OUTCOME REPORT

Accessible Europe: ICT for ALL

ICT Accessibility: The Key to Inclusive Communications

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International Telecommunication Union

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EVENT SUMMARY

Accessible Europe: ICT for ALL was organized by the Telecommunication Development Bureau (BDT) of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the European Commission, and hosted by the Government of Portugal in the context of the 2021 Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union. The event took place virtually from 23 – 25 March 2021 and was held within the framework of the ITU European Regional Initiative on "Accessibility, affordability and skills development for all to ensure digital inclusion and sustainable development", adopted by the ITU World Telecommunication Development Conference 2017 (WTDC-17).

Accessible Europe was held virtually, attracted more than 240 participants from over 40 countries, representing around 100 organizations from Europe and beyond. Hosted virtually by the Government of Portugal, the event saw over 1300 stakeholders following live streams online and engaging actively with #AccessibleEurope on social media. Almost 50 expert speakers and moderators, sharing the virtual stage across 8 sessions, identified priority actions to advance the ICT accessibility agenda in Europe. A total of 97 individual interventions, ranging from high-level speeches to expert presentations and innovation pitches, contributed to the proceedings. Captioning and interpretation in both International Sign Language and Portuguese Sign Language were provided throughout the entirety of the event. Here are the link to the full agenda for this event, the link to the presentations, the link to the full event webpage, and the link to the recorded live stream.

This event showcased the "ICT Accessibility assessment for the Europe region" (the link to download the report), which is designed to provide ITU members and stakeholders from the ITU Europe region with a holistic view of ICT accessibility requirements and of the implementation status of ICT accessibility laws, regulations, policies and institutional frameworks across the 46 countries of Europe region. It also serves to provide advice to policy-makers and stakeholders throughout the region in the form of good practices and recommendations.

It was identified that accessibility gaps remain between and within member states of the Europe region, and while COVID-19 did not cause access barriers to digital technologies, it has served to exacerbate them. For example, countries with higher accessibility standards were better equipped to enable all—regardless of ability levels—to continue activities in the transition to telework and distanced education necessitated by the pandemic. It has now become urgent for governments, civil societies, multilateral agencies, and private sector partners to work in unison towards the full accessibility of all areas of the digital world—from eGovernance services to private sector online enterprise—thus harnessing the digital transformation and the enabling power of ICTs toward a more equal, just, and secure future for all.

Concrete initiatives and good practices were shared in ensuring accessibility for individuals, schools, private-sector enterprises, and public-sector administrations. Speakers called for establishing multi-stakeholder strategies that are translated into action and the creation of long-term, sustainable solutions to achieve fully accessible digital services and opportunities for every individual, regardless of different abilities.

INTRODUCTION

The ITU-European Commission Forum Accessible Europe: ICT for ALL was held online from 23 – 25 March 2021. The conference was organized by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU)'s Telecommunication Development Bureau and the European Commission and hosted by the Government of Portugal in the context of the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

The Forum was conducted by the ITU Office for Europe, organized within the framework of the ITU European Regional Initiative on "Accessibility, affordability and skills development for all to ensure digital inclusion and sustainable development", adopted by the ITU World Telecommunication Development Conference 2017 (WTDC-17).

Accessible Europe served to further promote the development of accessibility in countries and institutions, through the collective effort and cooperation of stakeholders and through sharing of successful outcomes of projects and initiatives implemented, in order to interchange resources and solutions and make the European region a more inclusive society. Recognizing that Telecommunications and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are of vital importance for people's empowerment and in promoting accessibility policies, the event highlighted the relevance of joining efforts to remove barriers and enable human development and social inclusion of persons with disabilities and other groups of people with specific needs, through cooperation, programs and projects development, generating partnerships, and training.

Accessible Europe is an important milestone of collaborations between the ITU Office for Europe with partner organizations to foster enabling environment and inclusive digital society in the region. As a joint effort to promote ICT accessibility, Accessible Europe consisted of the following sessions:

- *Session 1*: International, Europe region and European Union vision: Policies and strategies, targets, and key resources to advance ICTs Accessibility;
- *Session 2*: Regional review of enabling environments ensuring accessible telecommunications and ICTs for persons with disabilities in the Europe region;
- *Session 3*: Digital Accessibility for response and recovery of the pandemic;
- *Session 4*: Accessibility standards for products and services;
- *Session 5*: Covid Response & Recovery: Making the future of education inclusive of persons with disabilities;
- *Session 6:* Building smart and accessible cities;
- *Session 7*: Advancing implementation of ICTs Accessibility across Europe;
- Knowledge Development for ICT Accessibility: ITU Academy Certification;
- PROJECT LABORATORY of the ITU Regional Initiative for Europe on Accessibility, Affordability, and Skills Development for All to Ensure Digital Inclusion and Sustainable Development;
- Awards Ceremony for the Regional Competition for Innovative Digital Solutions for an Accessible Europe 2021

Accessible Europe's main outcomes are outlined in this report, which structures the key points that emerged during each session.

PARTICIPATION AND DOCUMENTATION

Accessible Europe 2021 was followed and viewed by over 1600 individuals. Participants included representatives of administrations from Member States of the ITU Europe region, including the private sector and academia.

The Accessible Europe Forum was held virtually. Relevant documentation was made available in electronic form on the event webpage (the link to the event webpage). The forum was supported with **captioning**, Portuguese interpretation, and **International and Portuguese Sign Language interpretations**, and the edited caption text was made available on the event page. **Video recordings** of the sessions, as well as this outcome report, are also made available on the event website. The event has also been live-streamed on Twitter (click the link to Twitter to view) and YouTube (click the link to YouTube to view). Details about the agenda and speakers, as well as all presentations delivered, can be found on the event's website (the link to event website).

Figure 1 - Virtual Group Photo

OPENING CEREMONY

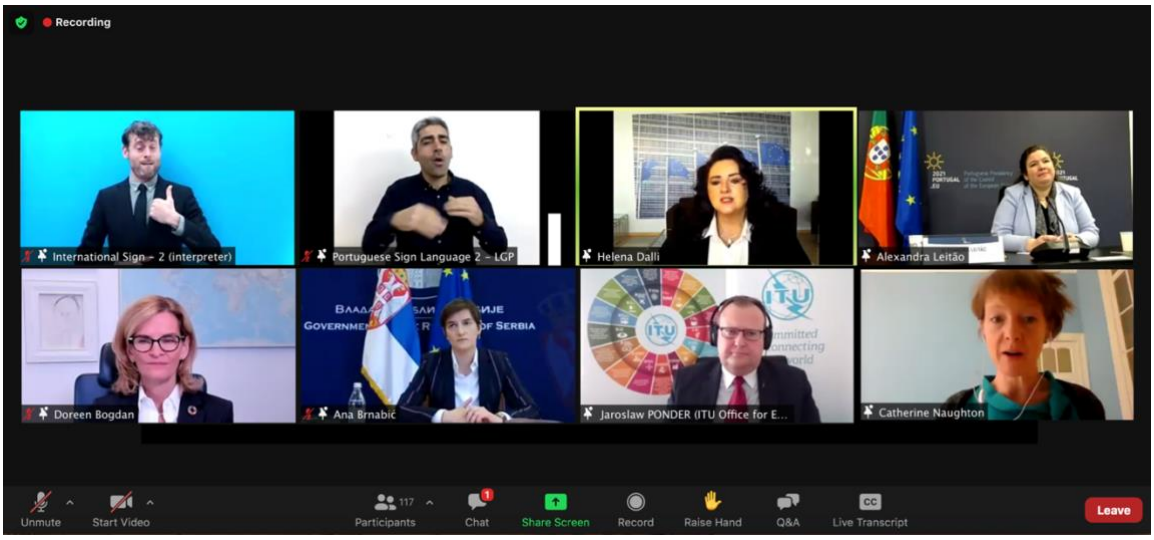

Figure 2 Photo of Opening Segement

H.E. Alexandra Leitão, Minister of the Modernization of State and Public Administration of Portugal

As the representative of the host of the event, H.E. Alexandra Letião welcomed all participants to the Accessible Europe forum, which Her Excellency emphasized was deeply rooted with the 2030 agenda and associated SDGs. Drawing attention to the motto of the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union, "Time to deliver: a fair, green and digital recovery", Her Excellency encouraged states to conceptualize digital transition as a keystone of the European pillar of social rights—and foster a digital transformation that is fair, inclusive and used to the benefit of citizens. Her Excellency also noted that digital inclusion must not be thought of as an abstract concept, but rather, must be considered as concrete as we work in collaboration toward achieving the SDGs. States, she said, must lead by example, by fostering cooperation towards more transparent, open, and participatory public administrations.

Her Excellency then outlined myriad Portuguese initiatives on the topic of digital accessibility, noting the importance of mainstreaming accessibility and ensuring that the digital transition provides equal opportunity to all and leaves no one behind. These initiatives include an accessibility portal launched last October, which provides tools to support public administrations adapt their interfaces for users with visual and hearing difficulties—thus ensuring a better digital experience for all citizens—and the Social Summit (the link to the event webpage) to be held in Porto in May 2021, for which Accessible Europe will prove of the "utmost importance", according to Her Excellency. She then emphasized the goal of the Government of Portugal to have 90% of digital services to be fully accessible by 2030. Her excellency concluded by wishing an excellent journey to all participants and thanked all for their engagement and dedication.

Ms. Doreen Bogdan-Martin, Director of the ITU Telecommunication Development Bureau, ITU

Ushering in the third iteration of Accessible Europe, Ms. Doreen Bogdan-Martin shared that the forum is aimed at accelerating ICT accessibility across Europe and is held in the context of Regional initiative for Europe 3, adopted at WTDC-17 and designed by European member states who recognize digital accessibility as a top priority to ensure that no one is left behind. She then thanked the Government

of Portugal for its commitment and leadership in working toward a digital world founded upon equal opportunities.

Ms. Bogdan-Martin noted that globally, over 1 billion people live with disabilities, meaning that ICT accessibility has become more relevant and necessary than ever before. She also noted that 80 million Europeans live with disabilities, and while they comprise an integral part of today's digital society, they often face discrimination and exclusion. In order to address such inequities, she emphasized the need to fill gaps with concrete action, noting that the ITU is committed to supporting all countries to make digital accessibility a reality. Digital accessibility remains a top ITU priority and an integral part of ITU's strategic goals.

Ms. Bogdan-Martin also emphasized that the ITU's Telecommunication Development Bureau is vigorously preparing for the World Telecommunication Development Conference (WTDC-21), where one anticipated outcome is a concrete digital development roadmap, including as key pillars both digital inclusion and digital accessibility. She invited stakeholders to join the preparatory process on the Road to Addis, noting a central takeaway from the "Connect2Include, Include2Connect" (the link to the webpage of Connect2Include, Include2Connect) Road to Addis event on Digital Inclusion: it is vital to create solutions not *for* but *with* the people who are going to use them, keeping in mind users and their diverse needs. She concluded by citing the European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen's apt description of human-centric digital innovation, noting that Accessible Europe continues to engage all countries and stakeholders thorough the region through the regional competition, technical assistances, and policy guidances.

Ms. Helena Dalli, European Commissioner for Equality, European Commission

Commissioner Dalli began her intervention by assuring that all stakeholders have the full support of the European Commission in working to achieve the goal of ICT accessibility. As the event proves, Ms. Dalli emphasized, technology can break down barriers to exclusion and participation; when technology is accessible, it becomes a powerful tool for persons with disabilities to participate on an equal basis as active members of society.

The Commissioner noted to stakeholders that in March 2021, the European Commission adopted the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 (the link to download the strategy), which aligns EU strategy with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Prioritizing a human rights approach, the newly elaborated strategy focuses on areas where EU action can bring the most added value, and Ms. Dalli strongly called upon the European Member States to properly implement EU accessibility legislation. Recalling the time that has passed since her participation in the second edition of Accessible Europe, hosted in Malta in 2019, Ms. Dalli said that in the pandemic recovery efforts of Member States, EU funds stand ready to be deployed to ensure a human-centric digital recovery. Ms. Dalli also informed participants of the European resource center 'AccessibleEU', which will be launched by the European Commission in 2022, in order to facilitate the implementation and enforcement of EU accessibility rules, share good practices, and inspire policy development.

