# The Rights Reporting Podcast ep 3 –

# Digital inclusion (1).mp3

[00:00:00] This podcast is supported by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme of the European Union.

**Neven:** [00:00:16] Welcome to the right reporting podcast. This is a show aiming to improve the rights of blind and partially sighted citizens in Europe. And my name is Neven Milivojevic and I will be today's host. Today's episode will focus on the important right of digital inclusion. It is, for instance, stipulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Article nine, the convention called UNCRPD. So what is digital inclusion? Well, one way of describing it is the ability of individuals and groups to access and use information and communications technologies. It includes not only access to the internet, but also the availability of hardware, software, digital content and services. And not to forget, also training for digital literacy skills required for effective use of information and communication technologies. So one very important step towards this digital inclusion has been the preparation and the decision about the European Accessibility Act, where the European Commission had a key role. Today in our episode, we will hear more about what this implies and about the challenges and possibilities which lay in front of us. We will meet two experts, one from Estonia and one from Croatia, and we will hear more about barriers and challenges, but also about possibilities and tools for solutions. Let's first listen to Ines Hlevnjak from Croatia, who will tell us about her experience when trying to create a profile on the funding and tenders portal of European Commission

**Ines:** [00:02:25] Three months ago, I decided that I wanted to explore a little bit more the European Commission's funding and tenders portal, where one can find all the EU programmes offering funding for companies and associations. And the first problem I encountered was the search box that I couldn't use. I am the user of a screen reader. Then I was using the NVDA and I couldn't choose filters or any parameter, so I had to go through all available and not available funding opportunities until I got to the one that was interesting for me. A couple of times I also experienced the problem with the European Commission's notice that was interfering with the screen reader because the notice, for example, was informing the people that some function of the portal was not available at that time. And at the same time, I wanted to hear like the text my cursor was on, so that was really frustrating. So after I read the call documentation, I figured I had to to create a profile on the portal to be able to submit a proposal for the project. And there I had the problem because firstly, I couldn't jump to the section, but I had to go through all the the information on the site and it took me more time that than it should have. And another problem was that the editing boxes in the part where I had to fill in my personal information were not accessible for a screen reader, so I couldn't select, for example, the country I'm from or similar. So I was a little bit disappointed with that. And then I decided to write to the IT helpdesk, the European Commission and there was another disappointment because neither that help form was accessible there. I couldn't select the country, neither the field of the problem that I was experiencing. So I felt this and really left behind.

**Neven:** [00:05:18] I would like to welcome our two guests for today's podcast, we have Jakob Rosin from Estonia, who is the chair of Estonian Blind Union. And we also have Bruno Tot, assistive technology expert at the Croation Blind Union. Bruno., what are your thoughts about this story?

**Bruno:** [00:05:41] So since she is my work colleague at the Blind Union, I am quite familiar with the case. In fact, I helped create a video showcasing the issues with the accessibility of the website, which turned out to be wildly inaccessible, especially the help desk part where you are supposed to report the issues, which was quite ironic and the whole thing with the accessibility issues. I find also ironic on the whole, since the tenders site and the European Commission in general, you know, it's structured its purpose is to fund projects and activities that also include improving the accessibility they had responded. Since then, they state, they had stated they are working on a new platform, which should be completely accessible. So the only thing right now that we can do is sit and wait and be patient and hope for the best now. And it's frustrating for visually impaired person. I mean, I know from personal experience as well when you need to get some information and you have the skills and the knowledge as she does for accessing the site. And yet, you know, the information is just out of her reach because, well, the site or any any sort of information, any platform was not designed correctly. So I can sympathize.

**Neven:** [00:07:17] I understand. And what about you, Jakob? Do you have any reflections about the case we just heard?

**Jakob:** [00:07:23] So from my experience, those barriers keep showing up in, like most unexpected places. You know, for example, the European Commission is talking quite a bit about accessibility and, you know, with all our Accessibility Directive and the Accessibility Act. So you would assume they themselves are paying attention to their own accessibility. And it's quite unexpected that those issues show up in these cases where, you know, especially you want your voice to be heard or they would want to get the input of the European citizens. So I'm actually a little shocked, more shocked than average because, you know, we are used to accessibility issues, unfortunately. But where an institution which is talking about accessibility and trying to enforce it doesn't follow their own rules. I think that's quite peculiar.

**Neven:** [00:08:22] It is significant. Yes. Well, but that brings us then to to the topic of the new Accessibility Act, which actually was handled by the European Commission. And could you tell us a little more about the act and what we can expect for the future from its accessibility act?

