

# **EBU in Action Episode 12: the European Accessibility Act- a new legal state of play**

## **Intro**

[Music]

(Neven): Welcome back to another episode of “EBU in Action”, the podcast of the European Blind Union. This is where we bring you the latest updates on the rights of blind and partially sighted people across Europe.

I'm Neven Milivojevic, and I am joined once again by my wonderful co-host and friend, Paweł Masarczyk. Hello, Paweł, how are you?

(Paweł): Hello, Neven. Hello, dear listeners. I'm fine, thanks. It's been a restful summer, calm one, but it's been okay. What about you?

(Neven): Yes, I had a great summer too, and now, you know, things are starting to be very active on all fronts. So, this is why it's really great to be back in the podcast world and also to connect with everybody within the EBU.

(Paweł): Exactly. And I think the work never stops there. I have a feeling like those EBU people, they never stop advocating for blind and partially sighted people in Europe, even when everyone else is taking holidays.

(Neven): I think you're perfectly right. Well, I hope that you have recharged your batteries over the summer, and I even think that even though all of us have been on holidays, there have been lots of things happening.

One thing which really hit us during the summer was the European Accessibility Act's implementation deadline in June, and we also have had a co-hosted EBU event about accessible banking and financial services. And this was together with the AccessibleEU consortium.

So, I think we have a lot of things to talk about today.

(Paweł): I agree. And I'm so happy that so much has been happening in terms of digital accessibility, which is my kind of subject, definitely. And since we talk about the EAA, it's been so big that we've decided to make it the main topic of this episode.

So, in the focus section, we will talk to several guests to see how the preparations for it looked like and how the implementation in the first months looks from the side of people who campaign for it, people who evaluate and volunteer their expertise.

So, we will talk to Daniel Casas, the Accessibility Policy Officer at the European Disability Forum, and we will also talk to Susanna Laurin, the representative to the EU of the International Association of Accessibility Professionals and also Svajūnė Sirvydytė, Advisor at the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of Lithuania.

So, three wonderful guests to tell us all about the EAA.

(Neven): What a fantastic panel. I'm sure we will learn so much from these people and I am really looking forward to it.

And well, speaking about Lithuania, we will also be able to talk to Vilmantas Balčikonis, who is the Vice-President of the Lithuanian Association of the Blind and Visually Impaired. And to him, we will talk in our correspondent' section because after so many focus episodes, we haven't really had the correspondent' section, but now we are back to listen more to what's happening within our Members.

(Paweł): So am I, it'll be so fantastic to find out what has been happening in Lithuania. So, without further ado, shall we give it away, Neven?

(Neven): Absolutely, let's start.

## **News from EBU**

[Music]

(Neven): So first, we will welcome our colleague and friend Nacho Lopez from the EBU Office because he will be together with us talking about what's new at EBU.

So, I first say "Hello" to you, Nacho. How are you?

(Nacho): Hola, Neven, how are you? Yes, I'm doing fine. The summer has been great for me. I hope it's been great for you as well as I have been able to listen to in the introduction of the podcast.

Just to start the show on a funny note, if you find my voice to be very low, I'm sorry, but you'll have to know that I attended a football game recently and I really shouted a lot.

I was enjoying the game a lot, but, well, you see that I still have some voice strength left in me to go on with this podcast, I hope that I will be able to carry on.

(Neven): Don't worry, don't worry about it. You can really carry on and we can hear you perfectly well. I hope that the right team won anyway.

(Nacho): Well, it was a France versus Iceland game. It was a very close game actually. You know that EBU is based in Paris, in France. Well, after three years living here, I've already learned the French language, and I started going to football games of the France National Team.

Well, my voice is the result of all the support.

(Neven): Well, that's great integration, so wonderful to have you with us anyway, so let's go into what's going on at the EBU. Tell us a little about what happened.

You know, 28th June we had a deadline for the implementation of the European Accessibility Act, and that's one of the themes for this episode. So tell us a little about what news you've got there for us, Nacho.