Ms. Catherine Naughton, Director, European Disability Forum

After thanking the ITU and European Commission for organizing the event, Ms. Catherine Naughton explained the importance of meaningfully leveraging the participation of persons with disabilities in policymaking, particularly that related to ICT accessibility. She praised the excellent progress achieved both within and beyond the EU as it pertains to ICT accessibility, before addressing good practices for filling remaining gaps on accessibility.

Two notable examples of progress elaborated by Ms. Naughton were the ratification of the Marrakech Treaty—an important piece of legislation on web accessibility for the public sector, electronic communications, and audio-visual media services—as well as the passage of the European Accessibility Act (EAA), which provides horizontal legislation on accessibility and includes a very strong ICT component. Ms. Naughton stated that the EAA represents a turning point for accessibility in Europe, both in terms of current technology and the technology yet to come. To underpin such legislation, Ms. Naughton called upon stakeholders to develop technical standards suitable for industry, public administrations, and users, since such standards prove to be foundational for the emergence of inclusive innovation.

The success of such legislation, Ms. Naughton emphasized, is thanks to the active involvement of disability organizations like EDF and its constituent organizations. Under the leading role of Commissioner Dalli, the European Commission understood the importance of consulting with persons with disabilities and their representative organizations in all matters which concern them, Ms. Naughton noted, as is evidenced by the European Disability Rights Strategy and the flagship initiative, AccessibleEU—both of which involved consultations with organizations of persons with disabilities throughout the strategic process. Ms. Naughton also informed participants that such organizations still struggle to work on an equal footing with other stakeholders.

Ms. Naughton emphasized that despite COVID having catapulted most into the digital world—and the associated presumption that such digitization would equate to more equal access for persons with disabilities—poor technological and policy design meant that many persons with disabilities still face barriers to studying, working remotely, communicating, and accessing culture and leisure through ICT. Fortunately, Ms. Naughton noted, technologies evolve rapidly and can be replaced for more inclusive ones, providing far greater possibility and functionality. She called upon participants to enable such innovation through proper legal frameworks that involve persons with disabilities, developing key standards, raising awareness and developing the necessary tools so that public authorities, companies, innovators, future professionals consider accessibility as one of the core aspects of new technologies. Ms. Naughton concluded by encouraging stakeholders to consider the need to achieve *accessibility by default* through cooperation and meaningful engagement of persons with disabilities.

H.E. Ana Brnabić, Prime Minister, Republic of Serbia

H.E. Ana Brnabić began her intervention by congratulating the Government of Portugal for hosting, as well as the ITU and European Commission for organizing the Accessible Europe forum and bringing together stakeholders to discuss how to bridge the digital divide. *"I am honored to represent Serbia at important gathering"*, Her Excellency said.

The Prime Minister shared with participants that digital transformation is a key pillar of her government's agenda, as digitization is a necessity to offer better public services, more competitive job markets, a more attractive business environment, and better education to the entirety of Serbian society. Years of tech-driven reforms made the Serbian economy resilient and agile, as evidenced by the fact that the Serbian GDP declined by only 1% in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Serbian immunization rollout has achieved the second-highest vaccination rate in Europe, after only the United Kingdom.

Her Excellency noted that she was proud to have many societal actors mobilized behind the digital agenda, and she emphasized a common responsibility to ensure all citizens can benefit from

digitization efforts through a guaranteed endowment of digital literacy and provision of connectivity. One such initiative to digitize has been spearheaded in the education sector, where digital textbooks and digital classrooms have been provided in accordance with Serbia's goal to fully digitize all schools by 2022—an initiative replicated in several other European countries.

Mr Jaroslaw Ponder, Head of ITU Office for Europe, ITU

To inaugurate the event, Mr. Jaroslaw Ponder, Head of the ITU Office for Europe and Chair of the event, delivered a short presentation (the link to the presentation) setting the context for the Forum. His presentation served to highlight the foundations of the Accessible Europe agenda and contextualize the joint motivation of all partners to join forces. In his presentation, Mr. Ponder stated that one of the primary objectives in the context of the ITU Regional Initiatives for Europe is for the Office for Europe to support countries and facilitate their efforts in bringing accessibility to their digital spaces. Mr. Ponder reiterated that the efforts in delivering products and services to the countries are supported by the Telecommunication Development Bureau undertaken at the global level and through the ITU-D Study Groups.

Mr. Ponder emphasized that, with a total of almost 700 million citizens, countries of the Europe region must conceptualize accessibility as an integral part of digital inclusion, reaching targets set by member states to establish enabling environment. Mr. Ponder stated that Europe is undoubtedly leading by example in terms of accessibility targets, and in order to provide a clearer picture of these accessibility advances, the ITU conducted the *ICT accessibility assessment for the Europe region* (the link to download the report). Mr. Ponder invited stakeholders to examine the assessment to see the great achievements Europe has noted, as well as the areas where further efforts are needed to ensure full accessibility. Some notable achievements include the fact that 44 out of 46 European region countries have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), a majority have adopted anti-discrimination and equality laws, 41 have adopted web accessibility laws and statutory requirements, and 23 recognize sign language, with four (including the host of the Accessible Europe event, Portugal) recognizing national sign languages in their constitutions. Notably, Israel is the only country in the Europe region that requires private sector organizations to attain certain levels of web accessibility (in addition to public sector counterparts).

Despite Europe being a global leader in the provision of quality connectivity at relatively low prices, there are still gaps that impede such connectivity from being accessible for all. In 12 countries of the European region, emergency services are accessible through apps, and in 10 countries, text or video relay services for the deaf and hard of hearing are provided; however, there is a serious limitation in that such as emergency services are not usually available around the clock. Similarly, while some media service providers may be required to make programs accessible, there remains progress to be made to ensure such services are available everywhere and in all countries. Such gaps, Mr. Ponder emphasized, necessitate a strong commitment.

Finally, as accessibility is inherently embedded in the larger context of ICT development context, accessibility considerations should be integrated as priorities in digital agendas focusing on ICT infrastructure, digital education policies, and e-Government priorities. Mr. Ponder expressed his gratitude to partners who joined Accessible Europe to advance digital accessibility and urged stakeholders to incorporate accessibility from a design point of view while providing for innovation and the development of human capacity in this field. This can be achieved not only by policies but also

by developing an enabling ecosystem through a multistakeholder approach and reviewing implementation at the country and regional levels.

CONFERENCE SESSIONS

SESSION 1: INTERNATIONAL, EUROPE REGION AND EUROPEAN UNION VISION: POLICIES AND STRATEGIES, TARGETS, AND KEY RESOURCES TO ADVANCE ICTS ACCESSIBILITY

Figure 3 Photo of Session 1

Focus: The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and The UN Disability Inclusion Strategy on the accessibility of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs); ITU actions and challenges; European Accessibility Act; European Commission actions and regional challenges.

Moderator: Mr. Jaroslaw Ponder, Head of ITU Office for Europe, ITU.

Interactive Discussion: Panellist 1: **Ms. Roxana Widmer-Iliescu**, Senior Coordinator - Digital Inclusion, Telecommunication Development Bureau, ITU; Panellist 2: **Ms. Inmaculada Placencia-Porrero**, Senior Expert, Disability and Inclusion Unit, DG for Employment, Social Affairs, and Inclusion, European Commission; Panellist 3: **Mr. László Lovászy**, Senior Research Fellow, University of Public Service, Hungary (Former Elected Member of the CRPD).

Key points

- ICTs are embedded in almost every aspect of modern life—from keeping in touch with loved ones and access to vital government services to education and work. Digital accessibility is thus instrumental in accelerating the implementation of all global commitments, including the

SDGs. It is vital, therefore, for states to ensure that everyone can equitably access and understands public services without any discrimination.

- The right to be able to access and use information to communicate has become a human right in the digital age. However, in its current state, technology is not always developed and delivered in a manner that is accessed and understood by all. In order to achieve full inclusion in the digital ecosystem, technologies must be developed with universal design in mind. We must deliver information in an accessible format, facilitated by ICT accessibility standards and requirements.
- The common language for the digital world is accessibility, and accessibility is a catalytic driver that enables everyone to understand information and communicate. World digital leaders, particularly in the private sector, understood this years ago, and they thus pioneered the development of smart tech by incorporating more features into traditional office software. Smart technology is accessible because it can be used by all—despite age, literacy levels, and ability. Text-to-speech and speech-to-text capabilities, as well as digital "assistants" who perform tasks, are all examples of accessibility features that serve to advance everyone's lives.
- All Europeans are dependent on technology. When such technology is not fully accessible, persons with disabilities face barriers and discrimination. ICT accessibility is a unique enabler for rights and participation, and thus, the European Commission takes a human-rights-centered approach to accessibility, anchoring its strategy on [1] the European Pillar of Social Rights, and [2] the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Thus far, the EU has worked toward creating a policy and legal framework for ICT and transport accessibility, with the Commission establishing European-level rules that cover telecoms, visual media, standards, and other enabling legislation like copyright legislation to ensure the digital transformation provides accessibility and equal opportunity.
- The newly announced AccessibleEU Centre will facilitate coherence and share knowledge among experts and professionals from all corners of the field of accessibility. By sharing good practices, providing a new guide about how to "buy accessible" in public procurement, and developing a set of tools and standards to facilitate training, AccessibleEU aims to inspire policy developments in the field of accessibility.
- The Berlin Declaration on Digital Society and Value-based Digital Government outlines the European Union's digital governance strategy: human-centric, user-friendly, and responsive to the needs of persons with disabilities. In accordance with the Declaration, the Commission seeks to lead by example in the field of accessibility. Clear actions have been spelled out to make the Commission an institutional leader for both employees and the public to make it more accessible. For example, websites, digital tools used within Commission itself will all become accessible, and actions to develop plans on web accessibility will be shared with other institutions to align with European standards.
- December 2021 will mark the 15th anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). With over 180 ratifications, the CRPD remains the first, and most popular, human rights treaty of the 21st century. Importantly, it is the first human rights treaty dealing with technology as it pertains to human rights, with notable references to ICTs in Articles 2 and 9. There is consensus among most actors in the international community that ICTs have the enabling power to ensure full enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all persons—an idea embedded in ITU Strategic Goal 2

(inclusiveness) and related target 2.9 (enabling environments to ensure fully accessible communications in all countries by 2023).

- There is an evolving concept of "disability" in terms of the application of the CRPD, and the definition of "accessibility" remains dynamic. This dynamism is, in part, due to technological and scientific developments whose deployment may have seemed impossible, nevertheless, remain central as solutions to accessibility barriers. One such example is robotics, which can be incredibly useful for people with limited mobility, blind and reading-impaired individuals, and serve as assistants, providing independence to persons with disabilities if deployed as global caregivers in homes.

SESSION 2: REGIONAL REVIEW OF ENABLING ENVIRONMENTS ENSURING ACCESSIBLE TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND ICTS FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE EUROPE REGION

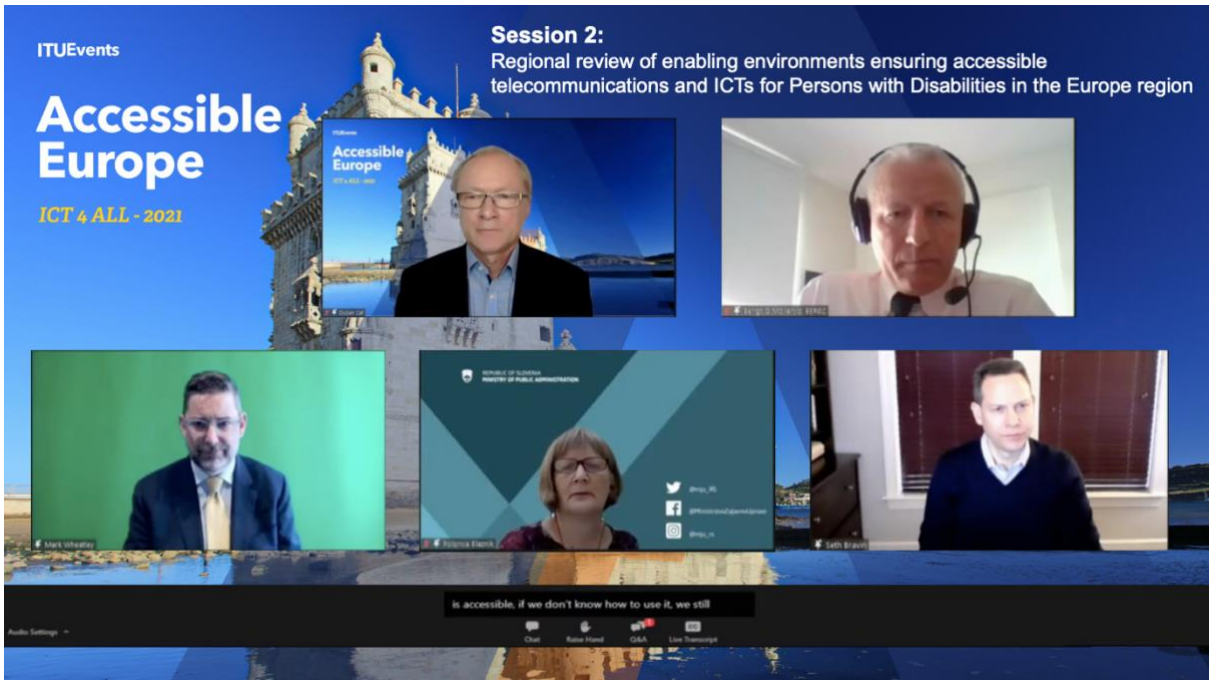

Figure 4 Photo of Session 2

Focus: Current implementation status on ICTs Accessibility regulations, policies and strategies; Sharing of best practices and recommendations for ICTs Accessibility implementations.