**Jakob:** [00:08:41] As many rules do, many directives and acts, they kind of try to paint a very nice future for us. So the Accessibility Act actually does kind of try to enforce accessibility rules on to a lot of different areas and sectors. There is public transport, there's banking, there are e-commerce possibilities, et cetera. So as we know, we have the European Union Web Accessibility Directive, which was enforced a couple of years ago, but that only focused itself on the websites of public sector. So governments and institutions from your own country. But everything in private sector has been quite left out. And it's not good to force everything by rule, but it certainly helps. And I'm glad that the Accessibility Act is coming into play here. So for example, the act could help us enforce accessible payment terminals or accessible ATMs on the streets. We have those issues showing up everywhere where payment terminals are becoming touch screen and unusable for blind and visually impaired users, or the ticket machines, which we see in train stations and in bus stations where you can buy tickets. Those are all touch screens. Grocery stores are heavily implementing self-service kiosks and mechanisms. Those are inaccessible as well because all of them are based on touch screen terminals, which are not accessible. All of those topics are being covered on the. Accessibility Act, and it's going to be interesting for a few years, the implementation period for that is quite long.

**Jakob:** [00:10:36] I have from a top of the year my head the end ideally is in the 2030s. I think 2035 is the year where everything has to be accessible. So, it's about 13 years to go here. And part of the reason it's that long is that much of this technology doesn't exist, so the manufacturers really need to start thinking today. Well, actually, yesterday they should have started thinking on how to make their products accessible because it's going to be needed. The manufacturers who make those terminals and devices are soon going to be bombarded by stores and then the other companies who, you know, maybe give those terminals to stores on demand and accessibility. So it's going to be a whole set of new standards, new rules on this front as well. So technically, it's going to be really interesting. I'm quite excited to see what's going to happen. The act isn't ideal in the sense that it has left out some some things. There are some exemptions like transport. The urban transport is not fully extensible. There are terminals inside transport like, you know, you have some information screens or stuff like that in trains. Those don't usually need to be accessible. So there are some exceptions which we hope will be changed pretty soon. But at the moment, if in theory I'm really excited for what's coming, I hope it reflects into practical world as well.

**Neven:** [00:12:12] Thank you, but you, Bruno, what do you think about what are your expectations in relation to the recent development and how do you think that the Accessibility Act can be used to make changes in Croatia, for instance?

**Bruno:** [00:12:26] Well, I am a sceptic by default, so I have quite low expectations from personal experience, but I have to agree with everything, Jakob said. Because we do need some sort of regulation, some sort of enforcement to actually force everyone to start considering accessibility. We do have the same problems like Jakob stated. Most things are inaccessible. Accessible public transport is semi accessible only here in Zagreb, in the capital. And that's only some of the time, not all of the time. So, and only like citywide tram transport or some local buses. Not, nothing major, really. So I do think that it's quite necessary and well, I hope it will be. It will fare better than the accessibility of the European Commission's website. So I hope we won't see a similar thing where one thing is being preached and then another is actually being practiced. I'm always worried about legislation and sort of legislation directive anything like that, since it tends to be quite vague. And Jakob will remember when we were attending one of the webinars held by a certain company, I posed the question why the presenter thought the Web Accessibility Directive was interpreted so differently between countries. Was it because it was so vague or because the responsible institutions were ill equipped to actually handle it? And I believe the answer is a bit both. And actually the presenter did say that they believed you must not be too prescriptive with certain directives and legislation, which is partially true because it's quite difficult to define exact features that a certain product needs to have, while also being broad enough because you cannot predict what will be invented, what will be created and put out on the market. But on the other hand, the argument the person stated was like this is an example for websites.

**Bruno:** [00:14:47] So what they said was a good website in one country won't necessarily mean it's a good website for another country, which is concerning the visual impairment I have to strongly disagree with because I believe that certain things can be quite strongly, narrowly and precisely defined regarding the visual impairment. So you can say if certain product or platform website, whatever does not have speech or is not accessible via any screen readers in a meaningful way, then it's not going to be a good website in any country. So that's quite universal, I believe, and I hope the recent shift in the market that I've seen. By that, I mean, there are certain companies, private companies actually being formed and who are specializing in certain types of accessibility, providing certificates and other services. I hope that shift will push the rest of the market to actually consider, OK, this would be good PR. We could use this and that will kind of, uh, you know, pool the accessibility improvement along alongside it. Because I mean, we've had certain leaps of inaccessibility over the past few years because the for, for instance, the dark themes have become commonplace in design. There are new trends in design, universal design, which have helped accessibility greatly. So I hope something like that will happen here, although I am a bit sceptical, as I've said, more and more than a little, maybe. But we as a Croatian blind union, are actually trying to get in contact with the responsible institutions, try to establish connections in the government to actually get an early start on implementing this and also improving other aspects.

