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BEST PRACTICE GUIDE

Web accessibility and other initiatives for persons with disabilities
in EU in pandemic and other crisis times

WAI 4 PWD



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What's WAI4PwDs?

WHAT IS BEST PRACTICE GUIDE ABOUT?

The project focuses on communities' response to rights of persons with disabilities in times of crisis. In the times of forced social distancing, when the whole world is facing challenges such as COVID19 and War in Ukraine and is turning to ICT tools and contents as a means of dealing with everyday life, PwDs are burdened by the inability to move freely, to fulfill their basic needs and finally to access any kind of e-content. When physical access to all basic services is limited, relying on online forms becomes a precondition of living and if not supported properly by community action, PwDs are left deprived, marginalized to society.

The project is organized as 6 events in SR; HR; BL; CZ; BA that focus on building citizens' understanding on how to manage volunteering actions in times of crisis and importance of digital content accessibility for PwDs in almost all aspects of life (learning, public content, entertainment, professional development and employment, etc.).

By presenting regional good practices in community response to you in this guide, we intend to show how a community can take volunteering and solidarity action to cater for PwDs in times of crisis and second, what web accessibility initiatives and standards can be used to make digital content more accessible to PwDs.



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BASIC INFORMATION about the project

WAI4PwDs - Web Accessibility and Other Initiatives for Persons with Disabilities in EU in Pandemic and Other Crisis Times

Duration:

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Total value of EU funding:

136.080,00 EUR

Project applicant/Lead partner:

- Regional Development Agency Srem (RDA Srem)

Partners on the project:

- Faculty of Organisation and Informatics (FOI), Croatia;
- Centre for education and upbringing „Tomislav Špoljar“ (TŠ), Croatia;
- Brčko district of Bosnia and Hercegovina, Bosnia and Hercegovina;
- TMP Association for Employing Poor Eyesight and Visually Impaired Persons (TMP), Bosnia and Hercegovina;
- Municipality Prague 9 (Prague 9), Czech Republic;
- Association for People with Intellectual Disabilities (CHANCE), Bulgaria;
- Centre for Economic Empowerment of Roma People (CEUR), Serbia;
- Red Cross Sremska Mitrovica (RC SM), Serbia

Source of EU co-funding:

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SERBIA



WAI4PwDs is initiated by Serbian partners located in a small region of Srem, in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina. These struggle with everyday challenges in addressing rights of persons with disabilities and other vulnerable and marginalized groups and try to improve their quality of life through various project or volunteer based initiatives.



One of these is the project **Boards without Borders- Improving life quality for marginalised groups through people-to-people approach** which was financed through Cross-border Cooperation program Serbia-Croatia within the Consortium of the following organizations: Association "Bubamara", Vinkovci-Croatia; Centre for Social Welfare-Vinkovci, Croatia; Centre for Social Welfare-Šid, Serbia; Red Cross Sremska Mitrovica- Serbia and Regional Development Agency Srem-Serbia.

The project was created after terrible floods hit Serbia and Croatia (and other surrounding countries) in 2014. The main target group of the project were persons with disabilities and the persons who are directly involved in working with them: carers, social welfare workers, nurses, families etc. as well as life-guards and volunteers engaged in the Red Cross and other NGOs across the targeted regions.

These were directly involved in specifically designed training for reaching out to persons with disabilities, especially in the emergency relief situations, in this case floods. One of the most interesting and purposeful trainings was for persons managing the boat accessible to persons with disabilities and for the life guards, volunteers of the Red Cross of Sremska Mitrovica.

In order to overcome the difficulties persons with disabilities might be facing during floods and other emergency relief situations, both countries obtained specially designed vehicles for road and river traffic i.e. specially designed boats and vans for persons with disabilities. Final result of the project was an integrated social service– accessible transport for persons with disabilities as well as therapeutic and rehabilitation services. The project follow- up and achieved results can be used even today when there are COVID19 residues but also outbreaks of other crisis such as the War in Ukraine and the earthquakes that hit Croatia and Turkey afterwards.



Despite of their global nature and the fact that their impact is spread and projected as severe world economic and social crisis, this WAI4PwDs recognises the significance of local community and the importance of addressing needs of each and every individual, especially those who are the most vulnerable but also those who carry the future of the world: children.