(Nacho): Indeed, dear Neven. As you said a few moments ago, 28<sup>th</sup> June marked the deadline for the implementation of the European Accessibility Act. The Directive, which came into force in 2019, establishes a set of accessibility standards for the products and services covered by the scope of it.

During a focus hybrid event organised by the AccessibleEU Consortium in Brussels on July 3<sup>rd</sup>, Ana Carla Pereira, Director for Equality and Non-Discrimination at the European Commission underscored the importance of commitment of EU governments and private companies to make the EAA a reality.

Many representatives of disability organisations in the Union expressed their satisfaction with the requirements set by the European Accessibility Act, but flagged that it still has room for improvement.

As EBU has already underlined in the past, Ioannis Vardakastanis, President of the European Disability Forum, pinpointed the Directive's lack of coverage in domains such as household appliances. In this sense, disability advocates at the conference highlighted people with disabilities role in ensuring the EAA's nuancing and effective implementation.

(Neven): Very interesting. It's a very exciting development and process going on here. But I also know, for instance, that you had an event, the EBU had an event together with the AccessibleEU Consortium about accessible banking and financial services. Could you tell us something about that?

(Nacho): Indeed, dear Neven. Alongside the AccessibleEU Consortium and the European Banking Federation (EBF), EBU co-organised a hybrid event about accessible banking and financial services on July 1st in Brussels at EBF's headquarters.

The conference served as an excellent discussion point to underline the need to make products and services in this domain more accessible, especially in a moment where digitalisation is increasingly present and to respect persons with disabilities choice of format when using those.

Maria Luís Albuquerque, Commissioner for Financial Services and the Savings and Investments Union, stressed the importance of increasing banking literacy among Europeans, thus enabling all citizens to operate more autonomously in this domain.

EBU's Executive Director, Lars Bosselmann, as well as Board Members Jacob Rosin and Andreas Hasverg, contributed to the discussions underscoring our organisation's advocacy work to help make payment terminals more accessible for blind and partially sighted people, and the need to find harmonised solutions and promote user-testing protocols to bear our community's needs in mind.

(Neven): Oh, that's really great and very important. And, of course, I know that EBU had a very long-time collaboration also with the ECB to make accessible banknotes and coins. How is that going?

(Nacho): Yes, this is something that has been done for a long time. And as you said, this collaboration has been done under the context of including accessibility features on the coins and banknotes.

On a regular basis, the European Central Bank consults EBU in the development of more accessibility features in coins and banknotes. And they've been quite in touch with us during the development of the second series of Euro banknotes.

This is something that has been done on an ongoing basis during the last two years. We've welcomed them to our office. In fact, we did some tests with representatives of our National Members during our 12th General Assembly that took place last year in Lisbon, Portugal. And yes, since then, we've been currently in touch with them on a regular basis so we can keep this collaboration going on.

(Neven): Great, that's really great. Well, I'm thinking, talking about news, we really can't miss out on some very global news because very recently, the WBU, the World Blind Union's General Assembly took place in Brazil and, I don't know, do you have any news to share with us from that which just quite recently ended?

(Nacho): Yes, sure. On early September, on September 4th and 5th, the World Blind Union organised its General Assembly in Sao Paulo, Brazil. During those two days, participants reflected on WBU's work done during the 2021-2025 period.

The event also served as a forum for choosing the Members of the organisation's new governance: Santosh Kumar was elected as the new WBU's President, while Cristina Chamorro and Yaw Ofori-Debra came out of our umbrella organisation's GA as the new First Vice- President and Second Vice-President, respectively.

And at the same time, Moises Bauer Luiz from Brazil was chosen as WBU's new Secretary General and Alejandro Antonio Paz Ambrosio from Guatemala was chosen as WBU's new Treasurer.

On this event, we have to know that before WBU's General Assembly, the World Blindness Summit took place on September 2nd and 3rd. A big event gathering advocates in the area of visual impairment from all parts of the world. The Summit featured interesting focus discussions about

topics like access to employment, designing accessible cities, mobility, or tactile reading.

