



## SDM meets Helga Stevens and Adam Kosa

**Year 2014, a historic moment took place. Two deaf were elected into the European Parliament. The Hungarian Adam Kosa, formerly in the Chamber, was now joined by the Belgian Helga Stevens. The Swedish Deaf Magazine (SDM) caught them in Brussels and had a talk about how they enjoy the political buzz.**

*Tuesday morning.* We sit in Helga Stevens' meeting room. It is hard to miss that the room belongs to a deaf parliamentarian. On a wall there is a poster about a historic resolution about strengthening the sign languages in the EU, and on another wall a newspaper cutting about her and Adam Kosa's seats in the parliament.

Last time SDM interviewed Adam Kosa at the European Parliament was in 2011. Back then, he said that it was lonely to be the only deaf member. His first term of office was 2009-2014. Now he is doing his second run, 2014-2019. He says the work feels easier now that two deaf politicians work in the parliament. To the question in which way it is easier, he answers that it is simple math. Two are more than one. Therefore, they can better represent the deaf community as they strive for the same goals.

Helga Stevens is not a beginner in political contexts. She had previously served in the Flemish Parliament and the Belgian Senate. What surprised her most was that in the EU Parliament she has a greater influence and more opportunities to come up with initiatives than with the Flemish counterpart.

– In the EU Parliament there is no real opposition but rather we have dialogues and compromise with other politicians, she says, further explaining that in Flanders, it is government versus

opposition. She represents the New Flemish Alliance party. The party works for a gradual development towards increased independence for Dutch-speaking Flanders in northern Belgium. The southern part of the country is French-speaking Wallonia.

The party, founded in 2001, cannot easily be put into an ideological compartment. SDM contacts Peter Bursens, professor of Political Science at the University of Antwerp. He explains that the party is economically neoliberal, socially deeply conservative and nationalist. The party also has representatives who sometimes express themselves in populist terms, especially regarding refugees, migration, security and the EU.

Adam Kosa represents Fidesz, the ruling party in Hungary. The party is national conservative and Christian democratic.

In the last EU election, there were five deaf candidates of various political denominations. Only two managed to be elected.

**What do you think about the fact that the EU Parliament has two deaf members whom both are mid-right?**

– For a long time, disability politics was considered a left-wing issue. We wanted to show that we could handle it too, says Adam Kosa. Helga Stevens adds:

– For example, if we look at Great Britain and USA, we can see that they were the conservatives who made the DDA (British) and ADA (USA) anti-discrimination laws go through. Those on the left side talk, we on the right-side act, she says.

– But we would be delighted if it comes more deaf politicians here, Adam Kosa says.

Examples of political accomplishments that they have been contributing to are the 2016 resolution on the strengthening of the

sign languages in the EU, initiated by Helga Stevens, and the 2010 Brussels Declaration that implement the legislation of the sign languages in the Union, a collaboration between Adam Kosa and the European Union of the Deaf.

A total of 661 of 751 members of the European Parliament voted in November 2016 to adopt the historic resolution. The event is shown on the poster in Helga Stevens' meeting room.

**Sometimes Adam Kosa** and Helga Stevens work together, mainly with issues related to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, accessibility and the status of sign language, and more. It happens that in the parliament, Helga Stevens is a rapporteur and Adam Kosa a shadow rapporteur or vice versa.

As deaf politician, Helga Stevens tells us that one of the challenges is to get an interpreter when needed. The interpretation budget allocated to her is limited.

Adam Kosa does not have the same problem. The reason why Helga Stevens has problem is that she is registered in Belgium, where much of the EU work takes place in Brussels.

Otherwise, both experience that the fight for increased accessibility is a constant challenge. Adam Kosa says it is frustrating that many politicians have the attitude that disability policy is a social issue and should therefore be discussed in the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, where he is a commissioner and Helga Stevens an alternate.

– Disability issues should be discussed in other committees as well. It is a matter that spans all different areas.

Overall, both see that accessibility is not quite adequate in the Union. Helga Stevens brings up the transportation and the exchange program Erasmus+ for students as examples. Thus, people with disabilities do not have the same free movement as others.

One example is that for deaf students on bachelor's and master's levels there is no given right to get sign language interpreters while studying with Erasmus+. Access to the interpreting service varies widely in Europe.

One of the topics that Adam Kosa holds dear is the European Accessibility Act. In December last year, the social ministers of the Council of Europe took a common position to the proposal for an accessibility act. This means that the trilogy – negotiations between the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union on how the final text will look – can start.

The Act will affect 80 million people with disabilities in the EU and is about how products and services can become more accessible. Today, there is no accessibility laws on EU level. So, it will be of great importance. However, the European Disability Forum has concerns that the act risks becoming not strong enough.

Two of the proposals are about when granting grants from the EU Structural Fund, it should not be with the condition that accessibility, where the grant will be used, should be raised, and that small business owners with fewer than ten employees are exempted from the accessibility requirements.

One of Helga Stevens' core topics is also accessibility. But there

is another that engages her too: anti-terrorism. She is the vice-chairman of the Special Committee on Terrorism. Together with chairman Monika Hohlmeier from Germany, she will formulate a report on how security can be increased for all EU citizens, how radicalization can be prevented and how terrorism can be stopped.

– We will not only look at Islamic terrorism but also, for example, on extreme right-wing terrorism. It is a huge task for both of us, she says.

SDM runs into Soraya Post (FI, a radical feminist political party in Sweden) in a corridor in Brussels and asks about the two deaf members. Of these two, she says she has had more contact with Adam Kosa. For example, they both joined a EU delegation visiting the Philippines last summer. The purpose of the trip was to find out about the country's work on human rights. President Rodrigo Duterte is known for running a bloody war against drug trafficking with many being killed and imprisoned.

Soraya Post says that while it is amazing with a deaf politician like Adam Kosa, she does not have much in common with him and the politics of his party. Hungary is known for its tough and internationally criticized refugee policy.

– But I do respect him as a parliamentarian. He seems to be good at balancing between heart and brain, she says smiling and hurrying off to another mission.

Lolo Danielsson from Sweden is one of the board members of the European Union of the Deaf (EUD). She says:

**What does it mean to us deaf in Europe that we have two deaf EU parliamentarians?**

– A lot. Adam and Helga's efforts have made all parliamentarians in the European Parliament aware of the deaf's right to use sign language and get access to sign language interpreters and information in their respective languages. The EUD has also become more visible in the political arena on all levels in Europe.

Back to the meeting with Adam Kosa and Helga Stevens where we now round off the conversation.

**Do you want to be re-elected for the next term of office, 2019-2024, if you get the confidence of your parties?**

– Yes, I do not feel finished with my work on accessibility laws. I would like to continue with that, and there are always other challenges that attract me, says Adam Kosa.

Helga Stevens also wants to be re-elected.

– The EU's impact on the daily lives of EU citizens is large, and I want to ensure that this impact is positive and beneficial to all EU citizens.

Both enjoy the political buzz, they say, even though they come from different parties and do not sit in the same parliamentary group in the European Parliament.

– We both think that our national identity and our own languages still do matter. These different national identities and languages are what make Europe so special - something to be proud of. And as deaf members of the European Parliament, we stand up for and defend the right of deaf people to use and communicate in sign language. Deaf culture is important to us, and needs to be preserved and promoted, says Helga Stevens and Adam Kosa agrees.