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Belgium's De Sutter breaks new ground for transgender politicians

POLITICO takes a look at those who paved the way before Petra De Sutter, who is now Europe's highest-ranking transgender politician.

By Laurenz Gehrke

POLITICO (01.10.2020) – <https://politi.co/30JkmDM> – Petra De Sutter made history Thursday with her appointment as Belgium's new deputy prime minister, making her the highest-ranking

transgender politician in Europe.

De Sutter has previously broken new ground for the EU's transgender community, becoming the first Belgian transgender woman on a parliamentary list of a political party when she ran in the 2014 European Parliament election, though unsuccessfully. She later also became the first openly transgender Belgian MP that same year and ultimately won a seat as an MEP last year.

Katrin Hugendubel, the advocacy director of LGBTQ rights group ILGA-Europe, praised De Sutter's new role as "great news," adding: "We'll miss one of our strongest partners in the European Parliament, but are heartened to know such a committed equality and social justice champion will have a key role in the Belgium government."

De Sutter – who is also known for her work as a gynecologist and fertility expert, and has advocated for legislation to improve access to medically-assisted reproduction – has previously stressed that being transgender is only part of who she is.

"I don't want to be reduced to my transgender past, it's [only] one part of my identity," she said last year in while campaigning in the European election. "I have many others. I want people to talk about me because of my work, because of my political actions."

A look at the history of openly transgender politicians shows

it's a relatively short list of people who came before De Sutter in Europe, as well as worldwide.

The 2017 book "A Path to Diversity: LGBTQ Participation in the Working World" identifies Germany's Christian Schenk as Europe's first transgender member of parliament, though he was not publicly out as transgender when he joined the Bundestag in 1990, and did not make the official legal transition until 2006, after he had left parliament.

Schenk, who served as an MP between 1990 and 2002, said in several interviews after publicly coming out that – having fought for women's rights while he was still a woman – he would continue to do so as a man. "Testosterone changes the hormone balance and not the brain content," he said.

The first openly transgender MP in Europe was Italy's Vladimir Luxuria, who was elected to the Chamber of Deputies in 2006.

While campaigning, Luxuria complained that Italy was "one of the very few nations in the European Union that did not recognize civil unions," vowing to advocate for gay rights. The country didn't start recognizing same-sex civil unions until a decade later.

When Luxuria left the Chamber of Deputies in 2008, there were no trans parliamentarians in Europe on the national level, until Anna Grodzka joined Poland's parliament in 2011. She remained a member until 2015, a year after De Sutter joined the Belgian senate.

“Today, Poland is changing. I am the proof along with Robert Biedroń, a homosexual and the head of an anti-homophobia campaign who ran for office in Gdynia,” Grodzka said at the time, adding that she would be the only trans member of a parliament in the world – at least for the time being. The world’s first openly transgender MP, New Zealand’s Georgina Beyer, had left her seat in 2007 after entering office in 2005.

Despite Grodzka’s conviction that her election marked the beginning of change for Poland, members of the LGBTQ community have faced increased discrimination there since – in particular in the run-up to the country’s presidential election earlier this year.

The European Parliament’s first openly transgender member was Nikki Sinclair, who served as an MEP for the UK Independence Party and later as an independent from 2009 to 2014, and came out as transgender in 2013.

Hugendubel from ILGA-Europe said De Sutter’s new role is especially significant at a time when “trans rights are being viciously attacked in Europe and the authenticity of gender identity is being called into question.”

“[It] means a lot for the LGBTI community to see a woman like her appointed to one of the highest roles in a European government.”

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