

EBU in Action Episode 10: A toast for inclusion at the European Parliament

Intro

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(Neven): Welcome to a new episode of “EBU in Action”, the podcast of the European Blind Union, where we bring you the latest news for the blind and partially sighted community in Europe. My name is Neven Milivojevic, and here joining me, I have my co-host and colleague, Paweł Masarczyk. Cześć Paweł.

(Paweł): Cześć Neven. How are you doing?

(Neven): I am very well. And what about you? Did you have a good start of the year?

(Paweł): Yes, it was quite pleasant. It's still a bit frosty, so looking forward to some warmer weather. But other than that, I'm doing great.

(Neven): Fantastic. It's great to hear that you are back and that you are doing fine in Austria. And of course, today, we are going to have a lot of things to talk about and we are also very grateful that we have all our dear listeners with us.

So, looking at our “EBU in action” podcast and episodes for 2025, today, we will have a special segment and I'm sure that you're going to enjoy it, don't you think so Paweł?

(Paweł): I think we will. Actually, should we reveal what it is right now? I think we should, it's the time, right. So actually, the EBU has organised a cocktail event at the European Parliament and some of the MEPs who are active in the disability matters have been present there. So we can hear some more about the initiatives and other goings-on at the European Parliament that have been presented there.

(Neven): Well, I heard that it was an excellent occasion for some networking. This activity was actually sponsored by the member of the European Parliament, Li Andersson from Finland, who's also the Chair of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, and we will have the pleasure to listen to her and talk to her a little later on in this episode.

(Paweł): I can't wait to listen to her interview. I also heard that representatives of the European Disability Forum were present there, as

well as Lucie Davoine, the Acting Head of the Disability Unit for the DG Justice at the European Commission. So it'll be interesting to find out what has been said there.

But more importantly, we'll hear the interviews with some of the EBU representatives at the event: Francesca Sbianchi, the Chair of the Advocacy Committee, has been there, as well as Antoine Fobe, the Head of Advocacy and Campaigning.

(Neven): Well, it's going to be, for sure, many interesting interviews to listen to today. And they will all give us, I think, a much better picture of how everything went on this fantastic event. We shouldn't say party, but I guess it was more an event. As always, quite a packed show. Paweł.

(Paweł): Yes, definitely. So, let's get straight into it.

Focus segment: A toast for inclusion at the European Parliament

(Neven): Now, as we said, let's learn more about what happened at the cocktail event that the European Blind Union hosted at the European Parliament. For this occasion, our dear friend and colleague, Nacho Lopez, has the chance to attend today with us and talk to us about these interviews. So I say, Hola Nacho, how are you today?

(Nacho): Hola Neven, how are you? Yes, I'm doing very fine. It's quite chilly here in Paris, but we are starting to have more sun, spring is coming. So, as Paweł said in the introduction, well, the good weather is coming soon.

(Neven): Well, I look forward to that also in Sweden. So, I hear there have been a lot of activities at EBU in the beginning of this year.

(Nacho): Yes, sure. As you said in the introduction, EBU organised a cocktail event at the European Parliament in Brussels on 18th February. It was a very good occasion to let representatives of the EBU Network, whether if it was our Vice-Presidents, it was also Francesca, the Chair of our Advocacy Committee, who we would listen from later on.

Also, representatives of our National Members. And also, allow them to meet with MEPs who were elected in the last EU Elections that took place last year.

As you said, this event was sponsored by MEP Li Andersson. We had the chance to talk to Li after the event, and I have to say: it was a

pleasure talking to her and learn more about her extensive background as a politician in her country and also the current priorities that are on the table for people with disabilities, but more particularly for blind and partially sighted people ahead of the 2024-2029 legislative term.

So without further to add, I would like to share with our dear listeners the insights that Li Andersson shared with us at the microphone of “EBU in Action”.

Interview with Li Andersson, MEP of The Left Group (GUE-NGL) and Chair of the Committee of Employment and Social Affairs

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(Nacho): Li, you started your career as a politician at a local level in Finland, then you moved into national politics, went on to become Finland's Education Minister between June 2021 to June 2023.

