

# **EBU in Action – Episode 2: Accessible information in consumer products**

## **Intro**

(Neven) Welcome to the second episode of the European Blind Union's podcast, "EBU in Action". Our aim is to discuss different issues related to blind and partially sighted persons in Europe. My name is Neven Milivojevic, and here with me I have my co-host and colleague Paweł Masarczyk. Hello Paweł.

(Paweł) Hello, Neven. How are you?

(Neven) I'm very well, thank you. The snow is melting up here in Sweden. So what about you?

(Paweł) Yeah, Poland is quite cold as well, but we see some rays of sun, so that's very positive. It was raining a lot recently, so I'm almost all the time at home to keep warm, which is important these days, but otherwise doing fine.

(Neven) Great. Great. Okay, so, as always, we are going to give you an insight into the latest news about EBU's work in this podcast and I can already tell you that there is a lot of things going on.

(Paweł) Yes, I'm also excited to hear about that too. There seems to be a lot happening at EBU indeed. And what would be our podcast without the big subject of the day, an important subject for a lot of blind and partially sighted people in Europe. And this time we will talk about consumer products. How accessible are they? How to get this information in an accessible way? And for this we'll have our special guests: Javier Pita, the CEO of Navilens and Bart Simons, the EBU representative to ANEC, the European standardization body. I'm already excited. I don't know about you, Neven.

(Neven) Well, I am excited too, actually. And finally, after we listen to them, we are also going to get the latest news from the community of the blind and partially sighted in Germany this time. We're going to talk to Reiner Delgado from the German Association of the Blind and Partially Sighted, the DBSV. And as always, there are a lot of things to tell and discuss, so I'm really looking forward to this.

(Paweł) Same here. So let's get straight into it.

## News from EBU

(Neven) Now, we will start by taking a look at the most recent news about EBU's activities. Say hello to the External Communications Officer of EBU, Nacho Lopez. Hola, Nacho!

(Nacho) Hello, Neven!

(Neven) I'm really looking forward to listening to you today, as I know you have a lot of things to tell us.

(Nacho) Yeah, sure, because indeed there's a lot of things to tell and speak about now. So let's start. First of all, at the first board meeting in 2023 in Helsinki, EBU's board has decided to host the 12th General Assembly in Lisbon, Portugal, next year. The tentative dates are from February 11th to 14th. At the same time, our organization has also undergone through some internal changes at its secretariat. After the departure of Roman Ferretti, Sergio Marin has become EBU's new Project Officer. Having worked for many years in higher education, he has reflected on how his experience can make a contribution to our organization.

(Sergio Marin's audio) I am thrilled to have joined the European Blind Union as its new Project Officer. Over the years, I have developed an expertise in the management of EU and national projects and after working in several universities and business schools in three different EU member states, I look forward to settling in Paris and contributing to the advancement of blind and partially sighted people in Europe and to working with you all.

(Nacho) Meanwhile, our former Office Assistant, Valérie Bertrand-Vivancos, has been appointed as our new Membership Officer. Having worked for EBU for seven years, Valérie's good overview on the organization's needs will allow her to spot what is required to increase engagement among our members.

(Valérie Bertrand-Vivancos' audio) As the EBU Membership Officer, as is the case in other organisations such as EDF, my role is to develop tools and actions to enhance the national members' involvement, exchange knowledge and communication. This will improve decision-making and overall processes between the members themselves, but also with the EBU Board and the Executive Office.

(Nacho) At the same time, Leslie Nachbaum will replace Valérie as EBU's Office Assistant. With a lot of experience in the field of administrative and financial issues, she will start her EBU adventure in April.

(Neven) Oh, well, we wish all our friends at EBU great success in their new work or new role. By the way, I think that Valérie will provide you with some information for this podcast, won't she, Nacho?

(Nacho) Yeah, sure. As part of her new role, she will be in charge of checking what is going on among our members. And, of course, we will report about that in our podcast, so this will give our audience a very good insight on what is going on in EBU's national members.

