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BENEFICIARY:

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**Qualitative study regarding the needs of postal service
users in Romania – people with visual impairments**

RESEARCH REPORT

9.09.2015

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I. Research objectives and terminology

The general goal of the present study was to obtain a set of relevant information about the postal service preferences of visually impaired users and to identify these users' related needs.

The objectives of the study were to collect information about the following aspects:

- Users' needs as concerns postal delivery speed (d+1, d+2 etc.);
- Users' preferences as concerns frequency of postal item collection (at least twice a week in exceptional cases, or 5 times a week, on Saturday, etc.);
- Users' preferences as concerns access to post offices and their opening hours;
- Users' needs as concerns the frequency of postal item delivery (at least twice a week in exceptional cases, or 5 times a week, on Saturday, etc.);
- Users' needs as concerns the place and time of delivery;
- Users' preferences as concerns the quality of service provision (delivery in good time, number of misplaced post, etc.);
- Users' preferences as concerns the fees charged for postal services (same or differentiated fee depending on destination, fee brackets, etc.);
- Users' needs as concerns coverage of the postal network;
- Identification of other special postal service provision needs of visually impaired users;
- Identification of potentially new characteristics of postal services that users request (e.g. collecting deliveries from the sender's domicile, delivering correspondence through e-mail followed by physical delivery, etc.)

Throughout the present study, the following terminology has been used:

- **user** – any private person who benefits from postal service provision as a sender or a recipient of mail;

- **sender** – any private person or legal body that initiates the delivery of a postal item and, either personally, or through a third party, introduces it in the postal network;
- **recipient** – the person to whom the postal item is addressed;
- **postal services** – services consisting of collection, sorting, transport and delivery of postal items;
- **collection** – the act of collecting postal items either at access points, or at an address indicated by the sender;
- **delivery** – the act of delivering postal items by the postal service provider;
- **postal service provider** – any authorised person, individual enterprise, family enterprise or any legal body whose activity consists, entirely or in part, in delivering one or more postal services;
- **postal items** – goods addressed, in the final form as they are to be transported and delivered to the address indicated by the sender. In addition to correspondence, this category includes, for instance, books, catalogues, newspapers, journals, parcels that contain goods of some or no trade value, and paper postal orders;
- **access points** – physical equipment, including post boxes, made available to the public, where the postal items can be introduced in the postal network;
- **contact point** – the set of physical equipment through which postal items can be delivered to the recipients;
- **items for the visually impaired (cecogramme)** – postal items weighing up to 7 kg, such as open items, relief maps marked as cecogramme, voice recordings and special paper for the use of the visually impaired, if sent by or to an institution of the visually impaired;
- **person with disabilities** – the person having a physical incapacity, mental, intellectual or sensorial on a long term, which, in interaction with different obstacles, may impede the effective and complete participation to the social life in condition of equality with the other persons;

- **non-institutionalized person with disabilities** – the person with who lives alone or with her/his family and not within an institutionalized environment such as institutes, residential centres, etc.

II. Research design

The studied universe is represented by non-institutionalised people with visual impairment in Romania, who reside in rural or urban areas.

The target population – non-institutionalised people with visual impairment in Romania, who use postal services as senders or recipients.

Survey unit – a non-institutionalised interviewed person, of at least 16 years of age, who holds a certificate of disability as evidence of their visual impairment, issued according to the legal provisions¹ and who will be directly involved in using postal services.

Socio-demographic description of the groups:

Starting from the requirement in the Terms of Reference as concerns the **age variable** (to have at least 3 groups of users for each of the age categories: 16 – 34 years; 35 – 55 years and over 55 years, but also taking into account the different weight of the various age groups within the visually impaired population in Romania, the following was set up:

- 4 focus groups with people of the age group 16-34 years;
- 5 focus groups with people of the age group 35-55 years;
- 6 focus groups with people of the age group over 55 years.

¹ According to the stipulations of Orders of the Minister of Labour, Family and Equal Opportunities and of the Minister of Public Health no. 762/2007 and 1992/2007 for approving the medical psycho-social criteria based on which a person's level of impairment is classified, with subsequent amendments and completions.

As concerns **residence**, according to the requirements, the focus groups were carried out with:

- 3 groups of users residing in rural areas;
- 12 groups of users residing in urban areas.

Another essential variable of the focus group design was the **level of visual impairment**, ensuring the necessary proportions according to available statistical data. According to the initial plan, out of the total 150 participants in the 15 focus groups, there would be 76 people with profound visual impairment, 57 people with severe visual impairment, and 17 people with severe and moderate visual impairment (level III of impairment). In total, there were 154 participants in the focus groups, and the initially planned distribution by levels of visual impairment was observed.

Considering the above mentioned socio-demographic variables, the persons who participated to our focus groups were selected through a random manner (contacts from the members lists of the visually impaired associations) by applying the screening questionnaires until reaching the necessary number of participants (who matched the criteria) per each focus group.

Thus, the final distribution of the participants in focus groups was as follows:

No. fg	DATE	LOCATION	RESIDENCE	AGE GROUP	TOTAL PARTICIPANTS	PROFOUND	SEVERE	MODERATE
1	16.07.2015	București	urban	16-34	10	9	1	0
2	17.07.2015	București	urban	55 +	11	9	2	0
3	21.07.2015	Galați	urban	55+	10	7	3	0
4	21.07.2015	Galați	urban	35-55	10	7	3	0
5	21.07.2015	Galați	urban	16-34	10	9	0	1
6	22.07.2015	Buzău	rural	55+	11	6	5	0
7	22.07.2015	Buzău	urban	35-55	12	7	4	1
8	22.07.2016	Buzău	rural	16-34	10	7	3	0
9	28.07.2015	Craiova	urban	16-34	10	4	4	2

10	28.07.2015	Craiova	urban	35-55	10	4	4	2
11	28.07.2015	Craiova	rural	55+	10	4	4	2
12	30.07.2015	Botoșani	urban	35-55	10	3	6	1
13	30.07.2015	Botoșani	rural	55+	10	2	6	2
14	13.08.2015	Bistrița	urban	35-55	10	1	6	3
15	13.08.2015	Bistrița	urban	55+	10	1	6	3
TOTAL					154	80	57	17

III. Research results and data interpretation

1. Perceptions of postal services, the Romanian Post vs private service providers
2. Difficulties encountered by users – mailing correspondence
3. Difficulties encountered by users – mailing items for the visually impaired
4. Difficulties - mailing parcels
5. Needs of visually impaired users as concerns:
 - Speed of postal item delivery
 - Frequency of postal item collection
 - Frequency of postal item delivery
 - Place and manner of reception/ delivery
 - Access to post offices and opening hours
 - Fees for postal services
 - Coverage of postal network
 - Service provision quality of (timely delivery, number of misplaced items, etc.)

6. Identification of potentially news characteristics of postal services requested by the users. Needs of rural users

a. Perception of postal services. The Romanian Post vs. private service providers

The users' age and residence have outlined different lifestyles, and also different relations to communication activities and postal services used.

Postal services, with the exception of sending parcels, seem to have shrunk in comparison with telephone and Internet-based communication in the case of visually impaired people as well. Regardless of the age group, all the participants stated that at present the telephone was the major means of communication, which almost totally shut out traditional postal services such as letters.

In the participants' perceptions, postal services are first and foremost associated with the Romanian Post. As concerns their recent evolution, some positive elements were mentioned such as the broader variety of postal and non-postal services, better speed of postal delivery, in the case of both private providers, and the Post. Among the changes that have had a negative impact, the respondents mentioned: cutbacks in Post and post office staff, which led to overcrowding of the current post offices, longer waiting time for the customers; less competent staff than in the past, and less client need-oriented; more bureaucracy; forms that are difficult for the visually impaired to fill out; shortage of basic products for delivery in the post offices (e.g. envelopes, stamps, postcards, greetings cards), which the users associate with a **worsening situation of the Post at present**.

