



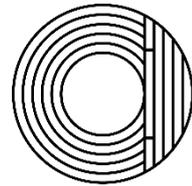
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TAVS ATBALSTS



anthropos

Research report of the “Without restrictions” project

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Recommendations

1. Provide more direct ways for young people with mobility disabilities¹ to participate in the stages of planning, development and implementation of services and infrastructure through steering committees, focus groups and other youth-friendly activities.
2. Improve accessibility of youth-oriented activities and facilities at a local, municipal level through making sure that built infrastructure is maintained and repaired in a timely manner.
3. Facilitate the accessibility of public transport, including international travel in order to improve the mobility of young people.
4. Improve information accessibility online by establishing clear guidelines of what kind of information must be provided on the home pages of facilities and services, including information about accessibility, for example, maps.
5. The compliance of the accessibility measures should be checked, according to the researchers and co-researchers of this project, either by people with disabilities, or by professionals trained to evaluate the real accessibility of the measures.
6. Principles of universal design should be applied in order to ensure accessibility of buildings and places to fulfil social, cultural, economic needs and desires of young people to participate fully.
7. Provide information about accessibility in the physical environment in a detailed manner, for example, with posters or signs detailing where to enter the building if you have mobility challenges.

¹ We recognise that there is an ongoing debate about the terms used in relation to people with disabilities. In this report, we use the term “mobility disability” due to our focus on the experiences of young people who have long-term mobility issues.

Introduction

About the project

“Without restrictions” is a project of the Latvian foundation “Fonds “Tavs Atbalsts”” and the Lithuanian Organisation for Applied Anthropology “Anthropos”, in which young people with physical disabilities participate in research. The project runs from February 2024 to July 2025. It is co-funded by the European Union under the Erasmus+ Small Scale Partnership.

Project objectives:

1. to equip youth workers working with young people with mobility disabilities with a new method to find out and understand their needs, wishes, and opinions on various issues;
2. to conduct research deepen the understanding of the needs and wishes of young people with mobility disabilities, in order to promote their inclusion in youth work;
3. to give the opportunity to youth leaders with mobility disabilities to participate in the research themselves and learn valuable and useful skills for life;
4. to identify stereotypes that hinder the inclusion of young people with mobility disabilities in youth activities;
5. to identify good practice examples of partner organizations countries in working with young people with mobility disabilities;
6. to develop recommendations for youth workers to challenge stereotypes about working with mentioned young people.

The project’s objectives are based on two main principles:

1. capacity building of partner organisations through international projects focusing on young people with disabilities;
2. to strengthen the capacity of young people with disabilities in both countries to represent themselves by involving them in the development of a research project to document and articulate the experiences of young people with disabilities.

This document is the report of the research part of the project. It aims to strengthen the capacity of young people with disabilities in both countries to represent themselves by involving them in the development of a study to document and articulate the experiences of young people with disabilities. The report includes the social and legislative context in Latvia and Lithuania, the methods used for data collection, the approach to data analysis, the data analysis, conclusions and recommendations.

The framework and methodology to carry out the research was proposed by the anthropologists involved in this project. However, among the goals of the project was involving the participants and having them become co-researchers, actively participating not only in providing the data but also in the stages of coding and analysis as well as the final stage of sharing the results of the research in the form of an exhibition. Such intensive involvement was possible due to continuous discussion throughout the project, facilitated by the researchers in Lithuania and Latvia. In the framework of this project, two meetings (in Riga and Vilnius) took place, both aimed at introducing the co-researchers to the fundamentals of qualitative research, the method of photovoice in anthropology, composition and production of photography, ethics, fundamentals of qualitative data coding, and so forth. This report is written by the anthropologists involved in this project. However, before its finalization, it has been read and commented upon by some of the co-researchers, making some changes according to their suggestions and comments.

Research questions

The initial aim of the project and the study was not only to focus on the accessibility of the environment, but also to describe the stereotypes that young people with disabilities face in their daily lives. However, as the research progressed, allowing the participants to give their views on the topic and trying to focus on what is important to the young people themselves, accessibility emerged as a central issue. Discrimination and stereotypes are not directly described here, as they are experienced and lived by young people through different prisms, of which infrastructure, environment and accessibility remain the focus this time. How the environment is designed, which places are accessible for young people and which are not, the ways in which accessibility is ensured, show how young people are perceived in the wider society, as well as the stereotypes of what a young person with disabilities needs and is interested in.

The main research question was discussed and defined collectively, by researchers and co-researchers. It has been formulated in the following way: What are the ways **disability** and **discrimination** is experienced by young people in contemporary Latvia and Lithuania?

- What are the **differences** between two countries?
- What **challenges** to accessibility are most pressing?
- What are the best **improvements** and **solutions**?

Context

In the context of this research we rely on the definitions provided by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) which stipulates that signing countries will strive to “[...] enable persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems, and to other facilities and services open or provided to the public, both in urban and in rural areas.”² In line with this, we define accessibility as a widely defined right, without limiting it to only state institutions but also recognising the right of people with disabilities to access public spaces while defining access as the ability to live independently and participate fully.

Legislation in Lithuania

In general, the Lithuanian legislation regarding persons with disabilities is built following the international guidelines, as since 27th May 2010 Lithuania has ratified the 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Convention states that accessibility includes the physical environment, means of transportation, information and connectivities as well as services. Furthermore, as a member state of the European Union (EU), Lithuania must adhere to the regulations and directives adopted by the European Parliament.