(Neven) Great, great. So what more news can we get from you?

(Nacho) Yes, EBU participated in the first meeting of the Disability Employment Package in 2023, as part of the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 of the European Commission. This session included a discussion on good practices in the hiring of people with disabilities. Our contribution was based on reports from the European Platform for Rehabilitation and from European Disability Expertise.

(Neven) That sounds very interesting. So, what do you think that we can expect in the future for blind and partially sighted persons, for instance, seeking a job?

(Nacho) Well, we are expecting more inclusive hiring processes and more accessible workplaces. And currently, we are also working on guidance on reasonable accommodation at the workplace for visually impaired people.

(Neven) Well, so our fingers are crossed then. Ok, so we have time for one more news bit. Tell us what you have.

(Nacho) Yes, we have good news for blind and partially sighted consumers from Portugal. A new decree-law on the accessibility obligations of both products and services has been published. It will come into force in June 2025, so those who do not comply with the set of rules established by then, may have to pay an administrative fee. Despite the delay of the transposition of the European Directive into national law, Portugal finally makes another step into ensuring inclusion in its society.

(Neven) Well, that's most interesting. Thank you so much, Nacho, for taking your time and joining our show today.

(Nacho) Thank you very much, Neven. See you.

(Neven) So, Paweł, well, this is also something we are going to talk about today, but how is it in Poland, for instance? Could you say there is accessible and adequate information about products and services?

(Paweł) I think I will have to give my usual answer to this. A lot has been achieved, but a lot is still to be done. Of course, since the modern technologies came into force and revolutionized the way we shop, so we have websites and apps and all that, more information is available and accessible, but still more could be done. We will discuss this in more detail in our second segment, but for instance, we almost don't have any Braille labels on products. Of course, if you shop something on the Internet, it will be hard to find alternatively described images. But we also have some nice examples. There are some, very few, supermarket chains that offer accessible versions of their prospects inside their mobile apps. There are accessible ATMs, automatic teller machines, for withdrawing money. One example I always like to quote is Inpost, which is the Polish company that operates package receiving machines, so when you order a package, it doesn't have to arrive to your house, (this would be usually a bit more expensive), but it's dropped at a locker and you can pick it up completely by yourself as a blind person using the app of Inpost and it will tell you exactly where your locker is located so you don't have to look for it with your hands. You will have everything written on your phone. You just have to listen in where the door has opened, maybe read the instructions on the phone and find your locker and pick up the package. Moreover, you can also send packages this way so you don't have to stick a paper label over your package anymore if you want to send something to somebody. It's enough if you enter the data in the app and drop your package at the locker. It will be surely delivered to your address, so you are sure that it will go fine wherever you need it to go. And I think this solution is quite unique, Europe-wide, maybe even worldwide, so I'm very proud we have something like this available. We will also hear about another solution coming from Poland later on the show. It will be mentioned in our discussion, but for this, let's wait for the second part of this podcast.

### **The Focus Topic: how can we get access to information of consumer's products?**

(Paweł) And now that we have heard from EBU themselves, about what is new at the organization, it's time for our focus topic of the episode. And this one is very close to every one of us, to every blind and partially sighted person in Europe and beyond, because it's consumer products and their accessibility, accessibility of information that we obtain about these products, and to talk more about it, with me today I have Javier Pita from Navilens and Bart Simons, the EBU representative to ANEC, the European standardization body. Hello guys, how are you?

(Javier) Very well, I'm very pleased to be here.

(Paweł) Thanks Javier. Great to hear from you. Bart, how are you?

(Bart) I'm fine, thank you Paweł. Great to talk to you again.

(Paweł) So, Bart, maybe we'll start with you. Who are you and how are you connected to this topic of accessibility of information on consumer products?

(Bart) I'm from Belgium. I'm blind since birth and I work as an expert on digital accessibility. In the European Blind Union, I've had several roles and currently, I'm a member of the Braille working group and I represent the European Blind Union in ANEC. ANEC is a European organization that represents the consumers in standardization. That can be very broad from products to services and we want to make sure that visually impaired people are not forgotten when the standards are made.

