

# **EBU in Action Episode 9: Looking for more inclusion: the 2024-2029 Legislative Term**

## **Intro**

[Music]

(Neven): Welcome to a new episode of “EBU in Action”, the podcast of the European Blind Union, the voice of blind and partially sighted persons in Europe. My name is Neven Milivojevic, and here joining me, I have my co-host friend Paweł Masarczyk. Hello, Paweł.

(Paweł): Hello, Neven. How are you?

(Neven): Oh, I'm very well, thank you. I'm feeling kind of it's getting colder somehow. What about you?

(Paweł): Yes, same here. That's quite universal, it seems. I think we are already, more or less, for Christmas and for this year to end, aren't we?

(Neven): Yes, yes. But I mean, it's really, you know, a lot of things have been happening this year, and it's really great to hear your voice and to be back with our listeners again. And, of course, we can look back to quite a lot of happenings in 2024. Would you say that we have had quite a dynamic year?

(Paweł): Definitely. I don't know where to start, to be honest, because we had so much happening within the EBU itself and also within the EU itself. First, we had the EBU 12th General Assembly with the new Board elected. Then we had the EU elections, so a completely new EU Parliament, and with that, new priorities and new challenges also in the context of blind and partially sighted people in Europe.

We had the Paralympics in Paris and so much more. So, if you look back at our episodes, you can definitely tell: this has been one wild ride.

(Neven): Well, yes, you're absolutely right. And I mean, this year is coming to an end, but there are a lot of interesting things going on. And as always, we will give you the latest updates on what's going on in the EBU. And I can tell you, the last months have been really hectic.

(Paweł): Yes, and of course, since we mentioned the EU Parliament, we will have to take a look at the priorities that will be taken for the legislative period of 2024 to 2029 and how that plays in within the tasks, priorities, demands and pleas of the European Blind Union. So for that,

we'll talk with Tytti Matsinen, the newly elected President of the European Blind Union, and Lars Bosselmann, the Executive Director.

(Neven): That's great guests, I think so indeed. And, of course, we shouldn't forget that we will, in the end, have a correspondent' section. And this time, we will talk to Anja Uršič, who is from the Union of the Blind and Partially Sighted in Slovenia. So, I think we couldn't find a better way to end 2024. I'm really looking forward to this show, what about you, Paweł?

(Paweł): Oh, definitely I am. And I'm really sure our listeners do as well. So, without further ado, let's start it.

(Neven): Let's start.

## **News section**

[Music]

(Neven): So let's have a quick update on the latest activity of the European Blind Union. Our dear colleague and friend, Nacho López, at our office in Paris is already here with us and I wish you welcome Nacho. Hola, how are you today?

(Nacho): Hola Neven, how are you? Yes, I'm very fine. And I'm joining you with this wave of coldness, which is coming to Europe. Yes, it's getting colder, but also, now that we're getting closer to Christmas, it's also warm in the sense that we are getting all to have time with our families and also to have time with all of you, from the EBU family. So yes, I'm very happy. I'm very excited for this new episode.

(Neven): Great, well, I mean, you have been a fantastic reporter this year. And so, let's continue in this last episode, to hear a little about the news from EBU.

(Nacho): Sure, Neven. We have good news for persons with disabilities in the EU.

On October 14th, the EU Council formally approved the final version of the text of the EU Disability Card and EU Parking Card Directive, one of the seven flagship initiatives of the EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030.

The two cards will give persons with disabilities travelling in Europe equal access in the host country to special conditions, other than social

security benefits and residence based social protections or social assistance.

EBU recalls that it is acknowledged in the text of the Directive that there are remaining gaps to ensuring the free movement of citizens with disabilities who move their residence to another EU country. Regarding this aspect, our president, Tytti Matsinen said: “We call on the European Commission to address, already in the second half of the current Disability Rights Strategy, the matter of recognition of the disability status for people who are in transition between two countries.

(Neven): Wow, this is good news. I mean, it's a first step, at least, towards even better news, I hope. But, may I ask you: so what is the deadline when it comes to the directive's implementation?

(Nacho): So, Member States have a maximum of 30 months to transpose the directive into national laws. When it comes to its implementation, they have a maximum of 42 months from the publication in the official EU Journal of the Directive to apply the law and start issuing the card. So overall, the expected deadline for its implementation is set to be in 2028.

(Neven): Well, thank you. Well, I also know, to move on to some other news, that EBU attended a very special day recently. Can you tell us a little about that?