Such was the initiative of a Children's department of the Ruma City Library „Atanasije Stojković" - a warm children's spot in which the youngest ones can exchange experience on a daily basis. In this place, workshops, exhibitions and all kinds of other social activities which are enjoyable to children are held on a regular basis. Every meeting ends with songs, hugs, and the message of visiting the library again. Employees always try to spend time with the children in a quality and fun manner, but also to provide them with warm welcome and friendly support, making them realize that this library spot is their little empire.

Pandemics of COVID19 virus caught everybody unprepared, including the librarians of the institution, and it has disabled every form of communication with the users. The contents became unavailable, and the socialization with children has completely disappeared. In that moment, librarians realized that the COVID19 pandemics closed all the doors of further cooperation and that the Children department of the institution would lose its purpose without children. In a matter of one day, uncertainty of what awaits left a worrying level of confusion and anxiety. To Mirjana Belošević, a librarian from the „Atanasije Stojković" library, this was a great challenge. In all those circumstances, her first decision was to provide any kind of support, and an idea to make a story about COVID19 and explain it to the children in the simplest way possible, just came to her mind. After this decision, a variety of new ideas came up, and the final one was to start audio recording AUDIO FAIRYTALES for children.

This job required a lot of effort, in order to make this into something children will enjoy. First phase was to collect materials, selection of the most beautiful and most famous fairytales to be recorded. Second and the most demanding phase was to select photos to match the content and the third one was to make recordings. Fairytales were recorded in a cheerful tone, short in content to keep children's attention, and followed by fun music and the narrator's voice. Fairytales were published every day on the social networks of the library but then Mirjana came up with an idea to make them available all the time. With this in mind, she created You Tube Channel „Zlatna kočija", where all the links can be accessed.

Original idea was very useful and it was given a lot of attention, because today the channel counts over 113 000 views



and over 600 followers and the numbers are still raising. In the meantime, the channel was updated with other content, such as creative workshops for the development of motor skills with children and similar. Diversifying the content of the channel makes the level of transferability of the action pretty high as it turns out that even small adjustments in terms of visual, motoric and audio skills can widen the scope of the target group to persons with disabilities, especially those with visual and hearing impairments.

CROATIA



WAI4PwDs was created as a result of long-lasting cooperation between the Lead partner, RDA Srem, and the Varaždin County institutions which do their best to ensure that the quality of life of all of its citizens continuously improves. Such institutions are definitely Centre for Education and Upbringing Tomislav Špoljar and Faculty of Organization and Informatics of the University of Zagreb who pride themselves for applying most modern methods and tools in education for persons with disabilities and for this reason participating in networking and knowledge transfer programmes.



Among their programmes, Centre Tomislav Špoljar offers primary education of children with moderate and severe intellectual disabilities and primary education of children with autism and influential developmental disabilities. In the pandemic times, those were the groups of pupils whose education was extremely challenged because of the lack of in person rehabilitation. Teachers tried to organise online education for pupils who had equipment and internet at home and who had the intellectual and physical possibilities to follow the lessons and rehabilitation online. Lessons materials were sent by email, viber, messenger and other social media with instructions to the parents how to use them. Some teachers could organise the lessons through ZOOM and could communicate with their pupils daily. The pupils and their parents who did not have technical possibilities for online lessons got paper materials by regular mail. At first, everyone was trying to work out the best in order for pupils to get the best possible education at the challenging times, but everybody lacked experience in online materials to work with.

During the second lockdown things were different. We learned how to adapt lessons to possibilities at home, IT literacy and social - economic level of pupils and their parents. Pupils got tablets to work with. The amount of online methods and materials increased and teachers from the whole country shared their materials with others. Still most challenging was to work with pupils with severe intellectual disabilities and autism. Those pupils needed rehabilitation procedures which could only be provided by personal contact with educational rehabilitators. Instead of working with pupils, most of the time the teacher instructed parents how to fulfil a task given. This was not easy for some parents who are not professionals in educational rehabilitation and who mostly had other school going children at home. But, we saw it as education for the parents too. The communication with the parents increased too, as they were the connection between the teacher and the pupil.