Moderator: Mr. Dušan Caf, ITU Consultant, ITU.

Interactive Discussion: Panellist 1: **Mr. Bengt G Mölleryd**, Expert, Body of European Regulators for Electronic Communications (BEREC); Panellist 2: **Mr. Mark Wheatley**, Executive Director, European Union of the Deaf (EUD); Panellist 3: **Ms. Polonca Blaznik**, Director of the Information Society Office, Ministry of Public Administration, Slovenia; Panellist 4: **Mr. Seth Bravin**, Director of Strategic Alliances, T-Mobile.

Key points

- ITU conducted a Regional Review (the link to download the report) to assess how accessible information and communications are in the Europe region. Commitments to ICT accessibility and the capacity to meet those commitments were investigated in 46 countries with over 100 indicators were used to assess the ICT accessibility in the region. There is no doubt that Europe is a global leader in ICT accessibility. However, with its multidimensional diversity, Europe has developed a distinctive approach based on regulatory intervention and multistakeholder cooperation. Several countries adopted advanced ICT accessibility requirements beyond the adoption of the EU accessibility framework. Overall Europe is doing fine, but there are still challenges ahead of us.
- BEREC is the organization that unites all of the regulators for electronic communication in Europe together with the European Commission. The OECD and BEREC organized an international workshop on the quality of services and experience to investigate how users perceive it while identifying gaps and issues related to accessibility.
- There is an issue of quality which is a technical aspect, but it is also a way to measure how networks are perceiving, how services are transmitted, BEREC is doing work in this area with an End-User group who are working on guidelines, identifying the parameters and measurements in order to comply with existing regulation and to guide the regulatory authorities and to provide the services so that they comply with equality and quality aspects.
- EUD is an NGO that works with national associations of the deaf around Europe with 31 national association deaf members and the only organization representing deaf people, deaf sign language users around Europe at the European level. EUD advocates on the issue of accessibility and how access can be transposed into law, monitor and support national associations of the deaf so that they can lobby their governments on harmonization and the adoption of legislation.
- EUD has been advocating on a number of priorities, for example, the EECC- the European Electronic Communication Code. EUD has been following this legislated procedure since 2016. In 2017 it submitted a number of amendments to Article 102, specifically on access to emergency services, EDF put forward some Amendments and fed back into that process to make sure that emergency services were accessible through a total conversation framework.
- There are countries in the world that have relay services, however, there are many that still do not have relay services at all. The countries that do currently have relay services, experience issues with quality such as the speed of answer, interpreter qualifications, as well as confidentiality, and security. The COVID pandemic shows the urgency to have relay services in place. Deaf people, people that are hard of hearing, deafblind, speech disabled, they're even more isolated within their homes and unable to microphone calls out if there are no relay services available. Europe has passed an important milestone with passing the recent European Accessibility Act, future challenges are making international relay calls, so people who cross over a border into another corner of the world will be able to use this service.
- Slovenia Ministry of Public administration (MJU) is a horizontal ministry, responsible for the development and coordination of digital government services. MJU started working on advancing accessibility several years ago by following the guidelines of the Web Accessibility Directive. Based on good practices, the MJU prepared the guidelines for the development of digital services and public administration pointing out the importance of inclusion and accessibility.

- The promotion of principles of user-centric approach in designing digital services is key, it means that putting the user at the center and taking into account his or her needs, not only when planning a project but through the entire development process, designing, testing, and already before the adoption of the Web Accessibility Directive. MJU designed eGovernment's state portal that is appropriate for the use of the visually impaired, hard of hearing persons, people with dyslexia, users with impaired understanding. For instance, descriptions of the administrative procedures are accompanied to a large extent by short videos with an interpretation of the text in Slovenia sign language.

SESSION 3: DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY FOR RESPONSE AND RECOVERY OF THE PANDEMIC

Figure 5 Photo of Session 3

Focus: Stakeholders' responses to challenges arise from the pandemic; Ensuring inclusive access to vital products and services, including health and care services, e-banking, e-commerce; Challenges and opportunities arise from the future of employment; Ensuring a disability-inclusive workplace in a Post-Covid world.

Moderator: Ms. Amela Odobašić, Director of Broadcasting at Communications Regulatory Agency of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Vice-Chair of ITU-D Study Group 1.

Interactive Discussion: Panellist 1: **Ms. Akiko Ito**, Chief of Programme on Disability, Secretariat for the Conference of States Parties to the CRPD, UNDESA/DISD; Panellist 2: **Ms. Roxana Widmer-Iliescu**, Senior Coordinator - Digital Inclusion, Telecommunication Development Bureau, ITU; Panellist 3: **Mr. Humberto Insolera**, Executive Committee, European Disability Forum: Panellist 4: **Ms. Marina Van Zeller,** Vice President, National Institute for Rehabilitation, Portugal.

Key points

- The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (the link to the convention) addresses the risks of exclusion of persons with disabilities from participating equally in society. Being the first international human rights treaty to require ICTs and systems to be accessible as a necessary condition for persons with disabilities, it embodies the right of ICT accessibility as a universal human right. In particular, article IX of the Convention sets out general obligations for States to ensure that persons with disabilities have access to ICTs and related systems. Furthermore, universal access to ICTs constitutes a key enabler for the successful achievement of the SDGs by 2030. Therefore, the UN mandate consists of mainstreaming the goals of the UN CRPD in all the implementation phases of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- At the onset of the global pandemic, the UN Secretary General made commitments to "leave no one behind", including persons with disabilities. What is key to respond to COVID-19, build back better, and foster inclusion are well-targeted policy interventions aimed at gathering data and statistics to clearly frame the crisis from its starting point. Following this initial phase, the UN System implemented a number of initiatives, including a Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and a dedicated Project Fund from the UN System to promptly respond to their fundamental needs. Furthermore, the UN System worked to coordinate and enhance technological services, such as INTERPREFY, to ensure access of persons with disabilities to all UN Conferences.
- ITU's work and cooperation with its Member States allowed to effectively exploit the full potential of ICTs in ensuring universal access to health updates and related information over the course of the pandemic, particularly through mobile, radio, TV, and dedicated websites. In order to guarantee proper accessibility, governments should foster broadband coverage and development of internet services. On the same grounds, the usability of digital devices and users' opportunity to communicate, learn, work, socialize through digital tools and platforms should constitute a key priority. Not only information should be made available, but rather also directly usable and fully understandable.
- COVID-19 exacerbated the already existing socio-economic inequalities and stressed the need for collective efforts to build an inclusive digital world for all. In close collaboration with the Member States, sector members, academic members, Data Protection Officers (DPOs), and in the view of fostering availability, affordability, and accessibility of ICT products and services, in March 2020, ITU developed a set of guidelines (the link to check the guidelines) highlighting key messages and actions for decision-makers and communication providers on how to ensure full accessibility of digital products and services for persons with disabilities, especially during the COVID-19 crisis. Furthermore, key training resources on digital accessibility were made available on the ITU website in multiple languages and accessible format.
- In the view of boosting global implementation, ITU launched, at the last meeting of the Study Group before the World Telecommunication Development Conference 2021 (WTDC-21), the ITU self-assessment and toolkit for ICT accessibility and implementation (the link to the toolkit). This resource highlights how it is fundamental to ensure broadband access, implement appropriate policy and regulatory measures, build accessible technology and ICTs, ensure digital skills for all.
- The EU has different standards in place to ensure that workspaces become inclusive, safe, and accessible for all. Among them, European standard EN 301 549, *the standard on Accessibility*

requirements suitable for public procurement of ICT products and services. This has been harmonized with the European Web Accessibility directive. Additionally, the European standard on design for all enables organizations to design, develop and provide products, goods and services that are accessible to a wide variety of users, including persons with disabilities.

- The European Disability Forum fosters access to events, meetings, documents and enhances a culture of accessibility in the design and building processes of all working spaces. The implementation of these good practices enables the Member States to comply with the European employment equality directive (the link to the directive), prohibiting discrimination on various grounds and granting universal access to employment and vocational training opportunities. Now more than ever, the EU and its institutions, both as employers and as public bodies, are called to foster inclusion and accessibility, becoming, in their implementation of the UNCRPD, role models for all participating Member States.
- The Portuguese National Institute for Rehabilitation (INR Portugal) is a public institute, dependent on the Secretary of State, and working towards inclusion of persons with disabilities through planning, execution, and coordination of national policies to promote their rights. To inform and raise awareness on the importance and value of digital content accessibility, the Institute participated in webinars and presented its mandate to ensure diversity and inclusivity across all sectors. It further designed a National Strategy for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities, to be implemented in 2021-2025. Finally, the Institute provided technical support to the inter-ministerial working group aimed at fostering transposition of the European directive on accessibility into the design of products and services.
- INR also developed specialized responses to alleviate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on persons with disabilities. Particularly, since the 12th of March 2020, it ensured that all the official communications of the Portuguese government and daily briefing of the Portuguese Ministry of Health were translated into Portuguese sign language. Finally, since April 2020 and to support the needs of deaf people, the Institute worked in close collaboration with the National Health Service contact center and allowed for the creation of a phone line supported by sign language interpreters in six languages and available 24 hours per day, seven days a week. The Institute also did collaborative work with local Public Administration organizations. This allowed for the publication of the Collaborative Work Plan in Public Administration to foster universal access to ICT.

AWARDS CEREMONY FOR REGIONAL COMPETITION ON INNOVATIVE DIGITAL SOLUTIONS FOR AN ACCESSIBLE EUROPE

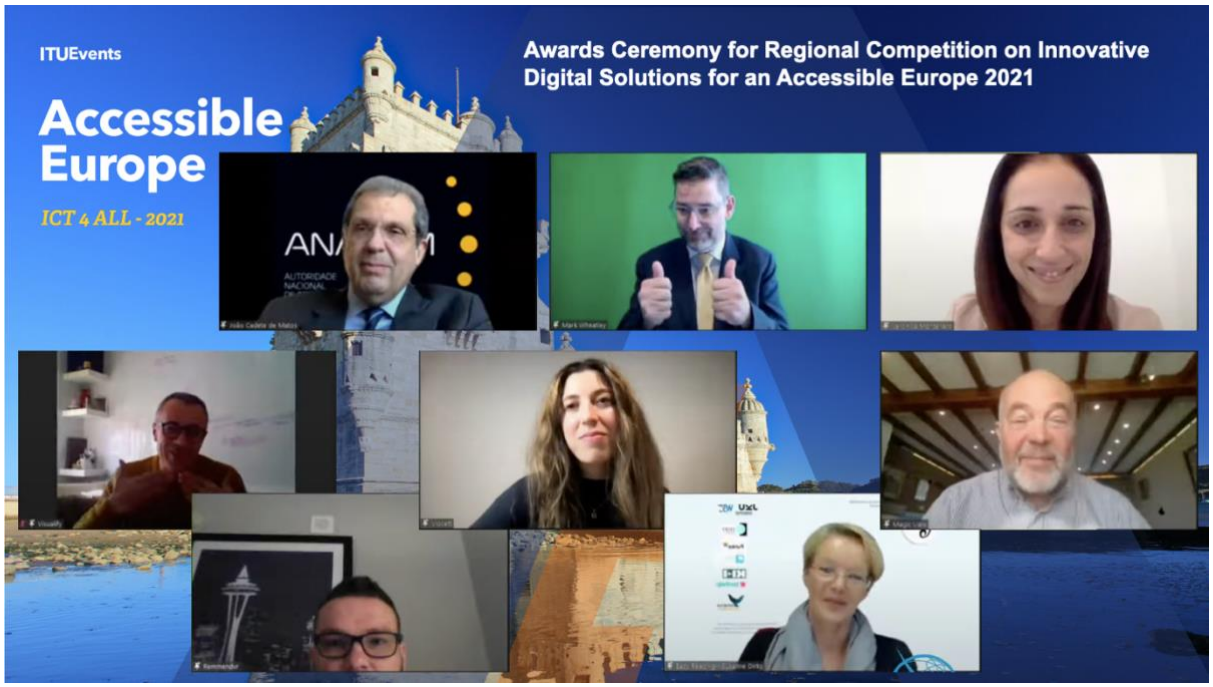

Figure 6 Photo of Award Ceremony

Focus: Importance of strengthening the ICT-centric innovation ecosystem for an Accessible Europe; Pitching session of Finalists and handing of Awards of the regional competition.

