

EBU in Action – Fifth Episode: The EU Disability Card Proposal: ambitious enough?

Intro

[Music]

(Neven): Welcome to the fifth episode of the European Blind Union's podcast, "EBU in action", a podcast aimed at discussing different issues related to blind and partially sighted persons in Europe.

My name is Neven Milivojevic and here joining me, I have my co-host, Paweł Masarczyk. Hello Paweł, are you there?

(Paweł): Yes, I am. Hello, Neven. Hello to all of our listeners. Welcome to this new episode.

(Neven): Thank you. How are you?

(Paweł): I'm doing fine, thank you so much. I'm excited about Christmas. Are you?

(Neven): Well, yeah, I would rather have some more warm, but it's quite cold here in Sweden. But anyway, Christmas is soon here and well, we are going to enjoy a very deserved holiday.

But before that, we are going to speak to our EBU friends in Paris. So many things are going on there and we would like to hear more about what happened in our organisation in the last months.

(Paweł): And then, we'll jump straight into our focus topic. And this time, we'll be talking about something that a lot of us probably have been waiting for even more than when it comes to Christmas, the European Disability Card. What is it? Does it fulfill what it says? Or could it be improved? We'll find out.

(Neven): Well, I'm really looking forward to hearing more about that. So, I'm also eager to know what's going on among our members in EBU. We have a section, as you know, the correspondent' section. And this time, we will learn more about the current challenges for blind and partially sighted persons in Poland. So we will speak to Dorota Krać, from the Polish Association of the Blind.

(Paweł): Yes, I'll be really excited to hear what's going on in Poland as well.

(Neven): Indeed. Okay, let's begin.

News from EBU

[Music]

(Neven): Now, we have reached our news section and first, we're going to learn more about what's the latest news at EBU. And for this, we're going to talk to our dear colleague Nacho Lopez. Hola, Nacho. How are you?

(Nacho): Hello, Neven. I'm fine. Christmas is at the corner, as you said. I would prefer a little bit of warm right now, but we have to get used to the typical chill before Christmas. And of course, I'm also waiting to enjoy my family time during the Christmas period.

(Neven): Great, great. Well, it's very nice to hear your voice again. So let's go on and see what are the latest updates at EBU.

(Nacho): Yes, EBU has a new face in its office. Amandine Guillemois joined our Secretariat in early September as our new Project Officer. With a broad experience in the management of European projects, she's worked for the research center Institut Pasteur and other non-profit French institutions.

Happy to assume this professional challenge, she's getting into the field of blindness and partial sight and shared with us the keys for a successful project management strategy.

(Amandine's voiceover): For a successful project management strategy, you need, firstly, to define roles and responsibilities clearly. Secondly, to set clear expectations from the start. Thirdly, to celebrate milestones without forgetting anyone.

The clear roles distribution enables each team member to have a clear vision of the organisation and to ask the right person for help if necessary, which reduces uncertainty.

The clear expectations for each team member increase the feeling of contributing efficiently to the project.

It allows team members to reach their objectives and even surpass them. Celebrating milestones is an opportunity to give positive feedback, build self-confidence, encourage teamwork, and show how valuable and inspiring are the contributions from each team members.

(Nacho): Among others, Amandine has been involved in the final steps of the UPowerWAD project. On November 23rd, a final webinar was held in order to scale up its impact at the European level. As discussed in our

previous episode, the objective of this initiative was helping to improve the feedback mechanisms for users with disabilities regarding accessibility issues of public body sites.

(Neven): Well, we wish Amandine great luck and look forward to reading these project's results in their website during the Christmas break. So, what about more from EBU?

(Nacho): Our organisation has been involved in several key events during the last months of 2023. Between November 6th and November 8th, EBU held its annual conference in Madrid under the title "People on the Move. Making educational and professional experiences abroad truly inclusive".

People with disabilities, mainstream organisations in the field of mobility, policy-makers and more, exchanged about the benefits of working and studying abroad, but also remaining obstacles.