(Neven): Most interesting, thank you. I know also that every time there is a World Blind Union General Assembly, the different regional associations like EBU have a meeting of their own organised at the same time.

I don't know, did the EBU have such a meeting and what came out of that?

(Nacho): Yes, indeed. At the same time of the event, EBU hosted a regional meeting with some of our National Members to evaluate the current state of the implementation of our own Strategic Plan. And we also reviewed some of our current and upcoming advocacy priorities.

And overall, this was the whole event. Both the General Assembly of the World Blind Union and the World Blindness Summit were excellent forums for meeting our counterparts across the world. It was a very fruitful experience.

(Neven): Excellent, excellent. Well, very interesting news. Thank you so, so much, Nacho. As always, we are very happy to have you as part of our show and thank you for all the support we get from the EBU Office and your colleagues. So, we wish you all success and looking forward to talking to you later on, in the next episode.

(Nacho): Thank you very much, Neven and have a nice one.

(Neven): Bye-bye. So, Paweł, have you ever been to the WBU General Assembly?

(Paweł): No, not yet, but maybe in the future, I might be able to go there. Who knows? I haven't even been able to go to an EBU one yet, so there is a lot of catching up I have to do.

(Neven): Well, but you are doing some good preparation work with being a host of this podcast. You actually make yourself known so everybody will know you when you go to these meetings in the future.

(Paweł): That might help, yes.

## **The Focus Topic: the European Accessibility Act- a new legal state of play**

[Music]

(Neven): OK, Paweł, so then I hand over to you.

(Paweł): Thank you. So let's go straight into our focus topic, the main star of the show, which was already briefly mentioned, and it's the European Accessibility Act, an act that was brought into light in 2019, and the date for complying with it has just passed.

The deadline is beyond us. That was the 28th of June. This act aims at making a lot of offerings in key sectors of society accessible to persons with disabilities: these sectors include computers and their operating systems, smartphones and their operating systems, banking, e-commerce, and many more.

But even though this act sounds quite revolutionary and we hope to get a lot out of it, there are still a lot of questions that blind and partially sighted people ask themselves. For example, there are many important areas that still aren't covered, we still don't know how effectively it'll be enforced.

So, we'll have to see how it all develops. We have many questions and to answer some of them, we have our guests today: Daniel Casas, the Accessibility Policy Officer at the European Disability Forum; Susanna Laurin, the Representative to the EU of the International Association of Accessibility Professionals; and Svajūnė Sirvydytė, Advisor at the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of Lithuania.

Hello to you all. Hello Svajūnė.

(Svajūnė): Hello, thanks for having me.

(Paweł): Hello, Susanna.

(Susanna): Hello, thanks for having me.

(Paweł): Hello, Daniel.

(Daniel): Hello.

(Paweł): So, as I mentioned already, there are many areas that the EAA still doesn't cover. Both the EBU and other NGOs related to the field of

disability and inclusion have signaled this and we are still worried that it is not there where it's supposed to be.

Yet Daniel, what are some of the other areas and domains where the EAA fails to protect our right to digital access?

(Daniel): Thank you very much for the question and for inviting EDF to this podcast. So, as you said, the disability community first welcomed a lot the European Accessibility Act.

It was a really needed piece of legislation, but quickly said, the scope of the Act was limited and there were many important things for persons with disabilities that were not covered. So, there were still some barriers that exist in society.

Some of them that we highlighted were the built environment; this is important because even though we have some products or services that are covered by the Act, we see that the physical place where this takes place, for example, banking services are not covered and also transport. And this is key because in Europe we have legislation that aims to facilitate access to transport services by providing assistance, accessibility of information...

But we still see that one of the main gaps is the physical access to vehicles, to the transport infrastructure. This is not covered by the Act either. And then also home appliances; so all the products that we use in our daily lives, for example, at home, the washing machines, microwaves, cooktops, all those things are not accessible.