Everyone communicates online or by telephone. And by post we send documents which ... need to be signed or sent to a farther place, when we do not... perhaps we do not trust the electronic signature. For documents that need to bear a signature, we use to Post to deliver them, otherwise they cannot be signed (FG 1)

I use the postal services only when I really must. Only when we are compelled. Never with pleasure. Honestly, only in situations that really require ... the use of this service, because given the quality we discussed earlier, it is rather difficult and uncomfortable to ... (FG 1)

A thing I saw ... I saw it at the seaside just now, when I was there: I went to the Post to buy postcards and I was told I could only find them in bookstores. And you again had this problem, yes, with the envelopes ... and the stamps at the Post. We used to go to the Post, got the postcards, wrote them and dropped them in the box. We did not use to have to go seven times. (FG 4)

It is very complicated to fill in, it takes time. You don't find envelopes. You don't find envelopes at the Romanian Post. This ... idea is cool. We went to mail the letter from the Post. We had the documents in our hands, they were some documents [18.39], and we went to the Romanian Post. And we say, "We would like to have them delivered", "Yes. You may send them like this.", "Aren't you going to give us an envelope?", "We don't have envelopes." (FG 7)

Honestly, services are the same poor, in my opinion. Yes, the same. That's what I think. They are very slow. Slow in delivering post. For instance, I needed ... so I needed my birth certificate to be delivered to me in original in France, and it took 6 weeks to arrive. (FG 1)

You may say they are slow also in the sense that they need a lot of stamps, too many things to fill out. Many forms and ... in this sense. The stamp and the rail folder will never die out. The courier services don't do this. (FG 1)

We may discuss involution. I think I only noticed the thing about sending information, documents and such. There are fees which, if you pay, they deliver them sooner. Emergency fees, I don't know, rapid ones. When you send documents and ... abroad, you pay a fee and you can be sure that they arrive in 2-3 days. (FG 1)

The staff are fewer anyhow. They have a lot of work to do. So it is very difficult with the post, they don't have serious contracts, personally, I went to the Post, and came back right

away, there was one clerk and a queue. From 4 o'clock onwards, there is not much staff, there is a single person. (FG 14)

I would like it if they would work in a more personalised approach, and introduce letter delivery services. It was better in the old times. It was better, and now they have the computers, they have everything. Now you can pay bills and send ... I saw small companies using a lot of postal services, they send stuff to Germany and receive mail from there. I understand that the staff are not properly trained. If someone is away from their desk, no-one stands in for them. (FG 15)

They are not all qualified to fill in those places. You queue and someone is away. Yes, it all freezes down. I think they need staff. I used to work as a secretary, and I am telling you we used the postal services until 2007, and I am telling you we never had problems, and there was a lot of items to be delivered, and they used to sort them, but this issue is not a problem any longer, and they are not qualified. That's why things are slow. (FG 15)

These ones think there are no more mail boxes – my opinion, I don't know about others – since the Greeks or whoever took over the Romanian Post. Yes, it's worse and it's regrettable. There are long lines. There are long lines. This means that ... I don't know, there are times when it is very busy; very busy, people are annoyed. (FG 4)

They discontinued some of these. But to put in something new ... They cut back on the number of postmen, and the staff at the Post. I think nothing has changed. Nothing has changed; not for the better, not for the worse. Not for the worse either. Nothing has changed. The system is the same. And if there is no long queue, they don't feel good. The same at the Post. If you walk into a post office, you will notice that the smell is the same as in my childhood. So the system has stayed the same. And the services have stayed the same. Yes. They are somewhat more limited. Truly, the Romanian Post ... I am telling you many things are limited. (FG 7)

The Post vs. private postal service providers

The essential aspect for people with visual impairment that makes the difference between the Post and private service providers is mail collection from and delivery to the

domicile by private providers. Opinions differ however, depending on the participants' age and residence. For those over 55 years, the Post is still the first option as concerns use of various postal services, mainly due to the tradition in using this provider's services. This preference has led to frequent use of some services (e.g. monthly collection of pension), frequent interaction with the staff, and familiarity with the Post offices. Consequently, for this category of respondents (55+), the Romanian Post is the most easy to use provider and they do not intend to change it despite the discontent expressed. The elderly people find interacting with the private providers difficult, they don't know where their headquarters are, and they cannot search the Internet for information about them. All these are valid also for people residing in the rural areas, who use private providers' services even less often. In addition, for the elderly, their relationship with the post office clerk/ representative of the private provider is important.

It's simple with the Post. The habit, the headquarters we know, their location. The others you should know ... they don't really ... when we get something, if... but they ... I am talking about these – Săgeata Albastră [Blue Arrow]... you need to find them.

It is more difficult for us, the blind, to grope around, ask where apartment so and so is... Sure. They are renting small apartments. Their address is not the same as their officially registered one. With the Post, I sent some documents and I went there, I know the place, I went to the Post, I handed over the documents, the person wrote my address and it was gone. And they had it delivered in 4 days, 5 days, the envelope with the documents was received. (FG 4)

As concerns the 16-34 age group, and even some of the 35-55 age group, things are different: especially when it comes to parcels, they prefer to use the private providers and track the status of their parcel by Internet, as well as hand over and collect the parcel at their domicile. They prefer the private providers because of the better speed and the direct interaction with the customer at their domicile. At this time, according to the participants who have interacted with private providers, they are closer to meeting the

needs of persons with disabilities through the services they provide and the means of provision.

I don't know if you are sure all your products get to the destination fine. And there's another thing, as we were comparing private courier services. It is very important that the car comes to your place, collects your parcel and delivers it to your house. Yes, you need not go anywhere. If the post is far enough from your place... (FG 1)

And especially for... I don't know, it seems that the Post is far, a person with disabilities ... it's somewhat complicated. So you need to find someone, to go and sign, and fill out, and ... ACCOMPANY YOU WHEN YOU SEND IT? And when you receive it ... Especially as there you need to sign again, some ... it's complicated. (FG 1)

You have no choice, by the Post, it does not always get delivered, and not fast, the private ones have taken over. Yes, they have won over services, because if you order something by Post, it simply does not make it. I ordered a book, for my grandson, a textbook about two weeks ago. On the Internet it said that the order was registered and that they don't complete it in 48 hours, you need to stay at home, with your ID and after two weeks, when I wanted to phone, a gentleman called to ask if the order was still valid. From Bucharest to here it took two weeks for a textbook, a school textbook to reach me. (FG 14)

Even if it's heavier to carry... if it's more difficult to move the item... so the parcel is heavier. And you go with him, yes, the person comes in front of your apartment building by car, takes it, puts it in the car and goes off wherever they need to go.... We sign what is to be signed, and ... it's not complicated. Not like there, at the Post – I told you before – the number of forms to fill in for sending a parcel... Yes. The thing is it's more difficult with that form, to fill in. For instance, some gadget gets broken, the company you purchased it from pays for the delivery. (FG 1)

I used it and as concerns quality, they are under the quality level of the private deliveries. For one thing, they don't phone, they don't come to your place. You receive a note in the mailbox, you need to go to the Post, fill out the form and receive the parcel. (FG 5)

So at delivery they say it was not paid for, for instance, although they know that it would not be accepted for delivery unless you pay. They are no honest. I prefer the legal way, by Post. WHY THE POST AND NOT A PRIVATE COURIER SERVICE? I don't have so much experience with the private providers, I only used them once. You either don't find them, or their offices are far. They have stricter working hours. (FG 15)

A synthesis of the strengths and weaknesses of the Romanian Post vs private postal service providers:

They would choose the private providers because...

- They collect from and deliver to the domicile
- Perform faster delivery
- They do not have complicated forms to fill out
- They assist the sender in filling out documents
- They are more flexible, the courier adjusts the time of collection/delivery depending on the client and even the location of the delivery
- They observe the timeframe for collection/ delivery
- They show more respect for the client
- The courier fills out the form
- They store the parcel for up to 5 days for free if the recipient is not at home
- They communicate with the client, they announce when the parcel has arrived, when the parcel will be delivered, the timeframe, etc.
- Orders can be placed via the Internet and the status of the delivery can be tracked

They would not choose the private providers because...

- They are not used to them
- They don't know how to find them, they have small, obscure offices, where it is difficult for visually impaired people to get
- They don't know how to contact them

They would choose the Romanian Post because...

- It has better rates
- They know the place of the post offices, they are familiar with the locations.
- They have better coverage in the rural areas where the private providers do not get easy access
- They are used to them
- They send greetings card, and postcards
- They trust that the delivery is safe and responsibility accepted
- They have a good relation with the postman
- They trust the Romanian Post
- They have the broadest coverage

They would not choose the Romanian Post because:

- They do not always observe the stated time of delivery
- It is too slow
- They do not assist the clients in filling out forms, they do not provide information about the services they offer and about their advantages
- It is rigid, it does not adapt to the client's needs/ programme
- It takes long from submission of the postal item until it reaches the final recipient.