Special Address: Mr. João Cadete de Matos, Chairman of the Board, ANACOM, Portugal.

Mr. Jaroslaw Ponder, Head of ITU Office for Europe, opened the Awards Ceremony and reviewed the milestones towards the Regional Competition on Innovative Digital Solutions for an Accessible Europe 2021, which is supported by ANACOM Portugal as a strategic partner. The competition's preparation started in November 2020 and was followed by an evaluation procedure conducted by experts working closely with persons with disabilities. For the 2021 edition, 97 submissions from 29 countries were submitted in total and, among the 25 selected competitors, 15 finalists were identified. After his brief introduction, Mr. Ponder gave the floor to Mr. João Cadete de Matos, Chairman of the Board of ANACOM Portugal.

Mr. de Matos firstly highlighted how ANACOM, sponsoring the event, is proudly working in partnership with ITU and the European Commission to enhance inclusiveness and accessibility of ICT-based tools and platforms across the region. Now more than ever, digital transformation has become a driver of economic and social recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, through the adoption of smart solutions such as e-commerce, e-health, e-learning strategies and tools. The European Union aims at sharing best practices and become a role model for the Member States and other regions through forward-looking legislative reforms, the development of accessible online products and services, and the introduction of affordable and smart innovations. The EU has also promoted a code of conduct, imposing specific obligations on companies operating in the market so that accessibility becomes an integrated facet of products and services developed and commercialized. Through its standards and directives, the EU has further fostered access to emergency services designed for persons with

disabilities, facilitating the inclusion of citizens with special needs through the use of ad hoc online tools and precisely designed website features.

On the same grounds, ANACOM committed to promoting accessibility and inclusiveness in Portugal through multiple initiatives. Specifically, ANACOM's work resulted in the creation of a set of accessibility obligations for providers of mobile services and direct information exchange and brainstorming with citizens and civil society groups who are primary recipients of digital services and products. In all circumstances, providers are required to offer a number of integrated solutions such as sound amplifiers for people suffering from hearing loss, visual indicators for persons with visual impairments, and simple devices in Braille. Additionally, ANACOM works to ensure that website contents and features are in line with accessibility requirements, focusing on functionalities that enhance users' experiences. Mr. João Cadete de Matos concluded his intervention by reaffirming the importance of working towards enhanced universal digital accessibility through initiatives such as Accessible Europe 2021, wishing the best to the finalists, and promoting the further implementation of successful accessibility solutions.

After this opening session, the Awards Ceremony officially started. All participants were divided into categories. At the beginning of the pitching session, the three top finalists of each category were announced. **Category 1** included initiatives aimed at supporting the life and opportunities of deaf persons. SignLab, Visualfy, World in Sign were the three top finalists of Category 1. **SignLab** (the link to Signlab website) is an international startup consisting of engineers, teachers, designers, and entrepreneurs, both deaf and hearing - all with a passion for making sign languages available and affordable for everyone. SignLab fosters learning outcomes, lowers costs of adopted tools and strategies, enhances access of persons with disabilities to ICT-based tools and platforms. Its central business models consist of long-term government contracts and user-specific subscription models. **Visualfy** (the link to Visualfy website) developed a unique algorithm, based on Artificial Intelligence, that recognizes sounds and translates them into visual alerts on any connected device. Visualfy works every day to improve the algorithm and develop applications that add even more value. The company designs and manufactures in Spain. **World in Sign (WIS)** (the link to WIS website) is a deaf-owned company dedicated to fostering access to all levels of society through innovation and technology. Its motto, "One Technological World", is at the core of all its services. WIS advocates for and develops digital products and services to help people with any type of disabilities, and of any age, communicate easily, and remove any barriers to achieving or maintaining their independence and self-reliance. Furthermore, it fosters inclusion and accessibility in all areas of society, especially in online spaces, while partnering with international organizations to encourage understanding and cooperation between different cultures.

Members of **Category 2** proposed concrete and accessible solutions to support people with visual impairments. Firstly, the CEO of **REMMEDVR** (the link to REMMED website) was introduced. As he reported, as many as 5% of children undergo vision therapy. REMMEDVR is a medical platform for home visual therapy that works to make this procedure attractive, engaging, and adapted to patients' individual needs, specifically relying on up-to-date and accessible digital solutions and virtual reality devices. Founded in 2011 and the second finalist of Category 2, **Project Ray** (the link to Project Ray website) is a telecommunication company with proven expertise in providing smart solutions for people with visual impairment, dyslectic, and seniors. The company proposes an innovative range of basic mobile phones that could be used easily with a simple, homogeneous user interface, together

with a user-friendly Ray application. With more than 50.000 users globally, Project Ray allows seniors and people with vision impairment to connect with others in the way that works best for them, whether that is through texting and emails, smart telephony features, or integration with social networks. On similar grounds, **Feelif** (the link to feelif website), the last finalist of Category 2, developed a solution that allows blind persons to create and perceive visibly tactile content. At the heart of Feelif devices is a special tactile grid that enables the user to feel what is on the screen. Using a combination of vibration, sound, and visual information the user can start to become digitally sighted. The tactile grid is a transparent embossed grid of dots laid over the smart devices' screen which, through specialized technology, enables the user to feel the digital world. A further ambitious goal of the company consists of connecting all stakeholders to a unified Feelif platform.

Category 3 included solutions specifically targeted to persons with speech impairments. Among finalists, **VoiceItt** (the link to VoiceItt website), a speech recognition app for people with speech disabilities, disorders, or impairments. This solution responds to the needs of 6 million people in Europe who suffer from speech disabilities. Through machine learning and Artificial Intelligence, Voiceitt identifies and learns users' unique speech, recognizing the exact pronunciation, shortcut phrases, language, and accents. In December 2020, VoiceItt made Alexa fully accessible for persons with disabilities. **Hand Help – Life Care** (the link to Hand Help website) also falls into Category 3. This up-to-date solution allows for emergency calls in all cases of emergencies, fostering information sharing and resulting in prompt intervention. In case of health emergencies, accidents, or personal threats, users can transmit with HandHelp at a press of a button a direct emergency call to the police, fire brigade, rescue services, but also to trusted persons of their choice. This innovative solution was granted a European patent in 2018 given its success in fostering barrier-free emergency alert transmission. **Pictogram** (the link to pictogram website) was the last solution introduced in Category 3. Pictogram is an integrative educational platform that relies on Augmentative and Alternative Communication solutions to help people with speech disorders develop fluent communication skills. It is made of four central components: a communicator that converts any device into a personal communicator, Pictogram Web, Pictogram Supervisor, and Big Data to generate analytics of users' progress and characteristics.

Category 4 included solutions developed for persons with cognitive disabilities. Among these, fall CAPITO Digital, Claro Software, and Easy Reading. **CAPITO Digital** (the link to CAPITO Digital website) provides a digital platform that allows for the possibility to copy-paste information and checks the degree of text comprehensibility for persons with cognitive difficulties or dyslexia. Users can further opt for the "read out loud function" or the "simplification option" to smooth and clarify the overall reading experience. **Claro Software** (the link to Claro Software website) functions as a visual digital tool specialized in speech synthesis, word prediction, spell checking and switch access. It further combines all these functions to develop innovative, easy-to-use products on Microsoft Windows, Apple Mac, Google Chromebook, iPad and iPhone, Android. It also presents a specific feature for education and study purposes. Finally, **Easy Reading** (the link to Easy Reading website) constitutes an open-source solution that guarantees independent web access to users with cognitive disabilities. It is a software tool supporting the cognitive accessibility of web content. It enables persons with cognitive disabilities to better read, understand, and use all websites. Easy Reading's objective is to make websites more accessible for everyone.

Finally, **Category 5** proposed solutions for persons with physical disabilities. It shortlisted three central projects: Magic View, Travaxy, and LifeTool. **Magic View** (the link to Magic View website) recreates an

Internet of Things (IoT) Home Infrastructure. Sign and motion sensors are integrated into living spaces to allow for precise positioning of objects and people, fostering safety and enjoyment of the home space. **Travaxy** (the link to Travaxy website) is a Business to Business (B2B) solution, a rich accommodations database, collecting hotel names and flight details that respect specific parameters to ensure travelers' full accessibility of services. It also provides airport assistance and airport transportation upon request. Through virtual simulations across multiple environments, **LifeTools** (the link to LifeTools website) creates a power wheelchair simulator to increase car safety and train drivers to avoid car accidents and associated risks. It also provides resources such as explanatory videos and easy-to-access, easy-to-use textbooks to foster training and learning of power wheelchair control.

Figure 7 Certificates for the Regional Competition Winners

In the conclusive part of the Awards Ceremony, Mr. Mark Wheatley and Ms. Veronica Montanaro, two members of the Evaluation Committee, were invited to officially declare the winners. **Visualfy won in Category 1, REMEDVR was declared winner in Category 2, VoiceItt won in Category 3, whereas Easy Reading and Magic View were winners in Categories 4 and 5, respectively.** In the closing remarks of the session, Mr. Jaroslaw Ponder, Head of ITU Office for Europe, reiterated the importance of fostering digital accessibility and the creation of an enabling environment conducive to accessible ICT ecosystems. Mr. Ponder expressed his gratitude towards ANACOM, a strategic ITU partner in all the competition phases. He then communicated to the winners that they would receive special recognition of Accessible Europe by ITU for their achievements. Moreover, all winners would be included in the ITU Smart Incubator's (the link to ITU Smart Incubator website) capacity building program, becoming active participants in the policy discourse, standardization, and programming processes of ITU. He then kindly thanked all contests' participants, finalists, and winners for their successful contribution and meaningful cooperation towards the achievement of full ICTs accessibility in the Europe region.

SESSION 4 : ACCESSIBILITY STANDARDS FOR PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

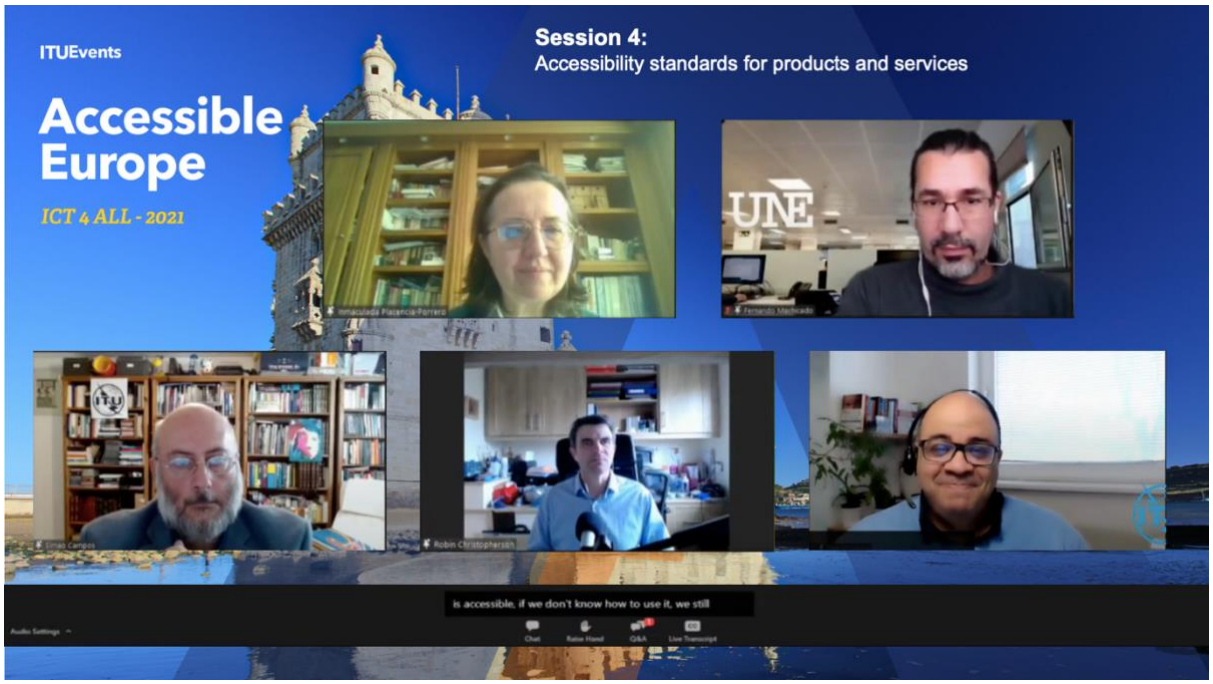

Figure 8 Photo of Session 4

Focus: Global standards in place for accessible products and services; European standards in the context of the European Accessibility Act.

