

What about accessibility with Kamil Goungor (GL/ENIL; European Disability Forum) and Laura Alčiauskaitė (LT/ENIL; TRIPS)

Opening soundtrack

Voice: Next Stop

Xenia Rak: All aboard to your new weekly favourite podcast, 'Next Stop', where you will find out all there is to know about trains! 2021 is the European Year of Rail - a year to remind us that the journey is as important as the destination. I am Xenia, and this is 'Next Stop', a podcast by the Spring 2021 trainees of the European Committee of the Regions.

Transition soundtrack

Xenia Rak: What about the next stop in the mountains? Then, we know the right place to go: Jungfrauoch in Switzerland. Jungfrauoch is the highest railway station in Europe. It is located at an altitude of almost 3,500 meters in the Swiss Alps. Its construction was a pioneering technical achievement. Today, you can take a trip of around half an hour, during which time the cogwheel train ascends an elevation of around 1,400 meters.

Transition soundtrack

Xenia Rak: According to the European Commission, approximately 20% of the EU population in 2020 are expected to have some form of disability. Persons with disabilities face different types of barriers that prevent them from travelling by rail spontaneously and independently. In some cases, even if the station or the train provide assisting tools for a person with reduced mobility, the need to book in advance still hinders a person's freedom. The 2013 Eurobarometer showed that only 37% of Europeans were satisfied with the overall accessibility of stations and that 19% of the population did not use trains because of accessibility issues. Improving our transport system to be more accessible and achieving a barrier-free Europe is not only taking care of those with disabilities or reduced mobility, but it is essentially making our transport system future-proof as most of us will at some point in our life – either through an injury or just by ageing – experience reduced mobility.

Voice: Next Stop

Xenia Rak: Joining us, today is Kamil Goungor from Greece. Kamil is a strong advocate for the rights of persons with disabilities. He works as a Development Officer for the European Network on Independent Living, and he is a member of the European Disability Forum. Kamil is also a travel blogger, and you can check his adventures on his channel 'The Trawheeler'! Kalispera Kamil! Thanks a lot for taking the time to share your stories and ideas with us! I believe you are currently planning a trip, right? Where do you plan to travel to and how are you preparing for it? What are you looking forward to the most?

Kamil Goungor: Kalispera Xenia. Thank you for having me here. This is an honour. I am very happy about joining your podcast series. Indeed, I live in Greece, but I am originally from Poland. So, I am European. A bit of everything. Indeed, I was planning to travel by train in the next few days, tomorrow actually. I planned to travel from Athens to two cities further North. I have had to cancel the trip for various reasons. One related to a medical appointment and another due to the very bad weather we have in Greece. The latter is not very common in June. I hope to do the trip soon, maybe by the end of the month, in the beginning of July. I am looking forward to doing it because I love using trains. I really enjoy them. They are comfortable. But you can also enjoy the view and reflect. You have some quality time with yourself. And there is for sure the green aspect.

Xenia Rak: Nice. Cool. You plan to travel by train. We think about trains as being accessible modes of transport, at least in comparison with other ones. However, this does not mean that our railway network is perfect. For example, in Germany, where I am from, in 2020, there were still around 20% of train

stations not accessible to those with disabilities or reduced mobility. Overall, what are still the main challenges to have a truly accessible railway network throughout Europe? What do the EU Regulations and Acts regarding this topic still need to achieve?

Kamil Goungor: I am not sure. When I was looking at the accessibility of the different transport modes. The train has potential, but in Europe, it is not the most accessible one. I would like to take you on a virtual trip. Let us see together what it means to travel by train. To begin with, we need to identify the route. Let us go from Brussels to Dresden, from Belgium to Germany. You must check the stations you would like to use. You must check first if the station has the necessary equipment for you to board the train. Maybe the platform is not at the same level as the train. Then, you may need assistance from staff personnel. This is not all. Then, you need to book the assistance. You must book it in advance. If you travel in your country, from Brussels to Bruges, you will need to book assistance 24 hours in advance. In some countries, in Greece, for example, it is 48 hours in advance. This is already a problem. The European Disability Forum did a campaign addressing exactly these issues: No need to prebook and the possibility to go to every station. We see that there is even a problem with the spaces. You have a train; it can be completely empty. No person on the train. But it cannot be used by persons with disabilities, because for wheelchair users, the train has only two spaces. So, the whole train could be empty, but you cannot go on this train with a big group. The barriers are not only environmental but also social in terms of discrimination and attitudes from the staff or other passengers. These are a lot of barriers. This is from my point as a wheelchair user. If you have additional access needs, you have different barriers. The EU and policymakers need to take these good examples and replicate them instead of passing, e.g., the European Accessibility Act which requires - if I am not mistaken - accessible ticket machines - which is, of course, very good. But what can I do with that if the basic needs are not met? I will buy the ticket, but I cannot board the train.

