Regional report of European Blind Union 2021-2025

July 2025

The reporting period 2021-2025 European Blind Union (EBU) covers two strategic periods. This report reflects this division that is marked by the EBU General Assembly held in Lisbon, Portugal in February 2024.

# Governance and leadership

The EBU Board 2019-2024 consisted of the following five officers and eight regular members:

President Prof. Rodolfo Cattani (Italy)

First Vice-President Alexander Neumyvakin (Russia)

Second Vice-President Bárbara Martín-Munoz (Spain)

Secretary-General Maria Kyriacou (Cyprus)

Treasurer Philippe Chazal (France)

Mario Barbuto (Italy)

Tytti Matsinen (Finland)

Emin Demirci (Turkey)

Sinan Tafaj (Albania)

Maria Thorstensson (Sweden)

Vaclav Polasek (Czech Republic)

Rodrigo Santos (Portugal)

Wolfgang Angermann (Germany)

Following the unfortunate passing of three officers - Maria Kyriacou (October 2021), Alexander Neumyvakin (December 2021), and Prof. Rodolfo Cattani (September 2022) - the board was reorganized: Maria Thorstensson became Secretary-General, Wolfgang Angermann was elected First Vice-President and later Acting President and Bárbara Martin-Munoz First Vice President.

After the General Assembly 2024, the Board consists of the following five officers and eight regular members:

President Tytti Matsinen (Finland)

First Vice-President Bárbara Martín-Munoz (Spain)

Second Vice-President Kevin Kelly (Ireland)

Secretary-General Maria Thorstenssin (Sweden)

Treasurer Roland Studer (Switzerland)

Hubert Perfler (Italy)

Andreas Havsberg (Norway)

David Aldwinckle (United Kingdom)

Sinan Tafaj (Albania)

Jakob Rosin (Estonia)

Dagmar Filgasova (Czech Republic)

Sabine Ström (Germany)

Anja Ursic (Slovenia)

A total of 15 Board meetings took place between July 2021 – June 2025. During the pandemic, some meetings were held either online or In hybrid format. After the General Assembly it was agreed that the number of face to face meetings would be reduced to two meetings a year and other meetings would be held online. This was seen as a way to reduce financial costs and environmental impacts of board meetings and make it easier for people to attend board meetings.

Board meetings: virtual (July 2021), Nice/hybrid (October 2021), Genova (March 2022), Malmö (June 2022), Lisbon (October 2022), Helsinki (February 2023), Berlin (June 2023), Ankara (October 2023), Lisbon (February 2024), Helsinki (Juna 2024), virtual (July 2024), Madrid (October 2024), Paris (February 2025), virtual (March 2025), Zurich (May 2025).

The EBU office is located in Paris, France. Currently, EBU employs eight staff members: Executive Director, Head of Campaigning, Membership Officer (April 2023), External Communications Officer (from June 2022), Internal Communications Officer, European Project Officer, Finance Officer and an Administrative Assistant. The General Assembly 2024 decided that EBU will open a branch office in Brussels and we are currently working on securing funding and making arrangements to implement this decision, expecting to open a branch office during 2026.

# Advocacy and Policy Engagement

EBU’s advocacy is discussed and designed by our Advocacy Committee chaired by Francesca Sbianchi (Italy). The Committee is open for all EBU member organizations and it convenes to a face-to-face meeting annually. Thematic expertise informing EBU’s advocacy and project work is nestled in EBU’s five thematic working groups comprising of nominated experts from EBU’s member organizations. These working groups are: Training, Mobility, Accessibility, Digitalisation and Braille. The working groups work through online meetings and email lists.

EBU contributed to the creation of the European Commission’s European Disability Rights Strategy (2021-2030), advocating for stronger alignment with the UNCRPD. EBU also participated in the European Union Disability Platform and AccessibleEU resource centre. By 2025, the flagship initiatives (AccessibleEU, European Disability Card, Guidance recommending improvements on independent living and inclusion in the community, A framework for social services of excellence, A package to improve labour market outcomes of persons with disabilitiesDisability Platform) of the Disability Rights Strategy have already been accomplished. EBU met with the EU Commissioner on Equality, Preparedness and Crisis Management and urged the European Commission to launch new flagship projects for the remaining years 2025-2030.