According to you, how is the situation of blind and partially sighted people in your country? Knowing you were an Education Minister, what has Finland done to make your country's educational system more inclusive?

(Li): To answer this question, I have to say that, of course, everything depends on what you compare it to. I think, in many regards, I would say the situation in Finland is fairly OK.

I know that in many aspects we have, for example, worked with accessibility and digital services and so on more than in many other countries, but there is still a lot of work to be done.

In the Education system, Finland is, of course, committed to the principle of inclusive education, which means that we strive to respond to different needs of different children within the classroom.

But we also, for example, have a system which is kind of a center that provides knowledge and guidance for the different schools and for the different municipalities that then are in charge of actually providing education.

So, we also tried through this system to support teachers, special education teachers and also municipalities to provide knowledge to them on how to make sure that Education really is inclusive for everyone.

(Nacho): Last year, you made the jump to EU politics, you were chosen as MEP. You have also been elected as the Chair of the Committee of

Employment and Social Affairs. What are the priorities of that Committee that are related to the rights of persons with disabilities for the 2024-2029 term?

(Li): I think one big discussion has to do with the EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Strategy is enforced all the way until 2030, but actually the flagship initiatives, the concrete actions of the Strategy have already been implemented, the most part of them.

So, we are discussing and we are pushing for an update of the Strategy so we would get new flagship initiatives for the European Union for the remaining time of this strategy, because we, of course, have to keep up the work.

Another big discussion, which has been this week actually, among many members of the European Parliament has to do with the decision of the EU Commission to withdraw the Directive on Equal Treatment altogether.

So, I know that there are many voices in the Parliament now saying that if this directive is withdrawn altogether, something else needs to be presented, so you need to have another alternative, another initiative. We cannot just stop the action and stop the work and the progress when it comes to fighting discrimination and ensuring equality within the European Union.

(Nacho): Before the Christmas break, the Disability Intergroup was re-established for this political term. This Intergroup has played a key role in bringing forward persons with disabilities daily challenges in the EP's agenda. How can we optimise the collaboration between disability advocates and EU institutions?

(Li): I think the role of the Intergroup is extremely important because that's also a place for the individual MEPs to get information. Many might know their own national situation, but maybe not so much about the European situation as a whole.

So, in terms of getting information, knowledge, it's very important and it's also a place where MEPs can decide on concrete action that they want to take together, initiatives that they want to push through their separate committees.

I think that the work that is being done within the Intergroup, of course, also supports the work that is then done, for example, in the Committees. The Committee on Employment and Social Affairs will have an own

initiative report regarding the need to update the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

And I think that's also one process where the Intergroup can feed into the work that's being done in the Committee. In addition to the Intergroup, we also have the network, the Intercommittee Network. I'm the co-chair of that, as the Chair of the Committee.

And I'm also interested in knowing how we can use that as a compliment as well, because there, the MEPs are representing their different committees and I think we have already decided to do a joint amendment regarding the mainstreaming of the rights of persons with disabilities in the budget process.

And I think we need to also think about how we can develop that Network further so we can also make sure that we work on this topic, on the mainstreaming of this aspect as well as possible in the different Committees in the Parliament.

(Nacho): One of the most recent highlights when it comes to disability policy in the EU was the formal adoption by the EU Council of the Directive establishing a EU Disability Card and a EU Parking Card. This will improve our communities' right to free circulation across the EU.

However, there are still some pending issues such as the EU Council's lack of response to the EU Parliament's proposal to reform the EU Electoral Law. What needs to be improved at an institutional level at the EU to bring even more progress for people with disabilities?

(Li): Well, on the institutional level, I think there's still a lot of work to be done in the Employment and Social Affairs Committee. We have been talking a lot about the employment issue, where you can see that there is still a clear employment gap when we look at persons with disabilities all throughout the EU.

So this is also a joint challenge, a problem for the Member States. They all need to work and do more in this field.

And referring actually to the example that you mentioned, which are good examples of concrete initiatives that can have concrete effects in the life of people, this is the reason we are also pushing for the update of the Strategy, to include more flagship initiatives such as these so that we really make sure that the work that's being done in the coming years is

not just about awareness-raising, but also about concrete action, decision-making that have a real impact in people's lives.