I have sent documents by the Romanian Post, and if I was to do it again, I would go to them. I trust them especially with official documents, if it was a parcel or something, I don't know if I would think too much. It depends on how urgent it is for the recipient to get it. If the delivery may arrive in about three weeks, I could use the Post. (FG 14)

I would choose the Post with fees. Yes. I mean I find it more accessible for me, I see somewhat and I find it alright. And this thing – it's cheaper than paying the courier service. But in general it depends on where from you have ordered something, and how much. I can see a bit so I can read, write and such and that's why it's alright for me. (FG 1)

Yes. Someone else writes for us... I myself would use the most convenient service. And at present this is the Post. I don't know precisely... I mean the price. Conveniently priced. Yes, if I need to send something and be certain, why not...? That's it! It's safer even if you pay a bit extra. Yes. (FG 1)

And if we do have something to send, it also matters if it's within the area they cover, outside it the fee is much higher. In the rural areas they do have some, but not everywhere. You can call them, and ask. "Sir ..." yes, they do provide information, after you fill out the form, they gave you some fees. And then the fee by kilometre, like a taxi; for each kilometre outside the area you pay this much. And they also go by the value of the item, as far as I know. (FG 1)

In my opinion, the Post was, is and will be the safest way of communication with clients. For instance, if I send an amount of money to Bucharest, and they don't find X there, they won't give the money to anyone without the recipient's signature, they money is not collected, and it is not lost. I have heard from friends that their money was lost in the Post, I don't know what happened. By Post, ever since I have been receiving and sending money, and I have been doing this communication with the Post for at least 10 years, I have never had a parcel lost. (FG 9)

You know what happens? When the postman comes home, and I find ... For instance, my wife is as blind as a bat ... this is about fairness. So. He tells her "Look, see..." and sets them out by categories. "This is a 5-RON note, this is a 10, and this is 100." Communication with the postman is very important, especially in our case I mean it's important that I trust the

postman, who says that he has placed 10,000 RON in my hand, and it's in that and that notes, that he does not only give me tenner ... I need to be ... and we are safe – we trust that it is so. (FG 2)

The fact that you know that you have received, as opposed to the other transport companies which you don't trust, a document, something official like at the Post. (FG 9)

It is simple, for a visually impaired person like me, let's take it like this: we know where the Post is, because it has always been there, while the private courier changes their location, and you need to look for them to get there. The Romanian Post, as you know the institution, you know where it is, you know the space inside, where you enter, where you exit. I communicate via the Post, only the Post. I sent stuff to the hospital, and they send things to me the same way, medicine in small bags. I go to the Post, take the parcel. I don't want it at home, I don't want them to come to my house, because they can bring me who know what and I pay them for it. (FG 3)

b. Difficulties encountered by users – sending correspondence

According to the users' experiences, the main forms of correspondence are especially the kind containing documents and, to some less extent, letters. The preferred version of sending documents, important official documents is recommended mail or mail with confirmed delivery, and these choices are explained by the need to have a guarantee of delivery. The Post seems to be the favourite provider when it comes to sending official/original documents, as it is perceived that it takes better responsibility than the private providers in case some problems arise.

As concerns the **context** in which they opt for various forms of mailing, the respondents stated that they use simple mailing via the Post when they do not care about the time of delivery and when they are not sending important documents. The major issue that was pointed out was the speed of delivery of the postal item, and not the safety of reaching the recipient (no respondent shared any experience when an item was lost).

In the process of sending correspondence, especially visually impaired people need the assistance of a third party to complete the address and to go to the post office (the accompanying person is generally rewarded for this).

As for the estimation of **duration/ speed of delivery of the postal items**, the responses varied a lot: most mentioned 3-5 days, but there were also examples of simple mail took 8-10 days to reach the recipient, while in the case of recommended mail or mail with confirmed delivery, the interval is shorter (the most often mentioned interval was 2 days from submission of the recommended mail).

Regardless of age and residence, the participants mentioned that the fees for mailing are satisfying, as the Post has no competitor in this respect. The difference in fees depending on the various form of mailing (simple, recommended, with a stated value) is also found acceptable, justified and of insignificant value, as related to the benefits.

As for the **difficulties encountered** during the process of using services having as object sending correspondence, the following were mentioned: little assistance or absence of assistance from the clerks at the post office, the need to go to the post office and to walk there and back several times, as many of the forms cannot be filled out there; extra trips to look for stamps, envelopes and even postcards (the issue of lack of envelopes in the post offices was pointed out in most of the focus groups); completing the forms; queuing inside the post office building.

We do send, but the problem is truly, even in Baia Mare, I went there two weeks ago and I walked into the Post, I wanted to put something in an envelope and they did not sell any, and sent me to the bookstore across the road. I was lucky that they were close and still open. The envelopes. You find ballpoint pens, and those greetings cards displayed. I need to go to the bookstore for the greetings card and then to the Post for the stamp. Then I go to the Post only for the stamp, if the greetings card and the envelope needs to be purchased somewhere else. In the old times, there were many kinds. Now nothing. (FG 14)

This problem is not only ours, we who see poorly, who need to take forms back home and have them filled, in my opinion the forms are very old and they do not work for legal persons or individuals either. I filled out one and they gave me another one to fill out. Why should they ask for my personal identification number (CNP) or the child's, in my opinion they should not ask for the CNP. (FG 14)

And for instance there is not enough space for me to write the account number. You need to write in very small print. In my opinion, those small forms should be changed for A4 size paper. And that can be inserted in a file as proof, or typed into a computer, it's simpler than that old cardboard which you write on. All of them are small, at least for parcels they should have bigger ones. If you need to send money, or something valuable, you need to write in very small print. (FG 8)

To hand in a letter, you need to queue, because there is no staff. And for a stamp you queue at counter 3. If there is no-one, there is no point in queuing somewhere else, because I am told that stamps are sold by the other clerk. If she wants, she may wait on you. If she does not feel like it, she won't. They say that if we have patience, they help us, after they finish with the others in the queue. The worst thing is with these stamps, and such, because you need to queue for 2 or 3 different things at the Post. (FG 15)

You may not see what you need to fill in and to sign, and the person there won't sign. It's very difficult. You stay there and look like a fool. They must be told that when a person says they can't see how to fill out the form, they should do something. For the signature, that's easy, you scribble something and that's done. They said they would not complete the forms that needed to be filled in by us. (FG 9)

Well, it's also difficult because we write down the address on the envelope and ... also on the computer. Yes. Including by hand. So we take a white envelope so we don't need to use those forms – addressee and what not –, we get some white and put it in the ... we fool the printer a bit, yes? And write. The recommended mail gets there much sooner, about two days, as far as I know, within Romania, or maximum 3 in the event of something, but the other one crawls there, it takes about a week. (FG 8)

It's true that at the Post Office as well the more you pay, the better the services. If you send a simple letter, you need to go to the post office, to ...And it takes time, it does. It takes I don't know how long. Say I sent some CDs and I guess it was simpler, I mean the same,

someone had to address the envelope for me but they got there. Recommended mail. (FG 7)

c. Difficulties encountered by users – mailing items for the visually impaired

Within the study, we have used the concept cecogramme, items for the visually impaired, defined according to the legal provisions as postal items weighing up to 7 kilograms, such as open cecographic postal items, relief maps marked with the cecogramme sign, voice recordings and special paper for the sole use of the visually impaired if they are sent by or to an institution of the visually impaired.

The term cecogramme is only familiar to a few participants, and only those who are closely connected with visually impaired people's associations are close enough to the correct meaning of the term. Most often, by cecogramme the participants only understood letters typed in Braille. As concerns the use of cecogrammes, some relevant ideas emerged:

- They are used by relatively few people with visual impairment due to a few factors: use of mostly telephones for communication, which replaced written correspondence, and of the Internet (Internet-based communication services);
- Their use drops with age: the younger the groups, the less frequent the use of cecogrammes, and the more limited the knowledge of the concept;
- There were also residence-dependent differences; no participant from the rural areas sends or has sent a cecogramme and they cannot type in Braille.
- According to the respondents, and the representatives of the visually impaired people's associations, fewer and fewer people learn to type in Braille, fewer and fewer people have the Braille instruments for writing (a slate, a typewriter or even the special paper to type on). Moreover, the process itself (of writing a letter in Braille) is complicated enough as compared to writing the same letter by computer; no representative of the

young group has ever sent a cecogramme up to now, and would not do it even if they were for free among individuals but they have expressed their request to have a special service of mailings for the people with special needs, not only in case of cecogramme.

In conclusion, use of cecogrammes is relatively limited, and the low frequency of their use is not necessarily connected to the gratuity / non-gratuity of the service. As concerns the fee for sending cecogrammes, there were notable differences among the opinions expressed: those who stated that cecogrammes can be sent for free among individuals as well – as long as the envelop mentions “Braille special printed matter” (București, Buzău); those who know that they can only be sent for free by or to associations of visually impaired people; those who state that the service was free in the past including for mailing among individuals, but that nowadays it is not like that, one needs to pay; those who know nothing about gratuity or special measures for mailing for visually impaired people either for person to person mailing, or through the mediation of visually impaired people’s associations.

