

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

Estonia

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I. LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

1. National legislation on digital public administration

Estonian law does not foresee a specific right to equal access to public services, whether digital or not, however such right stems from Article 12 of Estonian Constitution (*Põhiseadus*), which sets forth the right to equal treatment¹, as well as Equal Treatment Act (*Võrdse kohtlemise seadus*), which lays out the obligation to protect all persons against discrimination on grounds of nationality (ethnic origin), race, colour, religion or other beliefs, age, disability or sexual orientation². In Estonian national context it is quite hard to focus on public services that are “undergoing digital transformation” because majority of the relevant public services have been fully digitalised almost a decade ago. Access to such services is of course dependent on internet connectivity and availability of devices, also it should be ensured that the service remain available and functional offline.

Estonian legislation prescribes an obligation for all public web service providers to ensure equal accessibility standards that facilitate the user experience for all groups. The general obligation for all public authorities maintaining a website or mobile application to ensure accessibility is set forth in Public Information Act (*Avaliku Teabe Seadus*) §32(1)³. The technical requirements are further elaborated on in the Regulation on the requirements for the accessibility of websites and mobile applications, and the rules for publishing information describing accessibility (*Veebilehe ja mobiilirakenduse ligipääsetavuse nõuded ning ligipääsetavust kirjeldava teabe avaldamise kord*)⁴ issued by the Minister of Entrepreneurship and Information Technology (*Ettevõtlus- ja infotehnoloogiaminister*) in March 2019. The regulation refers to European standard EN 301 549 V2.1.2 (2018-08) as the basis for evaluating the accessibility of a particular service. Although the European standard is designed to cover the specific needs people with disabilities, many of its criteria apply also to providing equal access to older service users. The regulation does not specifically mention any demographic group that is perceived to be at a particularly high risk of digital exclusion, nor does it elaborate on the measures that need to be taken in order to safeguard equal access rights.

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

As most of the relevant public services have been digitalised almost a decade ago, there is no action plan that would cover these issues for the ongoing period. At the time of the first wave of digitalization, there were no specific development plans or strategies in force nor were there

¹ Estonia, [Constitution of the Republic of Estonia \(*Põhiseadus*\)](#), §12, 3 July 1992.

² Estonia, [Equal Treatment Act \(*Võrdse kohtlemise seadus*\)](#), 1 January 2009.

³ Estonia, [Public Information Act \(*Avaliku Teabe Seadus*\)](#), §32(1)6, 21 March 2022.

⁴ Estonia, [Regulation on the Requirements for the accessibility of websites and mobile applications, and the rules for publishing information describing accessibility \(*Veebilehe ja mobiilirakenduse ligipääsetavuse nõuded ning ligipääsetavust kirjeldava teabe avaldamise kord*\)](#), 8 March 2019.

any guidelines or other documents that would, among other issues, address access rights in general or from the viewpoint of any particular user group.

The current Digital Society Development Plan 2030 (*Digiühiskonna arengukava 2030*) mentions that increasing the accessibility of digital public service would contribute to the over-all cohesion and inclusiveness of Estonian society, it specifically mentions the needs of people with low to moderate technical skills, special needs or migrant background⁵. Furthermore, the development plan emphasizes the importance of inclusive design and accessible public space not only in physical, but also in digital architecture⁶. The development plan does not lay out any specific measures of attaining greater accessibility. As for internet access, the Development Plan highlights the need to improve the availability of fixed broadband subscriptions in rural areas⁷.

3. National recovery and resilience plan

National Recovery and Resilience Plan (*Riiklik taaste- ja vastupidavuskava*), highlights that since currently the available public e-services are not always foreseeable and event-driven, a wide-scale reform is needed⁸. It does not explicitly highlight any specific aspect related to equal access or technical accessibility (such as groups at risk of digital exclusion or concrete technical measures etc.) but emphasizes that all services should be available for users at the moment they need them and all data should ideally be seamlessly shared between different databases, so that the users will not need to fill essentially identical forms on different occasions⁹. The envisaged reform encompasses a thorough fundamental rights and data protection impact assessment¹⁰. The development plan mainly addresses accessibility in the context of physical infrastructure, however it mentions also that in the near future it is “highly important to guarantee that also any digital environment that will be created is in line with the up-to-date principles of accessibility.”¹¹ In connection to the broader concept of accessibility that encompasses both the physical and digital space, the plan mentions the older people and people with disabilities as two groups whose specific needs have to be reflected in all accessibility measures¹². It, however, does not proceed to describe any planned measures in more detail.

II. PROGRAMMES AND PRACTICES

As part of the programme aimed at strengthening advocacy initiatives for the elderly, the Ministry of Social Affairs (*Sotsiaalministeerium*), in cooperation with Tallinn University (*Tallinna Ülikool*) and NGO Golden League (*MTÜ Kuldliiga*), has created a course teaching digital mentorship skills to those who wish to support older people in using digital services,

⁵ Estonia, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications (*Majandus- ja Kommunikatsiooniministeerium*) (2021), [Digital Society Development Plan 2030 \(*Digiühiskonna arengukava 2030*\)](#), 23 December 2021.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 4, 56.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p 36.