They do not have accessible requirements, so we see that barriers exist. Our work as the European Disability Forum and also your work as EBU is to continue highlighting these gaps to push for a wider scope.

The good thing that we have right now is that the European Accessibility Act has some requirements that are quite clear and that can be applied to other products and services that are not part of the scope right now.

So our work is trying to expand those to some of the areas that I mentioned.

(Paweł): Yes, especially the home appliances, I can very much relate to that. My washing machine still requires me to call somebody sighted over



the camera and try and figure out which program I'm currently on. This is still better than having a completely touchscreen-operated washing machine.

But I mean, it's still not perfect, so it would be great if there was some kind of requirement placed upon the manufacturers of these devices to make them accessible because they are so basic. And quite often, when we rent flats or we share accommodation, we often come to possess certain equipment which we cannot change.

So, it's not in our influence scope to arrange the flat the way we want it. This challenge is quite universal across countries in the EU and beyond. But there are some challenges which are unique, even blind and partially sighted people in different countries of the EU face different challenges.

I find it always so fascinating to learn what works better than what I know doesn't work so well. Where is the room for improvement? And the governments play still a key role in making sure that the EAA is implemented according to what was written in it.

So, Svajūnė, could you tell us how it looks like from the Lithuanian perspective? Was it easy to implement the EAA? What were some of the obstacles that your government has met along the way?

(Svajūnė): Well, Lithuania has already transposed the European Accessibility Act in our national law at the end of 2022, it's called "the Law of Accessibility of Products and Services". The ministry where I work, the Ministry of Social Security and Labour coordinates the implementation of the European Accessibility Act together with other institutions.

We also rely on specialised institutions. For example, the Lithuanian Bank works on accessible banking services. The audio sensory library brings expertise on accessible eBooks and the Persons with Disabilities' Rights Protection Agency leads awareness campaigns for businesses. And, of course, Market Surveillance Authorities will directly supervise compliance.

As you were asking, that accessibility doesn't evolve in the same way in each EU country, that's definitely true. Now, we have a European Accessibility Act, which is transposed international legislation through all

Europe. But it's not, each EU country has still a different level of accessibility.

So in my opinion, the biggest challenge is not the legal framework here. That part is definitely in place, but on the practical side, the guidelines for different sectors are still being developed, and many businesses are only now starting to understand what accessibility means in practice. And awareness and expertise are particularly low in areas like publishing and digital services in Lithuania.

And yes, we do have enforcement measures. The fines can range from 500 to 15,000 euros in Lithuania, but our priority as policymakers is to actually support businesses with guidance and knowledge so that accessibility becomes a norm rather than an exception.

For me, the European Accessibility Act is a huge step forward, and it may feel that the progress is happening really slowly and sometimes, at the last minute; did you know that only a few Member States transposed the European Accessibility Act on time?

But I am convinced that this act will really bring lasting and positive changes.

(Paweł): I hope so too, for Lithuanians and for everyone in the EU that this will indeed happen. But in order for that to happen, there needs to be also some kind of guidance and cooperation between the public sector bodies and the private companies who, at the end of the day, are the ones who will actually have to make the necessary changes to make their products and offerings accessible.

Susanna, how would you evaluate this kind of reaction of the private sector between 2019, when the Act was first announced and started being put into law and 2025, when the deadline loomed closer and it finally came? Was there any difference? Were the reactions negative or positive? Do you see an increased interest in accessibility services?

(Susanna): I obviously cannot speak for every private entity in the whole world because this legislation is quite ambitious at its own, not only covers companies that are in the EU, but economic operators wherever they are headquartered, if they want to sell consumer products, to sell to consumers in the EU.

So that's a lot of companies and organisations. But generally, I would say that it's interesting because I am old enough to also have been in the same situation when the Web Accessibility Directive entered into force and was applicable. And there, where the public sector was in scope, we saw nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing.