(Nacho): On 28th and 29th November, a small EBU delegation attended the 2024 edition of the European Day of Persons with Disabilities. Co-hosted by the European Commission and the European Disability Forum, the event gathered policymakers, representatives of NGOs and other stakeholders in the area of disability rights.

Throughout this two-day conference, speakers underlined the milestones achieved during the first half of the EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, such as the adoption of the EU Disability Card Directive we've talked about, the launching of the AccessibleEU Centre, or the release of the EU Commission's Guidance on Independent Living.

About this particular subject, panelists highlighted the need to move away from the traditional institutional approach to one focused on the development of community-based services. Our Executive Director, Lars Bosselmann, intervened, calling the EC to ensure sufficient funding for inclusion through the Multiannual Financial Framework.

EBU also expressed support for extra flagship initiatives during the second half of the Strategy and made a point on the need to work for more accessible household appliances for visually impaired people.

(Neven): Oh, that's great, these are really important issues. So, what more did happen there on those days? I heard that there was an award also given out.

(Nacho): Yes, during the European Day of Persons with Disabilities 2024, the organisers also hosted the 15th edition of the EU Access City Award. And this year's winner was the city of Vienna. Vienna was recognised for its efforts to improve access to public spaces, public transport, information and communication technologies, and public services.

Nuremberg, from Germany, finished in second place and then, Cartagena, from Spain, received the third prize of the contest. Nuremberg, the German city, also received a special mention for their efforts in promoting Accessible Sports Infrastructures. And the Swedish city of Borås received a special mention for its Role Model in Built Environment and Transport.

(Neven): That's great. I think this is good, to acknowledge hard work. And I mean, of course, there could be much more done in many places, but I think it's always good to show good examples. So, congratulations to all these winners.

But, we have had now a new EU Parliament gathered in Brussels and Strasbourg. And I was wondering: what are the plans from EBU when it comes to working with advocacy with the new MEPs, the members of Parliament?

(Nacho): As part of the follow-up to the 2024 European elections, EBU is planning to host a cocktail event at the European Parliament in Brussels around February 2025. Through this one-day networking activity, EBU aims to underline the importance of promoting inclusive EU policies for blind and partially sighted persons according to the principles enshrined in the UNCRPD and other international conventions and treaties in the area of disability.

Sponsored by MEP Li Andersson, it will also gather other MEPs, as well as representatives from other European organizations, such as the European Disability Forum and the European Economic and Social Committee, as well as people from the EBU governance. The meeting will serve as a forum to discuss the daily challenges in the lives of

persons with disabilities and what the priorities should be for the new Assembly during the 2024-2029 legislative term.

(Neven): And I also heard that it is going to be a re-establishment of an intergroup working. Could you tell us something about that?

(Nacho): Well, this hasn't taken place yet, but as part of the follow-up to the EU Elections 2024, many organisations, including EBU (this is something that our listeners can find in our EU Elections 2024 Statement) and also other organisations such as the European Disability Forum; we have called for the re-establishment of the Disability Intergroup from the European Parliament.

This informal grouping of MEPs gathers people from all nationalities and most political groups. And in the last years, it has proven to be a key ally in advocating for and advancing the rights of persons with disabilities in Europe. So yeah, this is something to follow up in the upcoming months.

(Neven): Very, very exciting. Well, Nacho, I think this was what we had time for today. I would like to take the opportunity to thank you and all our colleagues at the EBU office for a fantastic year and fantastic work. And I would love to wish you and your colleagues a very nice holidays coming up.

(Nacho): Thank you very much, Neven. I would also like to congratulate you all, the "EBU in Action" production team. You've been fantastic, it's great. We've done so good episodes this year and I'm pretty sure that we are going to produce many interesting episodes in the future. So, I'm also wishing, on behalf of the whole EBU Office in Paris, Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.

(Neven): Merci beaucoup. So, Paweł, there are a lot of things going on. Do you have any reflections of all this work done?

(Paweł): yes, definitely. So, it's been definitely a great year and that's a great finish to this year. So I'm very happy that the Disability Card has been formally adopted. This is a great step. We've been waiting for this for years. And I really hope this will be a useful tool once it arrives. Pity that we have to wait for it so long, but well, there you are.

And yeah, I'm so happy for Vienna. It's all over the news right now that the Access City Award has arrived here. And, as a person...

(Neven): Your presence is known then.