Xenia Rak: Thank you very much for your call, especially to EU politicians. Let us have one more look at the European Union. A famous initiative by the European Commission is the European Access City Awards, where cities are recognised for their good practices regarding accessibility. While the 2021 winner was the city of Jonköping, in Sweden, there was also a Greek city receiving an honourable mention - Komotini - for promoting accessibility as an opportunity for the entire city. Have you been to these places? I know for sure that you have already travelled to many other of the award-winning cities. Kamil, which good practices of these cities would you like to share with our audience? Are there any specific examples or stories you would like to tell us?

Kamil Goungor: First, I am a big fan of the European Access City Award. Since 2015, I have attended the award ceremonies live in Brussels. I follow it very passionately. Last year it was online. I was honoured by the European Commission to be one of the influencers ambassadors. Indeed, Komotini received the award. The year before, Chania on a Greek island received a special mention. I visited both, and they are doing a good job. Unfortunately, both are not reachable by train. I attended a conference about the future of rail in Greece on the European Year of Rail. There was not a single mention of inclusion. This was very sad. For the other cities, indeed, I have travelled to a lot of them, like Warsaw and Helsinki. Warsaw was the big winner two years ago. I had good experiences. In Bologna, in Italy, there is a small train, a touristic one. The one which goes through the city and tours you around. They had a ramp in the last wagon. I could board with all the other tourists and go to a hill, enjoy the view. I have never experienced something like this before.

Xenia Rak: Very nice. Deriving from these best practices and as the Connecting Europe Express is starting in Lisbon in autumn of this year, passing by 40 different cities in Europe, do you have any recommendations on how our regional and local decision-makers can make the Connecting Europe Express more accessible?

Kamil Goungor: Yes, I know about this Connecting Europe Express. I do not know whether it will be fully accessible. I hope I will be wrong, and it will be fully accessible to all people. When I mean accessible, I do not mention wheelchair users. It is also about the messages and the materials. So, the communication must be accessible for everyone, including persons with visual and hearing impairments. It would be a strong message to Europe. For this, you need to involve persons with disabilities. With co-

production and co-design, you can guarantee inclusion. So, involve us. Ask us, what we need. We know best.

Xenia Rak: Yes, I think there is the saying 'nothing without us about us'.

Kamil Goungor: This is one of the key sayings of the disability movement.

Xenia Rak: Do you have one last message for our decision-makers to break down barriers and safeguard the participation of everyone in the European Year of Rail?

Kamil Goungor: I think the key is to involve us. To involve persons with disabilities at every stage. Together we can co-design and co-produce an accessible and inclusive future for our railways. I truly believe, I honestly believe, that the trains have the potential to become our favourite mode of transport. I love trains.

Xenia Rak: I think I would leave you into your hopefully free evening.

Kamil Goungor: I still must finish something. Thank you for having me.

Xenia Rak: Thank you, Kamil.

Transition soundtrack

Voice: Next Stop.

Xenia Rak: We are also joined today by Laura Alčiauskaitė. Laura is from Lithuania, and she is the Coordinator of the Project TRIPS at the European Network on Independent Living. TRIPS is an EU funded project which started in 2020 aiming to make the transport system more accessible in the following seven cities: Bologna, Brussels, Cagliari, Lisbon, Sofia, Stockholm, and Zagreb. Welcome, Laura! Thank you for your participation in our podcast! What was the inception of the project TRIPS? How did this project come to reality, and how can those living in those cities get engaged and support the project?

Laura Alčiauskaitė: First, thank you for having me here. Very nice Lithuanian pronunciation. Talking about the TRIPS project, the aim of the project is to make public transport more accessible for persons with disabilities, but also pregnant mothers, persons with temporarily issues. When transport is accessible, we do not exclude a group. Then, it is accessible for everyone. We would like to address barriers commonly faced by users with and without disabilities in public transport. We want to erase barriers of any sort. When talking about persons with disabilities, they are the ones providing the feedback for the project. They are very truly – I want to emphasize the word 'truly' – involved in creating the transport for the future. For this reason, we have seven project cities which you already mentioned. In each of these cities, we have local teams led by persons with disabilities. These are people who have different types of disabilities or disability rights activists. They are leading working groups to bring the ideas into consideration. They have contact to transport providers, city authorities and technology providers. They work together for almost three years to create solutions. The vision of co-creation made trips to be born.

Xenia Rak: Okay. Thank you very much, Laura. There are a lot of different types of disabilities, each of their own unique and needing specific infrastructures. Do you think our decision-makers are paying attention to that diversity of persons and the resulting diversity of barriers regarding our rail services?

Laura Alčiauskaitė: Indeed, this is a very good question. I would dare to answer this by saying 'no', they do not. I do not blame anyone. Decision-makers are not doing this on purpose. For example, persons with mental health issues or persons with intellectual disabilities are not very much represented nowadays. This also relates to topics related to public transport. In TRIPS we implemented qualitative research, and we noticed that persons with intellectual disabilities or having psychosocial disabilities is

very rarely represented in the media. Most of them are persons with mobility disabilities or persons having visual impairments. When it comes to persons with intellectual disabilities, they either do not complain, or they do not engage with transport providers or city authorities. This is sad. When you do not complain, it is perceived that there is no need to be put into consideration. Most of the solutions are based on engineering, like ramps. When it comes to people who have different types of need, they are very rarely considered. The more we talk about it, the more we raise awareness towards these persons' needs, the more changes will happen.

