

Ageing in digital societies: enablers and barriers to older persons exercising their social rights

Lithuania

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1 Legal and policy framework

1.1 National legislation on digital public administration

There is no specific national legislation on (digital) public services mentioning equal access for all or specific groups (e.g. older persons or persons with disabilities). The main principles on digital public services are ccc in the law on Information Society Services and the Law on Public administration.

The Law on Information Society Services¹ was adopted in 2006 (updated version of January 2020). The main purpose was to establish legal grounds to regulate the provision of information society services (e.g. services provided by electronic means). The law defines the requirements for the information provided and the conclusion of agreements by electronic means, regulates responsibilities, rights/duties and activities of service providers and, furthermore, establishes the means for dispute resolution. Therefore, equal access to public services is not recognised in any form in law e.g., guiding principle, commitment or similar in the relevant legal framework. The law also protects the freedom to provide information society services towards a party established outside the country. Restrictions may apply in certain cases, such as intellectual property rights, freedom of choice of law applicable to a contract, and others.

In July 2020, amendments to **the Law on Public Administration**² were approved and entered into force in November 2020. These amendments ensure legal precondition to a more effective provision of public and administrative services. This refers to a more equal access to services by different population groups.

1.2 National policy, strategy or action plan on the digitalisation of public services or digital inclusion

The principles of digitalisation of public services and digital inclusion are included into national policies, action plans, on (digital) public services mentioning equal access for all or specific groups (e.g. older persons or persons with disabilities).

¹ Law on Information Society Services (2006). (amended version of January 2020). Lithuanian Parliament (Seimas). Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.277491/xhYOZiqgJz>

² Law on Public Administration (1999). (Amended version of November 2022). Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.83679/vmXbvFEvOo>

In 2014, the **Information Society Development Programme 2014–2020**³ (Lithuanian Republic Digital Agenda) was approved (actual version of the programme as of 23 July 2019). The purpose of the programme is to define the priorities, objectives and tasks of information society development in order to maximise the advantages provided by information and communication technologies, primarily the internet as a very important instrument for economic, cultural and social activities. Indeed, the use of the internet allows people to provide or receive progressive eServices, work, access entertainment, communicate and freely express opinions. As a target group for improvement of necessary digital skills older persons are indicated in this programme. Other groups indicated in the document are persons with low income, disabilities or living in rural areas, and NEET youth (youth not in education, employment or training) youth. The document states that 26.3% of the population aged 65–74 in Lithuania used a computer, 26.1 % used the Internet in 2016 (in comparison to the EU average of 47% of the population in this age group used computers and 51 % used the Internet).

The Public Governance Improvement Programme 2012-2020 aimed to modernise digital services. With the support of ESF (European Social Fund), the Government established a national shared services centre in 2018. This centre was aimed in centralising the provision of human resources management (HRM) and accounting services to about 140 central level public administration institutions.

According to the **Public Governance Improvement 2012-2020 Programme 2019-2020 Implementation Action Plan**,⁴ a number of measures were implemented with regard to the quality of public services at both national and municipal levels, improving the monitoring and analysis system for public and administrative services and increasing the quality and availability of information on services as an increasing number of public and administrative services have been provided online during the last years. However, the issues of accessibility of particular population groups of digital public services (e.g. older persons) are not addressed in relevant legal documents.

On 10 March 2021, **Government programme implementation plan (2021-2024)**⁵ was adopted. It encompasses the development of a state data architecture, the implementation of a new stage of centralisation of state IT services, the creation of state information resources and digital transformation

³ Government of the Republic of Lithuania. (2019). Order on Approval of Information Society Development Programme 'Digital Agenda of the Republic of Lithuania' for 2014-2020, No. 244, 12-03-2014. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/a66c0760b04011e3bf53dc70cf7669d9/asr>

⁴ Lithuanian Ministry of the Interior. (2019). Order on Approval of the Implementation Action Plan for 2019-2020 under the Programme on Public Governance Improvement for 2012-2020. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/e147d990767e11e99ceae2890faa4193/asr>

⁵ Government of the Republic of Lithuania. Order on the Approval of the Implementation Plan of the Programme of the 18th Government of the Republic of Lithuania (2021). Available at: <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/d698ded086fe11eb9fecb5ecd3bd711c>

management mechanism, use of mandatory basic components (social and fundamental rights management, interoperability, classifications, metadata structures, functional requirements, opening, eServices, etc.); the development and implementation of a digital skills competency model in the civil service; the creation of conditions for businesses to create innovative technological solutions for consumers and convenient for them, as well as the promotion of transfer of provision of public services to business. The current 18th Lithuanian government⁶ is also proposing a new model for managing and using State data. The data currently in the information systems of different institutions is difficult to access, the integration is still difficult to create favourable conditions for joint management of state data, to simplify access.