(Paweł): Yes, I think so. I don't know if I personally could have played like a great role in making it more accessible. I hope, since I'm an accessibility auditor, that I could make a couple of websites or apps a little bit more accessible. But I think it's a joint work of so many institutions and organisations to make this happen. So, it's good to hear about that.

(Neven): Wonderful. Okay, so let's move on.

## **Focus Interview: Looking for more inclusion: the 2024-2029 Legislative Term**

[Music]

(Paweł): 2024 has been a crucial year when it comes to persons with disabilities and their situation in Europe. First, we had what Nacho already mentioned, that is the formal approval of the European Disability Card by the EU Council. Also, along the year, the EU Elections happened, which sets a host of new priorities within the new legislative period 2024-2029.

So, there are a lot of new priorities that we'll have to discuss when it comes to blind and partially sighted people in Europe. Finally, the EBU organised its 12th General Assembly and underwent a host of structural changes in line with their Strategic Plan 2024-2027.

To discuss all this, we have two wonderful guests in our studio: Tytti Matsinen, the newly elected President of the European Blind Union. Hello, Tytti.

(Tytti): Hi, everyone, and thanks for having me here.

(Paweł): And Lars Bosselmann, the Executive Director of the European Blind Union. Hello, Lars. Welcome to the studio.

(Lars): Hello, thank you for having me.

(Paweł): So, Tytti, the first question to you. You have been elected in the General Assembly at the beginning of the year, and we have had a chance to interview you on that occasion, but probably many structural changes have already happened since then. Could you quickly summarise what's been happening in the recent months?

(Tytti): Well, the EBU Board and other people beyond the Board in the Office and in the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Task Force have

done a lot of work to review the strategy and also have a look at the structures that EBU had to implement the strategy.

And we've done quite a bit of restructuring, but also sort of just rebranding or renaming some of the old structures that we have had and what we're going to try now for this term until the next Assembly is a threefold structure where there are Committees, thematic Working Groups and then, open Forums.

The three Committees that we have are: the Leadership Exchange Committee, that is basically bringing together the leadership of our member organisations and the committee is chaired by our Executive Director and it will cover all kinds of strategic planning, you know, following current trends in Europe and that kind of matters.

Then, we have something called the Advocacy Committee, that is partly a continuation of our former LC, the Commission on Liaising with the European Union. It also has a new chairperson, Francesca Sbianchi. And the Advocacy Committee brings together EBU members, advocacy expertise and that's the venue or forum that defines what are we advocating for, setting priorities for the upcoming years.

And then, the third Committee that we have is called Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee. And it is something that we've not have had before. We've had a Gender, Equality Committee or Working Group, I can't quite remember even the name, but it's been a smaller group. And now, this Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Group will look into ways of ensuring these themes in EBU's own work, making sure that we have a diverse base of participants in our own structures and work. But then also, highlighting any advocacy needs in this field or trends going on in Europe.

Then, what we have are the thematic Working Groups where we have five groups working on different themes, such as Training, Accessibility, Mobility, Digitalisation and Braille. And then, a sixth group that brings together the External Communication experts from our Member Organisations, hopefully supporting EBU campaigning, bringing sort of joint visibility to our cause across Europe.

And then, the third tier of our structures are the Forums where we have a Youth Forum, a Forum for Women and Gender issues. Then, we have an Older Persons Forum and a Low Vision Forum. And then there, the newcomer or new kid on the block is the Membership Exchange Forum,

which is basically an open email list for blind and partially sighted Europeans who wish to exchange information or ask for advice from fellows across Europe.

So, it's kind of an open-notice board which we haven't had before. And we're really looking forward to getting the structures rolling. The thematic Working Groups will bring together the sort of thematic expertise from our member organisations. And I'm sure that they will be able to provide a lot of technical expertise to our advocacy.

And then, in the Advocacy Committee, we have the people who have the networks and the capacity to do influential advocacy on EBU's behalf.

(Paweł): That sounds wonderful. So many new Committees, so many new bodies to cover a lot of issues that we experience in everyday life. I was the most surprised by the Membership Exchange Forum.

I really love the idea of blind and partially sighted people from different countries networking and taking advice from each other; because sometimes, if you stay closed within your own bubble, it may get a bit daunting and you sometimes run out of ideas. And then, it's a good idea to take inspiration from elsewhere.

You also mentioned the new Advocacy Committee, which has now been established. And I think this Committee has actually had its first annual meeting in Warsaw. Lars, you have been there. What are the areas of work for this group?

(Lars): Yeah, thank you. Indeed, I can confirm. I see you were well-informed about our meeting schedules.