So you go to the post office, you write the address, the label and send it to another visually impaired person. And that should be sent for free. And in Romania it's not between individuals (natural persons). As Sorin said before, it's between legal persons. It should be framed ... I think all letters sent by people with disabilities should be, at this time, the elderly – realistically speaking – communicate by means of letters. We send ... (FG 1)

I know people who have used it, but I don't know whether ... to provide precise information, but I know they used it and it's not free. Or maybe in some counties they accept to do it, but it's not the same everywhere. It's not general. (FG 1)

If Braille letters were free for visually impaired people, would they use this more? It's better without Braille. Rather than read 3 pages in Braille, you can listen to the person on the phone. Yes, you get minutes now. Unlimited. ... If you phone the wrong number, you apologize and retry whom you wanted. (FG 14)

It's simple. Up to some time ago, you could send letters between visually impaired people for free, but a regulation was introduced to write something on the envelope so that the gratuity would not apply, that cecogramme, now this does not work anymore, you need to put a stamp on the cecogramme as well, I guess they are having money problems as well. (FG 13)

Not so frequently, I usually send [them] to institutions, to the association in Bucharest, each month or once every two months, I send articles for the journal. Now I only pay for the stamp, that is not a problem, because I need to send, and before the revolution the stamp worked, there is no timeframe for when it gets there, it's up to 5, 6 days. Once it got there the 3rd day, another time the second week, and I also had mail that never got there, and I had to rewrite it. (FG 13)

I don't think they use cecogrammes anymore. They use stamps because something changed there, and I don't get any more ... I guess they have no more contract for the county or the city. (FG 11)

We receive them from the association and the association is privileged because they send them for free. For instance, the journal, the association's journal. It's sent – those who wish to receive it at home can do so. (FG 3)

The slates we have – some of us. Each of us has their slate and the stylus, no problem there. It's more difficult with the paper. Yes, this is special paper, we only get it from the association; one cannot find it anywhere else. Yes, it's an enduring paper, so the dots can last and be read. We receive rather than send cecogrammes. We get them from the association. In about 3 days, that's my case. (FG 4)

No, but these are services we really need ... Look, for instance, a cecogramme, a ... this, the Romanian Post gets them for free and no... Yes, it is free. I don't know legally or ... I have not encountered ... but I got from the associations books in Braille, and I also sent some. And a CD can also qualify as a cecogramme. And we write "Braille special printed matter" and ... It's free, yes, if we send it ourselves from the Post. (FG 7)

It's indeed free. It's the only, I believe the only one that is free for visually impaired people. But if you send from one individual to another, without the mediation of the institution, would you send it by post? Yes, we do. Go to the post office every day and say it's in Braille. Put it in the mail box. You must write in a corner "Braille special printed matter" – you need to write that. In the right hand corner, write like this – "B-R-A-I-L-L-E special printed matter". And they don't charge you anything. Especially as, as a rule, knowing that Braille writing is on special paper, a thicker one, the envelope is made of the same kind of paper and the people at the post recognise us ... (FG 7)

I have sent CDs by Post and also received them. Am just now I wanted to talk to someone; in fact, I tried to get in touch and I saw very big differences if I was to pay. And for the others it depends on the weight, and something else, and less so on the amount, so these fees are not so high. However, it's a CD, it's not that heavy, but I thought the price was quite high. We use the cecogrammes. A cecogramme is ... we really thank the Romanian Post for accepting and keeping up this special thing for us. I don't know, maybe they get some subsidy from the state... (FG 7)

Now if it's an item of some value, even with cecogrammes – I don't know, a CD perhaps or something – it is worth paying for the confirmation of delivery. When I had to send some CDs, I preferred to send them by the classical system, so I purchased the envelope from them, the one with the bubbles for protection, and I sent it using the standard fee. It got there in two days. The cost – rather expensive, almost 10 RON, around 10 RON, so... But I could have written on the same envelope "special printed matter" and it would have gone. Yes, it would have, for I sent such things, but I preferred to have the confirmation of delivery. (FG 7)

Before, correspondence among us, the blind, was more frequent, but nowadays it's much more comfortable by phone or by the Internet. It's more convenient to talk, to communicate directly, that's one thing, and the other, fewer and fewer blind people know Braille. The school is the root of the problem, I heard that they only teach them to use a laptop. (FG 13)

d. Difficulties – mailing parcels

Mailing a parcel via the Romanian Post seems to be the less accessible service for people with visual impairment. The first aspect is that they cannot go through this alone, they need an accompanying person to carry the parcel to or from the post office, which means time and costs (payment for the accompanying person), and difficulties with transport if the post office is far.

Another difficulty is filling out the forms. If people with profound or severe visual impairment ask for the help of the clerk at the desk, they are often refused because, allegedly, the staff are not allowed to write instead of the sender. A few difficulties were mentioned concerning identification of the post code, which they are not assisted in finding. If they are not assisted, they take the forms home, and with the help of a family member, they fill them out, and have to go to the Post office again to send the parcel.

Completing forms is a bigger problem for those with severe and profound visual impairment and for the elderly visual impaired. According to the respondents, the forms have many spaces to fill, and the spaces are very small, so it is difficult to write in those spaces. For people with severe and moderate visual impairment, the notes to be dropped in the addressee's mailbox are also difficult to use (due to the small size and the difficult to read type).

Summing up, sending a parcel is a complicated and time-consuming process for users, starting with going to the office, requesting support from a third party to help them carry or lift the parcel, and filling out the forms, most of the time without being able to rely in most of the cases on the other people in the queue or the staff at the desk.

Well, I could not fill it in because the forms needed filling ... First of all, the parcel had to be taken to the post office. AND HOW DID YOU MANAGE? I went there with someone. And they helped me with the forms, to fill them out. The fee was somewhat below what the private courier service charges. (FG 1)

To send a parcel, because I have done this for years, I took the forms from the Post and took them home – for money, and for ... so. And I filled them out at home. I use a

magnifying glass to fill them in. Anyhow, it's pretty difficult. First of all, and ... so the form is the same type I used when I was in high school. Well, now you peer, but what does one do if they are as blind as a bat? (FG 7)

They don't help you because there's a queue. They don't have enough staff. If you ask them, they send you away saying they cannot. I tell them I cannot see, they tell me to come with someone to accompany me. Not everyone has company. You don't have your glasses. You take them home, and fill them out with help. Data you need to enter is another thing. (FG 14)

Communicating with them is a problem. Look, this is what happened to me once with a parcel: I wanted to send a parcel, I called the post office ... I asked them briefly ... and was told "We can only explain it to you if you come to the headquarters". So, wait a minute, this was a 5-minute thing. (FG 5)

If we ask someone there, they help unenthusiastically, but we go there with someone, because there is a long queue, and no one really has the time to wait for us, the people at the back of the line start yelling, and I prefer to have someone with me. The parcel gets there sooner, at least one day sooner. Yes, indeed. At least one day, it's an extra one at the Post. (FG 5)

We always pay the person accompanying us. And we spend money. The person may not be able to go when we need it ... to see a doctor or ... it depends on how we agree.... If they are pleased, they ... when you ask them, they come again; if not, they will say they are busy the next time you ask them. (FG 4)

So the forms are the same, they have the same questions, the same spaces as before. I would not be surprised to find out that the form itself was printed back in Ceaușescu's time. With very small spaces so you can't manage. And some names are long, that's what it is. The best thing ... take the form home and bring it filled in, and then you go there with the writing done – doesn't matter by whom ... ask anyone to take it to the post office; the main thing is to have the form filled out correctly and take it there. So this is my many-year-long experience... (FG 7)

The private providers are an alternative especially for the young users. The advantages as concerns parcel mailing are essential for the needs of people with visual impairments: collection of the parcels from the domicile, and delivery at the domicile, simplified forms or even lack of forms (handing over the parcel is much simplified and as such easier for people with visual impairment); the need to go to the post office is no longer there; the possibility to place the order by Internet.