And then, when it was all of a sudden applicable, people said: "Oh my God, how did this happen?", "Why did nobody tell me?". And we had been trying to talk about that legislation for years. But in comparison, this legislation, I am very impressed and surprised, maybe, by how the commercial companies have been on their toes generally.

So, we have seen a lot of demand for accessibility expertise, demand for training. We have seen new companies popping up in many European countries with accessibility experts. For IAAP, which is a member organisation for accessibility professionals, our membership has exploded, mainly, kind of, in and across Europe.

And we really see also the companies that are in scope of the legislation that they are preparing much earlier than the public sector did. And I think that is contrary to the common belief that public sector are usually better than the commercial sector. So, I think that's very interesting, I'm quite happy.

I mean, I agree with Daniel, of course, that the scope is limited, but within this scope, I really see action. I really see activity, and I think we will see a big change. I really hope, and I'm very positive about that. And I also need to stress that there is a big difference between smaller companies and really large organisations.

Of course, a large international corporation that maybe sells also to other regions where there is already legislation on accessibility, that it is easier for them to be well-prepared. They have compliance officers and they know how to follow standards and so on. Smaller companies struggle more, of course.

I mean, that will always be the case. So, there are big differences when I say that generally they're well-prepared. You can find examples of people who still have no clue that this law exists, for sure. This will take time before everyone is, kind of, where they should have been already in June.

(Paweł): Yes, and it can be observed. There are some industries within the scope of the legislation that are very heavily mandated and very heavily regulated. And they are usually at the forefront. That's what I can observe, at least, for instance, with the banking industry.

But there is still a lot of catching up to do for others. But it's very positive to hear that a lot of companies take this Act seriously, whether it's for compliance reasons or whether they really would like to do the right thing.

But at the end of the day, we all get more accessible products that hopefully will be also designed with us in mind, with persons with disabilities, with blind and partially sighted people, with people of different disabilities in mind.

So, I believe also that we play a key role as stakeholders in shaping how this legislation will be implemented: what kind of solutions work well for us, which not really.

So, Daniel, how can EDF, the European Disability Forum, contribute to optimising these workflows of testing the solutions and optimising them for and with persons with disabilities?

(Daniel): So, as you know, the motto of the disability movement is "Nothing about us without us".

And what we mean by that is that we want to contribute and to be present on all the decisions that affect our life. And not because we just like to be on the table. It's because we really think that there's a lot that we can say in the process.

When it comes to accessibility, the adoption of legislation is really important. It sets minimum requirements, it's a starting point, but to really make sure that the legislation has an impact and, in that case, that the products and services that are covered are as accessible as possible, the cooperation with organisations of persons with disabilities, the testing with end-users is really necessary because it helps identify additional gaps that may be and barriers that exist even when you were trying to design the product or service with accessibility in mind.

It also allows you to understand what are the expectations from the disability community. It also brings you new ideas because you know that accessibility is also about innovation.

We have many innovations that started with this link, with the disability community and that mere compliance with standards and legislation would've not created that. So, we really think that this is important.

And the question is: what is EDF doing to support that? Well, the first thing at the European level, what we do is to basically be present in the conversations to provide input, to give our position, to provide recommendations, to basically tell policymakers and the industry what can be done to see where we can work together.

But this, we can only do it at the European level. So, when it comes to the National level, when companies come to us, when National Ministries come to us, what we do is the link with our members, with the disability community in each Member State to make sure that this cooperation is ongoing.

And the disability community is really diverse, so we know that in some Member States, the organisations are really well-resourced, they have really accessible experts in-house that can support in really technical discussions. But that's not the case all over Europe.

So, we also provide capacity building, we try to support our Members by helping them in those discussions, both with the industry and also with policymakers and society in general to provide them the tools to basically be present in those conversations.

And then, I would say also the legal framework and this is part of our advocacy work, when we are trying to influence legislation, we always pay attention to the closest, where there's the possibility to consult with organisations of persons with disabilities, with accessibility professionals, because we believe that this is key.