(Paweł) This sounds very exciting and we will learn about it in more detail soon. But before we do this, Javier, you represent this topic from a bit of a different angle. What is it?

(Javier) Yes, I represent Navilens. Navilens is a technology that we have developed after five years of research. It's like a new kind of QR code, much superior to the standard QR code and we are working in an app called Navilens, an app that uses computer vision in order to deliver information for blind users very efficiently, in collaboration with the University of Alicante. We are going to discuss it in more detail later.

(Paweł) Yes, we will, of course, hear of NaviLens and we will also learn what users of the app use it for and how they find it. But before we do, let's start with the most important aspect. Bart, you know this probably very well and this just happened to me right before we started this recording. I grabbed a bottle of juice because, of course, as a host of a podcast, I need to get a drink before I start speaking for a long time and it was apple juice. But basically, there was no way for me to tell whether it's an apple juice for sure. The only way I know is that this particular company we often get juice from bottles that are shaped in a certain way so I know it's definitely them and I know that there is just a couple of options. There is orange juice, there is apple juice, there is, I think, carrot juice and I'm fine with all of them, so it doesn't matter if I pick this or that, I'm fine with any flavor. But it's not always that easy. Sometimes you really have to know what you're opening and, more often than not, you have to be sure, so this is one of the challenges. And what are the others? So why is it so important to access this information about the products that we consume?

(Bart) Indeed, let's start with the product recognition or product identification. What is it in the box or the jar that I'm holding in my hand?

Now, ideally, manufacturers make this easy for us and they make something unique to their product so that we know what's inside. Anyone who has ever seen a jar of Nutella will recognize the shape. It may even be protected. Unless they start with different flavours, everyone knows without any technology or any solution what is inside. Now with your juice bottles, you could use your nose. If you can just simply open them and smell probably, or stick the naughty finger inside and taste. But for some other products, it's of course... before opening you want to know what's there. Now, what else can manufacturers do for us? They can put some Braille labels on the product, like there is now a regulation that medicine products have to be labelled in Braille, but we see that also a few other manufacturers are doing this like cosmetics and some wine bottles, you can find Braille on them. Now, if the manufacturer is not doing something for us, we rely on our own strategies to recognize packages and especially when they are of similar shape. Like I received recently a gift and it consisted of 10 different beer bottles and, of course, before opening, you would like to know which one you will try. Now, if you are very organized and you take the time, you could label them with (we all have been there) some elastic bands. Or you could even make some Braille labels or you could use a product like a Penfriend to label it, but that takes your own time and effort. If you want to hear a bit more about this, EBU recently produced a video on Braille and easy Braille production. So I hope you can include that link in the show notes of the podcast. Now, these strategies work inside your house once you have bought the products and you can use most of those techniques to label, but it's still somewhat cumbersome.

(Paweł) Of course, so this is why it is important to solve it at the level of production, the creation of these products, so before they reach the shelves of the consumers, they already should be equipped with some kind of label or some kind of way for a blind and visually impaired person to identify the product in hand. And one of the solutions is Navilens and, of course, we'll hear from Javier about what Navilens exactly is, but who can explain it better than the users themselves who profit from this technology. So we will hear in a moment from one of the users of Navilens, a lady named Sandy from Ireland, who is successfully employing Navilens in her daily life. So let's hear what Sandy has to say about the product.

(Sandy's audio) These Navilens codes just jump into your phone, not like other barcodes or QR codes. These ones jump into your phone, they find you and you get information, identification and guidance. It's wonderful.

(Pawel) Okay, thank you very much Sandy. That was very insightful. So now that we heard about a code that jumps right into the camera, it sounded a bit mysterious. Javier, what is NaviLens exactly?