You noticed that with the private providers practically you do not need to fill in any form, that is you have to address the parcel ... they complete the form when they come to collect the parcel. You just sign. If you ask the Fan Courier, they come to your home. You get a message, delivery report or an sms, and they call you when they are close to your place, and say "I will be at your place in about 10 minutes" and ... Or if you want you can track the status of your parcel by Internet. As concerns the types of mailing: simple parcel when it is sent in the rural areas, simple parcels when there is no urgency, parcel with a stated value when valuable goods are sent. (FG 7)

They also have Priori Post which should be delivered within 24 hours. I used it but it takes longer than 24 hours, I am telling you. So at the Romanian Post the day is longer than 24 hours. I have also used Fan Courier. And Priori Post as well as Fan Courier. I dropped it in early in the morning. Priori Post did not deliver it the second day either, by the end of the working hours ... or on the second day... Fan comes home, for Priori Post you need to go to the post office, like normally. As for the duration, Fan Courier is the fastest. I think with Fan Courier I have sent ... the distance from here, from Buzău to Satu Mare, and it made it in 25 hours. However the fee is rather high, I mean you pay about 20 odd RON. For instance, Buzău-Arad via Prioripost instead of 24 hours, it took 48. I was sending some documents which had to get there. By Priori Post, yes. Now what can I do? The day was over, the timeframe was off, they didn't collect them, and it was left for the next day in the morning to deliver.

e. Needs of visually impaired users

One of the important aspects that has emerged from the 15 focus groups is that the participants do not thoroughly or accurately know the full meaning of the names of services provided by the Romanian Post and the terms of various service deliveries. This is natural, in fact, and many have expressed their interest to be informed about the service provision of the Romanian Post and the options for various types of mailing that are available, as this is one of the shortcomings at present as concerns the post offices (customer information). We are making a point of this aspect as in the inventory of future needs (which will be detailed below) it is possible that the participants may state that they would like to have service options that are already available at the Romanian Post.

❖ **Users' needs as concerns speed of postal item delivery**

In most participants' view, speed of postal item delivery is the time it takes for it to reach the addressee. Discussions revealed that this criterion is one of the major differences between the Post and private providers, in general, the Post being perceived as less rapid than the private providers. As concerns the time needed for delivery of postal item, from the participants' experiences, the following were mentioned: 3 days for delivery of correspondence within the country, 7 days for delivery of correspondence within the European Union, and 3 days for delivery of cecogrammes within the country.

When asked in connection with optimal delivery intervals of postal items, most contributions outlined the following:

- the wish for an option to deliver items (correspondence and parcels) urgently (whereby delivery within the country is done within 24 hours and within the European Union delivery should be possible in maximum 2-3 days);
- the optimal delivery speed of postal items such as correspondence and printed matter within the country should be 48 hours, maximum 3 days from dropping it off;

- the optimal speed of delivering a parcel within the country should also be 48-72 hours from the time they are handed in, while for parcels within the European Union, the time of delivery should not exceed a week.
- the speed of delivering cecogrammes - most mentioned the option for the same delivery speed as for normal postal correspondence. It must be mentioned however that the above stated delivery speeds, those referring to mailing within the country (correspondence, printed matter, parcels, and cecogrammes) refer to deliveries in urban areas. For deliveries in the rural areas, the respondents find that an additional 24-48 hours as compared to the previously stated intervals is acceptable.

Asked to what extent they found it necessary for a simple letter/ printed matter to be delivered within 24 hours within the country, most stated that it was not necessary for the interval to be so tight for simple mail. However, they underscored that there should be an emergency service which could deliver within 24 hours. Very few respondents (3 out of 154) mentioned the use of the Romanian Post's rapid delivery Priori Post service. In general, what is needed is for the speed of delivery of Romanian Post processed postal items to gradually get nearer the speed of processing postal items by private providers, but without significantly changing the current fees.

The Post equals slow, the private courier service equals rapid. (FG 1)

Especially for us, visually impaired people, we do not often send simple letters. And if we do send cecogrammes, which you cannot be very picky about as it's free, you could get speedy delivery. A cecogramme gets delivered in about 72 hours currently. This is about the time it takes, and it's satisfying. I have also received parcels, I just got it today from Pro Lumina there, in Târgoviște, and the next day I received it, so it came in less than 2 days. So 72 hours is acceptable, but they have been delivered sooner, more rapidly as well. (FG 10)

I sent the documentation via the Post, as recommended mail, to the ophthalmology clinic in Barcelona ... it got there in 7 days. I also sent something to Oradea, to another clinic,

and it arrived within 4 days, I received the confirmation that it had arrived and ... Yes ... when I have something valuable to send I use Priori Post. About a day and a half. Within the country. But I know a way for example at court, when you need to file a document or a request, and you don't know ... when you are very certain that Priori Post makes it ... that your request gets considered. (FG 10)

The participants pointed out many issues regarding deliveries in the rural areas, both for postal and non-postal delivery (distribution of pensions/ allowances, invoices for utilities, etc.), the issues concerning the long time of delivery from the office or the post agency where they receive the items to the addressee: it has been mentioned that it takes days on end in the rural areas until letters, invoices and other mail gets from the commune centre to the villages. Moreover, examples were cited where due to the delayed delivery of important documents (e.g. various notifications about deadlines) the users confronted with significant implications (e.g. notifications from public institutions received too late, invoices reaching the addressee after the utilities were disconnected, etc.). The respondents from rural areas asked that mail that reaches the commune centre on day X should be further delivered to the addressees on the same day.

I had to report to the expertise commission, it was on a Monday, and I only received the letter on Thursday. So the letter was mailed 12 days before and it still did not make it in good time. (FG 7)

I did not know that I had to fill in a document, it had to be sent to Budapest, but the Consulate sent it to Cluj. They have a 30-45 day deadline legally speaking for the legal document to be filled to take effect and I received the letter from Cluj after the deadline, because the 40 days had passed. I was lucky to open the envelope because if I don't send what they ask for, I lose my right to act. I saved the envelope and the stamp was visible and they were alright because they said I should put the envelope in the letter to have evidence that there was a delayed delivery. (FG 14)

For instance, I received a letter summoning me to a place, and I should have gone the day before. I received the letter on Sunday evening, and I should have been there on Friday with the respective letter. The postmen don't do their job properly. (FG 9)

❖ **Users' preferences as concerns frequency of postal item collection**

Most visually impaired users were not very certain about the time the mail gets collected at present; they did remember that in the past, collection of mail from mailboxes and post offices was done two a day, in the morning and in the evening. At present, in most discussion groups, they mentioned the frequency as once a day, at the end of the post office working hours.

Preferences for frequency of mail collection were quite in agreement: the respondents asked for mailings to be collected twice a day, in the morning and in the evening on all working days. Some participants (less numerous, especially the younger groups) expressed their wish to have the mail collected on Saturday as well, within a shorter working day for the post offices (perhaps up to 2 p.m.), arguing that for people who are busy, a structure of working hours including Saturday morning would grant more accessibility of services. The maximal variant which could include 5 working days and Saturday was expressed in the group of elderly respondents as well, but they considered that in this case the costs of the Romanian Post's services would be too high.

In the morning and in the evening. That used to be the way. Not everyone drops their correspondence in the mailbox in the morning. Maybe there is an emergency, something you sent. One gets stuck with this mentality. Twice a day would be ok. (FG 5)

No, the same, the same – 5 days a week, the 5 working days, plus some timeframe – shorter - on Saturday. (FG 1)

In the city, I know it gets collected twice a day, in the village, once a week. We have the village postman, who goes around every day, I saw him walk up to the box and empty it every day on his way to the post office. That is, if there is something to pick up. From the office, the car must come every day and ... (FG 10)

Now they collect it once a day. It should be once in the morning, and once in the evening. Right? When they open the office, and when they close it. At least twice a day. (FG 2)

❖ **Users' preferences as concerns frequency of postal and non-postal service delivery**

The options are similar as concerns frequency of delivery; the clearly expressed certainty is that delivery only three times a week would not be enough, As for the other two options (5 times a week every working day, 5 times a week, on Saturday and other four working days), there were different preferences in the younger groups and in the over 55 year-old people's groups. The elderly people – pensioners – thought that the most adequate frequency of delivery would be 5 times a week, every working day, while some of the younger people considered that one of the working days could be replaced by Saturday. The preferences are explained by reference to lifestyle (the pensioners have enough time during the week, while for active people, the work schedule during the week may prevent them from getting to the post office in time or to be at home to receive postal items that are delivered).

Like in the case of preferences expressed for the frequency of mail collection by the Romanian Post, from the answers concerning the frequency of deliveries it was revealed that most respondents find that delivery on 6 days out of 7 (with shorter hours on Saturday) would be sufficient. Many of the interviewees consider that the Romanian Post should make efforts to increase the quality of its services, so that the frequency of deliveries should reach the quality level provided by the private companies, without a substantial increase in the fees charged.

A special situation is that of pension delivery. The big discontent is in relation to the gap between those who get their pensions via banks/ bank machines (usually as soon as the 14th day of the month), and those who get it delivered by the Romanian Post, of whom some only actually lay hands on their pension on the 27th (the delivery programme differs depending on the postman's workload and the itinerary he covers). This is the reason why a good many pensioners with visual impairment moved over to banks despite the difficulties associated with using a bank machine. However, those who do get their pension via the Post would like to have this situation change so that instead of the 14 day gap, there should be a maximum 2-3 days only, and the provider should make this effort so that all pensioners could get their pension by the 18th or 19th of the month at the latest.