So, that meeting took place in Warsaw, end of October. And, well, first of all, I would like to thank our Polish Member for hosting us very kindly and professionally, and I'm sure Paweł, you coming from the country, you're actually happy to hear that the Polish did a very good job in having us there.

But now onto your question, of course, I will not go through the whole agenda of the meeting. There were so many things: the context was, of course, still very much after the European Parliamentary Elections and what the results meant or mean for us for the years to come. So that's more about the context in which the meeting took place.

But in terms of priorities, let's say I would highlight at least three key items or outcomes of that meeting, which will be there and be around for



our work and the work of that Committee in particular, for the years to come.

One is actually in the area of Elections and, broadly speaking, Political Participation of blind and partially sighted people.

And I know we come back to that issue, but it has been discussed also in Warsaw in a broader European context, not only EU-related, but also, of course, there's still in many countries, whether they are EU Member States or not, challenges with having access to elections, mostly, of course, as voters.

But even if we look at candidates who are blind or partially sighted people, that would be still very challenging and really just basic, actually fundamental rights, such as casting our votes independently and in secret, as you all know, and there has been a separate episode also in the past about this, is still a challenge in many places.

Now, we will come back to that, but it has been discussed in Warsaw and will be on our agenda for the years to come. A second point, coming from that meeting is very clearly also the whole area of mobility in the wider sense, but mostly modern forms or new forms, if you'd like, of mobility.

And, very much in particular, I would say the challenges this poses in terms of, sometimes, just road safety or even safety without the word road in front of it. And very specifically there is when it comes to the so-called silent cars, which, of course, are and will, even more in the future, be a dominant feature on our streets in Europe and elsewhere, that there is the tendency to, of course, or the challenge for blind and partially sighted people can be, if they are too silent, these cars, we cannot hear them.

We cannot identify them when they come. And that, of course, can pose real challenges and can be dangerous when crossing streets or places. And there has been an international compromise already found on a certain sound level for these cars. And under the, let's say mantra of avoiding noise pollution, even this minimum, let's say requirement sound level, is now questioned by some countries at the United Nations level.

So, this is very important that EBU and the whole blindness sector remains very much on the ball and vigilant when it comes to these issues so that we are not left out.

And then, another, and the last point I would like to highlight from this meeting is the area of advocacy in the field of accessible Household Appliances. And now, the problem is more and more, and increasingly as you probably also know from your own experience in your own households, that the facilities and machines where we are buying are more and more equipped with, and interacted with, touchscreens and touchscreens only, which is then the, maybe, more problematic part of it.

So this poses real issues when cooking or even making a coffee or very daily needs and daily life skills that we all want to and have to do, both, at homes. There is really an increasing trend, a worrying trend that we, who need also some features that we can touch or at least activate in an accessible way, cannot perform these very basic tasks by ourselves.

And that, of course, is a real issue. And so, we, through the Advocacy Committee in the coming years, will certainly launch an activity, it is probably starting by some awareness actually in this area, because it's not a topic that is high on the international agenda and on the mind of people very prominently, to raise that this is actually an issue really.

And then, of course, proposing solutions that there must be alternatives. And, of course, there can be touchscreens. If there are alternatives or there have to be accessible touchscreens, as we all know, touchscreens are not by nature inaccessible, we all use our smartphones that have accessible touchscreens, but of course, the ones that are coming on the market more and more are mostly not.

So, these are, I think, the three, I would say, key areas that were highlighted. Many more, of course, as you would imagine for a two-day meeting. But these are the ones that I think are most relevant, also, in looking to the next couple of years of action.

(Paweł): Yes, this, I can also reflect as an end user. These are definitely the needs that I have myself every day: obtaining a device, household device that I can use independently, getting around the road safely and, most of all, electing the government and the officials I want.

This would be great if it can be improved. And I really hope that will happen in the next years and then, all your campaigning efforts and advocacy efforts will go towards that. Of course, the EU Disability Strategy touches, upon much broader in scope, issues that affect not just blind and partially sighted people, but people with all kinds of disabilities in Europe.

I mean, of course, the European, the EU Strategy for 2021-2030, and we are now in the half of this period in which this strategy should be put into action. So Tytti, how would you evaluate the progress done so far? Are you satisfied with it? Do you still find areas for improvement? Maybe you can see also some positive outcomes you would like to share with us.

(Tytti): I think what is remarkable and noteworthy with the disability inclusion Strategy is that we're only halfway through the Strategy, but still, if I'm not mistaken, most of the flagship initiatives of the Strategy have already been achieved.