Moderator: Ms. Inmaculada Placencia-Porrero, Senior Expert, Disability and Inclusion Unit, DG for Employment, Social Affairs, and Inclusion, European Commission.

Interactive Discussion: Panellist 1: **Mr. Simão Campos**, Counsellor, Telecommunication Standardization Bureau, ITU; Panellist 2: **Mr. Fernando Machicado**, Secretary of CEN-CENELEC-ETSI Joint Working Group on eAccessibility; Panellist 3: **Mr. Shadi Abou-Zahra**, Accessibility Strategy and Technology Specialist, W3C Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI); Panellist 4: **Mr. Robin Christopherson**, Head of Digital Inclusion, AbilityNet, United Kingdom.

Key points

- The development of ICT-based products and services and their availability on the market can effectively foster accessibility. Particularly, accessibility standards enhance the inclusiveness and participation of multiple stakeholders, in both the European and global contexts. According to a survey structured and administered by ITU Telecommunication Standardization Sector (ITU-T), the most productive and successful companies are also those precisely developing services and products whose characteristics are tailored to specific standards and requirements.
- Furthermore, standards contribute to the documentation of best practices, allowing individuals and businesses to focus on the most important facets of innovation, research, and development. Standards also overcome existing barriers, for instance, an indoor navigation device lacks standardization, then navigation is more difficult for users who need to regain their knowledge and adapt it to the characteristics of multiple applications. Through an inclusive standardization process and by fostering access to ICTs for persons with disabilities,

ITU standards allow for wider availability of solutions, as well as mainstreaming and promotion of universal design concepts.

- The most salient ITU-T accessibility standard referring to the Internet of Things (IoT) was incorporated into ITU-T Recommendation Y.4000/Y.2060 (the link to the recommendation). This clarifies the concept and scope of the IoT, identifies the fundamental characteristics, high-level requirements of the IoT, and describes the IoT reference model. ITU-T further works on joint projects to foster the accessibility of audiovisual media, ensure proper integration of indoor navigation standards for blind persons, update, and monitor television terminals accessibility profiles.
- According to ITU-T's mandate, standards must be viewed as technical specifications, whereas regulations as components can explain how to use and apply specific standards. Therefore, legislation constitutes the framework, and accessibility is granted through awareness-raising, a soft conviction of businesses, precisely targeted information campaigns to avoid the use of forced compliance and the introduction of strict punishment schemes.
- The first European Standard for accessible ICTs (EN 301 549) (the link to the standard) is intended in particular for use by public authorities and other public sector bodies during procurement, to ensure that websites, software, digital devices are more accessible - so they may be used by persons with a wide range of abilities.
- The European Commission works to ensure enhanced suitability and standardization of ICT products and services. Specifically, European standards assure that both providers and users are appropriately covered in their needs and objectives. Standards foster consensus among parties, introducing a demanding approval process while enhancing transparency and compatibility. Particularly, clarity in the definition of document guidelines and the introduction of support services foster the achievement of suppliers' and users' common objectives through the involvement of multiple stakeholders in the view of meeting the requirements of the European Accessibility Act (the link to the Act).
- This directive aims to improve the functioning of the internal market for accessible products and services, by removing barriers created by divergent rules in the Member States. At the European level, technical committees always consider accessibility a central priority once discussing issues related to the ICT landscape. ICT must be designed and manufactured in ways that respect the application of precise accessibility guidelines.
- Now more than ever, digital components have acquired a cross-sectoral nature. The central requirement is therefore to ensure that digital advancements are accompanied by proper accessibility support. As boundaries are moving and innovation is advancing, assistive technology is fundamental to foster inclusiveness and ensure that no one is left behind. In this view, the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.2 (the link to WCAG 2.2) cover a wide range of recommendations for making Web content more accessible to a wider range of persons with disabilities. These guidelines address the accessibility of web content on desktops, laptops, tablets, and mobile devices.
- W3C Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 3.0 (the link to WCAG 3.0) are a successor to Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.2 and previous versions. The first draft of WCAG 3.0 was released as an open platform, allowing stakeholders to add inputs and constantly monitor the progress of the document. WCAG 3.0 advises developers, content creators, and policymakers to maximize the future applicability of accessibility efforts.

- In the context of enforcement and implementation, the European Commission has conducted several surveys on digital accessibility in the EU. These surveys all show a high correlation between law enforcement and actual implementation and further highlight the existing difference between conformance to a standard and compliance to it. Conformance requires involved stakeholders to meet the requirements of a specific management system. Compliance means fully internalizing and respecting legal requirements despite them being jurisdictional, statutory, or regulatory in nature.
- The final and fundamental step consists in adopting a pragmatic approach towards accessibility, particularly by raising awareness to ensure a significant social and cultural shift, upskilling workers and professionals operating in the industry, and ensuring proper development of digital skills as well as the broad acquisition of digital literacy.
- Precisely formulated accessibility legislation fosters clarity, conformance, and the adoption of a non-binary approach to compliance. Each new piece of legislation should integrate end-users needs and requirements comprehensively and without discrimination. Enforcement should be viewed as a key component to ensure appropriate compliance and well-targeted implementation. In the UK, discriminating against persons with disabilities represents an act against the law.
- The Web Accessibility Act was effectively enforced in the country and allowed for fostered compliance on the side of service providers, ICT professionals, and product designers. This also resulted in concrete and functional response by local authorities, public institutions, government bodies, universities, and research centers, who fully internalized the message and recognized the importance of granting universal access to their ICT-based services and platforms.
- After Brexit, the UK risks losing all the momentum gained after the introduction of the EU Accessibility Act. Therefore, legislative bodies, governmental entities, local regulatory authorities must continue enforcing legislation, reviewing website features and content to increase their accessibility potential, and highlighting the risk of penalties for those not accommodating their standards with existing laws and best practices.

SESSION 5: COVID RESPONSE & RECOVERY: MAKING THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION INCLUSIVE OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

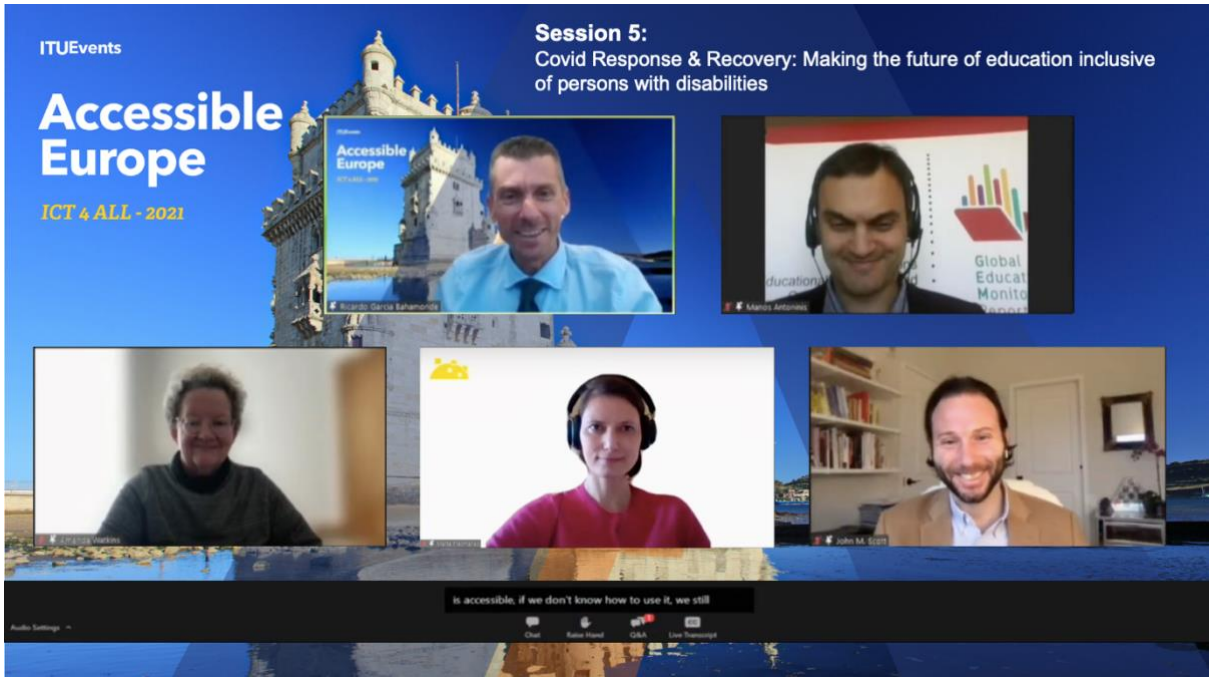

Figure 9 Photo of Session 5

Focus: How the pandemic highlights the importance of digital tools in education; The future of education in a Post-Covid world; Challenges and steps forward to build a disability-inclusive digital education in Europe.

Moderator: Mr. Ricardo Garcia Bahamonde, ITU Consultant, ITU.

Interactive Discussion: Panellist 1: **Mr. Manos Antoninis**, Director of Global Education Monitoring Report, UNESCO; Panellist 2: **Ms. Amanda Watkins**, Assistant Director, European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education; Panellist 3: **Ms. Marta Presmanes**, Project Manager, European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education; Panellist 4: **Ms. Stacy Scott**, Bookshare and Strategic Publisher Relationships Manager, RNIB Bookshare, Royal National Institute of Blind People; Panellist 5: **Mr. John M. Scott**, Product Manager of Blackboard Ally, Blackboard.

Key points

- The 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report, (the link to read the report), published by UNESCO, analyzes the key role played by assistive technology in enhancing access to education, fostering the achievement of SDG 4 - Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030.
- Universal digital inclusion and full accessibility can be improved through the recognition of the universal right to learn. As the Report highlights, to fully achieve this objective, technology should be adapted to students' needs, skills, and learning capacities in order to overcome existing barriers and ensure universal engagement in education and vocational training. This can result from the increased use of specialized educational software, e-learning platforms, online materials made accessible in affordable, familiar, and less stigmatized ways.