(Javier) Yeah, it's mysterious and you don't need to have in your hand in order to scan the NaviLens code. So, the NaviLens code is a kind of QR code, much superior to the QR code, that can be detected and scanned from far away in a very big angle and you can detect several NaviLens codes at the same time. That is super important for this topic. So, the NaviLens code was created for blind users after five years of research between NaviLens and the University of Alicante, here in Spain. So because we saw that it's very difficult to scan a QR code, a QR code that you have in products, because you need to know where exactly it is, and sometimes it's very hard to scan. In order to solve that, we spent five years and we designed a new kind of code that is a Navilens code, that can be captured very quickly and very easily for the use from any mobile phone, any mobile device, Android and iPhone as well. So, when Sandy is talking about the codes jump, okay, is that it's incredibly efficient, so, if you have your product in your hand, you only need to open NaviLens and automatically, boom, we've captured the code, no matter if it's straight or it's an angle or whatever. And even if you are at your home with different products in front of you, for example, the example of Bart with the beers, okay, and imagine that those products are with the Navilens codes, you don't need to check, you only need to read the information and, automatically, will jump that information to the screen of your mobile phone and with VoiceOver of course, or Talkback, you will hear about that information and that is super important to achieve. Something that is important as well, to be able to be in the supermarket, in front of a supermarket shelf with plenty of products and be able to discover or pick up one specific product, the product that you want with a specific variant or flavour. So I hope that in the future your juice bottle will have the NaviLens code, and you can quickly distinguish if it's orange or it's apple or it's another variant. So this technology was first implemented with the RNIB in the UK and Kellogg's company, and they implemented it across their cereals and it was an incredible success. So if you go to any supermarket across all Europe, across all the European countries, you will find all the Kellogg's cereals with the NaviLens code and this is amazing because you only need to download a free app, NaviLens is completely free, in iOS and Android. You only need to download it, put in front of, more or less, the cereal aisle, and the users will hear about the different Kelloggs. We'll hear this variant, this and other and the users can not only access to all the information of the Kelloggs, can pick up one of the Kelloggs located in them.

(Paweł) Bart, is this the approach that ANEC and the European standardization movement is taking in this case, or is it one of the options that is being considered? Or are there also other solutions or different solutions that are taken into consideration? So what could be done to make these products more accessible out of the box?

(Bart) Now let me help you out of the dream. Standards usually don't say how things have to be done. They mainly say what has to be done and we leave it to the invention of the market to come up with solutions. So I'm happy there is not just one way forward and, so, creativity is still invited to keep developing those things. Yeah, I think NaviLens is a very good outcome of that research, because indeed scanning a typical QR code, if you have tried this with Seeing AI or Envision AI, you probably will agree with me that it's not easy and, also, we depend on the database that they have access to, whether they recognize the product that we are trying to scan. So the NaviLens approach is different in the sense that they have direct contact with the manufacturer so they are absolutely sure that the information is correct. Of course, we depend on the manufacturer to find a free space on their package to include the code but then it works beautifully well. If this is not possible, as long as not all products are equipped with this specific code, we can, of course, use those, we can scan the box with some other smartphone apps like Envision or Seeing AI or SuperSense or there are certainly others like Lookout, I don't want to name all of them. And there, well, it will depend on our abilities to hold the camera on the lighting service, so it's still not the perfect solution, I think. So, we will have to keep searching for good solutions to access the information that is printed on packaging.

(Paweł) Yeah, you mentioned databases of, not really QR, but in this case barcodes of products, that they exist, and it seems like the most logical solution, right? Because the employees of supermarkets or other shops, they actually have to have these databases to tell what kind of product you're buying. So going by that logic, why shouldn't these bases be also available for blind people who would like to recognize the products? Do you think we can have a hope that such a product that will work Europe-wide, at least, is viable in the nearest time? Because it seems like a quite simple solution if you look at it, especially that the technology seems to be there. It's just a matter of access or am I oversimplifying it?

(Bart) Yes, it would be good if we had access to such a database but, of course, we are limited by the barcode. As you say, that some sighted person in the shop, he can see and point directly at the code. Finding the typical barcode is still a challenge, so anything that can help with that is absolutely welcome.



(Pawel) Like, for example, labeling the code in some specific tactile way, right?