(Nacho): Many thanks, Li Andersson, first for sponsoring our event and also for responding to the microphone of EBU in Action with this very insightful analysis on EU's Disability Policy. Thank you very much, Li.

(Li): Thank you very much, it was my pleasure.

[Music]

End of interview with Li Andersson

(Neven): Very inspiring, indeed, with the member of the European Parliament Li Andersson. And also, I see that she, as the Chair of his Committee, she can do a lot of things.

But Paweł, I have to ask you: you know, when we listen to her, it sounds that a lot of things going on and she seems to be quite positive about some of the changes and some of the processes, but taking into account everything else that was happening in Europe with security and all priorities which have to be done, what do you think?

Do you think we have some prospects of seeing some important changes when it comes to the rights of persons with disabilities?

(Paweł): I hope so. I certainly hope so. I think there will be some initiatives named also later on in this episode, and that gives me a lot of hope that, despite there being many challenges happening in Europe and in the world in general, we are definitely about to see some change.

We also cannot forget that even when we discuss security, security also means security for everyone and inclusion of persons with disabilities, even in times where it's not so peaceful.

So, of course, the challenges will be adopted and the landscape will be changing, but we will be still existing and there will be still certain areas that need to be covered in order to help us make it through these times and eventually to save lives.

So, I can only hope that in the midst of all this happening, what's happening right now, we'll not be forgotten.

(Neven): I certainly hope so.

(Nacho): Indeed, I hope so. As said in the introduction and coming back to the event, this cocktail event was an excellent opportunity for us, our

members, to engage in very fruitful discussions with the MEPs of their respective countries.

There was also the presence of a Digital Accessibility Officer of the European Parliament, which actually helped to enrich the variety of profiles present at the event.

There were also people of the EBU structure. One of them was Francesca Sbianchi, the Chair of EBU's Advocacy Committee. We also had a very nice chat with her about her new role and its implications within EBU's Advocacy Committee.

I would like to let our listeners, our dear listeners, listen to Francesca's impressions after the event.

Interview with Francesca Sbianchi, the Chair of EBU's Advocacy Committee

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(Nacho): First of all, congratulations for being appointed as the Chairwoman of EBU's Advocacy Committee. We're meeting in a very symbolic place, the European Parliament. With your new role within EBU, how can our organization best liaise with MEPs?

(Francesca): Thank you for your kind words. It is an honor to chair the EBU Advocacy Committee at such a crucial time for disability rights in Europe.

This is a very important place where we have the opportunity to interact here; also, the passion of many people that are in this event and it's very fundamental for us, to have organised such an important cocktail.

To strengthen our engagement with MEPs, I think that will be a key important aspect to ensure the voices of blind and partially sighted people. And it's fundamental that they will be at this highest level.

I think that EBU can best liaise with the MEPs through several approaches. We'll leverage key events, such as this EBU cocktail at the European Parliament to establish strong relationships with MEPs that are very interested in our policies, and this will help us to position EBU as a primary reference point on blindness-related issues.

I think that also the re-establishment of the Disability Intergroup is a crucial opportunity for EBU to ensure that our priorities, such as accessibility and inclusive policies, are discussed at the EU level, and for

this we will engage directly with the Intergroup and not only through EDF, who is a key partner. But for EBU is very fundamental to have also direct relationship with the Intergroup.

Our members have also a key role in this: national organisations should also actively lobby with their respective MEPs, to ensure that our issues remain on the agenda. This can be done also with personal meetings and also with structured advocacy campaigns, both at a national and international level.

It's also fundamental for us to announce our communication strategy, including also stronger engagement on social media and also, it's fundamental to have a better coordination among our EBU members, inside also their communication social media accounts in order to be sure that all our advocacy efforts are visible and have an impact at a EU level.

I think that these are very fundamental activities and areas of work and all the EBU members, the EBU Board and also the EBU, with the fundamental help of the EBU staff, will try to enforce their advocacy at a EU level.

(Nacho): I would like, Francesca, to come back to EBU's Advocacy Committee because, indeed, this Committee is composed by people from different European countries with very similar but also different challenges in the daily lives of visual impaired persons.