And I don't know if that was because there has been low expectations in the field of disability inclusion or because there has been big appetite for disability inclusion, but I really hope that now that there is still time left, that the big appetite would continue and there would be new flagship initiatives taken on board for the remainder of the strategic period.

I think for me, one of the biggest things has been the Disability Card because that will allow persons with disabilities to travel across Europe and sort of have a similar level of services and ease in moving from one place to another.

(But, of course, it's still, traveling is only a part of being European that we need to focus on, creating structures that allow persons with disabilities to relocate, whether for work or for studies in a different European country and have their disability recognised easily, because currently that is really a big barrier, hindering people from moving from one place to another.

(Paweł): That's great to hear. I mean, of course, a lot of good things happen, but there is still so much work to be done. And I hope it will progress, I hope the goals will be achieved, and I hope we can live quite soon in a much more accessible and inclusive Europe for all of us.

Lars, the new European Parliament has been elected, yet so many people with disabilities had issues accessing the voting system, putting a vote, obtaining information in an accessible format regarding the parties, politicians they would like to vote for.

What do the Member States of the European Union need to do better to accommodate persons with disabilities in political life?

(Lars): As we already said, a very essential and fundamental issue for all of us, as for all citizens, of course. And there's, it's quite, I have to say, on

a more personal note, it's quite actually disappointing to see that progress in this area, which is so important, is really quite slow and still very fragmented.

So there are good examples and good initiatives here and there, sometimes also very local ones, but overall, the picture, the progress is quite, quite slow. Now, this being the statement of the problem, there are, of course, solutions and some of them are a bit complex because, of course, the electoral systems are very much different from one place to another.

From one country to another, most definitely, but sometimes, even within countries, from one election to another, and it's not the same. It doesn't require the same, let's say, technique to adopt and make an election fully accessible, whether we're talking about a very complicated process, a simple "yes" or "no" more kind of a referendum vote, or whether we are talking about a very complex list system where you have to, or at least, where you can choose individual candidates from sometimes even different lists.

This is, I think, a little bit of the statement. Now, there are solutions to all of these and some are more in the area of new technologies or using new technologies when we go into the area of e-voting, I should say online voting, which is not exactly the same.

So, I think this has real potential, in reality, to make for fully accessible elections in the same way as the whole new technology and information technology, of course, also increases our access, as the blindness and partial sight community, to electoral information during the campaign, for example, you were referring to it, Paweł. So this is one, let's say, area of solution

Now, but even if we don't go into the quite controversial question of e-voting, online voting, which I know there are many security issues and questions, at least, around and so on. And some countries, also, have more, let's say, traditional approaches and all of this is to be recognised, of course; even on paper, there can be solutions, for Braille voting and for other forms of voting that are accessible.

The problem is, I think, first, it's not high enough on the agenda. So there is still, and I'm afraid to say that because I know many of our own organisations and other disability groups have been very vocal in advocating for this for many years and decades, and still there's

awareness-raising to be done so that this really is or remains very high on the agenda as a real important thing to do for us.

Of course, very important, ahead of the, or in light of the 2029 European Parliamentary Elections, which sounds very terrible because it's so long to go, but we have to really put energy and effort in the preparations for the 2029 Elections so that they really become a role model and an example of inclusive and accessible elections.

And then, also there, I would say there is a lot of work to be done with the more election authorities and those really conducting technically the elections. So, one is the political level and to make the legislation in line and making, let's say, inclusion and accessibility a standard and a mandatory, binding feature of all elections, that's one thing.

But then, of course, on the technical side, to really make sure that it is done and so that also the authorities know how to do it, in the different places with the different elections, electoral systems that we're having, which (I'll finish on that to not make it too complex) the European Elections are, of course, in reality, while there is a common frame, a legislative frame for them, they are in the reality on the election day 27 different elections with different challenges, how to make them accessible.

So, it would still be up to the national electoral authorities to cater for the actual practical accessibility features in their respective country. But this should be pushed, of course, by a more binding EU law, to encourage, at least, if not oblige, all the 27 countries to really make it happen finally.

(Paweł): And let's hope that will happen because the right to vote, the right to exercise our democratic privileges, it's fundamental. And if we would like anything to change for us, even in terms of the situation of blind and partially sighted people, we can start with the simple act of going to your election poll and casting your vote. So, if that right is hindered, or anyhow obstructed, we don't have a chance.