(Bart) Yeah, that's an interesting solution, yes.

(Pawel) Javier, do you also see this as a possible solution, as an alternative to dedicated codes? Or maybe you have also other solutions in mind that could possibly help in identifying and obtaining information about the products?

(Javier) This is a super important point for the accessibility point of view for consumer products and it's key. So, based on our experience, the barcode is not enough because the retailers, the supermarkets, only have one information linked to the barcode, that is the price. It's the name of the product and the price. They don't need anything more than to pay for that product in the supermarket. The manufacturers, they have all the information, and not only about the ingredients and allergens, about for example the sustainability of the product, how you supply that product or, for example, the telephone number that you need to contact in case you have any problem with the product. The manufacturers have all that information and it's needed to digitalize it and this is not possible with the barcodes because the barcodes, in the end, have not the changes, for example, for the formula, the ingredients of the product, the ingredients change a lot during the time. So, the manufacturers have that information. The project that we are doing with the manufacturers, not only with Kellogg's, we are doing with Kellogg's, Procter & Gamble, Pantene, Ariel, Coca-Cola in the UK and Ireland, Aunt Bessie's in the UK as well, and some brands in Spain. So, we are not only adding the Navilens code that solves the problem of reading or scanning the code, that is an important point. We are synchronizing the databases of the manufacturer and the information of the manufacturer in order to deliver that information for the users and deliver all the information: ingredients, allergens, how to resupply, how to cook, contact telephone number and so on. And not only that: the manufacturers are providing this information in multiple languages, so for example, if you visit Spain and you speak only English, German, French or whatever, you are going to receive the information in your own language and in much better than reading the physical product because the physical product only have information, usually, in one or two languages. Navilens provides it in 35 languages. And another point that is important to highlight is that the manufacturers are doing something. They are adding the Navilens code in front of the packaging, not in one corner of the product. Doing that, they are allowing blind users to scan in front of a supermarket shelf without the need to touch or pick one particular product. In order to locate the product that they want, and in order to discover which products are in front of the

supermarket shelf. So, I think that the manufacturers are doing a very good step in order to make their products more accessible, adding the NaviLens code in front of the packaging, synchronizing the information of the product. All the information that the product has, like ingredients, allergens, and all the other stuff, and creating this experience in order that the products could be accessible. And this innovation is not only good for blind users and visually impaired people; it's good for everyone, because when a fully sighted person goes to a supermarket and that person doesn't understand about the language, can access to the information in their own language and can pick up the product depending on the information in their own language. That is something that is very, very good. So the database, the information, and be able to scan very quickly and very efficiently the code are key to make a new standard, new way in order to access to all the information that our consumer product has.

(Paweł) Okay, thank you for this clarification. There is something new I have learned about the barcodes. I didn't know all of that before, so it's always great to learn it. I'm also always thinking about all the cases where it's not possible or somebody cannot or doesn't want to use a smartphone and, in these cases, it's also important to consider some low-tech solutions like Braille labels that Bart has mentioned before and, for example, tactile features of a certain package type. So let's hope that also these solutions will be taken into consideration. Another important aspect of the information that we want to obtain about the product is the expiry date. This is one of the top questions I'm getting from my friends when they ask me how I manage my household. It's like, how do you know that your meat or cheese or milk hasn't run out? And it's a question I'm often asking myself, how can I tell for sure without making meticulous notes and planning it all out? And recently, there was an app making rounds around the blind community at large called Zuzanka, which is an app made in Poland. It's an app that is a expiry date scanner and, from the description, we can tell that it's basically an app with pre-trained AI models, trained on many, many different products and their expiry dates, which basically tell us when our product is about to run out of expiry date. And I think it's a very important aspect of consumer products information access. Bart, what other solutions would you see and how is this being addressed at a more global level? How should we access this information?