Furthermore, our organisation also attended the 2023 edition of the European Day of Persons with Disabilities held in Brussels between 30th November to 1st December. With the 2024 European Elections coming next year, speakers at the event emphasized the need to keep working to ensure persons with disabilities' rights to vote and stand for elections.

At the same time, in the context of the European Year of Skills, participants also called on authorities to keep working to promote a more inclusive labour market. Furthermore, the event served as an excellent occasion to evaluate the first three years of the European Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

(Neven): Well, this sounds very interesting. I also heard that you had some meetings related to Braille. Could you tell us a little about that too?

(Nacho): Yes, correct. On September 15th, we attended a Braille-focused event in the French Ministry of Culture. The event gathered several French organisations working in the fields of blindness and partial sight. And the objective of the meeting was to discuss the potential registration of Braille as cultural heritage at UNESCO.

Furthermore, our Braille working group hosted an online webinar on 7th November about the use of Braille, its reading, its writing, and other subjects related to Braille.

(Neven): Great, great. Well, more power to you and our colleagues working with this issue. It's a very important issue. I also know that you work a lot with advocacy. Tell us a little more about that.

(Nacho): Yes, as always, we will give you the latest news about our advocacy work. On September 15th, EBU launched its statement on the 2024 European Elections on the occasion of the International Day of Democracy.

In this document, we made claims for blind and partially sighted persons in key areas like political participation, the accessibility of products and services, safe mobility and passenger's rights, among others.

The document was shared with the 10 main political parties in the European Parliament. In line with this, we also echoed the message of our statement in a meeting hosted by the Party of European Socialists in Brussels on October 18th.

Furthermore, on September 20th, we also launched our guidelines on reasonable accommodation for visually impaired employees and applicants. Based on the legal background provided by the UNCRPD and EU law, this document aims to promote inclusion in the labour market, covering special aspects like accessibility during the recruitment process to the provision of assistive technology or personal assistance at the workplace, among others.

Overall, this source aims to accompany the European Commission's Disability Employment Package Initiative, one element of the EU Disability Rights Strategy 2021- 2030.

(Neven): Wow, that's a lot of things. Thank you so much, Nacho, for this report. It was really interesting to hear about all the work. So, "muchísimas gracias", Nacho.

(Nacho): "Muchísimas gracias", Neven. Let me wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

(Neven): The same to you. Wow, that was a lot of things to take in, Paweł. So, a question to you. Next year, we are getting a new European Parliament. Do you have any thoughts about what would be the most important work for this Parliament within the areas of accessibility and inclusion?

(Paweł): Obviously, there is a lot. I am pretty much in support of the things that EBU has been campaigning for, such as the extension of the European Accessibility Act with the labeling of food products in Braille and the accessibility of household appliances. This resonates with what the community wants basically.

I hear this from a lot of my friends who are blind or partially sighted that they don't know where all of that is going, so how they will be able to use their household devices in the future. And that would be great if the foods were also labeled.

I'm also very much hoping that further impact will be achieved in terms of accessibility to the labour market because this is such an important value and such an important goal to achieve so that persons with disabilities who have skills and the willingness to contribute to the society have the means of achieving that and not be met with, you know, prejudice and low expectations.

I also hope that the work will continue towards improving accessibility in the digital and physical space, that the political parties will continue their efforts in that regard, backed by experts in those areas who have dedicated their entire professional careers to further their knowledge and to develop standards that ensure that we all can navigate, no matter if it's in the physical world or the digital one, safely and conveniently.

(Neven): Thank you very much, Paweł. So, let's move on to our Focus Interview.

The Focus Topic: The EU Disability Card Proposal: ambitious enough?

[Music]

(Paweł): Back in March of 2021, the European Commission has adopted the Strategy for Persons with Disabilities for the years 2021-2030. One of the flagship initiatives of this strategy is the European Disability Card, an instrument that a lot of us have been waiting for. This instrument ensures that persons with disabilities can enjoy free movement among European countries, retaining their full rights.

The same rights that they already enjoy in their home countries. Is the instrument everything that it promises to be? Or does it fall short of the expectations? What does it actually do? What doesn't it do? And when can we actually expect to hold it in our hands?