**Jakob:** [00:16:55] So I really agree with you here that on the topic of actually knowledge as well, and I think it's a very good time to reach out when we talk about Web Accessibility Directive. I think one of the issues is why it hasn't worked so well is the very low knowledge of accessibility and the way people who have a disability use assistive technologies and the knowledge among developers is quite low. And I think I'm afraid and all exactly almost non-existent, unfortunately. But I'm afraid we are kind of creating the same issue with the Accessibility Act here. So if you're going to be a terminal manufacturer or a telecom company or whatever, you still, you know, don't know. So I think it's important for blindness organisations also to reach out over their knowledge. And this has also been mentioned that we kind of need more accessibility experts on the field because that the need is going to grow exponentially and all the time because of those new regulations.

**Bruno:** [00:18:03] So the training is constantly needed for because we need to train new potential accessibility experts. You cannot just, you know, OK, I'm a blind guy using a screen reader. I'm an accessibility expert. That's not how it works, unfortunately. I think we would have been in a much better place had it worked that way. But. and also, you need to, like you said, you need to train developers, you need to train, need to teach everyone basically the wider public, you know, the general public why that's important. In one of their roundtables, I spent my whole lecture just explaining to everyone why skip the content is quite crucial for navigating any website, for instance. And as we saw in the accessibility report, I think Jakob will be quite familiar with that, navigation was listed as the top issue people have with any sort of website, which is not surprising at all to to anyone who is in this field. The issue is like I said, the vagueness is quite an issue, and I think I have not studied the act itself. I have not had the chance to study it quite thoroughly, but I am pretty certain you can correct me on this one. I hope I'm wrong. But is there any mention of localization as an accessibility feature so that any product needs to be localized in the native language? Because localization is one of the key factors for actually making something accessible to the wider audience. Because, you know, I know English. Jakob knows English, but not everyone does, and not everyone needs to.

**Never:** [00:19:49] Do you have any answer to that or?

**Jakob:** [00:19:52] Well, as far as I know, the act doesn't contain anything mentioning localization. And certainly, for example, Estonia is taking over the act with an accessibility law. Unfortunately, the accessibility law is basically like a translation of the act into the Estonian legislative system, and this doesn't either contain anything mentioning localising, which in my opinion, is bad because many of those devices speak in English. Find the text to speech synthesizers are available for English. But not so in Estonia, so that's as a small language, we kind of need to think of that.

**Bruno:** [00:20:36] So like I said, that's an often overlooked feature alongside affordability because as we all know, I mean, the prices of any sort of accessibility aids are quite ludicrous, at least here in Croatia, and just a few of them are subsidized. Actually, you can get remittance for any. And so that's affordability and localization are probably the two entry point requirements for accessibility for anything. So if I don't speak the language the device does and I cannot purchase it and I'm not going to use it. And when you eliminate

**Neven:** [00:21:13] May I sorry to interrupt you? May I ask you? We talked about the level of knowledge and you mentioned like the training was one of those things, which was important. I just wonder whether any other force you have on how to solve the lack of knowledge among providers of services. And so because, as you say, both of you, this is a key issue.

**Bruno:** [00:21:41] So we do host lectures and like public panels, presentations, education, all sorts of things for different profiles of people. So, professionals, like, for instance, medical staff, we do we do not have anything specifically for developers, but we do. I personally participate in anything technology related. So, we try to reach a wider audience via that. So, we basically insert ourselves into some events which would be widely visited because as someone else on one of the other conferences mentioned, it seems that the audience that the attendees for any sort of accessibility panels or any such events seem to be always, you know, the same few people. So that's not reaching quite wide enough. And I know there's been talk and some training resources which are free and some are paid, have been and are being actually created for developers, for instance, and that's something we can do. So we can create resources. Maybe you can make educational videos. Well, that's basically it's I mean, we have had several companies, actually one telecom provider. It was just a single person actually interested from the telecom company asking us how they could make telephone bills and other bills for their services more accessible to blind people. And they had considered, you know, printing them in braille and stuff like that, which some of that was pointless, but it was great that they actually had shown some interest.

**Neven:** [00:23:27] So I understand that the Association of Blind and partially sighted in Croatia plays a key role in this.

**Bruno:** [00:23:38] Sorry, just a small correction it's a blind union, just blind for now. Unfortunately, partially sighted are quite left in the open, unfortunately, in Croatia.

**Neven:** [00:23:47] Fair enough. Fair enough. Thank you very much for that. Now, Jakob, talking about the lack of knowledge amongst the service providers. I mean, what are your thoughts on how can we try to solve this gap which exists?