We don't have a chance to make our voices heard in even in this very basic capacity. So here is to hoping that indeed, complex though they may be, the changes will be introduced at some level, and that the next European Elections will be more accessible.

Another quite complex, quite difficult topic to tackle, but I think we'll try it anyway, is the situation of persons with disabilities, and especially blind and partially sighted people, on the job market.

Lars, in the view of the new EBU priorities and the Strategic Plan, what do you think needs to be done to increase the rates of employment for blind and partially sighted people in Europe?

(Lars): As you said, complex as well. And unfortunately, I'm afraid, like the previous point on elections, unfortunately, not a new item on the agenda but still, a very important feature.

Now, the situation, I think has, over the last 20 years, for the general population in most places, of course, with variations and nuances between countries and regions, but overall the situation on the labour market has actually improved over the last 20 years.

This is less true, and that's where the problem starts for blind and partially sighted people who have not benefited in the same way from the economic, I'm not saying booming times because that was not always the case, but the employment situation has improved overall and has not so much for blind and partially sighted people.

And this creates a real gap between the general population and our community. Now, this is also very complex. As we said, there is certainly still a lot of work to be done in the area of fighting stereotypes and prejudices, in the sense that still there are many people who do not believe simply that a blind or partially sighted worker can be as productive as a sighted peer, so to speak.

So there is still a lot of work to be done to fight those prejudices or negative attitudes to say the least. So this is one thing. There's, of course, something that needs to be looked into also when it comes to the training and education of blind and partially sighted people, so that we are all actually, let's say, fit for the open labour market in terms of new technologies, in terms of many things that actually are fast changing as well in the labour reality of today.

So there's, of course, you cannot always say it's only about employment because training and vocational training and education and many other things actually are connected with that.

And then, I think, there is still a lot also that needs to improve in the area of (not saying obliging because that sounds like a quota and that could be a whole different episode whether there's a good reason for having quota or not in the labour market) but still for incentivising, at least, companies, whether public or private employers, to hire blind and

partially sighted people. I think in that area, there are good examples, it's always good to look into those.

And there are also still some negative examples where, for example, the disability allowances that you can get, that we're entitled to in quite a number in many countries, they are somehow, you're losing them or they are diminished when you are accepting a certain level of job and thereby income, which of course is then making you think twice whether it's actually better to keep some allowances in a certain range, plus maybe some unemployment allowances or others, which make an income, or whether you're actually accepting a job with all the, let's say, constraints that this also entails.

So I think there's also sometimes, let's say, negative measures that keep people away from the open labour market, which still need to be removed. And then, last comment, I think this is more generally applying: of course, now, we are also looking, I'm not sure if I should in this episode spit out the word "recession". But well, I've done it now anyway. So we have to also see a little bit how the general labour market will evolve and develop over the next couple of months and years.

One thing is for sure: if generally the population will get less employed and will find it harder to find a new job, certainly for blind and partially sighted people, this does not improve the already very challenging situation.

So I tried now to find, somehow, a way to counterbalance, not to end on a negative note, but I think it's very important also to be realistic, of course, in the economic situation, we are currently working, working in that, of course, has an impact also on the chances on the labour market for blind and partially sighted people.

(Paweł): Yes, I see why you're struggling to do that. And I mean, there are definitely challenging times ahead, so let's hope we'll come out the best we can out of those, that we can learn how to adapt and that we can find solutions together with the general labour market to increase those rates and to make people be able to work because it's not like people don't want to.

I personally had a longer episode of unemployment and I know what it's like to fight against discrimination and to be confronted with prejudices from potential employers and definitely also the cutting up or cutting out of disability allowance based on your salary.

It's a theme and it's definitely demotivating a lot of ambitious people from reaching out for more, for grabbing higher positions with higher paid salaries.

And I hope we can counter this problem as well. I think I came across a study at some point saying that people who are blind and they can read and write braille, have much higher success being employed than those who don't. So now that we're approaching the 200th anniversary of the braille code being invented, Tytti, what do you think, how relevant is braille still in today's world marked by digital developments, where can we access information in so many different ways without needing to learn a whole new alphabet?

(Tytti): Well, I think braille and technology or audio, they are not competitors in most domains of life. I think there are still situations where it is sessions so that people have access to braille. For example, I had difficulties with my vision over the summer and it was really a rescue to me that my medication was labeled with braille so that I could still have access to the correct medicine at the time.