We try to have some kind of expert groups or support groups. There's one inside the European Accessibility Act that will be created basically to put on the same table all the stakeholders to see how the Accessibility Act is being implemented.

So, we try to have this framework also within the legislation because in many cases, the cooperation can be good without any type of legal obligation, and I think all the parties are open to it. But in some cases, we need to make sure that this is required and it's beneficial for everyone.

(Paweł): So, on one hand, we have the organisations of persons with disabilities. On the other hand, we also have accessibility experts in those two environments.

May and, I think, also should intersect on many levels, so it's good that there are those structures in place to support those who cannot rely on accessibility expertise within their own staff.

And I think it's also great that there is a lot of tendency to exchange good practice examples between countries, unlike the government and organisations level, companies on the private sector level, there is a lot of education effort going on to ensure that everyone is equipped with the right knowledge, but obviously there could and should still be done more. We all know that.

Susanna, since you're very much involved in underlining the importance of expertise of professionals who are experts in the field of accessibility and disability inclusion, what role, in your opinion, can the AccessibleEU Center play in ensuring that this knowledge is evenly distributed?

(Susanna): So there's a lot of things going on. I think with, especially with this new legislation, many stakeholders have activities like training and support services and research projects and all sorts of things. And I think all of this is good; and there's also quite a few online services that are for free.

What IAAP tries to do is to make sure that we support not only the kind of certified professionals, but also the larger community. So we are, for example, a member of the EDF so that we can, in order for us to support EDF and the community and also to maintain this good connection and make sure that the expertise of the end users also comes to the kind of technical expertise, and that is an interchange between the two.

I sometimes have discussions with EDF, when I call EDF or the people the “community”, the “disability community”, the “experts”. Because I think that you are the experts and they say: “No, no, no, we are not the

experts. You are the experts.” And it's kind of a play with words, but I mean, the expertise that comes from having a disability and experience inaccessibility, no one can be more an expert on that than that.

So, I think my visual impairment makes me an expert and my job makes me an expert. But those are two different things, and we really need both. And in the IAAP Membership, we have large corporations, we have public sector bodies, we have research academy, we have end- users with a disability, and civil society organisations.

So that mix, I think, is a really good way and I encourage everyone to look at our free webinars or join as a member if you have the opportunity. But because of the cooperation we have with EDF, we can also do things together and make sure that training and exchange of knowledge and experience is happening between the people who work as technical experts and the people who are the real reason we are doing this, which is the people with disabilities.

So, there are a lot of things we can do better, I'm sure. But to me, this cooperation and the kind of the link between the two, that is what I believe will change or is changing people's attitudes and the innovation that Daniel was talking about, that this can only happen if you actually work together with the users. That there's no way around that at all.

(Paweł): Very well said. I totally agree. Susanna, also as a person with a disability and accessibility professional myself, I can definitely tell that there could be more of us in the field and I really hope it'll be the case in the years to come.

So, on a related note, Svajūnė, we all know that governments of the different countries should revise their accessibility legislation regularly to identify some new obstacles and challenges that population with disabilities in this particular country comes across.

And it's best done when actually the persons who it relates to, so persons with disabilities, are involved in this process on a regular basis, and this can also be achieved if those people actually work within those public structures.

Have you got examples of persons with disabilities working in the public administration in Lithuania? And if yes, how did that influence the implementation of the European Accessibility Act?

(Svajūnė): So yes, people with disabilities do work in public bodies in Lithuania, although their numbers are still lower than we would like.

What makes real difference is people with disabilities' involvement, not only in policymaking, but also in checking how that policy works in daily life.

For example, at the Ministry of Social Security and Labour, we regularly consult persons with disabilities through various advisory councils, working groups, both at drafting legislation and then implementing it.