In relation to the European Accessibility Act, EBU influenced revisions to standards like EN 81-70 (accessible lifts), promoted EPUB format for accessible e-books, and worked on accessible payment terminals and Euro banknotes. The European Central Bank took part in EBU’s General Assembly 2024 to test prototypes of the new notes. Following the Europan Accessibility Act coming into force in June 2025, EBU together with the AccessibleEU and European Banking Federation organized an event “Hoe to improve accessibility of Banking” that was hugely successful with over 400 participants.

EBU contributed to the EU’s Disability Employment Package and published guidelines on reasonable accommodation in employment for blind and partially sighted people in 2023 to improve equality in employment.

The work on Marrakesh Treaty also continued. EBU advocated for ratification and implementation of the treaty across Europe, especially in the Western Balkans.

In February 2025, EBU together with the Chair of the European Parliament’s Committee on Employment and Social Affairs hosted a cocktail event at the European Parliament. EBU greeted the newly elected members of parliament and presented some of our key achievements as well as our key asks for the Parliament’s five-year term. Many EBU members were able to hold private meetings with the Parliamentarians from their countries before and after the event.

Our key issues for the next years include the following:

* The European Accessibility Act (EAA) which requires to make a number of products and services accessible, mostly applies to the digital world, leaving out real and daily life products such as household appliances, the accessibility of which is crucial for the autonomous living of visually impaired people in their own homes.
* The EU Directive implementing the Marrakesh Treaty, contrary to the spirit of this WIPO Treaty, allows EU Member States to require authorised entities to pay compensation to rights-holders when exercising their rights under the treaty.
* The EU insufficiently promotes audio description, be it by using the leverage of EU funding – namely through the MEDIA strand of the Creative Europe programme – or through sufficiently strong accessibility requirements in the Audiovisual Media Services Directive.
* For the protection of vulnerable road users, if anything, the EU needs to strengthen its rules on acoustic vehicle alert system (AVAS) for silent vehicles (electric or hybrid), especially on speed below which AVAS is triggered and its sound level. Yet, worryingly, the position expressed by the European Commission at United Nations level indicates a desire to weaken the rules.
* Advocate for adequate EU funding to the disability movement. With an increased focus on defense and security spending, and with the trend to question rights-based work, this will be a key battle for European NGOs in the coming years.

Against the background of the deadline for implementation of the EAA in June 2025, EBU has started to prepare a campaign on Accessible Household Appliances. The aim of the campaign will be to flag that the EAA fails to cover household appliances, and that the fact that household appliances increasingly come with touchpad operated systems hinders the autonomy of visually impaired people in their own homes. A direct and immediate result of the cocktail event of February was a written question on the matter by an influential Member of the European Parliament to the European Commission, for written reply. The Commission’s answer – yet to come – will doubtless inspire our campaign.

In the first quarter of 2025, the initiative on getting recognition to the use and teaching of braille as UNESCO Immaterial Cultural Heritage got a very enthusiastic welcome in EBU’s Advocacy Committee. The initiative came from Germany and there are multiple European countries that have embarked on the journey to get the use and teaching of braille recognized nationally. In that respect, we recently learned that France and Germany are preparing a joint initiative at the UNESCO level to move this forward.