To answer these and many more questions, today in the studio, I have with me Antoine Fobe, the Head of Advocacy and Campaigning at the European Blind Union, and Claire Damilano, the Senior Legal Manager at the European Citizen Action Service. Welcome to both of you.

It's great to have you with us today because, well, who can answer better than you about this very important instrument. So maybe, Antoine, if you

could start and explain to us, why is it important for the EU to take a legal stance on this issue and get involved with pitching further this initiative?

(Antoine): Well, as you said it yourself in your introduction, it's a long-standing call of the disability community that there'd an EU-wide binding legislation in this area to ensure equal treatment for persons with disabilities when exercising their EU free movement rights.

For the moment, we already have a council recommendation for a Disability Parking Card, but it is only a recommendation, and for that matter, for that reason, only limited results. And we also have a pilot project for a Disability Card that concerns, unfortunately, only eight countries and only with a very limited material scope, also different from country to country.

So, it was really important to bring binding legislation with a broader view and with more harmonisation, a more consistent approach.

(Paweł): Yes, I definitely remember when the pilot started and unfortunately, Poland, where I come from, didn't participate. In fact, very few, as you said, countries participated and I remember this being quite a period full of tests where all the countries were testing the waters and seeing what they can offer, what they can't offer. And there was a lot of public discussion about the scope of the card, which we will probably come back to at a later time.

But Claire, if you could quickly explain how does this legal initiative resonate with other areas of EU law, especially those that are of the interest to your organisation?

(Claire): Yes, my organisation promotes different citizen rights and personally, as a Legal Advisor in my organisation, I'm managing a new legal service and we provide advice. We received quite a lot of questions from people with disabilities who want to move from a country to another within the EU.

And in preparing this podcast, I've checked the enquiries I received from people with disabilities and, in most cases, their status is often linked to social security, which has, for consequence, that the status and the degree of that disability has always been a national responsibility. There is no harmonisation in this specific area.

And this lack of mutual recognition in disability status among Member States creates serious difficulties and even sometimes discrimination in the exercise of the right to free movement, which is really one of the most important rights as EU citizen.

This proposal is really important. First, as Antoine has just said, it's not just a recommendation, but a directive, so it will be binding. The European Disability Card will be valid in all Member States and it should facilitate the mobility of people with disabilities within the EU.

(Paweł): it's really great that you signal this as a public and a civil rights issue, Claire, because I can remember from my times, of the twenties of my life, that I was moving certainly quite a lot around Europe.

I was studying in one country, then I went on Erasmus to another one. I took a traineeship somewhere else and I still went ahead and did my European Solidarity Corps activity. So, they were all longer periods of stay. And not to discuss, you know, traveling as a tourist, which I also did extensively.

And what I learned quite quickly was that all the different countries offer different kinds of services to their citizens with disabilities. And I couldn't benefit from that, I was moving around as if my disability did not exist at all. And even in one instance, what I heard from somebody was: "Well, you don't pay taxes here, so why should you be eligible?"

And well, there are so much that has been harmonised across the EU. We have the common "Roam like at home" plan where we can use the roaming services of different EU providers as if we were home. And there is a lot of things that are European in the sense of universal across the entire EU.

Yet, persons with disabilities do not have their rights recognised across the common area. So, it's good that this is being addressed. We have had, as you Antoine rightly said, the European Parking Card for a while. Is it appropriate to address, because this initiative addresses both the European Disability Card and the European Parking Card, is it appropriate, in your view, to address both in the same instrument?

(Antoine): Yes, it doesn't really matter that both types of cards are addressed in one single instrument. In fact, for pragmatic reasons, strategic reasons too, it is good that they are addressed in one single instrument because time is of the essence here.

The European Elections, the European Parliament Elections are coming up in June 2024. There isn't much time left to push different sets of legislation. So, the Commission might as well, and in fact it did, go for one single instrument to cover both types of cards.