Xenia Rak: Thank you very much for this insight. I move on to the next questions. Something that is also very important is the integration of persons with disabilities in the labour market. Being a Project Coordinator at the European Network for Independent Living, sure have a lot of ideas and input on this. How can the railway sector company - private or public - break barriers to be an inclusive employer, particularly to women?

Laura Alčiauskaitė: Transport is considered one of the most – let us say – masculine sectors. I found that only 22% of women work in the transport sector, while the rest are men. I think becoming more inclusive is always a process. By saying inclusive, I mean to have very diverse groups in all the sectors, including the transport sector. This does not happen overnight. It is very much possible. Raising awareness is very important in this process. If you ask me, the first step is to acknowledge that women or persons with disabilities can be equally competent colleagues as anyone else. That should be the most important thing when forming a team. As a person with a disability myself, I can say that diverse people bring different ideas, perspectives, and approaches. It would be good to have this in the transport sector itself, including the railway sector. If you become more inclusive to women, to persons with disabilities, women with disabilities, you make a big promise to your company. It would be a good activity for each group.

Xenia Rak: Thank you. I personally would completely sign this statement. Do you have one last message for our decision-makers to break down barriers and safeguard the participation of everyone, despite their differences, in the European Year of Rail?

Laura Alčiauskaitė: Probably, I would like to encourage them to be more co-productive in their work in rail and any other sector of public transport. But do it not only when it comes to persons with disabilities. Do it for all groups of society, as well: Women, the elderly, migrants, refugees and many more. Co-production, in my eyes, is a well-established way to acknowledge collaborations between people, technology, and society. We can come together and collaboratively create new ideas and new concepts. In this process, not everyone shares expertise or resources. It also means that we share the responsibility. We are all responsible for making it happen and to bring the changes. It is up to all to make the changes happen. The co-production is not only good for the specific groups of society, but also for transport providers and for the ones for making the decisions. Co-production can make services a benefit for the people using them and can make everything more accessible. It can make every situation more human. This is quite lacking sometimes when it comes to different services, like railway services or public transportation. To the approach of the human and humanistic values.

Voice: Next Stop!

Xavi Miro: Hola! Zdravo! We are Mila and Xavi, and welcome back to Pop Wagon!! We are again on track.

Mila Coric: Today, Jose is not with us. He is exploring Germany by train!

Xavi Miro: Mila, he has promised to send us a voice message. But before, we want to focus on the linguistic use of the train vocabulary in everyday language.

Mila Coric: For instance, have you ever heard of this one? 'Trains of thought don't always run-on schedule'.

Xavi Miro: Personally, I like: 'On the right track but on the wrong train'.

Mila Coric: That one would be perfect to make excuses! But let us 'stay focussed on the track'.

Xavi Miro: I lost my train of thought, sorry Mila. All yours.

Mila Coric: Today, it has already been discussed how railway sector companies could break barriers to be an inclusive employer, particularly to women, so in that regard, I am about to mention a very interesting historical fact! A cultural anthropologist Genevive Bell stated that extreme reactions to new technology are old! Namely, early trains were thought to make women's uteruses fly out!

Xavi Miro: What?

Mila Coric: Yes, you heard well. Critics of early locomotives thought that women's bodies were simply not designed to go at 50 miles an hour. Therefore, were worried that their uteruses might literally fly out of their bodies! It was a real threat to health!

Xavi Miro: Crazy! And now, the promised voice message from Jose! He wants to recommend us a great train museum in Hamburg.

Mila Coric: In Germany? A train museum?

Xavi Miro: Indeed! Surprisingly, ah? Well, the museum, called Miniature Wunderland is a model railway and airport attraction so you can also find other means of transport there. Is the largest of its kind in the world. Should we listen to his voice message?

Mila Coric: Sure!

Jose Llopiz Ortiz: Hola! Greetings from Hamburg. I am here visiting Miniature Wunderland, holding the largest model train set in the world. It reaches 15.400 metres. More than 15 kilometres of miniature tracks. If you like travelling, you can visit Germany, Austria, United States and many more, this is the place to go. I highly recommend coming here and visit by yourself.

Xavi Miro: Jose, Jose, enjoying his vacation surrounded by trains.

Mila Coric: Jose in Wonderland.

Xavi Miro: It sounds like a name of a thematic park.

Mila Coric: Ai, let us go back on track! For today, we have reached our destination!

Xavi Miro: Farewell, dear pop waggoners! Thank you for listening! Until next week!

Xenia Rak: And as usual, with the Pop Wagon section, this fifth episode of 'Next Stop' comes to an end. Thank you to all our listeners, and do not forget to follow us and give us your feedback on social media: Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. We cannot wait to hear from you! My name is Xenia Rak, and we see you in the 'Next Stop', auf wiederhören!

Closing soundtrack