**Jakob:** [00:24:06] I think one of those things is we need to show the benefits of accessibility features to more groups of people. The misconception of accessibility today is that accessibility features are needed just by disabled people, but it's not like that. And first of all, we haven't really defined what is the definition of a disabled person. I think we need to also concentrate more on if we make those changes, who will benefit not only screen reader users, but maybe people who are elderly or who are or even we make the website simpler or the application simpler to read or use. Then not only low vision people benefit for that, but also like elderly people, children, people who are using their device one-handed, who are using it in a car or a bus exactly who are in a hurry or tired, et cetera. So, think those we need to kind of emphasize those values in various areas more to make the understanding that it's not just a small target group because unfortunately, when we talk about private sector, a lot of them will eventually, you know, start putting into the numbers. When we spend, you know, those tens of hours or hundreds of hours of development for accessibility, what's our gain, how much users to be gained? You know, how much will they pay? Those are the questions you really shouldn't ask because you know, you would really ideally want your product to be as usable.

**Jakob:** [00:25:45] But this is one of the areas I think where a lot of people would benefit because we've seen those examples where services which are accessible are being used by the greater public, more or preferred by the general public because it's usable. And I quite often like to make this example of pyramid that visually impaired people or disabled people are usually at the top with the greatest needs of accessibility, but down at the other groups of users, the need is there as well. It might be smaller, but the need is there and not everybody would realize it or not. Everybody would complain about this. But if you would ask in detail from people about some service which is not accessible, you would find that they will complain about a lot of those things which are trouble for users with disabilities as well. So I think the broader benefits of accessibility should also be emphasized during those trainings and meetings, cetera.

**Bruno:** [00:26:53] Yeah, that's what we actually do. And it's a great point you brought up, actually. So maybe the collective motto of all associations of the blind or the movement in general could be accessibility equals usability because you never know when an accessibility feature can prove useful to you. I mean, one example that has nothing to do with visual impairment or any sort of visual disability is I don't know if you've noticed in modern cars, especially hybrids, we've had several of those you have, you know, the car mode on a phone actually makes everything bigger, fewer icons so you can concentrate on the road. But now with all sorts of the statistics and icons and everything's being crammed into small displays in the infotainment center, and you need to pay quite close attention to what's on screen and you lose focus on the road. And that's something that can also be counted as reduced accessibility because it's endangering everyone.

**Neven:** [00:28:04] So you're both targeting actually one term here, which is sometimes used, which we call universal design. But that could be a way forward, could we, because we are approaching the end of our podcast? Could you please tell us about this a little more about universal design and how you think this could be something which could create possibilities for their future?

**Jakob:** [00:28:29] It's slightly overused, in my opinion. Everybody likes to use the word universal design, but it's being implemented more rarely. But in broad terms, universal design would be a design of a products where it would, you know, the design would take everybody's needs in account. And that's, you know, an ideal definition, which in many cases cannot be implemented in practice. There, you know, are some conflicts, but we can do a lot. For example, one way you know, to do universal design is not break things which are working. And you know, when the example of cars is is very good. And I would take another example from there. The new Mercedes, which came out this last year, has a whole touchscreen touch dashboard like it has a huge touchscreen. It has no buttons. What is the biggest complaint in the reviews that it is hard to use the screen while driving because you cannot, you know, people are used to, you know, putting their hand to the dial, turning the dial. We get the climate warmer or volume higher. But now you have to look into the buttons there, but you have to look where your touch and obviously like it's an accessibility issue as well, because when you're blind, maybe a passenger, you wouldn't be able to do this.

**Jakob:** [00:30:02] So I think it's a perfect example where we're trying to fix things which are not broken. And another example is those payment terminals. I have no idea. Why do we need touch screen payment terminals? I mean, it wouldn't display anything but the keypad one two three four five six seven eight nine zero. That's what you need. And OK, one benefit I have heard is that they are easy to clean. I wonder how. Do they make calculations, how much time do they win when they have a touchscreen terminal versus a button terminal? How much time do they win? Not cleaning it? So basically what? What I want to say is, I think the first thing when thinking of designing something is what things work and what don't and why do we want to change things? And if you just say it looks cool, then you really need to think again.

**Neven:** [00:30:55] Guys, you have been fantastic. I'm so happy that you took your time to be participating in today's podcast because now we are actually at the end of it. I want to thank you everybody for listening to the right reporting podcast. Well, this show is a part of a European PARVIS project, and it's led by the European Blind Union, the Swedish Association of the Visually Impaired and the Eye Association of the Netherlands. The project is supported by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme of the European Union. Did you get more curious about talking about these issues or maybe talk to our guests? Well, you are welcome to contact us. You can find contact details in the show notes. Thank you very much. Also, to Emil Cornelisse, who is our sound master. And the next episode of his podcast is planned to be aired in about two months. So don't forget to subscribe. In your podcast app, or maybe just find us on EBU web page, so we wish you all the best and see you next time. Bye-bye.

**Speaker1:** [00:32:19] This podcast was supported by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme of the European Union.