How can this be channeled in a way that progress can be achieved for people with visual impairment across the EU?

(Francesca): The diversity of challenges faced by blind and partially sighted individuals across the different EU countries is, for me, both a challenge and an opportunity.

We must not forget, however, that the Advocacy Committee is composed of all EBU members, both EU and non-EU. Therefore, while we pay attention to what happens at a EU level, we also have to focus on priorities that are common to all the EBU Members.

This is very fundamental, and for this, we should take a structured and coordinated approach through the definition of our priorities. The Advocacy Committee has already outlined the thematic priorities for 2025, including the gap of the European Accessibility Act and the improving of safety standards for silent vehicles.

By focusing on these areas with broad relevance, we can maximise our impact. It's very fundamental also to have localised the approaches within a common framework. While issues vary by countries, they often share underlining cases. For example, the standardisation of accessibility features, employment barriers, and also digital inclusion challenges, these are tangible examples of similarity.

EBU will promote best practices that can be adapted nationally while advocating for EU-wide solutions. Another important way where the EBU Advocacy Committee have considered very fundamental to work is the Taskforce Working Groups.

We have at a EBU level now a new structure and we consider very fundamental to ensure the effectiveness of advocacy to cooperate with the Taskforce Groups that are dedicated to specific fields of work, in order for this areas of work to be updated and also to be supported from their knowledge.

Another fundamental way to cooperate and to ensure that the Advocacy Committee is very effective is the collaboration with the EU institutions. It's very fundamental to work in cooperation with the EU institutions, the European Parliament and also with the national governments.

And this will help to translate EBU's Advocacy efforts into concrete policies and also, as I already told you, the active involvement of our national members. That is very fundamental to enforce our activity at the Advocacy Committee level.

(Nacho): I would like to go deeper through the EU's disability agenda. The European Accessibility Act comes into force on June this year. While a milestone on its own, it still remains too much focused on the digital area, and it doesn't cover accessibility in physical formats such as braille.

However, the European Parliament has the capacity to demand the extension of the scope of the act. Will EBU's Advocacy Committee underline this to MEPs in the near future?

(Francesca): Absolutely. While it's very important to be aware of the limitations of the EAA and identify ways to address them, it is also important this year, as the EAA comes into force, to highlight what has been achieved with it and also push for its full implementation.

As regards to addressing its limitations in covering physical accessibility, the Advocacy Committee has already identified gaps in the EAA as a key

thematic priority for 2025, and in particular including the identification of the accessibility of household appliances, tactile interfaces, and also urban transport and the built environment.

We are already focusing in household appliances, and we are in the procedure to define an important EBU campaign on this topic. To push for an extension of the European Accessibility Act, EBU will engage directly with MEPs. We consider very fundamental to interact also with the Disability Intergroup in order to attract their attention to this portfolio.

And also, we are considering to present evidence-based advocacy and push also for national level advocacy. As I already told you, the engagement of our National Members is very fundamental to the enlargement of the scope of the EAA.

By mainstreaming pressure on the European Parliament and working with key stakeholders, EBU will continue to advocate for a truly inclusive European Accessibility Act that covers both digital and physical accessibility. This is our engagement, and this is the way we'll try to reach this goal.

(Nacho): Thank you very much, Francesca Sbianchi for your interesting insights about EBU's Advocacy Committee. And again, it was a pleasure to meet you here in Brussels.

(Francesca): Thank you Nacho.

[Music]

End of interview with Francesca Sbianchi

(Pawel): Very great insights into the advocacy work at the EBU and how it correlates with the priorities of the European institutions. It's always good to see how this machinery works from inside, and it's good to see that the two organizations are working together.

Neven, Francesca has mentioned something that really resonated with what I always associate European work in a broader sense with: that is tackling the challenges experienced by individual countries.

So what was mentioned is that different countries have different challenges, although in a broader sense, they seem to have the same global root cause.

Nevertheless, they have a bit of a national flavour. Have you got an example of something like that in Sweden, like a typical Swedish

problem or maybe a global problem with a Swedish twist that you would see that could be solved by this cooperation?