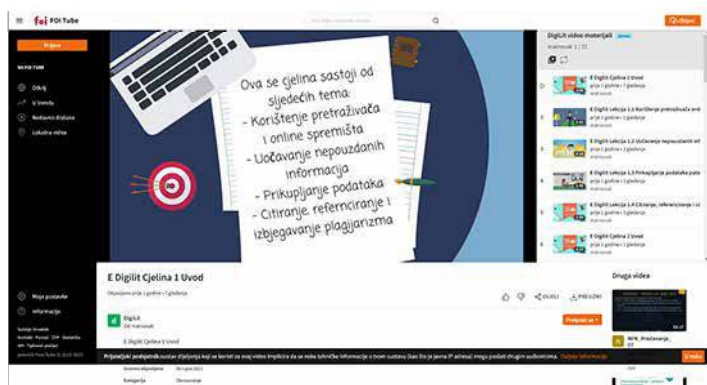
Knowledge transfer between colleagues of the same school and other schools increased significantly. The result is a huge number of digital platforms and materials to be used by teachers and pupils. Both teacher and pupils learned how to use new learning methods and techniques. The Ministry of education and science organised daily lessons on the television programme and posted many materials for everyone to use. In this way the school came to many homes and the public was offered the possibility to learn how the lessons at school are given. But the most valuable effect the circumstances had on the parents of children with disabilities was that they learned how to work with their children.



For University of Zagreb, Faculty of Organization and Informatics, Varaždin- work with students with disabilities is not a novel thing and their history of adapting learning materials to PwDs comes a long way. Center for students with disability FOI, among other goals, provides support for students who are visually impaired and blind in their access to digital text books. FOI library enables great help in this project. Before, during and after COVID 19 pandemic other digital learning materials are developed. FOI LMS system MOODLe includes presentations, videos, quiz, forums for discussion and other learning techniques / tools suitable for online and hybrid learning for each particular course.

Furthermore, Many FOI projects are focused on development of online and hybrid learning materials. One of them is project E-DigiLit - Enhancing Digital Literacy of University Students (Erasmus+), KA2 - Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices, KA203 - Strategic Partnerships for higher education (2019-2022). Digital materials for teaching and learning, in form of presentations, video materials and quizzes are available at UNIZG FOI Tube , E-DigiLit project information are at <http://edigitlit.eu/en/home-page-english/> and <http://lms.edigitlit.eu/> . Main goal of E-DigiLit project was to improve the university student's digital literacy skills for all students, including students with disability.

Additional support before, during and after COVID 19 pandemic is based on student individual initiative – You Tube channel "Liter of Proud, Kilo of Prejudice". Vlogs are created by Kristina Ivatovic, alumni FOI student. Content is linked to tips and experiences of student with disability in everyday student life inside and outside the lecture rooms. <https://www.youtube.com/c/LitraponosKilapredrasuda> Results are presented at the international conferences and published (Ivatovic, Kristina; Vidacek Hains, Violeta YouTube as a Source of Information and Support for Students with Disabilities. Proceedings of 45th Jubilee International Convention MIPRO, Opatija, HR, Opatija, 2022. str. 708-711 <https://www.bib.irb.hr/1197708>)



BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA



WAI4PwDs partnership is composed of both EU and non-EU countries whereas those who still do not officially belong to European Union nevertheless strive to its democratic values and principles, especially when it comes to rights of persons with disabilities. Moreover, in some areas of development, BIH partners can pride themselves in overcoming and completely fulfilling EU goals, best of which is being illustrated in Sarajevo Canton and the TMP- Society for employment of blind and visually impaired persons. TMP was founded in 1968. It has been widely renowned for employing persons with disabilities – especially blind and visually impaired in various areas: printing, bag making, jewelry, physical rehabilitation and therapy, cooking and catering etc. To this company, not any crisis, and even a crisis such as COVID19 cannot come as a surprise since they provide adapted working conditions and better life standards through employment for more than 50 persons with disabilities. To this respect, TMP has made all of its facilities accessible to people in wheelchairs. They installed an elevator and made ramps. During the pandemic, TMP modified the already accessible website and made it more accessible, so that it is now fully accessible for blind people. Since visitors and service users are people with different types of disabilities, accessibility standards are diverse. For example, a website is accessible to use a voice program. The built-in elevator has a doorless sensor with a low keypad. We also have toilets for people with disabilities. Their restaurant is always mobile for deliveries to people who cannot physically come to their facilities, which proved to be especially important during the pandemic.