What is important is that within the proposal, and so it is, the two cards are treated as two distinct documents, each with its purposes and

eligibility criteria. And this is something we called for, and that in fact is reflected in the Commission's proposal.

(Paweł): Thank you for addressing this. Claire, if you could explain now what are, in your view, the strong points of what the European Commission has proposed?

(Claire): So again, I speak as a legal advisor and first, I must say that there is a positive approach in this proposal because it will be based on the principle of mutual recognition, which is a positive approach because often, in some cases I go through, there is always a kind of suspicion that the person can lie about his status.

So it's also something positive that now there won't be any discussion. Once the Card is delivered by one Member State, it will be automatically recognised everywhere. Then, I agree with Antoine, it's also a pragmatic approach. The directive has created two different instruments, completely separated.

It would be available physically and also on an electronic version. And also, what I think it's very important is that there will be an obligation for the Member States to provide awareness-raising and accessible information to the public. So, that's also very important.

The Card will also respect all the principles of privacy. Normally, there will be measures to be sure to avoid forgery and fraud, and it will complement also national instruments. So, there are a lot of things in this proposal, and yeah, it's a very positive and pragmatic approach.

(Paweł): Yes, as a person who is quite deeply involved in the field of digital accessibility and accessibility in general, I'm very happy to see that the aspect of accessibility has been considered and that the Card will be delivered in both physical and digital forms and that both of them should be fully accessible. This is very, very important.

Antoine, however, what would you suggest? Could there be fields of improvement for the currently proposed strategy for this Card or do you think it's flawless and it can go ahead as it is?

(Antoine): No, unfortunately, it's never like that. It's never all peach and rose and there is always room for improvement. So, I'll mention a few areas in reverse order of importance, starting with something that seems to me to be a matter of fine-tuning.

It isn't sufficiently clear in the proposed text that it should remain voluntary for a person with a disability to hold a Disability Card or a Disability Parking Card.

So, as not to stigmatize them, this should be made clearer in the text. And also that in those areas where EU legislation also already provides for rights for persons with disabilities without having to show a European Disability Card, the introduction of the European Disability Card should not make it indirectly compulsory.

I'm thinking, for instance, of passenger's rights for persons with reduced mobility. There is no question in there of having to show some sort of a European Disability Card or even a national disability card. That's one point.

More importantly is the fact that we recommended, in our consultations with the European Commission ahead of the proposal, that there should be a directive, the text (we didn't know it would be a directive then) should establish a new level centralized register so as to provide information, accessible information, about the event advantages attached to the card in each country, bearing in mind that there are, there will be important national differences.

So, it's important, in order to plan ahead your trip or your move, to be able to seek information as to what exactly the Card will give you when you move or travel to another country.

Such a centralized register would also be key to facilitate cooperation between Member States and also the fight against fraud, which we know is always a concern as Claire mentioned.

More importantly, even probably these are the two main defaults in the EBU's position, the two main defaults of the Commission's proposal. These defaults relate to the scope of the proposed directive.

First of all, it does not consider third-country nationals unless they are family members of an EU citizen on the move. And if you think that disability rights are fundamental rights, nationality should not be a criteria. We argue that any third-country national who is legally resident in an EU country and moving to another EU country legally under EU law, that person too should benefit of the European Disability Card and European Disability Parking Card schemes.

A second point (means this a lot more and I would say that if I had to single out one, that would be the one I would be most vocal about) is the

fact that the directive would be about ensuring equal treatment for persons with disabilities when moving within the EU.

But moving within the EU is not only traveling for short stays, be it for leisure or business or whatever within the European Union. It's also about moving your residence or staying for longer stays than just three months, for instance, in another EU country. And that is completely excluded, the moving part, moving your residence part is completely excluded from the scope of the directive, leaving out a number of persons with disabilities exercising their EU rights.

And I think it's useful here to give you an example: Lars Bosselmann, the EBU Executive Director, when he moved two or three years ago from Brussels to Paris. He is totally blind, he had to have his blindness assessed again in France. That took almost a year, and during that year, he had no disability status in France, and no more rights in Belgium. And that period of limbo, that sort of problem that we call the transition problem, is not addressed by the directive, and it could have done so.