(Bart) Yes, indeed. The expiration date is something you want to quickly pinpoint. With existing scanning apps, you may run across it, but again you never know like the QR code will it be on the top or at the bottom or in the back. So, you would have to turn your product around and scan

around and hopefully fall on that specific piece of information that is somewhere on the package. Now, since you're scanning it, you know it's absolutely sure that it's added to the product. We don't need to query any database so, at least, what is printed on the package if you have access to it. Now, Zuzanka is interesting because it helps you, it's specialized just in this. In the end, we can wonder if we need for every piece of information a different app but, at least, what it tries to do, it does it quite well. But for me, a limitation, it's still that, you still need a smartphone for everything you're doing in your kitchen. More importantly for me, you need to hold it in your hands and what I would like, especially with dirty hands or in the shop with full hands, I would like to have something, a camera or another device that I can use hands-free, that's maybe somewhere attached to my head or to my glasses or anywhere, that I can have a hands-free mobile camera, maybe connected to a smartphone. But I will leave that to the invention of the creativity of the market. I really would like to have something that is stable and that is looking the way I'm looking at something.

(Paweł) Yes, that sounds really reasonable and also, again coming back to the low-tech subject, it sounds like this very basic information that should be placed on the package in some kind of tactile way, be in Braille, be in big tactile digits, but any way that doesn't require a smartphone. Nevertheless, it's good to see that this subject is interesting to the market and something is being done to alleviate this issue. Javier, do you also have some thoughts about this? How would you approach this very specific aspect of information access on consumer products, so expiry dates?

(Javier) Yeah, this is super important for the users and, indeed, for all the users because, sometimes, you are seeing expiration dates even for fully sighted people in bottles of water that are super difficult to read, super difficult to read, or on the cans of Coca-Cola, for example. So, the approach that we are working on is following a standard that is called a GS1 Digital Link. GS1 is the organization that assigns a barcode for each one of the products on Earth. The GS1 Digital Link is one approach to add the information about the expiration date, batch number, that is very important as well, into a 2D code. So? in synchronizing the manufacturing to create this 2D code in order to store all that kind of information. Our approach is a hands-free mode, so you don't need to look around the packaging in order to locate the code and extract that information; and that is the approach that we are working with manufacturers in order that will be available. I must say that Zuzanka is a great app and they have done an incredible innovation and you must be very proud, because it's a company from Poland and it's a great

advance, but we are approaching in that other way that is using a 2D code, extract that information and show to the users, through the GS1 Digital Link. That is the next big thing that is going to happen.

(Pawel) Okay, so there is a database in which this kind of information could be stored globally. Bart also mentioned this issue of actually identifying where the expiry date is. The way Zuzanka approaches it is basically by giving the user a little tutorial with a description of where the date is placed on most common products. It's an interesting one because you hardly ever see an app, like, teaching you where to find the things that you need to scan, and of course, it relies on the fact that you don't have any readily available database, so it's a sort of a solution in that case. As we see, the solutions are abundant, plenty of ideas out there, let's see how the market shapes for this in the future, and most of all, let's hope that we will live to see the day when every product - I know it's very far-fetched but one can always dream and dreams are important - every single product we reach out for in the shelves is accessible or, even better, every product we come across in a shopping alley is interesting to us and we know about it because it's accessible to us, so we also know what to pick the way a sighted person does. I know it's big dreams, but this is the future we would like to live in. Thank you a lot, Javier, thank you Bart, for this very important discussion and here is to hoping that quite soon we will live in a more accessible future when it comes to consumer products.

(Bart) Thank you very much to all the research that's being done. Everything that we try is only when we try something we can move forward. So it's very good that different organizations and companies are trying to solve the problem from different angles. Let's keep that creativity and inspiration high. And yes, I agree: we want to have access to all kinds of products, not only the premium brands, but of course also the branded products of a specific shop, so whatever we can do or whatever ideas that the listeners may have, please contact European Blind Union if you have any other research or any other solution in your country that we don't know of yet, because we will not stop following this topic. I'm always very interested to hear what I don't know yet, so I guess there is a way to contact the team.

(Pawel) Yes, of course, all the contact information will be given out in the show notes, so...

(Bart) Excellent!