- As the UNESCO Report further underscores, assistive technology leads to enhanced participation of persons with disabilities in community life and lifelong learning, well-targeted academic orientation, increased graduation rates, fostered subjective well-being, and a higher probability of finding paid jobs in all economic sectors. In order to fully exploit the potential of innovative solutions and ensure accessibility of learning opportunities through digital tools and platforms, it is fundamental to increase the availability of assistive technologies and to harmonize their use across schools and geographical areas.
- Additionally, governments are called to finance digital solutions and make computers with incorporated assistive technologies available free of charge, as it happens in Italy and Estonia, where money is directly granted to schools to introduce this type of support. In Slovakia, direct payments are made to students so that they can buy the technology needed for education.
- Training of teachers is a further key point in order to enhance the appropriate use of these digital solutions and introduce assistive technologies as an integral component of school curricula and practice. In particular, Portugal has identified a network of reference schools providing screen readers, special calculators to enhance math skills of persons with disabilities, representing a reference for mainstream education and public schools which most of the time are not fully integrating ICT-based tools and platforms in their educational portfolios.
- On a country-level basis, Montenegro introduced textbooks in digitally accessible format together with the official requirement of adding audio and visual information to written materials available online. In Slovakia, textbooks must include transcriptions in braille which are added to accessible learning materials completely free of charge. Further disparities emerge between urban and rural areas, as well as on an individual country basis (for instance, in Bulgaria, 1 in 5 students with disabilities reports to lack of assistive technology and ad hoc education and training, whereas in North Macedonia a dedicated platform to increase learning opportunities of students with disabilities was successfully developed at the beginning of the pandemic).
- Due to the fact that COVID-19 has increased the use of digital technology in education and training, pre-existing digital divides have been exacerbated. Globally, persons with disabilities reported that the access to digital learning tools was more difficult during the pandemic. Geographical isolation and the pandemic's socio-economic crisis enhanced the risk of losing learning opportunities and school dropout rates dramatically increased.
- Distance learning programs were rarely adapted to the special learning needs of persons with disabilities. Lack of teachers' training and parents' limited capacity to follow their children full time as well as difficulties in access to social care services represented additional barriers to full accessibility and universal learning. In this respect, the Council of the European Union approved, on 18 February 2021, the "Council resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021–2030)" (the link to the resolution). The resolution presents key priorities to improve access to education and the functioning of education systems, among which fall "improving quality, equity, inclusion and success for all in education and training" and "making lifelong learning and mobility a reality for all".
- The EU further acknowledges the importance of fostering the development of a high-performing digital education ecosystem and enhancing digital skills and competencies for digital transformation. It precisely reinforces these objectives and works towards their

achievement through the "Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027)" (the link to the Action Plan) which outlines the European Commission's vision for high-quality, inclusive, and accessible digital education in Europe.

- According to available data and current research conducted in the education sector, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and more specifically in the past five years, a steady increase in the number of learning materials uploaded on digital platforms has been registered across universities and countries. However, full accessibility of these resources has not yet been achieved. In fact, 80% of this content lacks images' descriptions, subtitles for video lessons, and proper accessibility features. Accessibility and disability departments, working in schools at all levels as well as universities, are called to develop and deliver alternative content in order for these resources to become universally accessible.
- This revolution aims at supporting learning and skills development of persons with disabilities, who have been left behind by the impact of the pandemic and represent an extremely vulnerable group in all countries. Data can constitute an important starting point to foster the introduction and use of accessible tools and platforms in the education sector. Data are of paramount importance in driving cultural shifts and enhance the development and adoption of inclusively designed digital tools and platforms.
- As a study conducted in Switzerland exemplified, the impact of accessible vs. non-accessible learning materials on persons without disabilities can still be different and users who took part in the experiment always gained more information from accessible tools than from the least accessible ones. Therefore, the key message is that, in order to successfully enhance students' experiences and learning outputs, digital tools must be accessible, easy to use, and comprehensible for all.
- The European work with its Member States is based on the premise that inclusive and accessible education automatically involves the deployment of ICT-based tools to remove existing accessibility barriers and ensure all learners are involved in meaningful education. The effective use of accessible tools and the adoption of better-suited teaching approaches lead to high-quality learning outcomes. However, in order to meet this objective of achieving universal deployment of digital tools and services in education, teachers must be adequately trained to develop digital skills and design comprehensive teaching methods and tech-based education approaches.
- This has also been highlighted by the outcomes of the OECD Teaching and Learning International Surveys (TALIS) (the link to TALIS survey) teachers identify digital skills as an area in which they need more support and professional development, especially to foster education opportunities of persons with disabilities, students from migrant backgrounds, and pupils living in remote and rural areas.
- Both the education and the digital sector must open a goal-oriented conversation and exchange best practices to enhance the principle of universal inclusiveness as a cross-sectoral priority and allow for a fruitful exchange of knowledge, information, and digital skills among teachers, educators, and ICT professionals.

SESSION 6: BUILDING SMART AND ACCESSIBLE CITIES

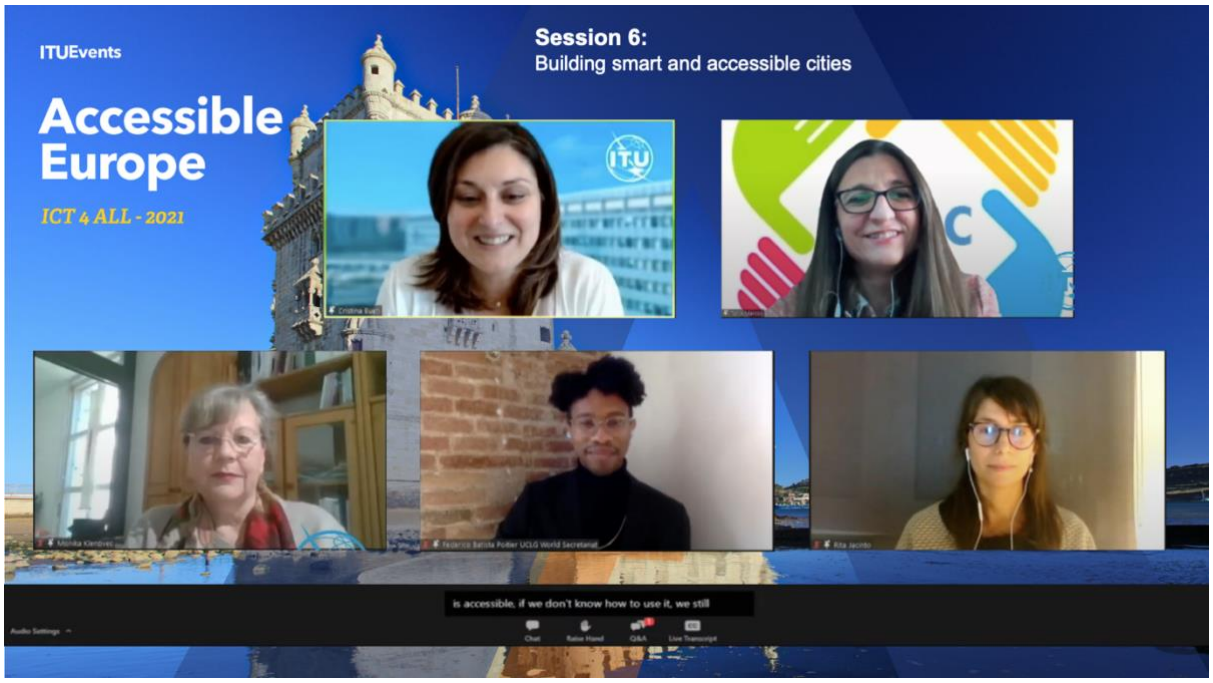

Figure 10 Photo of Session 6

Focus: Defining smart and accessible cities; Tools and strategies needed to make a smart and accessible city; Examples of good practices making European cities more accessible.

Moderator: Ms. Cristina Bueti, Counsellor, Telecommunication Standardization Bureau, ITU.

Interactive Discussion: Panellist 1: **Ms. Tania Marcos**, Vice-Chair, the UN initiative on United for Smart Sustainable Cities (U4SSC); Panellist 2**: Ms. Monika Klenovec**, Architect & Project Team leader of Expert Group of the European Commission Standardization Mandate M/420; Panellist 3: **Mr. Federico Batista Poitier**, Accessibility Policy Officer, United Cities and Local Government (UCLG); Panellist 4: **Ms. Rita Jacinto**, Program Manager, Division for the Pedestrian Accessibility, Lisbon Municipality, Portugal.

Key points

- The use of ICT can make a city smart because it aids city leaders in making decisions on public infrastructure and services based on the data they receive to improve the quality of life, operations, and competitiveness of the city. On the other hand, a sustainable city also needs to cover all aspects including social, economic, cultural, and environmental. Hence, the transition to smart sustainable cities requires a mandatory action plan addressing accessibility. City leaders need to ensure access to quality basic services and public spaces for all citizens because, in smart sustainable cities, no one should be left behind.
- A smart city could not solely refer to technology, but also being smart because it enables equitable and inclusive access to diverse groups of people to engage and enjoy different services a city could offer. A smart and sustainable city is still an ambiguous concept, for instance, what does it mean and who can claim a city is fully accessible, sustainable, or smart. This brings the importance to standardize and have clear requirements which are open and freely available for everyone.

- The accessibility of the built environment is a key element to assure the inclusion of all citizens in the everyday life, as well as the suitability of the buildings and public spaces to be effectively used by people regardless of their abilities or age. The standardization mandate from the European Commission, M/420, supports accessibility in the built environment by providing guidelines to assist European countries to fulfill their accessibility requirement for public procurement in a built environment.
- We should not aim to re-invent the wheel when it comes to building accessibility standards or requirements. For instance, during the process of EC M/420 mandate in the built environment, in the first phase of the mandate, inventory on analysis and feasibility on the existing European and International Accessibility Standards in the built environment are being carefully studied to find general approach, recommendations, and missing areas. From this, technical requirements and specifications of building regulations were formulated in the second phase of the mandate along with conformity assessment. One of the expected outcomes of M/420 would be a European standard on the accessibility of the built environment, having ISO 21542 as a base document.
- Partnership and collaboration are also central components in making cities smart and accessible. Initiatives such as United 4 Smart Sustainable Cities (U4SSC), which aims to promote smart sustainable city approaches to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable, provides an international platform for information exchange and knowledge sharing and partnership building among stakeholders including public, private, and third sector organizations in delivering smart and sustainable urban solutions.
- An inclusive partnership also needs to be done with local and regional governments and their networks in order to bridge the equity gap for persons with disabilities. At the level of local governance, inclusive policies and coordination need to be done with the local authorities who are in charge of accessibility or disability inclusion. They need to be well-coordinated with a lot of different agencies including civil society and particularly organizations of persons with disabilities and older persons for the baseline policies really looking at the challenges and opportunities and a clear way forward.
- Looking into implementation at the local government level, Lisbon City Council has undertaken several efforts to utilize technology and data to make the city more accessible. Currently, the city is focusing on the co-creation and the co-design of transport solutions for disabled people which aim to address several mobility challenges in Lisbon by using technology and available data to improve the experiences and mobility opportunities for disabled people for a more inclusive and smart city.
- Taking the experience from the Lisbon City Council, several key areas need to be addressed when working on making a city more accessible: 1) Limited availability of data availability – a lot of data needed to work on the project is not available, for instance, information on whether lift on tube stations or ramp on public transportation is working or not are yet available; 2) Involvement of persons with disabilities – Representative from Disabled People's Organizations need to be a part of the process in every step.

SESSION 7: ADVANCING IMPLEMENTATION OF ICTS ACCESSIBILITY ACROSS EUROPE

Figure 11 Photo of Session 7

Focus: Concrete steps on what to do and how to achieve ICTs accessibility; Examples of good practices across the region; Challenges lie ahead in engaging private sector; Good examples of public/private partnership in the field of accessibility.

Moderator: Ms. Sabine Lobnig, Director of Communications, Mobile and Wireless Forum.

Interactive Discussion: Panellist 1: **Ms. Zuzanna Raszkowska**, Deputy Director of the European Affairs and International Cooperation Department, Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy, Poland; Panellist 2: **Ms. Sara Carrasqueiro**, Board of Directors, Administrative Modernization Agency, AMA Portugal; Panellist 3: **Ms. Ljupka Mihajlovska**, Chairwoman of the Serbian Alliance for Accessibility, Serbia; Panellist 4: **Mr. Jesús Hernández Galán**, Director of Universal Accessibility and Innovation, Fundación ONCE, Spain.

Key points

- The European Accessibility Act is a huge step in the accessibility landscape and some stakeholders even refer to it as revolutionary. The Act is very focused on technology and this is good news because it requires digital products and services providers to integrate the accessibility aspect from the very beginning of their products or services development. This is an important milestone not just for European citizens but also for people around the world given the technology industry is very globally interlinked.
- Looking at national perspectives, 2017 was a turning point in Poland when accessibility is placed on the top of the government agenda by including it in key documents for the Polish medium- and long-term economic policy. Accessibility gained further momentum with the introduction of the Accessibility Plus Program which enables permanent inclusion of the accessibility concept into all public policies and investment plans in the eight priority areas covered by the Program, with digital accessibility among them.