We say that it could have done so in two ways: for instance, simply by saying that within the material scope of the directive, that is, special conditions and preferential treatments in services, even if you're not just staying in the host country, but actually moving to that host country, during the transition period, the European Disability Card should allow you to continue having equal treatment.

And we also say that even further, when it comes to state-funded social protection benefits, precisely because there is this period of limbo, a European Disability Card could have become the tool to organise a consultation between the two countries, country of origin and host country, to decide which of the two countries would offer the social benefits attached to the disability status.

So, we think that not doing that, if it's not going to be done (we are lobbying to have this improvement in the text) would be a missed opportunity.

(Paweł): Antoine, you're hitting it very close to home for me at the moment, because I actually am a resident or a citizen of one EU state and I recently found a job in another. So, all these topics of moving, transferring benefits, finding out basically what am I eligible for, where, and what should I do, is very much on topic for me at the moment.

Even yesterday I made a bunch of administrative calls, and I still have to make some to figure out which health benefits, for instance, I am eligible to receive, where and under which conditions.

So, I definitely see how it looks like, also as the end beneficiary of the potential Disability Card whenever it arrives on the table. And I can tell you that it's a hurdle. It's a hurdle to go into each new country, especially if you want to profit or benefit from all the EU programs that were set up for instance, for young people, and you have to figure out basically by yourself.

I mean, if the country has the infrastructure set up for you to get the information you need, it's already like halfway solved the problem, but it's only halfway, but you actually have to figure out more or less by yourself, where do you need to go?

Also, bear in mind, you may not be able to speak the language because, at the beginning, not many people can and you have to find out where to go, whether you need additional medical examination to prove your disability again. Will it be accepted or not? Will the authority that distributes the disability certification in that country say: "No, because our rules are different than your host country, the country where you came from. We can't grant you these rights."?

So, it's definitely good if there is some concerted effort, as you said, among the EU states to, maybe not harmonise the law as it is because I know it's a sort of an utopian goal, but at least, talk to each other and be able to communicate who is eligible for what in such a case, because now persons with disabilities who are trying that are basically left to their own devices, unless they are lucky to receive a big amount of support from knowledgeable people.

So this is very important to address for people moving around abroad in the EU. Claire, how do you feel about this main criticism of the Card?

(Claire): Oh, yes, I completely agree with what Antoine said because I don't see why this proposal should just cover Union citizens and their family members. It should cover everybody who are residents legally in an EU country.

Then, I also agree why it should cover only very short stays. When we speak about this proposal, we have the feeling that it will cover only situations covering areas such as culture, leisure, sports, or transport. Of course, it will go beyond that, but it's not really the impression we have

when we read the communication about it. It's also an issue concerning the way that the Commission communicates around it.

And I also agree, it should cover longer periods, even more important, this transitional period when a person is going to move to another country to work, to study, or even to take their pension in another EU country and when they will leave their residence, they will stop to be resident in one country.

So, as in some country, as soon as you start to be resident, all the services, benefits will stop at the same time and the time that they get really resident in the new country. And we know that, for the moment, the delays are longer and longer, it's really more and more difficult just to be recognised as resident in another EU country, it takes really months and sometimes years.

And if you had on the top of that, that you have to assess your disability, it will take even more time to get access to such benefits and services. And we know through the questions that we received that people are less without any access to services, even sometimes they must pay for some vital services on their own pocket. Sometimes they do not have enough money to do that.

So, really, I don't see why this proposal cannot really cover as well this transitional period. I think it should be possible and it's a pity that it does not do that. And another thing that I would also like to add is when I read the proposal, it's not explicitly mentioned that the Card should be also issued free of charge. And I think it's something also very important.

(Paweł): Thank you for signaling all of these issues. This is, maybe even a breaking point in that, if this comes through, if the suggestions of your organisations will be listened to and heard and implemented, it may encourage more persons with disabilities to give it a try and take a first step towards independence elsewhere and encourage them to go out of the comfort zone and move abroad, maybe for a shorter time, maybe for a longer time and give it a try. Simple as that.