(Pawel) Fear not, there will be a way. Neven, when was the last time that you bought something at a shop and you found that it's accessible? What kind of product was that?

(Neven) Well, I have to say that I seldom find the information accessible and well, if that wouldn't be enough, my shop where I usually shop, they shuffle around everything every second or third year just because they think that people will shop more, so even if I'd learn where to find my things, in two years they will be in some other place in the shop. I think this is a very important topic, so let's hope for more success in this field in the future for us.

(Paweł) Yes, I hope so too. That's also my problem. Either the things are reshuffled, as you said, and then, even if you ask for assistance, usually it can happen for you, but it sometimes happens that the staff will just say they are very, very busy, busy and it's not possible to assist you at this time and then it's quite problematic, so let's hope that this topic will be more on the agenda in the future.

### **Correspondent' section: Germany**

(Neven) So welcome to the correspondent' section. This is a section where we get a better insight into the situation for blind and partially sighted persons across Europe. And today, we will talk to Reiner Delgado from the Association of the Blind and Partially Sighted in Germany. So most welcome to our show, Reiner. Ein herzliches Willkommen!

(Reiner) Danke schön! Hello Neven, hello Paweł!

(Neven) So tell us briefly, who are you, Reiner?

(Reiner) I am Reiner Delgado, I am 52 years old, I have three children and I am married. I live in Berlin. I am blind because of Retinitis Pigmentosa. I work in the German Federation of the Blind and Partially Sighted, or in German it's Deutsche Blinden und Sehbehinderten Verband, DBSV. This is the umbrella organization of 19 regional associations of blind and partially sighted people and 35 other organizations who work in this field and we have about 25,000 members. My task, as the head of social affairs, is on a national level: the topics of children, youngsters, women, parents, deafblind people, Braille, education, culture and sports.

(Neven) Oh, that's really a lot of responsibilities.

(Reiner) Yeah.

(Neven) Well, but anyway. I know you also engage in some working groups within the EBU.

(Reiner) That's right. As I said, I'm responsible for Braille in our organization and also on the European level. There was rebuilt working group on Braille two years ago and now, I'm the leader of this group and

we have about eight persons very busy in this field of making Braille more accessible for blind people and working and fighting for Braille, and one result, for example, is that we published a video on the EBU YouTube channel about Braille. The main target group is sighted people, to inform them on how they can get Braille and how they can make Braille for their blind relatives, for example.

(Neven) Yeah, we are delighted to have you here.

(Reiner) Thank you very much.

(Neven) Well, actually, I'm amazed because in our pre-chat, Reiner, we discovered that we met more than 35 years ago. I don't know, should we tell the listeners what we did together as teenagers?

(Reiner) Yes, of course. I would tell them.

(Neven) Okay, well, we played chess, didn't we?

(Reiner) Yeah, it was the first chess world championship in chess for youngsters who are blind and partially sighted and it was very nice to be there in Sweden, once in winter, once in summer, and this shows that it's nice to offer international things even for young people and finally, we arrive at EBU, which is international too.

(Neven) Yes. And talking about international, I think we should move on to some of your news from Germany, and I heard some rumor about that there was some international song contest on.

(Reiner) Yes, of course. We did this two years ago and it's a bit according to the Eurovision Song Contest. We are now making the International Low Vision Song Contest and the big final will be on 12<sup>th</sup> May, so one day before the ESC. We have now 23 countries taking part and they will send us their songs until the end of March and then, we will prepare the show and we will have this online show on YouTube. It will be streamed and you can listen to songs from America, Africa, Asia and, of course, Europe. Later, you can vote and then we will see who is the champion in songwriting and singing.

(Neven) Wow! So everybody can vote for this?

(Reiner) Everybody can vote, yeah.

(Neven) Oh that's great. Oh well, that's something we will have to follow. What more is on in Germany then?