I also think that for people working with precise, detailed information such as pupils and students or people working with mathematics or with language, it is the only way of having access to precise language, that you have your reading and writing skills and you're able to read and write braille as well, because that's the way, for example, when you learn new languages, how do you learn to write French, unless you have access to the written language, letter by letter?

So it is the literacy, essentially, of blind people. But I think braille comes handy in many cases. When you have in public spaces, for example, doors or writings marked with braille, people can have access to information that would be possibly there in the space for you to seek for with an AI camera or something, but when it's there, on the surfaces that you touch in any case, it is much more convenient or in the case of Finland, the train seats, seat numbers are labelled with Braille.

Of course, I could take a photo of the seat and magnify it with my phone, but it's a lot slower than it is to just check the tactile braille marking on the seat. So I think, I think they're not competitors and they should not be sort of put against each other, but rather we should see that braille makes some everyday situations, as well as the text accessible, to blind and partially sighted people.



But then, also audio and technology are good aids in some situations where Braille would be more difficult to use. So I think combining these two will allow us to live more independently, even in this day and age.

(Paweł): Yes, that's great to hear about so many uses of Braille. Definitely the learning language part is something I have experienced when learning Russian.

I was able to tell when I was able to access the written language. I could much better correlate this with the spoken one, the numbered seats in Braille. We also have them in Poland and they are always a great enhancement. You can just go across the car and find your seat without asking anybody for help and the medicine.

I really hope we will have more labelled products soon, especially foods and especially, cleaning products and all this common household things that we buy so often. I think also a great enhancement is the ability to input Braille on any smartphone imaginable. This is basically your braille tutor program, where you just take it out of your pocket and you can put any text in it and, first of all, practice, but second of all, write so much faster.

So I really think they can also go hand in hand. Thank you so much to both of you for being here. So much material, great, competent, knowledgeable guests. I hope our listeners enjoyed this interview as well. And now handing over to Neven.

## **Correspondent' section: Slovenia**

[Music]

(Neven): Now, we have reached the final part of the ninth episode of "EBU in Action", and this will be the correspondent' section, as we always have. You know that we used to have this segment in the podcast because we think it's very important to find out more about what's happening with our EBU Members and what activities they do and what's the latest news from their point of view.

So today, we are happy to welcome our member from Slovenia, the Union of the Blind and Partially Sighted of Slovenia, and also Anja Uršič. So I say to Anja "Dobrodošli v našem podkastu, Anja."

(Anja): Thank you for saying words in Slovenian. So yes, I'm Anja and I come from the Union of the Blind and Partially Sighted of Slovenia, where I'm quite an active member.

This year, I was also elected as a EBU Board Member and, currently, I am also working as a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at Novartis.

(Neven): Well, wonderful to have you here. I guess not everybody has been in Slovenia. I've been there several times, it's a beautiful country. And I know one of the first topics you wanted to tell us about is actually how you are trying to make more people come into Slovenia. Could you tell us a little about one of your projects called DATIS?

(Anja): Yes, sure. So, among several social services that we provide for Blind and Partially Sighted in Slovenia, we are also quite engaged in several projects. One of them is DATIS.

This means the Digital Pioneers of Accessible Tourism. And this project was implemented this year, in spring, in the border region of Italy and Slovenia aiming to raise awareness and training of tourism service providers in that region while establishing several accessible activities in the field of tourism.

Why is accessible tourism so important? Because it actually ensures that tourist destinations, products and services are available for everyone, regardless of disability or any other type of health condition that restricts daily life activity of individuals with visual impairment. And this project also includes accessible digital contents, websites, and also accessible tools for booking accommodations and accessible tools for sports, cultural and gastronomic and natural heritage offers.

So, the Slovenian Union of Blind and Partially Sighted, as a partner, has committed to develop a joint strategy and provide communication. And in doing so, we also conduct a survey where we assess the needs of visually impaired in the field of tourism.

And based on this survey, we will also prepare recommendations and tips to several tourism service providers, how to enhance their digital accessibility and also facilities.

(Neven): That sounds really, really interesting. I hope a lot of your partners and stakeholders actually promote this so we will get a lot of accessible tourism to Slovenia.

So, tell me, I know also you have a project called "Sense". Could you tell us a little what is that about?

(Anja): Yes, sure. So, the project "Sense" is focused on integrating visually impaired into physical activities through martial arts, aiming to,

let's say, promote health and also social inclusion. Because with over 2.2 billion people across the world experiencing visual impairment, this project addresses, let's say, the current issue of integrating these individuals into physical activities by enhancing their mental health, well-being, and of course also physical coordination, balance, and overall social inclusion.