We are now talking about proposals and initiatives and projects. Antoine, when do you estimate we will see, when will we be able to hold the Card in our hands, put it in our pockets or in our smartphones, mobile devices? When do you estimate this may happen?

(Antoine): Well, it's always difficult to give an estimate because, of course, we do not control the pace of the legislative process. After all, it will have to be a negotiation, a discussion between the European

Parliament and the EU Council. And this could take more or less time, depending on whether they agree fast on a position or not.

What we know is that both those two institutions, called legislators, have the intention to get it through, get it adopted before the European Parliament Elections of June 2024.

So, let's suppose that that does happen and that the directive is adopted before the European Elections. It will probably be then before March, by March next year. If that happens, then at earliest, citizens with disabilities could effectively feel the benefits of the directive from November 2026 at earliest, due to the mechanism of implementing the directive into national legislations, and then, the delay of entry into force of the provisions of the directive.

(Pawel): So, it's still a while away, but it's still, hopefully, this decade. And let's hope for that. Let's keep our fingers crossed that the legislation will not be delayed for too long and that soon enough, we'll be encouraged to travel, move around Europe and be independent wherever we choose to be. Thank you so much for being here with us today. Thank you, Claire. Thank you, Antoine.

And we'll hand it off further to Neven, but before we do, a quick question to you, Neven. How do you find this Disability Card? Have you been also hoping for it for a long time? Maybe already have your first destination in mind? And what would you do with it?

(Neven): Well, of course, I would use this kind of card when I travel in Europe. And, for instance, many years ago, before Brexit, I used to live nearly one year in London and I would have had great use of this kind of card at that time if it would have existed.

And I also believe there is a great potential for new possibilities and opportunities for persons with disabilities in Europe to travel with this kind of support and safety which this card can represent.

At the same time, I'm not really sure that politicians all over Europe will understand this and take advantage of these possibilities. And I'm a little afraid of that they will put in a lot of restrictions. And maybe, we should more see this card now as a first step and it might take some time before it gets fully functional.

The Correspondent' section: Poland

[Music]

(Neven): We are closing our last episode for 2023 with the correspondent' section. This is a section where we will know more about the current challenges of blind and partially sighted persons in Europe. And today, we will talk to Dorota Krać, from the Polish Association of the Blind. So I say welcome to you, Dorota.

(Dorota): Thank you, Neven. Good morning, everyone. I'm Dorota Krać, I work for the Polish Association of the Blind. I'm the chairperson of our regional unit in Lublin, eastern Poland. I represent our association both in EBU and WBU, World Blind Union.

(Neven): That's great. We are very, very pleased to have you here. So we are going to speak about a few topics. What's going on in Poland? I heard that one of those news going on there is connected to a new code for official building, so tell us a little about this new standard.

(Dorota): We are very proud of our new standard because the Polish Association of the Blind is going to introduce a new building code standard, both for Braille signage used in buildings, in public space, as well as all kinds of graphical signs like staircase symbols, floor symbols, and so on.

We didn't really have, we haven't had such a standard until this year. Honestly speaking, all the standards of Polish Braille are a bit outdated now because our oldest standards were introduced in the 1980s. Those were standards for literary Braille. Other standards used for mathematics, for instance, were introduced around 2003. And then, we had a 20 years long gap. So now, we are going to renew all the standards, but the most relevant one is the building code.

(Neven): That sounds really exciting. So, I hear you have great hopes about that.

(Dorota): Exactly. A special commission has been established. We have collected great specialists. We are in touch with them all the time. We organise meetings every month actually to introduce all the necessary changes gradually.

(Neven): OK. But then, I also heard that in your region, in the Lublin region, you are also doing something completely different. You're promoting visual arts. Could you tell us a little about that?

(Dorota): Yeah, that's right. Lublin is very famous for its artistic projects. We became a European capital of youth. It's a great promotion of our regional art and also, contemporary Polish art in Lublin. But our main focus is a big, huge project called "Art Carousel".