- Based on the Polish government's experience - while building awareness is the beginning of the path towards accessibility, an effective legal framework also establishes a key tool to stimulate people to achieve this goal. Additionally, multi-stakeholder partnerships and efficient funding play here a pivotal role in advancing accessibility. Yet, a journey towards greater accessibility is not an easy road and a few challenges have been faced by the government in Poland. Still too little awareness on accessibility among the society and stakeholders remains one of the most important ones. Now, the priority is to continue the efforts and develop new projects in the frame of the national accessibility program, as well as attracting and maintaining the engagement of all crucial partners.
- Digital accessibility is placed at a very high priority in Portugal for quite some time, as a matter of fact, Portugal was the first European country to have the W3C accessibility requirements for websites in legislation back in 1999. Hence, digital accessibility and usability are since then two pillars in the Portuguese digital transformation strategy. Portugal also faced a similar issue with Poland when it comes to raising awareness for accessibility, hence, it is also essential to incorporate it in the national legislation and strategies.
- The Portuguese public administration digital transformation strategy relies upon a governance framework led by the Prime Minister delegated in one ministry comprised of ICT council with representatives from all governmental areas. It is quite important to involve all areas in these questions related to digital transformation and digital accessibility, and by having an agency that coordinates the strategy and develops common methodologies and development of new digital services which comply with several International and European standards, it provides great assistances to public entities in implementing digital accessibility within their bodies.
- The implementation and adoption of the UN CRPD or any International Standards at a national level are crucial, but political determination, among others, is a necessary precondition. Progress is not possible if government officials do not send a clear political message on a particular issue: if the government is not committed to deal with the issue the steps will be very small. Serbia became firmly committed to working on accessibility a few years ago, the country starts with establishing a working group for improving accessibility, and also with support from ITU, Serbia has been working on a baseline study on ICT Accessibility in the country, which contains key recommendations for further action. Taking a strategic approach such as conducting a baseline study and making a strategic plan for improving accessibility and moving barriers is a very important step.
- To bring private sector partners on board, accessibility must be "advertised" as engaging and user-friendly. It is important to view accessibility as an opportunity, not only a cost for the private sector as the disability market is an economic force. For instance, the private sector in Serbia is more cooperative than the public sector, because they are profit-oriented, seeking to make services available to the vast number of population. Hotels, restaurants, gas stations in Serbia tend to be accessible, seeing accessibility as an investment rather than cost. Furthermore, the national relay service is available to all 24/7 with the cost taken up by private sector entities on the condition that it is included in the public budget in the future.
- In the context of the European Accessibility Act, there is defined a "right balance between the strictness of rules and flexibility" to changing contexts, i.e., safeguards and leniency for SMEs who may struggle to implement changes in time—but must only be used as a transitional measure.

- On the other note, it is important to not fall into the trap of replacing accessibility with social exclusion. Freedom of choice must be paramount, and the digitalization of services and products must not become excuses or alternatives to free physical movement. "*Online environment is only an option and cannot become an alternative to free movement*".
- When it comes to technology, it is growing with or without accessibility e.g., last year subtitles were not included in digital video conferencing tools, however, now there exists a virtual tool to analyze which technologies are growing and which are helping persons with disabilities, i.e., Artificial Intelligence which must focus on ethics and exclusion in AI algorithms. These algorithms can be exclusive, as they do not take diversity into consideration.
- Other tools that can be helpful for Accessibility include social assistance robots which can help people move through large public buildings e.g., train stations, airports. 3D printing can develop ways to help people in low-cost i.e., providing cheap assistance robots through 3D printing.

KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT FOR ICT ACCESSIBILITY: ITU ACADEMY CERTIFICATION

This session was a knowledge development session following the sessions provided in the first two days concerning the international and regional targets and commitments implemented by various stakeholders to build a digitally inclusive region and world.

Ms. Roxana Widmer-Iliescu, Senior Coordinator - Digital Inclusion, Telecommunication Development Bureau presented various video tutorials of ITU-Trainings (the link to training website) on ICT Accessibility available in the ITU academy. These online courses are self-paced, free of charge, available in multiple languages and in an accessible format with the possibility of obtaining an ITU certificate at the end of the training validating the knowledge gained. Additional ITU-D Creation of accessible digital contents (the link to access video tutorials) were shared, in particular for policymakers and communicators, to help them increase their audience, and for the private sector, to add to end-users, and to increase their business values. The focus of these videos was on "how to build accessible digital content" to ensure that accessibility is upheld with all content being developed and delivered in an accessible format.

Ms. Elena Stankovska-Castilla, Associate Capacity Development Officer, International Telecommunication Union (ITU) gave a short presentation on accessing and joining courses at the ITU Academy. The proceedings of this session are available online at the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4T9UEyCuiQ.

PROJECT LABORATORY OF THE ITU REGIONAL INITIATIVE FOR EUROPE ON ACCESSIBILITY, AFFORDABILITY, AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT FOR ALL TO ENSURE DIGITAL INCLUSION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Focus: In follow up to Session 7, this session provided an open space for an in-depth discussion on initiatives including:

- Implementation and monitoring on "Regional Review on Enabling Environment Ensuring Accessible ICTs for Persons with Disabilities in Europe"
- Curation Programme on "Strengthening the ICT-centric Innovation Ecosystem for Accessible Europe"
- Other special projects/initiatives

Mr. Carlos Duarte, University of Lisbon presented three initiatives promoting accessibility:

- **LEAD-ME** (Leasing Platform for European Citizens, Industries, Academics, and Policymakers in Media Accessibility). It's a COST Action that began last October and that will run through October 2024. The main objective of this action is to foster collaboration and knowledge exchange between its member participants. This platform can serve as a place where stakeholders and communities linked to accessibility will meet. This will enable coordination of efforts at multiple levels, tracing a roadmap for accessibility across Europe, coordinating policymakers in regulating the established standards for accessibility, like the web accessibility directive for the audio-visual media services directive. For this, there are four distinct working groups. Working Group one is tasked with the creation of a platform that will work as a one-stop-shop for accessibility-related resources. Working Group two is focused on defining best practices, guidelines, and curricula, that should be implemented in order to have a harmonized approach to accessibility education. Working Group three aims to promote a set of standards that guarantee a satisfactory level of quality. Finally, Working Group four looks at the current legislative framework, and input from the other Working Groups to derive the strategic priorities for future directions and priorities for policymakers in media accessibility.
- **WAI-CooP**, the Web Accessibility Initiative communities of practice. WAI-CooP is a coordination and support action funded by the EU under the Horizon 2020 Program. It started this January, and it will go on for three years. WAI-CooP is primarily concerned with supporting the implementation of international standards for digital accessibility. WAI-CooP will facilitate the Member States and other non-EU countries in locating media resources, but also want to help bridge the gap between what the accessibility research community focuses on, and what are the needs of companies and practitioners that work in the accessibility field. The project's outcomes will materialize the work through resources made available to the community by developing a list of training and certification offerings.
- **SONAAR** is a preparatory action funded by the European Commission that started earlier this year and will end in July of this year. User-generated content is large, if not the largest part of the content available on the web. With the affordability of cameras and smartphones, images and videos are a large part of that content. While the interfaces of social networks are becoming fairly accessible, this user-generated media content is not. Although some social networks already have features that are capable of providing automatically text descriptions

for content, they often lack quality. The primary goal in SONAAR is to demonstrate that advertising possible for authorizing in the social context. SONAAR will explore the mechanisms that make it possible to explore the accessible media content, both on mobile and web platforms. So far, an extension for Google Chrome and an application for Android phones that targets two social networks, Twitter and Facebook. In these social networks, the SONAAR prototypes are able to offer text descriptions and it's being authored. These suggestions can come from a variety of sources but the primary one is existing textual descriptions that have been created by other users, therefore, looking to improve the quality of suggestions when compared to automatically generated ones. The SONAAR user, when in the presence of an image on a web page or MOL application screen can request from our service a textual description for that image.

Mr. Micheal Fembek & **Mr. Robin Wim Weis** presented Zero Project:

- The Zero Project has been initiated by the Essl Foundation from Austria, an entrepreneurial foundation. It was founded when the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was launched in the late 2000s.
- The mission is completely related to the articles of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and contributes to the implementation of the CRPD.
- A very clear approach to do that is finding and communicating innovations on the one side and on the same side, building communities around innovators, and telling the story of innovations.
- The main process is interconnecting these people that select and choose and give us their opinion on innovations, the same people who should use those opinions, leaders and the decision-makers, using the innovations that we jointly develop.
- Throughout the years, Zero Project has focused on employment, accessibility, independent living, political participation, education, and every year, given its outsized importance, ICT.
- In the past 7-years, the foundation has come up with 662 innovative policies from over 118 countries (the link to innovative policies 2021).
- Zero Project has 6000 people that have contributed in the past eight years to the network, and to the selection and the communication of the Zero Project innovations jointly discovered and communicated, some 180 plus countries have contributed. 662 awardees have been selected since 2014. Ten Zero Project conferences have happened already, which are the flagship activities and the last one was completed digital last February.
- For Zero Project 2021 Awards, the organization is looking for nominations centered on accessibility and innovation which are innovative, scalable, and impactful initiatives. The period of call for innovations will be launched from May 3, 2021, until June 20, 2021.

ITU-Essl Foundation Partnership for Innovation Ecosystem in Accessibility

During this session, it has also been announced that ITU will be joining forces with the Zero Project of the Essl Foundation to launch an initiative together around the ecosystem of innovation in accessibility, to work closely with start-ups and SMEs and other relevant stakeholders to enhance, of course, regional cooperation in Europe, and engagement in the innovation ecosystem for an Accessible Europe.

MAIN CONCLUSION AND CLOSING OF THE ACCESSIBLE EUROPE

Concluding remark from Mr. Jaroslaw K. Ponder, Head of ITU Office for Europe, ITU

Mr. Jaroslaw Ponder highlighted the Accessible Europe forum as an important milestone in the implementation of the Regional Initiative for Europe on Accessibility, affordability and skills development for all to ensure digital inclusion and sustainable development. From this three-day event, we also learned that ICT Accessibility is on the top of the agenda in many European countries. While Europe is leading on this topic, several things have to be fixed and a lot has to be done.

Mr. Ponder also added that the event is joined by innovators and by so many stakeholders who and are working on advancing ICT accessibility in Europe which opens pathways to greater social and economic inclusion and self-empowerment of all people which is Instrumental in ensuring the achievement of the SDGs by 2030. States, civil societies, and private sectors have a collective responsibility to bridge the digital inclusion gap creating a world where everyone has equal opportunity to access ICT, and hence, multi-stakeholder engagement is key to ensure availability, affordability, and accessibility of ICT products and services.

He ended his remark by thanking the co-organizers of the forum, particularly the European Commission and all stakeholders from the Portuguese Government. Held within the framework of the Portuguese Presidency of the EU Council, the event is hopefully could create good cooperation and elevate the meaning of accessibility on political agenda within and beyond the European Union.

Concluding remark from Ms. Inmaculada Placencia-Porrero, Senior Expert of Disability and Inclusion Unit for DG Employment, Social Affairs, and Inclusion of the European Commission

Ms. Inmaculada Placencia-Porrero opened her remark by noting how the 3rd ITU-EC Europe Forum - Accessible Europe has been continuously evolving to be a richer and more interesting forum. She noted that starting the forum with a very high-level panel showcased how high and the increasing relevance of ICT accessibility in the policies agenda of the EU council presidency and also European States in general, impacting the lives of so many people in the region.

During her concluding remark, Ms. Placencia-Porrero shared several reflections and main takeaways of the event:

- At the European level, accessibility policies, legislations, implementations, and practices are going hand in hand and getting more advance, but we were also reminded of the need of paying attention to the research of new technologies to accelerate the process;
- As technology is something that always evolving, it is also important to pay attention to more traditional forms of ICT infrastructures to ensure accessibility is embedded in every digital products and services;
- The world of ICT accessibility is getting more mature as we passed the phase from having to define the policies into implementations, and standardization plays a fundamental role here which has been shown in different practical applications such as in the education sector and building smart and sustainable cities;
- Following the panel discussions throughout the event shows that now Europe is better equipped in terms of tools and skills to foster ICT accessibility in the region, and the benefit of working together to achieve this goal will be shown in the coming years.

Closing her remark, Ms. Placencia-Porrero states her enthusiasm in continuing the ITU-EC incredible partnership in organizing the Accessible Europe forum.

Concluding remark from Ms. Maria de Fátima Fonseca, Secretary of State of the Innovation and Administrative Modernization of Portugal

Ms. de Fátima Fonseca commenced her remark by thanking the ITU and the European Commission for the opportunity to host Accessible Europe this year. She emphasized the governments and public services must lead by example and ensure that we share the same vision regarding the development of the skills necessary for the future of work to foster job opportunities as well as access to information and public services for all. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to deal with big challenges but also has shown how technology can play an important role by removing barriers and promoting the autonomy of persons with disabilities.