For example, in my daily work, when I work with the implementation of the European Accessibility Act, I cooperate very closely with the Lithuanian Union of the Blind and Visually Impaired. This cooperation is often very practical. Sometimes, it's as simple as picking up a phone, asking for a quick feedback, or just testing an idea together.

In my opinion, the truth is that the biggest barriers are really in the law itself, but in whether the product or a service is truly usable. That's why I often advise businesses to consult directly with people with disabilities. I mean, we know best where the true obstacles are and, of course, more needs to be done.

We need stronger recruitment of persons with disabilities in public bodies and, of course, as well, more adapted workplaces. But, we are coming towards a better future just with small steps.

(Paweł): And I wish you lots of luck achieving that and all the best for this month and years to come to all of you.

Thank you so much to all the guests. Thank you, Svajūnė. Thank you, Susanna. Thank you, Daniel. I wish you all the best and hopefully we'll hear from each other in the future with some more positive examples of accessibility.

(Svajūnė): Thank you. It was a pleasure for me too.

(Daniel): Thank you, a pleasure.



(Susanna): Thank you very much for having me.

(Paweł): Neven, how did you find this interview? Did you already find any positive examples of accessibility implementation affecting your life directly following the implementation of the Act?

(Neven): No, I couldn't say that unfortunately. I think that, in Sweden, here we haven't been really that very quick on the ball.

But I do find this very interesting and I am positive in the sense that I do believe that there are some very good prerequisites now to do something. I think we need to continue, I think what EBU does, trying to, keep on and to broaden the scope is very good. But I do believe we have something which we, as National Members, can actually work with now and let's see in a few years when we do some evaluation, but I am positive of some small changes anyway.

(Paweł): Yes, hopefully that will be true, that will happen. I must personally say I already found one banking app in Poland that was previously pretty much unusable for me being fully accessible now. So, I couldn't be happier than that, I can finally manage some of my money independently at last.

## **Correspondent' section: Lithuania**

(Paweł): Yes, we already spoke to Svajūnė in Lithuania, but it's not the end of our Lithuanian holiday in this episode, isn't that right Neven, huh?

[Music]

(Neven): Exactly. No, because now we are going to continue to speak with people from Lithuania because we are very happy to have our National Member, the Lithuanian Association of the Blind and Visually Impaired here.

And we have its Vice-President, Mr. Vilmantas Balčikonis, who is here and most welcome. So, Vilmantas, could you tell us a little about your organization?

(Vilmantas): So we are an association of the Blind and Partially Sighted, we represent blind and partially sighted people in Lithuania. We have 50 branches in whole Lithuania and in our center in Vilnius, we mainly focus on advocacy. We advocate for inclusive education, for rehabilitation for

the blind and partially sighted, for accessibility of the built environment, accessibility of information... Our main focus is making big changes in advocacy, oversee new laws, if they are aligned with our group values, and so on.

(Neven): Yes, and I know that you've also been very successful in some aspects. I know that, for instance, when it comes to the question about supporting Guide Dog training in Lithuania, you have really had some great success. Tell us a little about that.

(Vilmantas): Yes. I think it's a good example of how advocacy works and how through advocacy we can achieve a big impact.

So, in Lithuania, until now, there was no support for guide dog training, for guide dogs in general. Only recently we had a law that described what a guide dog is and where it's allowed and so on. So those simple rights.

And for some time, we ourselves maybe didn't believe that we can achieve new changes because we are, I could say, we are the only country in Europe that doesn't have any support for guide dogs.

I could say through help of colleagues from the European Blind Union, from other countries we talked to, with Iceland, with Slovenia and so on. They encouraged us to work in this area, we decided to make an impact, to try to make an impact. And we put a lot of effort into it.

We invited the European Guide Dog Federation to Lithuania, we made public gatherings and just publicised this topic for some time, during the whole last year. And we persuaded our government to include this task of making some kind of support mechanism for guide dogs in their program.

So now we have approximately six months to devise all instruments in detail, how it'll happen. But the initial decision to include this support in our system is already made. So, I think it's a huge achievement that my colleagues and I were part of.