(Neven): Well, I think that it's really obvious that when European initiatives are coming into activity, for instance, if you take the European Accessibility Act, I mean, there are things happening which we didn't manage to do at a national level completely by ourselves.

So, I think one way of actually facing this problem with having the differences between the different European countries is actually pushing for European reforms because then, the Member States of the European Union, at least, they will have to follow this. And then, also other, European countries may follow.

So, I think this is the key issue here, that we need to be better in advocating for our members and our member organisations why the European work is very important. And speaking about that, maybe, we should now listen to the Head of Advocacy and Campaigning at the EBU, named Antoine Fobe, who Nacho also met recently.

(Nacho): Yes, sure. I had the chance to meet and well, of course, I went with him, with Antoine, during the meeting. He's the person who was in charge of organising the event, and also helped us make sure that everything went as smooth as possible.

And, we also had the chance to talk about many subjects concerning EBU's advocacy work now, but also, looking ahead of the future.

Without further to add, I would like to share the insights that Antoine shared with us at the microphone of "EBU in Action".

Interview with Antoine Fobe, EBU's Head of Advocacy and Campaigning

[Music]

(Nacho): Antoine, last year brought us a whole set of institutional changes, starting with the election of a new EP. Today, many MEPs have gathered at EBU's cocktail event. What's your overall impression of it? Was it good in terms of representativeness?

(Antoine): Yes, it was a good exercise. It helped put EBU on the map with new MEPs in a new institutional setting, as you said. It was a good networking and a network building exercise, which was the main aim.

We were happy to have MEPs from various countries, groups and committees. Also, a mix of MEPs who were already members of the Disability Intergroup and some who were not. And, all in all, a good opportunity to put across our key issues, our main concerns for the next five years of legislature.

(Nacho): Over the last years, we've seen our organisation campaigning on subjects such as promoting the use of Audio Description and Audio Subtitling in audio-visual content, or advocating for the extension of the ratification of the Marrakesh Treaty. What other areas is EBU planning to campaign for during the upcoming years?

(Antoine): A key campaigning issue will certainly be campaigning for accessible household appliances. The issue here being that, in their own homes, visually impaired people losing rather than gaining autonomy due, in particular, to the widespread use of touchscreens for household appliances, among other things, which of course is not an accessibility improvement for visually impaired people.

Another issue, which is not new: we had campaigned for this in the past is AVAS, that is, Acoustic Vehicle Alert System for silent cars, that is electric and hybrid vehicles. There is EU legislation on this, but we fear that there might be a temptation of the European Commission rather than to strengthen the existing rules to weaken them in the international context. So, we'll be on the watch out for that.

(Nacho): We're also at a moment where the EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 has reached its middle point. Equality Commissioner, Hadja Lahbib, has announced more flagship initiatives for the second half of the Strategy. What areas do you feel should be covered with the new proposals, apart from household appliances as you mentioned?

(Antoine): So many things to say here, but I'll just mention a few that come to my mind. One is accessible labelling of products. Another is public calls for tenders to be used as leverage for promoting best practices in terms of accessibility. Also, topical is the fact that the Commission has announced its intention to withdraw the Horizontal Equal Treatment directive.

If that is going to be the case, then we want to push the Commission to propose alternative legislation. And another important issue that should

be addressed in the rest of the Disability Strategy is having available and affordable assistive technologies.

(Nacho): You made actually a very good point with the Equal Treatment directive.

We also spoke about that with MEP Li Andersson, who kindly sponsored our event. I want to come back to the Strategy, Antoine. I would like to talk about the AccessibleEU center: conceived as a knowledge-exchange center on good practices between experts, advocates, and other stakeholders in the area of disability, how do you see the potential in strengthening this center in the future?

(Antoine): First of all, I should give a little bit of background to this: jointly with our umbrella organisation, the European Disability Forum, we had advocated for a US-type of accessibility agency. The AccessibleEU center falls short from that, but it's still useful as a knowledge and resource center as you described it.