⁸ Estonia, The Government of Estonia (2021), National Recovery and Resilience Plan ([Riiklik taaste- ja vastupidavuskava](#)), p 167.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p 168.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp 8, 55.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp 55, 56.

websites and applications. The programme kicked off in 2018 and is ongoing to date. Target groups include but are not limited to caretakers, relatives, librarians and social workers. The objectives and outputs of the course encompass acquiring knowledge of the specific needs of older people in navigating the digital sphere, and also the learning and teaching methods that have proven successful among older learners, the course also includes a module dedicated to public e-services.¹³ In addition, the Central Library of Tallinn offers a training programme titled Digismart Seniors (*Seeniorid digitargaks*), where older people can gain skills in using computers, the internet and digital public services. The course is free of charge and can be held both virtually through Skype and on-site.¹⁴

III. RESEARCH AND DATA

1. Number of complaints

According to the research published by the Consumer Protection and Technical Regulatory Authority (*Tarbijakaitse ja Tehnilise Järelevalve Amet*) in 2021, it had not received any thematic complaints after it was granted supervisory authority over all matters relating to accessibility in 2019. The report also mentions that the same applies to the previous supervisory body, the Data Protection Inspectorate (*Andmekaitse Inspektsioon*).¹⁵ Neither the Equal Treatment Commissioner (*Võrdse kohtlemise volinik*) nor the Chancellor of Justice (*Õiguskantsler*) have received any complaints related to discrimination on the grounds of old age in the context of access to public services during the reference period¹⁶.

2. Research

The above-referred report assesses the accessibility of the most important digital environments of the Estonian public sector, some of them more relevant to the present request, some, like for instance, municipal public transportation websites less so. The inspected digital environments specifically linked to health records, public statutory pensions and social benefits were the government gate-portal eesti.ee and the websites of health and social insurance boards. The first constitutes a centralized gateway to all digitalized public services, the latter two provide information on and access links to some of the services. The patient portal digilugu.ee was not part of the sample, although it is the environment for some of the key services for the older people, such as appointment reservations, access to one's own medical case history and prescriptions. Among the studied digital environments eesti.ee scored the lowest on the accessibility criteria, which were based on World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) Web Accessibility Initiative's (WAI) Web Content Accessibility Guidelines. According to WAI's homepage "[the Guidelines] define how to make Web content more accessible to people with

¹³ Tallinn University (*Tallinna Ülikool*) (2020), Digital mentorship for older people (*Vanemaealiste digimentorlus*).

¹⁴ Tallinn Central Library (*Tallinna Keskraamatukogu*) (2019), [Training programme Digismart Seniors](#).

¹⁵ Consumer Protection and Technical Regulatory Authority (*Tarbijakaitse ja Tehnilise Järelevalve Amet*) (2021), Report on Digital Accessibility of the Estonian Public Sector in 2021 ([Eesti avaliku sektori digiligipäätavus aastal 2021](#)), p 43.

¹⁶ Estonia, Equal Treatment Commissioner (*Võrdse kohtlemise volinik*), Correspondence of 17 June 2022; Estonia, Chancellor of Justice (*Õiguskantsler*), correspondence of 17 June 2022.

disabilities. Accessibility involves a wide range of disabilities, including visual, auditory, physical, speech, cognitive, language, learning, and neurological disabilities. Although these guidelines cover a wide range of issues, they are not able to address the needs of people with all types, degrees, and combinations of disability. These guidelines also make Web content more usable by older individuals with changing abilities due to aging and often improve usability for users in general.”¹⁷ The guidelines consist of a set of technical standards that developers, designers and site owners should align with in order to ensure the four principles of web accessibility: perceivability, operability, understandability, and robustness.¹⁸

The most problematic features were recurrent links without text alternatives and the clipping of content when pages were resized¹⁹. The tests were carried out by independent professional testers and also automatically, using the Siteimprove software.

A Bachelor’s thesis defended in the University of Tartu in 2018 focused on the user experience of the older users of the patient portal digilugu.ee. The sample consisted of five senior citizens (65+ years of age) with varying experiences of using computers. While no conclusions can be drawn from a study of such a small scale, all the participants reported difficulties in understanding when an operation is finalized, what kind of content is related to a specific tab and how to navigate backwards. As a result they faced problems in accessing their medical records and appointing official representatives for the purpose of picking up prescription medications from pharmacies. The thesis concludes that there is a demonstrated need for a wider scale national level survey that maps the current shortcomings of accessibility and usability of e-services from the perspective of older users. It further stresses that any such study should involve testers, who represent the target group.²⁰

State institutions, NGO-s and academia have not published research that focuses on network access, availability and affordability of devices or the continuous maintenance of on-site services.

¹⁷ World Wide Web Consortium Web Accessibility Guidelines (2021), [WCAG 2.1 Overview](#).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Kungla, M. (2018), Usability of the Estonian Patient Portal among Older Users ([Patsiendiportaali kasutatavuse uuring eakate näitel](#)), University of Tartu (*Tartu Ülikool*).

IV. 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	N	N	
	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.	N	N	N	
	Physical administrative access points (Y/N). If yes , please specify the level of availability (local, regional, national), the opening days and hours.	Local, Mon-Fri 9.00-17.00	Local, Mon-Fri 9.00-17.00	Local, Mon-Fri 9.00-17.00	
	Specific locations that facilitate offline access to the service (Y/N) If yes , indicate the location(s). Please describe what kind of support is provided.	N	N	N	
	Specific locations that facilitate online access to the service (Y/N). If yes , indicate the location(s). Please describe what kind of support is provided.	Y, Local libraries, general support in using various digital services, not custom-tailored to any specific service	Y, Local libraries, general support in using various digital services, not custom-tailored to any specific service	Y, Local libraries, general support in using various digital services, not custom-tailored to any specific service	
	Other – please indicate any other access channels to the service.				
Other forms of support for online use	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.	Easy-to-read, resizing and customisation, compatible with various screen readers	Easy-to-read, resizing and customisation, compatible with various screen readers	Easy-to-read, resizing and customisation, compatible with various screen readers	