1.3 National recovery and resilience plans covering the digitalisation of public services

In 2020, the Lithuanian Government approved **the National Progress Plan 2021–2030**⁷. The plan aims to increase the availability of digital services and ensure the population's ability to use such services. The plan aims to identify the main changes to be achieved in the country in the next decade, ensure progress in the social, economic, environmental and security fields, and mobilise the sources of financing for the implementation of these changes. The plan sets out long-term strategic goals, progress targets and quantified indicators to measure progress with targets for 2030. The strategic goals are implemented under three horizontal principles: innovation (creativity), sustainable development and equal opportunities for all (a special indicator is foreseen on the quality of life of persons with disabilities). Within the plan, specific indicators are foreseen for persons with disabilities. These are related to an increase in physical and information accessibility, increase the wellbeing of people with disabilities, the older persons and other vulnerable and socially excluded groups; reduction in poverty, increase in the number of persons with disabilities in employment, increase in the number of children with disabilities in inclusive education settings, etc.

⁶ The Government Offers a New Data Management and Storage Plan. Chancellery of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania. Available at: <https://lrvk.lrv.lt/lt/naujienos/vyriausybe-siulo-nauja-valstybes-duomenu-valdymo-ir-naudojimo-modeli>

The National Progress Plan for 2021-2030 (2020). Government of the Republic of Lithuania. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/c1259440f7dd11eab72ddb4a109da1b5?jfwid=32wf90sn>

2 Programmes and practices aimed at ensuring equal access to public services in the digital age

In the framework of the project **“Change in Business, Public Sector and Society - New Standards for Reducing Discrimination”**, the Office of the Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson (OEEO) together with partners, in 2018 prepared a **guide titled “Internet for All: A Guide to the Development of Accessible Digital Information**⁸ (Contract No. 07. 3. 4-ESFA-V-426-01-0001). This guide is aimed to provide comprehensive information on how to provide information online that could be equally accessible to different population groups (older persons, disabled, etc.). There is a lack of comprehensive research about the accessibility of websites and other digital services and products in Lithuania. The guidelines provided in the guide are intended for professionals who supervise and create web content. The guidelines provide information on how to meet websites (or apps) the needs of all users. Recommendations created not only for the web content creators, but also content programmers and testers. This guide will help to formulate specific tasks or requirements for specialists in other fields and find links to standards to be followed by developers and testers of digital products.

3 Research and data focused on equal access to public services in the digital age

Approximately 60% of Lithuanians are now using digital public and administrative services. For the modernisation of public services provision, Lithuania is actively using EU structural funds. A recent study by the Department of Statistics⁹ on the use of digital technologies in households revealed that technologies that the so-called digital divide among older people is slightly narrowing. In comparison to 2012, internet use among people aged 65-74 has risen from 6% in 2012 and reached 46 % 2019. The survey shows that 33 % of them use the internet on a daily basis. In addition, more and more older people are browsing online more than once a day (in comparison to 2019 about 20 % two years ago, this figure rose to 24 % in 2021). The findings from the recent research also indicated that

⁸ Office of the Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson. (2018). Internet for All: Guidelines on Preparing Digital Information. Available at: <https://lygybe.lt/data/public/uploads/2018/12/prieinamos-informacijos-rengimo-vadovas-versija-internetui.pdf>

⁹ Lithuanian Statistics 2020. Digital economy and society in Lithuania. Available at: <https://lygybe.lt/data/public/uploads/2018/12/prieinamos-informacijos-rengimo-vadovas-versija-internetui.pdf>

the digital divide is more frequent among older persons and rural inhabitants (Šuminas et al 2018).

In 2021, the Office of the Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson¹⁰ received 41 complaints, and 52 inquiries, initiated 4 investigations at the initiative of the Ombudsman and provided 42 telephone consultations on possible age discrimination. The data indicating exact number related to discrimination on the ground of old age in the context of access to public services are not available. If there was no complaint in this context or data are not available, please state that as well. The Office's Facebook account also received 17 inquiries about possible age discrimination. The number of complaints and inquiries into age discrimination remained broadly the same as in 2020, but the number of written or telephone consultations fell slightly.

In 2021, a similar number of women and men complained to the Office of the Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson about possible age discrimination, with 17 complaints from women and 19 from men. In 2021 the largest part of enquires was held on employment discrimination, with 38% of all inquiries being age-based. Inquiries on discrimination in the activities of state and municipal institutions and bodies accounted for 29% of all surveys on the basis of age, and 22% of all surveys on the basis of age in the field of consumer protection.

Example No 1

One of investigations was related to the compensation provided by the Environmental Project Management Agency of the Ministry of Environment of the Republic of Lithuania for the utilization of polluting cars when purchasing a less polluting vehicle. According to the Minister of Environment of the Republic of Lithuania 2019 October 11 by order no. D1-605 "Description of the Procedure for Promoting Compensatory Payments for the Acquisition of Less Polluting Mobility Equipment for Individuals of the Climate Change Program" the application for compensation can only be submitted electronically. The applicant stated that due to his age (he was 86 years old at the time of the complaint) he could not use electronic systems and did not have access to e-mail and did not use the electronic banking systems. According to Eurostat data, the older a person, the higher the percentage of those who have never used a computer (for example, more than 60 % of people aged 65-74 in Lithuania have never used a computer); older people are also less likely to use the internet, less likely to use e-mail or banking systems (just over 30% of people aged 65-74 in the EU use e-banking).

The Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson controller acknowledged that in the decision that by not allowing access to services provided by other means (not electronic), older persons are indirectly discriminated against, that is, they face barriers to using common systems that actually make it more difficult to access the services provided. The decision was addressed to the Ministry of the Environment and it was proposed to change the provisions of the description of

¹⁰ Annual Report (2021). Office of the Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson. Available at: <https://www.lygybe.lt/lt/metines-ataskaitos>

the procedure, allowing the submission of applications for compensation in other (non-electronic) ways, for example, upon arrival at the Environmental Project Management Agency or similar.

The Ministry of the Environment informed that it had changed the text of the call for compensation claims, which clearly states that individuals may come to submit applications in person to the Environmental Project Management Agency, but the provisions of the description of the procedure have not been changed.¹¹

Example No 2

The Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson office¹² received an inquiry by a retired person related to e-services at grocery store Lidl Lietuva". The person has indicated that he does not use a smartphone and therefore does not have the opportunity to purchase goods cheaper in Lidl grocery stores, as discount is offered only with the *Lidl Plus app*. To get discounts and other benefits, individuals need to have a smartphone with internet access. The decision of the Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson acknowledged that, although retirees, like others, are eligible to download the *Lidl Plus app*. Older people have been found to be indirectly discriminated against on the grounds of age and face additional barriers to accessing more affordable goods. The decision was addressed to "Lidl Lietuva" and it was suggested to consider the possibility of extending the terms of use of the *Lidl Plus app* in order to ensure equal rights for all customers, regardless their age. "Lidl Lietuva did not agree with the decision of the controller and refused to make changes. It should be noted that other persons also complained about the unavailability of Lidl services using the *Lidl Plus* discount app. However, inquiries will be refused if a repeated complaint is lodged on the same subject matter which has already been examined unless new circumstances or new facts are presented.

¹¹ Annual Report (2021). Office of the Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson. Available at: <https://www.lygybe.lt/lt/metines-ataskaitos>

¹² Annual Report (2021). Office of the Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson. Available at: <https://www.lygybe.lt/lt/metines-ataskaitos>

4 State of digitalisation of selected public services

		Selected public services relevant for older persons			
		Access to health records	Public statutory pensions	Social benefits	Other (as relevant in your context)
Stage of digitalisation	Not digitalised (Y/N)	N	Y	Y	
	Information is available online (Y/N)	Y	Y	Y	
	Transactions are possible online (Y/N)	Y	Y	Y	
Recognition of groups at risk of digital exclusion	Service specific regulation recognises barriers to digital inclusion / vulnerable and disadvantaged groups (Y/N).	N	N	N	
	If yes , please list the barriers and groups that are mentioned.				
Multichannel access options	Telephone service (Y/N) If yes , please describe what kind of personalised services it provides.	Y Provides access to all relevant information, also provides consultations.	Y Provides access to all relevant information, also provides consultations.	Y Provides access to all relevant information, also provides consultations.	
	Physical administrative access points (Y/N). If yes , please specify the level of availability (local, regional, national), the opening days and hours.	Access of eHealth records – is possible through a general practitioner at a local level. Local or regional Social Insurance Fund Board territorial offices, Monday to Friday 8-20 p.m.	Local or regional Social Insurance Fund Board territorial offices, Monday to Friday 8-17 p.m.	Local or regional Social Insurance Fund Board territorial offices, Monday to Friday 8-17 p.m.	

	<p>Specific locations that facilitate offline access to the service (Y/N)</p> <p>If yes, indicate the location(s).</p> <p>Please describe what kind of support is provided.</p>	<p>N</p> <p>Access of eHealth records –is possible through a general practitioner at a local level. Local or regional Social Insurance Fund Board territorial offices, Monday to Friday 8-17 p.m.</p>	<p>N</p> <p>Local governments (seniunijos) offices Monday to Friday 8-17 p.m.</p>	<p>Local governments (seniunijos) offices Monday to Friday 8-17 p.m.</p>	
	<p>Specific locations that facilitate online access to the service (Y/N).</p> <p>If yes, indicate the location(s).</p> <p>Please describe what kind of support is provided.</p>	<p>N</p>	<p>N</p>	<p>N</p>	
	<p>Other – please indicate any other access channels to the service.</p>	<p>No other channels to the service</p>	<p>No other channels to the service</p>	<p>No other channels to the service</p>	
<p>Other forms of support for online use</p>	<p>Please indicate any other form of support to facilitate the use of the online service for older persons such as easy-to-read versions, different language versions, etc.</p>	<p>Website version for persons with disabilities, providing easy read version</p>	<p>Website version for persons with disabilities, providing easy read version</p>	<p>Website version for persons with disabilities, providing easy read version</p>	