To the second WAI4PwDs partner from BiH, its governmental role naturally leads to attempts to make initiatives and improvements on BiH legislation for persons with disabilities, making them sustainable and supported by policy framework. In this respect, The Law on Social Protection of the Brčko District of BiH provides support to persons with disabilities through: social benefits, financial support for the care of a person with a disability, personal assistance, spa climate treatment, one-time assistance, counseling, increased child allowance, electricity subsidies, etc. The law provides maximum support to families with children with disabilities through financial support, assessment of children's abilities, interaction with the education system through inclusive teaching etc. Best examples of support provided by the local community of the District to the persons with disabilities through the COVID 19 pandemic are: fully covered medical expenses in other BiH cities, in case of complications caused by COVID, ambulance service, elevator for people with disabilities, and related support services between social workers, school assistants and psychologist.

The news in the promotion of a better quality of life for persons with disabilities living in Brčko District of BiH is the adoption of the Law on Professional Rehabilitation, Training and Employment of Persons with Disabilities of the Brčko District of BiH, which is currently in the process. This law would regulate the field of work and employment in a comprehensive manner and would prevent discrimination against citizens based on the cause and form of disability, place of residence and place of employment.

The proposed law will fully regulate the employment process of persons with disabilities, the competence of public institutions and obligations of the public and private sector regarding the right of persons with disabilities to work. By its nature, this law is part of the strategic orientation of the District institutions for the full enjoyment of civil rights, as well as it is a part of the reform process and EU accession.

The Employment Bureau of the Brčko District of BiH annually announces a public call for employers to employ unemployed persons from the category "hard-to-employ persons" from the records of persons actively seeking employment at the Employment Bureau of the Brčko District of BiH. One of the goals of the public call is to employ people with disabilities and civilian victims of war. Beneficiaries under this program are business entities, to which the Institute provides co-financing in the case of employment of persons with disabilities.

There are several associations in the Brčko District of BiH, as well as non-governmental organizations whose goal, with the strong support of the Government of the Brčko District of BiH, is to raise awareness, promoting understanding of disability issues, prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of disability, and equal opportunities to raise the quality of life of this population.

BULGARIA



To the WAI4PwDs partnership, introducing CHANCE Association was of great importance as it was the first non-governmental organization in the Consortium who successfully addresses the needs of persons with disabilities, reflecting on how civil sector is supported by EU programmes and funds to cater for the target group of the project. CHANCE defends the rights of people with intellectual disabilities, non-discrimination and a dignified life by guaranteeing access to quality services, developmental training and appropriate employment for them. The association is a member of Bulgarian Association of People with Intellectual Disabilities, INCLUSION EUROPE, INCLUSION LIVING, INCLUSION INTERNATIONAL.

They were the first in Bulgaria to initiate the creation of the first alternative forms of social services in the community: Day Center for Children and Youth with Intellectual Disabilities established and successfully functioning – 1999; Day Care Center for Adults with Intellectual Disabilities – 2002; Sheltered housing for people with intellectual disabilities – 2005; Family Counseling Center – 2005; Center for Social Rehabilitation and Integration – 2007; Social enterprise - sheltered workshop – 2010; Family-type Accommodation Center for Children – 2011.

Given their main target group are persons with disabilities, accessibility in physical environment is much appreciated and very well recognized in the premises of this organization. As part of the project Improvement of the Social Services System system of the “Chance” Association, whose aim was to improve the access of children and persons with intellectual and physical disabilities to social services and to improve the process of their social inclusion in the social and economic life of Razlog municipality, CHANCE installed a stair lift to enable access to the second floor of the building with kinesitherapy room, classrooms, etc. Specialized equipment was purchased for better rehabilitation - dry pool with balls and ladder, ultraviolet panel and water towers with bubbles for the sensory room; non-combustible walkways for staircase and stair landings were purchased.

The project was very well accepted by the local community because it has a direct impact on improving the quality of life of families of persons with multiple disabilities, as the inclusion of their children in social services will allow their family members to work, which will also increase the quality of life of the local population. The project could certainly be multiplied at other Daycare centers around Bulgaria but the main problem would be the old buildings and the lack of appropriate infrastructure which hinders the implementation of projects like the one described.





Within a project called CAN- Small Community for a Big Asset, which was financed by the Operational Programme "Development of Human Resources", co-financed by the European Union through the European Social Fund, CHANCE association tackled the problem of unemployment, low level of training and qualification of people with disabilities by supporting their social integration and adaptation to the challenges of the labour market. The main objectives of the project were to introduce and develop new approaches for sheltered employment and social inclusion of people with intellectual difficulties and/or multiple disabilities. In such a manner, the first steps have been taken to promote social entrepreneurship in Bulgaria.