She further elaborated on the Portuguese Government's exemplary efforts in advancing ICT accessibility in the country, including by introducing the Portuguese law and reinforcement mechanism in 2018, which transposed from the EU directive on Accessibility of the public sector's websites and mobile applications, covering administrative and public services such as universities, libraries, and hospitals. Ms. de Fátima Fonseca then concluded her intervention by sharing her optimism on the shared value and commitment of all stakeholders towards a meaningful transformation of public services contributing to full digital citizenship for all to overcome barriers and to bridge social inequalities to foster a more cohesive Europe.

Concluding remark from Ms. Ana Sofia Antunes, Secretary of State of the Inclusion of the Persons with Disabilities of Portugal

Ms. Antunes stressed that the question concerning accessibility is one of the highest political priorities in Portugal which is reflected in the government's program and shows how the country is at the forefront of promoting accessibility. She reminded us how we cannot talk about accessibility without recalling the UN CRPD as a fundamental document (ratified by Portugal in 2009) to improve our vision and paradigm of inclusion because it shows us that every person is the subject of rights and had to be able to actively participate in the society.

At the regional level, she added, the European Accessibility Act will lead to more inclusive products and services, and an internal working group has been established in Portugal to work on the transposition of this act. Ms. Antunes also mentioned the currently formulated National Strategy on the Rights for Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities which comprises some measures in digital accessibility in various areas including public websites, broadcasting, transportation system, culture, and tourism. She ended her remark by thanking the ITU and the EC for the opportunity to share pathways, experiences, and solutions in making Europe more accessible through the Accessible Europe forum.

KEY DOCUMENT: ICT ACCESSIBILITY ASSESSMENT FOR THE EUROPE REGION

As mentioned throughout this report, the ITU completed an *ICT accessibility assessment for the Europe region* (the link to download the report) in advance of the Accessible Europe forum, which will serve as a tool for the ITU Office for Europe to launch targeted ICT accessibility programs for the Member States. ITU Member States can use the assessment as a tool in their efforts to take the necessary steps in establishing the enabling environments required to ensure accessible telecommunications/ICTs for all people regardless of age, gender, ability, or location. The assessment will also serve as input for ICT accessibility discussions under the presidencies of the Council of the EU in 2021 and the preparatory

process for the upcoming ITU World Telecommunication Development Conference (WTDC-21). The link to the assessment is made available below.

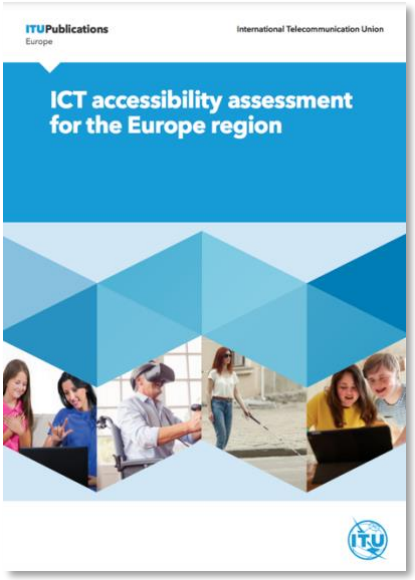

Figure 12 – ICT accessibility assessment for the Europe region

VIDEO CONTRIBUTIONS

In addition to the eminent speakers who participated live over the three days of the Accessible Europe event, participants benefitted from numerous video contributions, which can be viewed on the ITU YouTube playlist (the link to playlist). The call for video contribution offers a platform through which all stakeholders can showcase their activities, call for collaboration, and reiterate their commitment to fostering ICT accessibility in the Europe region. The contributions are listed below.

Special video messages

1. **H.E. Ana Mendes Godinho**, Minister of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security of Portugal.
2. **Ms. Maria de Fátima Fonseca**, Secretary of State of the Innovation and Administrative Modernization of Portugal.
3. **Mr. Pedro Nuno Santos**, Minister of Infrastructure and Housing, Portugal.
4. **Mr. Manuel Mendonça**, Manager of the Homologation and Certification of POS and ATM terminals Unit, Portugal.
5. **Ms. Fátima Resende**, Member of the Regulatory Board, Media Regulatory Body of Portugal.
6. **Mr. João Costa**, Deputy Minister for Education of Portugal.
7. **Mr. Rui Fernandes**, Coordinator of ICT Resources Center for the Special Education in Amadora and Lisbon (CRTIC), Ministry of Education of Portugal.

Exchange of ICT practices and fostering ICT accessibility in the Europe region

8. ***Universal Accessibility Pillar and Bridge for Human Rights and Sustainable Development***, a contribution from **Ms. Maria Soledad Cisternas Reyes**, Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General on Disability and Accessibility.

9. ***The Agency's Vision for Inclusive Education Systems,*** a contribution from **the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education**.
10. ***Challenges Institutions Face in Delivering Accessible, Inclusive Digital Learning Experiences,*** a contribution from **Dr. John Scott, Product Manager of Blackboard Ally**.
11. ***Discover Accessibility Features on your Device with GARI FHD,*** a contribution from **The Global Accessibility Reporting Initiative (GARI), Mobile & Wireless Forum (MWF)**.
12. ***Making online job application and recruitment systems accessible for all,*** a video contribution from **ITU/ILO project on the "Accessibility of Online Job Application and Recruitment Systems".**

In addition, 15 finalists of the Regional Competition for Innovative Digital Solutions for Accessible Europe also submitted their video contributions showcasing how their solutions benefitted persons with disabilities. The videos can be viewed on the ITU YouTube playlist (the link to playlist).

REGIONAL COMPETITION: INNOVATIVE DIGITAL SOLUTIONS FOR ACCESSIBLE EUROPE

The Regional Competition for Accessible Europe is aimed to support the Europe region in strengthening the ICT-centric innovation ecosystem focusing on ICT accessibility. As an integral part of the Accessible Europe forum, a **Regional Competition for Innovative Digital Solutions for Accessible Europe** took place from **15 November 2020 to 24 February 2021**.

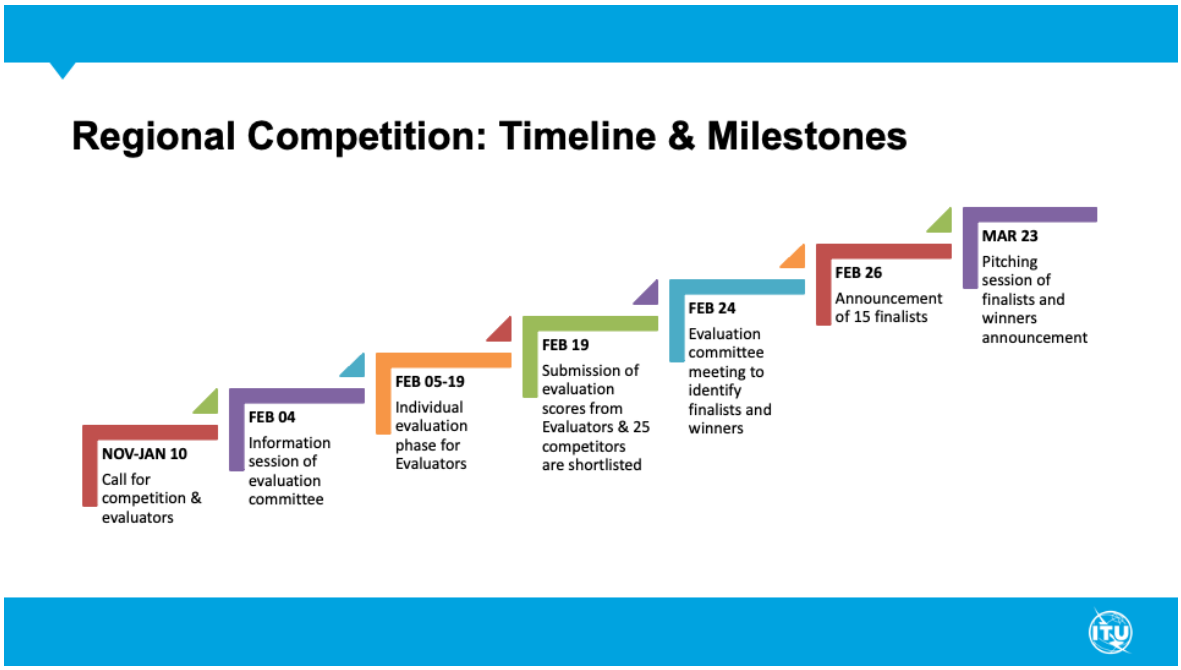

Figure 13 Regional Competition: Timeline & Milestones

The Competition sought solutions from individuals and teams across the private, public, non-profit and academic sectors that addressed the needs of persons with vision, hearing, speech, cognitive and physical disabilities. In particular, the Competition expected new concepts of digital applications or interfaces designed to remove barriers, helping People with Disabilities (PwDs) live a more

independent life, participate in cultural events or political processes, benefit from education or entertainment, or obtain a job. As a result of the Call for Competition (the link to the call), ITU received **97 submissions from 29 different countries** in the Region. The solutions were reviewed by an independent Evaluation Committee (the link to the Evaluation Committee profile) composed of experts from European disability associations and ICT Accessibility experts who responded to our open Call for Evaluators (the link to the call).

Evaluators gathered on 24 February 2021 through a virtual meeting where they spent time working to identify **3 nominated candidates for each category**. This meeting was coordinated by **ITU Office for Europe** and supported by **ANACOM Portugal** as a strategic partner of this year's Regional Competition for Accessible Europe. Additional input was provided by the **Telecommunication Development Bureau, Telecommunication Standardization Bureau, and Radiocommunication Bureau of ITU**.

Figure 14 Evaluation Committee for the Regional Competition

The nominated finalists (the link to the finalists' information) for the 5 categories are the following:

- ***Persons who are deaf or hard of hearing:*** Visualfy, SignLab, and World In Sign EU GmbH
- ***Persons with visual impairment:*** RemmedVR, Project Ray and Feelif
- ***Persons with speech impairment:*** Voiceitt, APP-SEC-NETWORK and Pictogram
- ***Persons with cognitive and intellectual disabilities:*** Tu Dortmund University, Capito App and Claro Software
- ***Persons with physical disabilities:*** Magicview, Travaxy and Lifetool

Nominated candidates are invited to participate in Accessible Europe, from 23 to 25 March 2021 where their pitching presentations were taking place on 23 March 2021 followed by an Award Ceremony announcing winners and runner-ups for each category before an audience comprising a wide range of experts and interested stakeholders.

The winners were announced by Mr. Mark Wheatley and Ms. Veronica Montanaro, two members of the Evaluation Committee. **Visualfy won in Category 1, REMEDVR was declared winner in Category 2, VoiceItt won in Category 3, whereas Easy Reading and Magic View were winners in Categories 4 and 5, respectively.** The winners receive special recognition of Accessible Europe by ITU for their achievements and will be included in the ITU Smart Incubator's (the link to ITU Smart Incubator website) capacity building program, becoming active participants in the policy discourse, standardization, and programming processes of ITU. Moreover, all finalists, providing innovative digital solutions for Accessible Europe, will benefit from the Curation Programme where ITU and its partner will actively promoting and connect innovators to its network.

Figure 15 Winners of the Regional Competition

ITU thanks **ANACOM Portugal** for the support they have given to this Regional Competition as they are providing accessibility features during the process and supporting the Awards Ceremony which was held on 23 March 2021.

CAPACITY BUILDING IN ICT ACCESSIBILITY

In addition, participants are offered to enroll in self-paced online courses available at ITU Academy, on which successful candidates will receive the certificate in electronic version upon the completion of the course. Courses available on the topic of ICT Accessibility:

1. How to ensure inclusive digital communication during crises and emergency situations (the link to the course)

2. ICT Accessibility: the key to inclusive communication (the link to the course)

3. Web Accessibility: The cornerstone of an Inclusive Digital Society (the link to the course)

PARTNER INSTITUTIONS

ITU would like to express sincere appreciation to partner institutions for their immense supports and contributions working together for more than six months in the preparation and organization of the Accessible Europe forum.

European Commission	**European Commission**
ama ADMINISTRATIVE MODERNIZATION AGENCY	**Administrative Modernization Agency, AMA Portugal**
ANACOM	**National Regulatory Authority in Communications, ANACOM Portugal**
INR instituto nacional para a reabilitação Ministério do Trabalho, Solidariedade e Segurança Social Instituto Nacional para a Reabilitação, I.P.	**National Institute for Rehabilitation, INR Portugal**