# Projects

* **ADVISE (Aiding Young Visually Impaired Seeking Employment) 2020-2022**: The project strived to support young visually impaired individuals in entering the labor market, to provide training, mentoring, and tailored resources for both jobseekers and trainers, and to foster peer-to-peer learning and cross-country collaboration among EBU members. The project concluded in 2022 after empowering young jobseekers in countries like Croatia, Denmark, Lithuania, and Serbia. Manuals produced in the project were translated into multiple languages.
* **PAsCAL (Enhance driver behaviour and Public Acceptance of Connected and Autonomous vehicles) 2021-2023**: The project focused on Connected and Autonomous Vehicles (CAVs). EBU conducted surveys with over 1,000 visually impaired participants, ran focus groups, and contributed to the Guide2Autonomy toolbox with over 100 recommendations.
* **AVA (Accessible Voting Awareness) 2020-2022**: Project ended in 2022, with materials translated into multiple languages and used in advocacy across countries like Slovenia, Hungary, and Albania. Evaluation results fed into the 2024 CERV programme.
* **PARVIS (Promoting Awareness on the Rights of Visually Disabled People in an Inclusive Society) 2020-2021**: The project promoted awareness of visually impaired rights through multilingual campaigns, videos, and events in 9 countries.
* **UPOWERWAD**: Under this project, running from June 2022 to January 2024, tools were developed allowing blind and partially sighted users to give constructive feedback on accessibility issues they encounter on public sector websites. This feedback mechanism is an underutilized feature of the EU web accessibility directive.

The above-mentioned projects come in complementarity to our multi-year grant that we are having with the European Commission. These multi-year agreements also allow for thematic activities in areas such as low vision, audiodescription, the promotion of Braille etc., in addition to allowing EBU to cover some of our running costs.

# Member Engagement and Inclusion

EBU’s membership remained largely the same over the reporting period. Due to the war in Ukraine, EBU Board made the decision to suspend the constitutional rights of its Russian member organization until the end of the war. In the General Assembly 2024, EBU’s member in Moldova was excluded due to 8 years of unpaid membership fees. Latvia asked to join EBU again and was admitted. EBU’s membership remains at 42 organizations.

In 2022 EBU launched the Leadership Exchange Forum to improve member involvement and align national and European advocacy agendas. After the 2024 General Assembly this structure comprising of the leadership of member organizations was renamed and is now the Leadership Exchange Committee and it convenes face to face annually.

The former Gender Equality Committee was replaced by a new Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee in 2024. The Committee is chaired by Polona Car Djuric (Slovenia) and is currently working on an updated Code of Conduct that will guide the way individuals in EBU’s network are expected to work together. The coordinators of EBU’s four forums (Youth, Women and Gender Issues, Low Vision, Older Persons) are automatically members of the DEI Committee.

The Gender Equality Awareness Raising project continued with capacity-building in Germany, Iceland, and Montenegro. A follow-up gender balance survey was conducted in 2022, with results published in 2023.

Low Vision Focus Group meetings were held in Lithuania and Slovenia in 2022, identifying key issues like poor contrast in public spaces, mobility challenges, and limited access to assistive technology. In 2024-2025 a Low Vision project group designed and created a [Facilitator’s Toolkit on Raising Awareness on Visual Impairment](https://www.euroblind.org/sites/default/files/documents/Facilitators%20Toolkit%20Raising%20Awareness%20About%20Visual%20Impairment.pdf).

EBU continued leadership training for young people in 2021-2022 as well as engagement through workshops and events, including a youth meeting in Cyprus in 2023 that produced a youth manifesto. From 2024 the EBU Youth Forum has focused on inclusive exchange study opportunities.

# International Solidarity

After the war in Ukraine started in 2022, EBU has collected funds and supported Ukrainian blind and partially sighted people during. This support has included financial aid to organizations in Ukraine for service provision and rebuilding of premises and to neighbouring countries providing shelter and assistance to blind and partially sighted refugees from Ukraine.

In 2024, EBU decided to dismantle its Development Fund that had not been utilized in many years. The remaining funds were transferred to EBU Solidarity Fund.

# Communication

During the reporting period the staff members working on communications increased from one person to two which has had a positive impact on external communications.

EBU’s website was updated with Google Translate function and it attracts approximately 10,000 monthly visitors. EBU is present on Facebook and X, and our social media presence has expanded with a LinkedIn page

EBU launched “EBU in Action” podcast in December 2022, featuring news, interviews, and national perspectives. We also introduced #ViewsOfLife video podcasts with ORF Connect journalist Julius Kratky to highlight lived experiences of blind and partially sighted people across Europe.

EBU continues to publish member newsletters monthly, covering updates, campaign news, and expert insights.