For instance, those who get their visually impaired person's pension in an account at CEC, receive them around the 12th. Those who get them via postal order get them about two weeks later as compared to the bank. I would like this to be brought forward. The Post just keeps ... keeps it there. They will... they will say that there are no postmen to do it. It could be done another way as well – so you could get it either from the postman, or from the post office. At present, you cannot collect your pension from the post office. If you don't ... unless you go before ... let's say you are scheduled to get it on the 27th. You go to the post office, and say, "I would like to ... leave on holiday on the 27th ... " It won't work. "Be home on the 27th. You'll get your pension then." They send it back. But the big problem is... you say that, but you know what it is? The Post gains, it keeps your money for 15 days and they get some interest. (FG 4)

Other issues connected to delivery in the rural areas:

Better first of all personally, to cover the entire area of the commune and each inhabitant, for ten thousand people you should get more staff because there's a lot of work. With the newspapers, the correspondence, and there are many envelopes ... with this ... delays with the pension and you pay some fine, the notifications get delayed, and when you get it, you are already behind the schedule, so you go to the Post. The invoices always come after the date when you are supposed to pay them, a week after, or two, so you can get

disconnected from the electricity system, they cut off your phone. It has happened to me. They cut off my TV channels. (FG 10)

In each part of the commune there should be these services, if not daily, at least two or three times a week. I can find a postman to meet all the requirements that we listed, letters, parcels, and invoices. But as there is a single person ... he comes once every two weeks. He is two weeks late. It takes seven days... the envelope I received arrived four days later. It was recommended mail, four days. There are cases when they should get to me directly. Someone should be held accountable. (FG 10)

❖ **Users' preferences as concerns the place and manner of reception/ delivery**

As concerns the place of collection/ delivery, the preference expressed by people with profound visual impairment is their own domicile, while the least favoured option is the post office. The possibility to send/ receive items at the domicile is the major need expressed by the participants in the focus groups especially as concerns parcels, the reasons being listed in the chapter concerning the difficulties encountered in sending or receiving parcels by the Post by people with visual impairment.

From the answers we received from our interviewees, it results that the young people tend to opt for using the postal services provided by private companies, because they generally ensure collection/ delivery directly from/ to the user's domicile, and this fact helps avoid the issues common to people with visual impairment.

Consequently, the visually impaired users' preference is to receive/ send correspondence, and parcels from/at domicile. Moreover, they point out that they would pay for this extra service provided that the fees are accesible. As concerns the preferred period/ time of delivery, the respondents stated that it should be set depending on the context, on a case by case basis, the most appropriate approach being scheduling via phone call, whereby

the courier/ postman announces the time interval. A telephone call could be made to confirm the person's presence at the domicile and a written message or an email would significantly help the quality of the process of receiving postal items from the Romanian Post at present, the day of pension delivery by the postman entails that some of the pensioners do not leave home at all so that they do not miss the postman).

Whenever the pension is delivered, I have ... we had postmen who did not feel like coming upstairs. They don't feel like dropping a note in the post box either, saying "Your so-and-so has arrived ..." I went to the Post office and was told, "You have no ..." they say, "It's still with the postwoman. Look for her. Keep looking out for her!" If they don't notify you, you have to do some extra trips. (FG 4)

Their biggest disadvantage... So we send them home and ... - for one. And the second – my opinion is they should bring that note, because for instance in our block of flats they steal from the mailbox. Those notifications should be brought home, so that we know when the parcel arrives. (FG 8)

A parcel, a letter... Well, we would contact them by phone, a person would come ... and myself – at home.

And they should phone prior to that, to check whether we are at home, a written message somehow should notify us of the time when they get there. (FG 8)

Even if we pay a fee, it's better to receive it at home. So even if you had to pay? ... It would not be an issues; rather than carry ... (FG 3)

At the same time, some of the respondents don't see how the solution of delivery to/ collection from the domicile could be resolved, given that the postmen (who they think should be doing this) are very busy at present, and they do not have the means of transport, and in the rural areas they have a very big area to cover.

If you give the letter to the postman and ask to have it delivered as a simple letter, I think they would take it. With the parcels, it's a problem. Other than that ... It's one aspect. But I feel sorry for those people, the postmen. To walk for 7-8 km, if you have a car of your own... if not, you walk... It's very stupid what they did with those agencies there, especially in the mountain areas. It's impossible, ma'am, to have them walk 10 km! (FG2)

❖ **Users' preferences as concerns access to post offices and their opening hours**

Cutting back on staff meant reducing the number of post offices in all localities where focus groups were organised. As a result, the respondents shared examples of how the users need to walk quite far, and the itinerary itself is more of a problem when a parcel needs to be carried. People with profound visual impairment must always have a person to accompany them to the post office. Those with less profound impairment do not find the trip so much of a problem, but they however run into the difficulty of filling in the forms.

Moreover, there are post offices where the users do not find everything they would need to be able to send correspondence, such as envelopes, stamps, copying machine, etc., so they need to walk additionally.

Another significant element is that in the interior layout of the post offices, the designers did not take into account the needs of people with disabilities, any kind of disabilities, and even less so of the visually impaired people's. There are no ramps (which would be much better for visually impaired people as well than the stairs), no helpful sign for orientation, (e.g. touch carpet). Another problem is that the post offices are crowded, and the queues makes it even more difficult to find your way around inside the building.

In this respect, the recommendations made related to the entrance and interior design of post office buildings, for instance special carpets could be laid down which help people with visual impairment find their way more easily. Another problem that was pointed out

is that they cannot always decide which office they need to queue at, so they end up queuing at several until they manage to identify the one they actually need.

With the parcel collected from home and delivered to the domicile, it would be an important aspect for disabled people with mobility limitation. Or for the elderly, who have various mobility issues. Yes, for them as well, some of the ramps are not very easily accessible. Or there are no ramps. And you should know ... for instance, I get easier access when there is a ramp rather than take the stairs. It's easier. A ramp makes it easier. (FG 1)

We need the place to be more easily accessible, first of all, to get the right desk and whatever else there is to get right in there. (FG 1)

I am quite close myself, but it depends: if I have to collect a parcel, and I have to leave, I don't have time to make two trips. But the biggest is access. I can go on my own, for instance, to the Post. And inside until I get to actually collect the parcel, but how do I get back? If I hold the parcel in my arms, how do I carry my cane? (FG 1)

It is complicated, definitely. One cannot carry the cane and ... yes, the post is there and I was brave and have been going to pay the bills on my own, for the last three years up to now. It worked well, only the post offices are ... even this one, but some smaller ones are even more crowded, and for us ... I mean if there is no special entrance for us or a ... something separate, it is difficult. And few people notice, unless you carry a cane, and then you need to say "I am ..." (FG 7)

Yes, we do rely on people, but there are things that should be regulated. Regulations and common sense should be there. And we would not mind staying in a line, because it's something normal; we are humans. Exactly. That's what I said the first time I went there, "I don't want to push in; – I say – I can stay here and wait". But I need to know if this is the right queue. (FG 1)

It would be a small carpet, like a line on the floor and we could get guidance feeling it with our feet. A sort of carpet. With rubber or something. Like at pedestrian crossings....In our city, they have such ... such tactile carpets. And you just follow the line that's made of

some rubbery stuff, I don't know precisely what, but it is very easy to feel, with your feet and with the cane. (FG 1)

When you go somewhere, there are several desks, and the recommended mail is here, and the parcels there, and what do I know, so you may end up queuing... and then they say, "Not here, the other desk." And you start over. I find it ... for visually impaired people, the Post Office downtown is very difficult to access. (FG 7)

As for the working hours of the post offices, there was no criticism voiced, the users mentioning that their visits to these offices are not so frequent that the opening hours could become a problem.

❖ **Users' expectations as concerns staff**

The post office workers' attitude was the most often mentioned aspect that needs significant improvement. At present, the visually impaired users of postal services find that the current employees have no training for proper interaction with special needs people, and no procedures in this respect, and that they are rather annoyed by the difficulties the visually impaired encounter.

In the focus group, the participants' insistently recommended that the post office be trained in how to assist people with special needs. Another recommendation was that a staff member could be assigned the role of assisting people with special needs (in the process of using the postal services sought).