So, among, let's say, increasing the rate of social inclusion for these individuals, one of the most important deliverables will also be focused on how to create adaptive practices in these sports activities. And we are with other partners: with North Macedonia and Greece, we are developing a toolkit for martial arts, how to safely integrate individuals with visual impairment into such specific sport activities.

And additionally, we are also organising several training sessions, so in Greece and here in Slovenia, visually impaired individuals will have the opportunity, actually, to be included in such a specific sport activity as martial arts.

And, yes, we think that this project is also very important because we foster building capacity because it's a transnational project involving many partners, and each of these partners has a, let's say, really specific role in enhancing equal opportunities for integrating visually impaired individuals into physical activities, which is really important.

(Neven): Indeed, indeed. And so, what is the feedback you get? Is there a great interest in the community?

(Anja): Yes, it is quite of interest because it's a specific sport, and we haven't yet developed an integration to such a specific sport. So, of course, there is expressed interest.

(Neven): Great. Well, I think we will be able to hear one more news from Slovenia, and I think it's connected to a subject we talked about earlier also in this podcast episode because, I know that you're working a lot with labour market and accessibility for persons with visual impairments. Could you tell us a little about that?

(Anja): Yes, sure. We, in Slovenia, we noticed there is the lack of, let's say, enhancing opportunities in the open labour market when we talk about visually impaired.

And for that reason, at the Union of the Blind and Partially Sighted, we decided to establish a working group which is taking a kind of a role of a

task force for improving, let's say, the unfavorable position of visually impaired individuals in the labour market.

So, on one side, we are trying to address employers because we still have found out that employers still have negative attitudes, prejudice, and also some discrimination is still happening in this field. And for that reason, we decided to develop a kind of, on one part, explanatory video where we explain that also individuals that have visual impairment are capable of doing many, many, many job positions and work.

So, in that regard, we also prepared a toolkit for employers that they see which incentives, within the legal framework, they can have and how to, for instance, adapt a workplace, environment in a company and so on. I think that it's really important that employers give opportunities also to visually impaired, so that they can thrive and have, at least, an opportunity to show their potential, which is often overlooked and untapped in the labour market.

(Neven): Well, indeed, very important. I really wish you great success with both this project and also of this group and with the two projects you mentioned. So, Anja, to wrap up, anything else you want to say from Slovenia to our listeners before we wrap up the correspondent section?

(Anja): Yes, I just want to encourage each National Member of EBU that it strives towards more innovative approaches, how to include maybe more young people and provide services that are, let's say, more interesting and addressing social problems in their countries.

(Neven): Very wise advice. Thank you so much, Anja, and I wish you a very merry holiday.

(Anja): Yeah, thank you for inviting me. Bye bye.

(Neven): So Paweł, have you been to Slovenia?

(Paweł): Yes, I have. Actually twice. Once I was visiting a friend, and the second one, we were with a group of blind people and sighted guides on a hiking trip across the Julian Alps. So it was a bit of a challenge.

(Anja): Oh, nice.

(Paweł): Yes, but every single time the people have been so welcoming and the atmosphere was always so great. I would love to come again. And now that I live in Austria, it's not that far away.

(Anja): You're welcome.

(Neven): Yes, and it's easier for you, Paweł, because you are close to Slovenia. So, Paweł, thank you very much for great co-hosting and great company during this year in this podcast. It's been a fantastic pleasure to work with you and I hope you will have some time during the holidays to rest and enjoy and I wish you a great holidays.

(Paweł): Thank you, Neven. Same to you. Happy holiday to you and may the new year be everything we wished for it to be.

(Neven): Thank you. And of course, we should not forget to say a big thank you to our sound master, Emiel Cornelisse, who is residing in The Netherlands. So thank you very much.

I would also like to mention that if you would like to subscribe to the podcast "EBU in Action", you can do so in your podcast reader, or if you would like to know more about the European Blind Union, or if you want to send us some comments, you can find all the contact details to us in the show notes.

And, of course, I need to say that we are really grateful to you all taking your time to listen to us. This year has had a lot of activities and, of course, now as it is a Christmas episode, we have made it bonus long. So it's a little longer episode than usual, but we hope you enjoyed it. And we welcome you back next year because we have a lot more things to tell you.

And by that I say Merry Christmas, "Happy Holidays, and a Happy New Year! Bye bye from Neven.

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

END OF EPISODE