And this "Art Carousel" comprises of many smaller projects which give the blind the chance to touch visual arts, so to say, to make those visual arts more familiar and more friendly to the blind. We introduce sculptures to them, we introduce also paintings. We are invited to exhibitions, and moreover, we are able to try ourselves in painting, in making sculptures, so we can both admire the existing artists and, as well, we are able to become artists ourselves.

It's renewed every year. As far as I remember, this year, we have the third edition, so it's a very long lasting project and it's very precious to us. There is also the so-called "Zone of art" in it.

And this series of events has a special focus on making into art. Basically, every sphere of your life, everything actually can be an art. So, we have an art of eating, so using spices, using ingredients in a more artistic way than we used to do before.

(Neven): Well, thank you for that. So, speaking about art, I hear that another thing which can be art is actually voices. And I hear that you have some interesting projects in relation to new voices which can be used, for instance, with screen readers. And so, could you tell us a little about that?

(Dorota): Of course, with pleasure, there is an international project called RHVoice. It's not a Polish project, but we take part in it. The project is held by Americans and Russians and many, many other countries get involved because, fortunately, it becomes increasingly famous. So, now there is five Polish voices, high quality voices, available for free.

And we hope there's going to be many more. We also have a section for catering the needs of underserved languages. Polish is included in the range of underserved languages because underserved, by RHVoice definition, is a language which doesn't have any voice available for free. Even if you have many paid voices, it means that your language is underserved.

It's underserved unless you have at least one voice available for free, for non-commercial use. We are going to introduce our voices, not only to the blind, but also to the people who are not able to speak, those who can't really communicate efficiently because they don't have their own

voices, and we are going to provide them with a voice. So, we need children's voices, young adults' voices, and also, elderly people's voices in order to have good quality voices for everyone in every age.

(Neven): Wonderful, thank you so much, Dorota. This was really an interesting insight into some things which are going on in Poland, thank you for taking your time. I don't know if my voice is doing this in the right way, but I think you say: "Dziękuję bardzo" in Polish to thank you for taking your time and being part of our podcast. And also, I wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

(Dorota): Absolutely, your Polish is very nice. Warm welcome to RHVoice and to all other Polish projects. We are all happy to hear and meet any of you guys.

(Neven): So, Paweł, did you use any of these new Polish voices?

(Paweł): Yes, I do. And I'm really happy they exist because, first of all, some of my very good friends helped create them, both in terms of the grammatical corpus and of the voices themselves.

It's such a democratic technology because it's open-source so everyone can double with the code and also everyone with a little bit of preparation and training can record their own voice and turn it into speech synthesis ready for screen reader use.

So, imagine you could sit in front of your microphone, you would read a bunch of sentences, and then everyone could use your voice on their device of choice.

I really hope this technology can be available to every language in the world in the future. And believe it or not, there are still official EU languages that don't even seem to have one single voice available like this. And, you know, if you think about it, the European Accessibility Act is coming and a lot of devices, according to the Act, should become accessible.

And you can ask yourself the question: "Well, what should some countries make these devices accessible with if there is no easily available speech, text-to-speech technology for their native tongues?". So, I'm really hoping that, one of these days, one of these projects will make this happen.

(Neven): Thank you, Paweł. And by this, I also would like to say thank you very much to you for your fantastic co-hosting during this year. And I would like also to wish you Merry Holidays coming up.

(Paweł): Happy holidays from us as well.

[Music]

(Neven): Bye bye, Paweł. And before we wrap up the podcast, I also would like to say that we should never forget that we have a great sound master helping us doing this podcast. His name is Emiel Cornelisse, he's from the Netherlands. So, a great thanks to you, Emiel, and Merry Christmas to you too.

So, if you would like to subscribe to the “EBU in action” podcast, you can do that in your podcast reader. And if you would like to know more about the European Blind Union, or send us some comments about our show or something, you can find the contact information in the show notes.

And by that, I am wishing everybody a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. Thank you for listening to us this year.

(Voiceover): “EBU in action” is co-funded by the European Union.

END OF DOCUMENT