are the future plans in this area?**

The Commission is promoting funding opportunities for sport through various conferences and meetings with stakeholders. We have worked with the Special Olympics for more than 10 years. Once a year the Commission organises the EU Sport Forum where all the latest developments and possibilities are presented. This year this event will take place in Milan on 1 and 2 December.

In the future, we will continue to raise awareness or finance sport projects for people with intellectual disabilities, notably through Erasmus+

Starting in 2015, a European Week of Sport will be organised each year, allowing us to support Member States' efforts to promote sport and physical activity.

I would also mention that 2014 is the first year for implementation a Council recommendation aiming at promoting health enhancing physical activity (HEPA). People with disabilities should of course be fully involved in this initiative.



# Including people with intellectual disabilities in the workplace

About 300 scholars, athletes and policymakers gathered on Monday (15 September) at the Special Olympics scientific symposium to discuss new and better ways to include people with intellectual disabilities in the labour market.

As experts at the event in Antwerp, Belgium, discussed innovative ways to better integrate workers with disabilities, some stressed the need to view them as assets rather than liabilities.

## Innovative social inclusion

In a study conducted by Bart Cambré, research director at the Antwerp management school, and two Special Olympics athletes, Evy Ploegaerts and Andre Schepers, the “job design” is the best way organisations can improve inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities.

This means that once the company assesses the basic skills of the employee, the final job description is adapted to the employee’s skills and expectations.

“Employees are not viewed as ‘persons with a disability’ or as part of a group of people that are different,” said Cambré.

“On the contrary, the focus lies on what the employee can do, with his/her talents,” he added in the study.

According to Cambré, companies should treat people with disabilities equally, as “they are not ‘special’ or ‘different’ but ‘specialists’ in a job”.

For instance, many intellectual disabled employees enjoy doing manual repetitive



*The Special Olympics was also an opportunity to discuss issues such as workplace inclusion for those with disabilities. [Special Olympics Belgium/Facebook]*

tasks in a job, something other employees avoid doing. This brings benefits to the company and to the disabled employees.

The research was based on eight organisations that employ people with intellectual disabilities.

The symposium was called “In search of innovative collaboration for better integration” and organised by the management school of university of Antwerp and of Liege together with the special Olympics team. At it, a number of other scholars and policymakers made the case for a more inclusive Europe.

## EU policy perspective

László Andor, EU commissioner for employment, social affairs and inclusion, said that disabilities affect the education and the labour status of a person. They also increase the risk of poverty and social exclusion.

“The employment rate of disabled

people is around 70% of those who do not have limitation in work,” Andor said.

The EU offers tools such as the European social fund and “Progress Programme” to support projects and companies that help make a difference to people with disabilities by either employing or training them.

Commissioner Andor said that in the past four years the EU allocated about €20 million to 45 projects to research innovative methods of inclusion for disadvantaged groups, including for people with disabilities.

The scientific symposium is one of the many programmes the Special Olympics organised during the games. Other initiatives include an art exhibit where athletes with disabilities exhibit and sell their art work or the health screening initiative where the contestants get a full medical check-up for free.

The host town programme is another opportunity for the athletes to meet and interact with locals from a Belgian town.



*VIDEO:  
Tim Shriver:  
Intellectually  
disabled  
people  
still face  
mocking,  
humiliation*

**Tim Shriver**  
Chairman, Special Olympics

13 September 2014  
Brussels, Belgium

EurActiv



# How sport can end discrimination against Europeans with intellectual disabilities

Special Olympics is not just about sport, but also about overturning stigma and prejudice, says Mary Davis.



*Mary Davis is regional president and managing director of the Special Olympics Europe Eurasia.*

The thrill and excitement of sport is unique and it should be available to everyone. Serving almost 600,000 athletes in the Europe Eurasia region and 4.3 million globally, in Special Olympics we promote sport as a vehicle for ending discrimination and the stigmatization of people with intellectual disabilities – of which there are more than 200 million people in the world. A majority face a life of prejudice and discrimination, loneliness and limitation. Our number one challenge in Special Olympics as a global Movement is to end that.

In Europe and the rest of the world, people with intellectual disabilities are still largely excluded from mainstream discussions about sport and the broad scale

political and social discussions around health. Even in the wake of the Olympics and the Paralympics, where there is increased attention on the day-to-day importance of sport as a way of life, we still feel there is a challenge for athletes with learning difficulties to be included. You can go to sports clubs around the world and find programmes for children, adults and women - but not for people with intellectual disabilities, still to this day.

The Special Olympics European Games 2014 are taking place in Antwerp until September 20th involving 2,000 athletes and 1,000 coaches from 58 countries across Europe Eurasia. Using the slogan 'A great performance deserves a great audience' the Games will showcase the abilities and talents of Special Olympics athletes. We want people to become fans of Special Olympics athletes and support their sporting achievements by attending the Games to see first-hand what Special Olympics athletes can achieve on and off the sports field.

The way in which we create the sporting activities is one whole strand; the way in which we communicate and engage the public and the community in owning that relationship and owning that idea, leads us into the world of social, community and political change. People say sport is good for health; for confidence; for teamwork – this is all true. But we have a slightly sharper edge.

We are confronting a massive social problem. It's not just about teamwork and confidence. That's nice and it's good. But this is about the world's oldest prejudice - against people who have a greater challenge learning and participating. For our mission to succeed in Europe we need to reach out to people with intellectual disabilities and their families and welcome them onto the field of sport but secondly, we must be able to communicate the message of their abilities as a way of overturning stigma and prejudice.

Through sport, our athletes experience equality, freedom and a dignifying means for empowerment. We receive vital support from the European Union to help us fulfil

our mission so we are very much looking forward to being significantly involved and supporting the Commission's EU wide European Week of Sport in September 2015.

We commend the Commission on this initiative particularly on the idea of focusing on a different theme daily. This allows for depth and focused discussions. The proposed theme of 'Sport and Inclusion' will be very much the focus for us in Special Olympics and we look forward to supporting it significantly. We also welcome the energetic focus of the Italian Presidency towards sport and its attention to dealing with discrimination in sport.

Special Olympics inspires people in Europe and across the world to think beyond the normal bounds of possibility. With each athlete's experience, there comes a lasting legacy of attitudes changed and an ability to welcome and accept that which is different. The power of sport is the vehicle that changes the lives of our athletes over and over again.

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