(Reiner) So, of course, we are doing a lot of things but I want to pick out some nice things or interesting things. As I said, we work for deafblind people also, and what we are just preparing is an iPhone workshop for deafblind people. So you can connect your smartphone via Bluetooth

with a Braille display and so you can use a lot of different apps without synthetic speech, but only with your Braille display, and so even deafblind people have the opportunity to communicate, of course, via things like email and WhatsApp and SMS, but also in a live communication. There are special apps for this, and then you have apps which scan text or scan products and so on and so on, and we show these people how to manage this on their smartphone to be more independent, so deafblind people mostly depend on personal assistance and we want to give them a bit more autonomy.

(Neven) That sounds really very interesting.

(Reiner) Yeah, and maybe one other thing that we are working on is tactile books for blind children. So we started this about 10 years ago, also with an international project funded by the EU, by the former Comenius Programme. We developed with other countries together a style of books which is quite interactive and has tactile representations with many different materials and as 3D as possible, and of course, with Braille and normal print; and we love it to create these books, for example, the last book that we published were to make the knots that people use when they are sailing on the sea and there you can learn how to make these knots.

(Neven) That's great. That's great. So, well, finally, I have one more question to you, actually, because we all know this awful thing which is going on in Europe with the war in Ukraine and the aggression against Ukraine and in relation to that, I know that a lot of refugees came to Germany. Are you and your organization doing anything in relation to that?

(Reiner) So we are not the closest country to Ukraine. Of course, in Poland, there's much more, there are much more refugees and much more work on this and there are also much more blind and partially sighted refugees, but over this full year that we now nearly have this terrible war, there came people to Germany too and in March we organized three buses and financed them, which took people from Lviv, from Ukraine and from Poland to Germany and we helped them to find places to live. Over the months, now, we have contacted about 180 blind and partially sighted persons from Ukraine and we try to help them in anything that... Yeah, any problem that they have. We have a person here speaking Russian who had very much time on the phone advising people and a big project that we did was a mobility camp, which we organised in Poland, to give mobility training to those people, because they were not so skilled in mobility and it's very important to get

independent and to get familiar to a country that you are able to walk around to find your way.

(Neven) Well, I hear you're doing really many interesting things in Germany and we are very happy that you took your time to share some of them with us. So thank you very much Reiner for being our correspondent this episode.

(Reiner) Yeah, thank you for listening to me and I really appreciate EBU as a platform and a forum where we can meet with people from other countries. Of course, we do a lot of very important political work, but what we do also is just to meet, to get to know each other and to build a very nice international network.

(Neven) Okay, thank you. Bye-bye, Reiner.

(Reiner) Bye-bye.

(Neven) So, Paweł, I don't know, this was many interesting things here from Reiner, but tell me, how is your singing? Maybe you would like to participate in this international song contest and send your contribution before the end of March?

(Paweł) You know, Neven, I think I would feel more at ease moderating the show, if ever the need arises. Like even when I watch Eurovision, I'm always excited the most about the giving out of the points and the Eurovision hosts connecting to all the different countries and saying "hello Europe" from Italy, Sweden, Poland and so on. It's always interesting to hear that and I always imagined myself doing like just that sitting there and screaming "hello Europe" into the void and waiting for the reaction but I'm very sure there will be a lot of really good contributions. I have spoken to some friends in Poland who actually want to try their singing skills in this competition and they do singing much more professionally so I really hope one of them will succeed and we have a nice representation and I'm looking forward to the entire show. I know it will be hard to give out all the points and the places but, you know, the experience taught us from Sweden that "The winner takes it all!", so we'll see who that will be.

(Neven) Wonderful! So thank you very much for today's show, Paweł, and I think we are about to wrap it up, but before I do that I would like to say a big thank you also to our sound master Emiel Cornelisse in the Netherlands, and I really would like to encourage you all that if you would like to subscribe to the "EBU in action" podcast you can do that, probably most easily, in your podcast reader or if you would like to know more about the European Blind Union, just send us some comments or



questions. You can find all the contact details in the show notes. So until next time, we wish you all the very best. Bye bye.

(Paweł) Bye-bye!

(Voiceover)

EBU in action is co-funded by the European Union.