(Neven): Yes, it's indeed a huge achievement. And it's a great inspiration to everybody how we can actually strengthen our advocacy work.

Well, talking about advocacy also, I mean, in this episode today, we've been speaking quite a lot about the European Accessibility Act. Tell me a little about how does your organisation promote this in Lithuania?

(Vilmantas): When we heard first about the European Accessibility Act a few years ago, we decided that it was a good opportunity to show ourselves as experts, as accessibility experts to be useful, to be useful to society, to governmental institutions, to the public sector and private sector companies.

And we developed good relations with those entities. We, on one hand, advocated for change. On the other hand, we are those experts that can explain what accessibility is and how to try to achieve it.

Because for some time, accessibility became like a buzzword and people encountering this word, usually don't really understand what's underneath it, what are the details, and we can explain. We are screen reader users; we are magnification users.

We also understand other disabilities and we can approach those entities and explain to them in detail what is needed for their systems to be accessible.

And, this way, I could say that we change our image a bit from just from askers of help to impression experts or partners and I encourage other organisations to go in this direction because it's very useful.

(Neven): Well, that's great advice. And everybody around Europe who needs some advice on how to promote themselves as experts within this field, they could contact you and maybe get some more ideas from you.

So, finally, I wanted just to ask you, I know that you've also been participating in a Horizon European Project. Tell us a little about this European-funded project.

(Vilmantas): We are very fortunate that a few years ago, the Siemens organisation, one team approached us with a proposal to participate in a Horizon Europe project called "Ability".

The aim of this project is to develop an affordable braille display. This is a very important and interesting topic and kind of technical even. So, we

are not technicians, we are not engineers, but we represent a very valuable part, that is user's opinion.

So we are involved in user studies where users can say what they like, what they dislike, how they would like to use one or another feature.

So it's a very valuable experience, how to work on these kinds of projects. And we see that we can be valuable in these projects also.

(Neven): Well, thank you very, very much, Vilmantas. It was most interesting to hear a bit about what's going on in Lithuania and well, hopefully we will see you soon.

I know that the European Blind Union's Advocacy Committee will have a meeting in Lithuania in October, and I will be there, so I might see you. So, thank you so much for participating in our podcast.

(Vilmantas): Thank you, it was a pleasure to be here.

(Neven): So, Paweł, you are a braille user. I was wondering, have you heard anything about this project they called "Ability"?

(Paweł): I think it appeared at the last SightCity conference. I heard an interview with a representative of the consortium that makes it, and it sounds quite ambitious, so I'm really curious what it's going to develop into.

I also really hope that they will tap into the market of multi-lane line braille displays because this is the latest fashion in a way, but also the latest breakthrough in accessible and braille technology.

I wish them a lot of luck, and I really hope we'll see some fruits of that because the time is here for us to have affordable access to braille, and I think there is no better time to say this than in the year of the 200th anniversary of the braille code.

(Neven): Very well said. Paweł, I think that with these words we are going to approach the wrap-up of this episode.

So, Paweł, I wish you a very successful and nice prolonging of autumn. And I look forward to seeing you soon again.

(Paweł): Thank you, same to you. And take care to all the listeners, thank you for being with us here for yet another episode of "EBU in Action".

[Music]

(Neven): Thank you, and of course, we have a huge thank you to our sound master, Emiel Cornelisse, who is situated in The Netherlands.

Thank you for dealing with all the sound, which you all can hear is fantastic in this podcast. And, of course, the music. And also thank you to all the listeners, we are very happy to hear from you.

If you have something you want to convey to us and if you've enjoyed today's episode, and if you still haven't, please subscribe to the "EBU in Action" podcast in your favourite podcast platform.

And, of course, do you want to learn more about the European Blind Union or do you want to share your thoughts with us? You will find all the contact details in the show notes. So, from all of us to all of you, thank you and bye-bye.

(Voiceover): "EBU in Action" is co-funded by the European Union.

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