But to make the most out of it, it is starting to show its potential, but we still need to see how it will develop to actually find a connection with European standardisation, because the problem is that currently there is a huge disbalance in representation, in the sense that business interests are by far overrepresented compared to civil society interests

And AccessibleEU, we hope could be a way to solve that through direct connection with European standardisation, not just making general recommendations and sharing best practices.

(Nacho): Thank you very much Antoine for your insights on EBU's event at the European Parliament, and also thank you very much for describing us and giving us a better insight on what EBU's priorities are for the future as well when it comes to our expectations for future developments at the EU level. Thank you very much, Antoine.

(Antoine): Thank you, Nacho. Bye-bye.

[Music]

End of interview with Antoine Fobe

(Neven): Well, guys, this was really an impressive networking event you had in the European Parliament, I have to say. I mean, when I listen to these interviews, of course, people are very committed and they know a lot and, sometimes, it's kind of becomes theoretical.

So I wondered, Paweł, you are one very good example of a blind person who, in this case moved from one European country to another. Did you find any specific challenges in doing this?

And do you feel that the priorities of EBU, but also the European Parliament, that they are going in the right direction when choosing the focal points?

(Paweł): so, you were asking about the challenges, maybe I'll address that first. Definitely, having your disability recognised formally by the country where you're moving is a bit of a challenge. I have gone through this procedure in three countries of Europe so far.

Even maybe, before, if you consider the one where I didn't manage to complete it, and it seems like every country has different procedures. Some countries are a bit more relaxed about it. Some others require very hard medical documentation proof that your disability is actually a disability and it's a lot of stress.

This I can tell for sure, even if you want to have your public transport free of charge as any other blind person does, or at a reduced rate, depending on what's available.

So I really hope that the European Disability Card solves parts of these issues because I feel, after all of my experience that I have gathered through the years, that we should push more for blind people, young blind people, also adults to be more mobile and to enjoy European mobility because it broadens horizons and it's a real test of your independence and it's a booster to your independence.

It gives you motivation to try out yourself in new situations. And I know that I haven't come back the same person that I was after my mobility experiences. So I really hope these kind of initiatives, like the European Disability Card, will be expanded and they will actually be working.

But other than that, I was happy to hear about some of the initiatives that are going to be pushed, because what mobility has taught me is also that other countries are a gold mine of best practices. And it would be nice if some of those good practices were spread across the entire EU because if one country has proven it and it worked, and then, why shouldn't everyone else be doing it?

(Neven): Yes, you are right. So, Nacho, just a last question to you: do you have any reflection after meeting all these committed people in association with this cocktail event?

(Nacho): well, the first memory that I have is how cold was that day, although very sunny. Just on a funny note, I was freezing literally.

But, in general, I think that the exchanges were very good. I was very comfortable with making people to meet each other and also let them know about the presence of certain profiles which they could be interested to talk to. It was a very nice experience, I have to say.

And also visiting Li Andersson and talking to her, it was very nice experience. I have to say that I learned a lot with this event, quite frankly, I'm very honest here.

(Neven): Wonderful. Well, I think we learned a lot listening to your great reports today, the interviews you did. And I would like to thank you very much, Nacho, for your great work.

And also, I would like to thank you, Paweł, for co-hosting this today. I wish you all a very good continuous spring and some warmer weather.

(Paweł): Yes, thank you also from me. Thanks for co-hosting with me as always, Neven. It's been great. And also, hearing from you Nacho and from our wonderful guests. Greetings to all of our listeners. We hope you enjoy this episode.

(Nacho): Yes, same goes to you, Paweł. Great co-hosting as always. Also, congratulations to you Neven for co-hosting this episode as well. See you the next time!

[Music]

(Neven): So, we shouldn't forget a key player here in this podcast and that is actually our sound master. And the sound master today is Emiel Cornelisse, in the Netherlands. And we would like to convey our greatest thanks to him for his great work.

And finally, I would like to thank all our listeners of this podcast. I would like to encourage you to contact us and if you would like to subscribe, for instance, to the "EBU In Action" podcast, you can do so in your podcast reader.

And if you have some questions for us or if you would like to know more about the European Blind Union, all the contact details can be found in

the show notes. So, I would like to wish you all a continuous spring. Bye-bye from Neven.

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

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