A team of skilled professionals - artists and craftspeople developed exemplary models, the reproduction of which started the work of the four workshops of sheltered ateliers - for ceramics, applied jewellery, souvenirs and painting on different materials. In the course of implementing the project activities, conditions were created to improve the standard and quality of life of people with disabilities and special needs, their work and creative expression was encouraged in order to overcome social isolation. Referring to the impact of such actions, it should be mentioned that the sheltered ateliers are still working and have to a greater extend contributed to the social inclusion of the residents of the Day Care Center in the society.



CZECH REPUBLIC



Being a member of the European Union for the longest time, Czech Republic was definitely one of the best representatives in the partnership who can exemplify how web accessibility and other related standards related to persons with disabilities are practised in the EU. Such is the Blind Friendly Web project established in the United Organization of the Blind and Visually Impaired of the Czech Republic in 2000 as one of the outputs of computer technology courses for the visually impaired. During these courses, the organisers found that many websites are inaccessible to visually impaired users and therefore unusable. In order to be able to train visually impaired users in the use of the website and then be able to use the website, something had to be done about this condition.

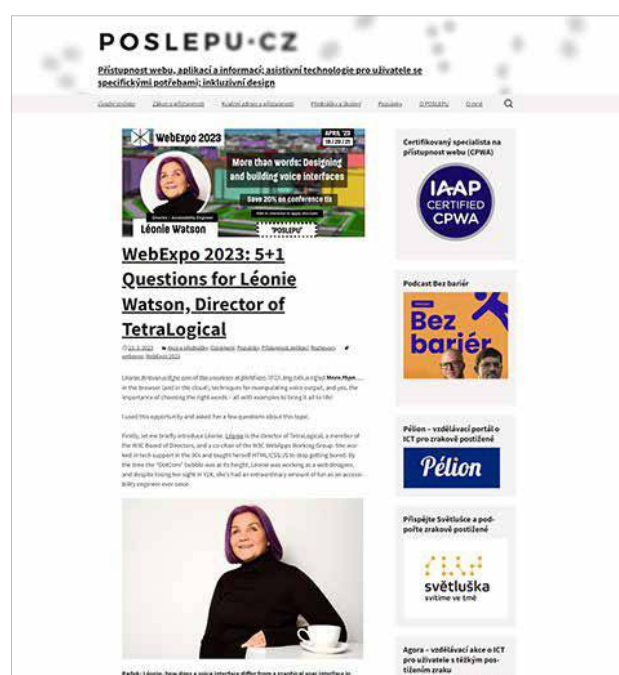


In 2004, the project participated in the creation of the first methodological material, Best practice - Rules for creating an accessible website, published by the then Ministry of Informatics.

In 2006, the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Republic approved an amendment to Act No. 365/2000 Coll. on public administration information systems. Section 5 (2f) stipulates the obligation of public administration bodies to have access to information related to the performance of public administration for users with severe disabilities.

At the Ministerial Conference of the EU Member States in Riga on 11 June 2006, the Czech Republic, through the then Minister of Informatics Dana Běrová, signed a declaration committing the EU Member States to creating public websites in accordance with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines prepared by the W3C - WAI.

Throughout the years of development, the project grew. In 2019, the Act on Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications (Act No. 99/2019 Coll.) was adopted, which introduces the established and proven WCAG 2.1 standard into the environment of web content, which not only specifies accessibility requirements, but also connects them with other information infrastructure that can raise electronic (ie not only web) content to a higher quality level. The organisation now offers a comprehensive Accessibility Audit, combining a practical test and a conformity assessment with the ETSI EN 301 549 - V2.1.2 standard, which refers to WCAG 2.1.



In the POSLEPU.cz project, the author started writing the POSLEPU blog in 2007, because at that time there was a lack of a Czech-written and regularly updated source of information about web accessibility, applications and information, assistive technologies for users with special needs and inclusive design. It is currently the oldest Czech-written and regularly updated source of information on this topic.

The POSLEPU blog was named the best non-profit blog in 2009 at the Online Marketing for Non-profits conference, and won the third prize in the category of works published on the Internet for journalistic work focused on disability issues in the Government Committee for Disabled People Award competition.

POSLEPU is a Czech word for “doing something blind” and is also abbreviation for “helping the blind users”: with accessibility of the web-site, applications and information; assistive technologies for users with special needs; inclusive design.

The blog is archived by the National Library of the Czech Republic and in these days (2020) is mostly focusing on webinars, lectures, workshops and raising awareness.

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