In this respect, the staff should be informed somehow about such situations, that there may be such situations and they should be prepared to interact with ... I don't know ... be receptive, so some people interact in a manner which ... as my colleagues said, because they are not trained, they don't know how to interact with a visually impaired person. They simply do not care. They are to deal with ... however ... we ... We have to communicate something to them ... we respond as normal people, and they don't ... not having ... at least

some idea, see, this blind person comes to you ... when they see you there, they get stuck and there's another reaction... Yes, unless they know someone like us, they treat us like an extra-terrestrial being. (FG 1)

Rather comfortable. If you go, they take their time, they are relaxed. If they don't manage it today, you can come the next day. They are not trained. They are tired as there are few of them, and a lot of work, and they are impatient. (FG 14)

When I moved to Bistrița, I went to collect my pension, to the Post there, and an employee of the office was aggressive with me, she took my hand and told me that there was plenty of time until the end of the month, and then I could not keep silent any more. I got angry and I left. She showed me a piece of paper to prove that I can go and collect the pension at the end of the month as well, but I said that was not helpful at all, because I cannot see. So she told me to go home, and wait for the postman. (FG 14)

They are very complicated, often when there is something to fill out, I have to ask the lady at the desk. And they scold us for not completing it correctly. No-one comes to our help, there should be some specialised staff to help us fill in the form. Or on the table, under the glass, and I said, "Sir, I cannot see." (FG 14)

I stood in a line to pay some invoices. It was very long, but I stayed, right in the centre. After I queued for over half an hour, I get to the desk, and they say "don't you see that this is not the line for paying?" "Ma'am, do you want me to take out my eyes and show you that I do not see?!" I don't see! I stood in the line like everyone else", there were other people who said they were there to pay bills. "No, you should go to the other side", but with a tone of the voice as if she was saying, excuse me, "Go to hell", and I got so sick. It's sickening to be treated like that, they talk to you as if you were ... (FG 9)

And there's this thing, on the one hand when they say "go to the room and seek someone", and another thing when they say ... if it's ... let's say she should be made to write and she cannot, and she sees him in the line, sees a lady, a gentleman, like ... you know, they look ... "Please, would you help this gentleman/ lady?". (FG 5)

For instance, I went to collect a parcel, wrapped as they usually are, I went to another office. And there I was told "Ma'am, you should have ... over the writing, so it seemed absurd to me – over the writing to put sellotape... over the writing? And this means you go home and put sellotape over that and then come back? Of course! So this is a matter – I am telling you, it's absurd... like... (FG 7)

They are very crowded here, the post offices. They don't have time for us. It would be good to have a staff member for this, I mean... one or two ... in addition to what they do, they could also help the visually impaired. Yes, they could assist us with our business there... (FG 5)

I find this like..... I don't know, maybe it sounds ugly: when you ask for help. Very few people help you. FROM THE POST OFFICE OR...? To write your, for example address. You, as a disabled person, maybe you get to write it not so neatly and... You ask for help. Many ... or you don't write it at all. Yes. You don't because you can't. Many people say "We are not allowed to". The staff, yes. Some people were ok, but most in general are ... they are very sour. And the people at the social assistance – they are the same ... unfriendly. Yes, I was thinking about that. It would be valid for all public institutions. (FG 1)

When you go there and want to find out something, they should tell you which desk to go to. When you get there, they should say Good morning, and I say good morning, I would like that, and they say "why did you come to me?", I understand they work with people and it's difficult, but we are not responsible for that. It is necessary to be well informed, and say where you want to go and how to fill out the form, we should get some explanation, there should be some models or we should be told to go to this or that desk, and the documents we need for that so we know what we need to do. There's no point in going to the guard there, he does not know, it's true, the doormen or guards in the public institutions know nothing. (FG 9)

By informing the, I mean at the Post Office, the lady or the gentleman who is the manager should have a meeting with the staff there and inform them that there are people who cannot see, and other problems, and when they ask for help, they should be assisted. There are not so many of us that they would be spending a lot of time on us so that there would

be not enough time left for the other customers. Indeed, whatever institution you walk in, whether the post or something else, they treat you as if there's something wrong with your head. (FG 9)

In the countryside, where I live, they generally think we are somewhat behind. They would not give us instructions, especially when we go together or with someone, they would not explain things to us. They would not say what conditions and rights we have and how... We don't know the products well, the options that you get for the various services. I am asking you, I tell them the postman's name, say I was mother, I wanted to send to my child in Cluj this and that, how long does it take? They must be informed, to know, look, we send it off today and it gets there the day after tomorrow, not to avoid the question and in fact ... so they don't know. Or this is not my business. (FG 10)

❖ Users' preferences as concerns fees for postal services

The fees the Romanian Post charges are considered to be the main advantage of the provider. In each of the 15 focus groups, the respondents repeated the idea that the most pleasing aspect of the Romanian Post's services is the fees charged, while the least pleasing aspects are the delivery time and the post office staff's attitude.

The respondents find the differences between the fees charged for simple, recommended and the value-stated mail ones as justified, given the advantages of each service. As a consequence, the users would not like any changes in the future in terms of fees and ways of calculating the fees charged by the Romanian Post, even if the current services were made optimal, an increase in the fees would not attract new customers, on the contrary, it may generate a migration of the current users to the private providers.

As for the option to have uniform or differentiated fees depending on the destination, **the users opted for uniform fees for correspondence and small parcels**, pointing out that some differentiation can be applied for the larger parcels (e.g. over 7 kg) depending on the weight and the distance.

But they are best insofar as fees are concerned, if we think about it. However, if they implement some of the things we discussed, will the fees stay the same? It's worth it ... I mean if they keep the same fees. They will reach the same fees as the private providers. If they introduce... Yes. They should be competitive at this level, I mean ... they should keep the uniform fees. Like bus fares, whether you go one stop or to the end of the line, you pay the same. (FG 7)

Insofar as receiving/ sending cecogrammes, without involving an institute for visually impaired people, many do not use this services, those who use them do so either for free (as the post offices or counties accept to handle them for free even among individuals) or for a fee (acceptable, in the respondents' opinion) just like the ones charged for normal deliveries (simple, recommended or value-stated correspondence). From the answers we received, it has resulted that many of the respondents are not informed about the Romanian Post's service to process cecogrammes for free. Asked whether they would make more frequent use of this service if it were free, the respondents stated that they would not, for some reasons: communication in Braille is simply not used any more by young people, as they have more effective means of communication; those in the rural areas do not use them currently either, and those who do make use of this service at present do not find that charging a sensible fee would become an impediment.

The number of Braille users is shrinking. Previously, there were blind people who used to read, now we are old and we don't have the same fine tactile sense. They get sent occasionally ... and not many of us subscribe to the journals of the association. I don't remember how many, but before there used to be hundreds... (FG3)

If sending cecogrammes to individuals were free, so you would not pay anything for it at the post, would you use this service more often? I don't think so; this generation, no. Not any more, the ones that come after us, even less so. We have people who, of course, use the Internet, they have the voice soft installed, that synthetic voice, and then they manage very well; those who had the willpower got prepared, and we have some who are very good, we also have programmers. (FG1)

❖ Users' needs as concerns coverage of postal network

The opinions concerning the number of post offices in the users' locality of residence differs depending on the size of the locality. The most displeased seem to be people who live in large cities, where the offices are very overcrowded and those in the villages (where the post offices were closed down, and the distance to the ones that are left open is very big). In smaller towns where some of the focus groups were organised (Botoşani, Bistriţa) it seems that there is an optimal balance between the request for postal services and the number of post offices; moreover, in these towns, distances to postal office are not too big either.

The old post office no. 13, which was in Micro 20. It changed into a small store of 2 m by 2 m. And there are now two people staffing it. No, I was exaggerating; rather 3; so 3 by 3. And there are two people. And some lines ... yes, it serves 19, 20 and 21. And there are only two people in a space of 3 by 3. (FG 4)

What we find displeasing insofar as the Post is concerned, and it really affects us – that the number of post offices was reduced. And we need to walk. For instance, I live in Țiglina 3. If they don't find me at home, I need to go to 17, which is very-very far. The distance is very big. (FG 4)

Is it difficult for you to get to the post office you are allotted to? We go by car, by minibús. No, the small buses. They are public transport. (FG 4)

It would be good if in each village of the commune there was a post office. Not daily, but when you go there, two or three days, you should know that they work. So maybe fewer days of the week, but it would be good to have an office in the village? I understand that they cut the number of staff, but at least I should know that the office in my village is open a couple of days. (FG 10)

❖ Users' preferences as concerns postal service provision quality

According to the opinions expressed, a quality postal service means:

- Effectiveness – rapid delivery, timely delivery, no delays;
- Efficiency;
- Kind attitude of the staff, assistance from the staff, humaneness and sensitivity;
- Fairness;
- Seriousness;
- Accessibility, stable and easily accessible location;
- Promptness;
- Confidentiality;
- Reduced bureaucracy;
- Safety of the delivered items.

IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

After having carried out the 15 focus groups, the potential **new characteristics for postal services**, in case of the providers which are not offering these services at present, and also a series of improvement suggestions for the existent services, requested by the users in our target group are:

- Development of some procedures for interaction and assistance provided for disabled people; the procedures should stipulate the manner in which a person who is visually impaired should be assisted from their access to the office to the completion of their business in the respective institution, including assigning by the service provider of an employee for each postal office whose job would be to provide support for the visually impaired people in their attempt of using postal services (e.g. orientation to the right window, filling the forms, etc.)

- Simplification of forms or new forms with larger space to write in for the visually impaired people. Postal notices should be easier to read, with larger print;
- Collection/ delivery of postal items from / to the visually impaired people's domicile;
- Purchase of equipment (photocopier, printer, facsimile machine) that has voice synthesizer and Braille keypad; tactile carpet, fewer stairs in the offices, access platform;
- Adequate information of the users about the service provision, the advantages and disadvantages of each service;
- Free services for mail between two individuals with visual impairment,
- The possibility to use electronic signature.

There is this stupid thing in the regulation, because Romania could also learn about the international conventions, the European ones and so on. Normally, when you send a letter ... when two people with disabilities send a letter to each other, they should be free. In Romania, however, the gratuity applies to mails between institutions, firms, but not individuals. (FG1)

And we would need someone to guide us and not yell at us, or tell us that they would not get involved and they don't know what to do, and call and tell someone that there is someone who cannot see and they don't know what to do with him and... Perhaps they should have a specialised person for people with disabilities. (FG 1)

If the parcels could be delivered and collected from the visually impaired people's domicile, that would be exceptional, it would make our life much easier. And there should be a period, about 30 days, when the money is kept at the post Office. That is, if I announce that I am leaving and returning at a certain time, they should not send the money back to Bucharest, because I will come and collect it when I said I would. Not like that, you should announce when you come. When the person is not at home, it does not matter whether they announce or not, they should not rush to send the money back to Bucharest, they should hang on to it. (FG 13)

I send it by post, they bring it, the postman comes and should bring it on time, or they should give that notification earlier, communication, to the office, "Sir, you have some medical journals." It often is over the middle of the month and they do not notify me. (FG 13)

My opinion is that the postman should have an electronic application to get electronic signatures, so you can sign there. When I have signed on the screen, I get what I was delivered. That's how they do it abroad.

From the focus groups dedicated to users in rural areas, the following recommendations resulted for Romanian Post; if taken on board, these recommendations would lead to an increased quality of the postal services in rural areas and, in the same time to an increased satisfaction of the users of these services:

- Improvement of the postmen's working conditions;
- Increase the number of postmen, as in the rural areas, their area to cover is too big for them to be efficient with the deliveries;
- Equipping postmen in rural areas with cars or other means of transport to increase the speed of delivery and to ensure the person's safety;
- There should be collection/ dropping off sites in each village, even if there is no post office proper;

They should pay the postmen better. They get rained up, poor souls. In the rain, by bike, on foot. It's also risky for them, you see. They don't take ... several. Hooligans attack them. They attack them, and steal their money. (FG (6)

I think they should increase the number of postmen. Their area is large. The others are affected. From one village they had to cover, now they have three. Too many. They now have three. On foot, by bike, by microbus – they don't wait for you, you have to hurry up, go ... Yes. And in the afternoon they have to be back. It's very difficult. And there's a lot of responsibility involved. They should be back and account for what they had done by 3.30

or 4-5 at the latest. Return what they are left with. The parcels they cannot carry back. They are heavy. That should be something, but I am not sure this is possible.

Like the Police have a service car, the Post should also have one.

A service car for the Post would be excellent. Before, in Ceaușescu's time, each postman had to have a little cart, to ... (FG 6)

It depends on the person. Especially if you give them the small change ... it depends on the postman, if I did not find it convenient, I would not ... they don't make you do it. No-one makes you do it. You give them if you want. But the postman has a relationship with his clients. Now, he knows them each like a case. Yes. We have known each other for years and we are simply like in a family, I mean... I would not want to... they don't come into my house. They are serious people. (FG 7)

In our commune, there are three postmen for 14 villages. Before there used to be about 6. Their number was reduced, because they were not paid, a lot of field work, many bags to carry and now we have three postmen in the commune and the pensions are late. (Fg 10)

And another thing that upset me, they make the postmen sell us greetings cards or envelopes, they are made to sell them. For 400 Ron, through the boost, the farmer who worked the land for 40 years, and gets 400 Ron as a pension, and they make them buy your greetings cards, I find it shameful. This is not something the postman does, he is given a bunch of greetings cards to sell. And who can he sell them to. He is given the greetings cards forcibly. By the Post. And the poor man is made to sell them to these people with the small pensions... One of those is 1 Ron or 2. We must buy them for Christmas, New Year, Women's day, etc. (FG 10)

His salary is small all postmen... we want them to be kind, respectful, and to provide the necessary information, for he is also a man, and cannot carry that bag like a donkey, to be rapid. You see he is angry, sweaty, he needs some equipment, a cart, a motorbike, a bike. (FG 6)

Ma'am, I have another point to make about postmen. And please mention it there, and spread it in your entire network. Their behaviour should be: like kind, well-behaved people, because all the banks are courting us to get their cards.

And slowly we will be gone. You know why we don't go to the banks? Because we are blind. And it is difficult to get your money from there, not to trust this, not to trust my son. I do, indeed, that's different. But there are people who do not trust the bank machines. But when a person gets to trust the bank machine, slowly, they will lose us. And it's a shame, because they also lose their bread and that quantum ... whatever the percentage is... (FG 2)

From the focus groups carried out with the target group “young people”, it has resulted that they would like to see the Romanian Post’s internet page more accesible. Most of them use special software – screen readers both for the computer and for the telephone, and as such they access more the pages of private providers than the one of the Romanian Post. According to those who did access the site, from the perspective of a person who is visually impaired, the site is difficult to use by sections, the various sections are arranged in a confusing manner and the buttons for various commands are hard to identify.

It is difficult to use sections, the manner in which they are laid out. They are not clear ... the buttons you press are not clear ...; how can I say? Named ... like, for instance, I need to get the post code of an address and I had a horrible time searching the site of the Romanian Post ... for half an hour, and then I went to another site and looked there. Yes, and I, the same... I found the code on another page, not of the Romanian Post, because ... I couldn't access it. It has a lot of useless codes, Java-type. (FG 1)

I think it should be redone, from our point of view, there should be a special section which we could access. That much at least. It can be done... as far as I know... there are ... official sites are obliged to be made accessible to people with visual impairment; and not just such disabled people. (FG 1)

One of the major conclusions of the study is that the visually impaired users' needs as concerns postal services differ very much by age. While the needs of the elderly focused

on improved interaction with the Romanian Post staff, and on making the post office buildings more easily accessible, the needs of the younger users targeted mainly the improved speed of delivery, accessibility of the internet page of the Romanian Post, and the possibility to send/ receive correspondence and parcels directly at one's domicile. One of the recommendations that resulted from the group discussions (regardless of age or residence) was the need For the Romanian post to develop a set of procedures that should specify supplementary assistance measures for users with visual impairment.

For visually impaired people, the essential difference between the Romanian Post and the private providers is the fact that private companies collect and deliver items from and to the domicile. For the age group 55+, the Romanian Post is still the first option for using postal services, due to their familiarity with the provider. This preference resulted from the frequent use of some services (e.g. the monthly delivery of pensions), frequent interactions with the postmen, and familiarity with the post office building. Consequently, for users from this age group (55+), the Romanian Post is the easiest to use provider and they do not intend to change it despite the discontent they expressed.

As concerns the 16-34 age group, and even some of the 35-55, in case of parcels, they prefer to work with the private providers, due to the possibility of tracking on the internet of delivery status, hand in and collecting at/from domicile. They prefer private companies due to the higher delivery speed, and to the directly interaction with the customers at the latter's' domicile. According to the participants, the services offered by the private providers, are more useful for the visually impaired people, considering their specific needs.

The study has also revealed that the frequency of using cecogrammes is relatively low and a possible generalisation of mailing them for free even between individuals (not just institutions) would not lead to an increase in the intensity of their use.

Postal services are a significant help for people with visual impairment in terms of both their professional and their private life. Although other means of communication have taken over in the communication field (telephony, the Internet), the postal services still

respond to important needs that these users have, a reason why they expect to see improvements.