On the 9th of September 2020, Lithuanian Government approved the “National Progress Plan 2021-2030”.³ In correspondence to the task related to the implementation of accessible environment, the Ministry of Social Security and Labour (further on – the Ministry) drew up a Programme for the Development of an Environment Accessible for People with Disabilities (*Neįgaliesiems tinkamos aplinkos visose gyvenimo srityse plėtros programa*)⁴ (further on – Programme). In one of the documents that contextualise⁵ the need for such programme, the Ministry notes that while the overall level of poverty and social exclusion in Lithuania in 2020 was 24,8% (according to the EUROBAROMETER data), the level of poverty and social exclusion among the persons with disability amounted to 43%.⁶ A conclusion is drawn, in the document, that this level of exclusion is connected to the lack of accessibility in terms of both physical and informational environments: “Inaccessible physical and information environments limit disabled people’s access to education and their ability to participate in the labour market and the country’s social and public life. The lower educational opportunities of persons with disabilities also lead to lower employability or to lower paid jobs, which results in high levels of poverty risk or social exclusion of persons with disabilities.”⁷

² Available: <https://likumi.lv/ta/lv/starptautiskie-likumi/id/1630> (accessed on 18.03.2025.)

³ Available: <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/d492e050f7dd11eaa12ad7c04a383ca0> (accessed on 15.10.2024.)

⁴ Available: <https://socmin.lrv.lt/lt/veiklos-srityys/strateginis-valdymas/aktualus-strateginiai-dokumentai/pletros-programu-pazangos-priemones/neigaliesiems-tinkamos-aplinkos-visose-gyvenimo-srityse-pletros-programos-priemones/> (accessed on 15.10.2024.)

⁵ Available: <https://socmin.lrv.lt/uploads/socmin/documents/files/veiklos-srityys/Strateginis%20valdymas/Neigaliuju%20PP/informacijos%20prieinamumas/PPP%20apra%C5%A1o%20pagrindimo%20forma%20.docx> (accessed on 16.10.2024.)

⁶ According to the “Poverty and Social Exclusion of Persons with Disabilities”, published by European Disability Forum in 2020. Available: <https://bit.ly/32s17Cl> (accessed on 16.10.2024.)

⁷ However, even having a higher education degree doesn't guarantee employability due to discriminatory practices during job interviews, as one of our co-researchers with a current experience of looking for employment shared commenting on this document: “I almost got blamed directly for not telling about my disability prior to going for an interview in person, even though my disability in no way affects my ability to fulfill

Accessibility of physical environment in Lithuania is regulated by the following:

- Law on Construction of the Republic of Lithuania, 19th of March 1996, No. I-1240;⁸
- Law on Social Integration of Persons with Disabilities of the Republic of Lithuania, 28th of November 1991, No. I-2044;⁹
- Technical regulations for construction, approved by Orders of the Minister of Environment of the Republic of Lithuania.¹⁰

However, the documents contextualizing the need for the Programme state that the existing regulation is often contradictory,¹¹ which results in a number of buildings not complying with the accessibility requirements. The documents also show that the accessibility index of the physical infrastructure in Lithuania was 30% in 2019, while it reached 43.55% in 2020. However, the breakdown of these figures should be taken into account. Research conducted on behalf of the Ministry in 2017-2019 shows that in 2018, only 19% of health care institutions subject to the research were fully accessible; in 2018, 66.6% of centres providing social assistance, 32% of NGOs providing social assistance, 18.3% of social support departments and 4.5% of senior citizens' homes were fully accessible to persons with disabilities; in 2019, only 20% of higher education or vocational training institutions were accessible; in 2019, 885 persons with disabilities were queuing for housing accessibility measures, whereas in 2020, 992 persons were queuing (the report states that the number of persons queuing is increasing every year). Access to cultural facilities was found to be extremely limited, with only 16.6% of facilities being fully accessible, meaning that both the grounds and the buildings are fully accessible to people with disabilities. The documents state that the aim of the programme is to increase the index of infrastructure accessibility to 70% by the year 2030 (more than double from 2019).

The slow pace of change – both in legislation, its implementation and regulation – is responded to by community-led actions by groups of people with disabilities. One such group is the Facebook group *Aplinkos prieinamumo teisinių reguliavimų* (Legal Framework for Environmental Accessibility), which aims to discuss, evaluate, revise and comment on various regulations on different accessibility measures. Some of the group's members are involved in this activity at municipal level in different cities, and some of them organise actions such as monitoring the compliance of outdoor terraces built by cafes and restaurants. In cases where the structures are inaccessible, the municipal authorities are informed and asked to follow up.

Access and accessibility of transportation in Lithuania is regulated by the regulations of the EU:

- Regulation (EC) No. 1107/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 concerning the rights of disabled persons and persons with reduced mobility when travelling by air (Text with EEA relevance);¹²

the role. And I only started being invited to at least some interviews removing the info about disability from my CV.”

⁸ Available: <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.F31E79DEC55D> (accessed on 13.10.2024.)

⁹ Available: <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.199156E4E004> (accessed on 13.10.2024.)

¹⁰ Available: <https://vtpsi.lrv.lt/lt/teisine-informacija/teises-aktai-2/statybos-techniniai-reglamentai/> (accessed on 13.10.2024.)

¹¹ Available: <https://socmin.lrv.lt/uploads/socmin/documents/files/veiklos-sritys/Strateginis%20valdymas/Neigaliuju%20PPP/Infrastrukturos%20priemone/PPP%20apra%C5%A1o%20pagrindimo%20forma%20virtinimui.docx> (accessed on 16.10.2024.)

¹² Available: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/lt/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32006R1107> (accessed on 13.10.2024.)

- Regulation (EC) No. 1371/2007 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 October 2007 on rail passengers' rights and obligations;¹³
- Regulation (EU) No. 1177/2010 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 November 2010 concerning the rights of passengers when travelling by sea and inland waterway and amending Regulation (EC) No. 2006/2004 Text with EEA relevance;¹⁴
- Regulation (EU) No. 181/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 February 2011 concerning the rights of passengers in bus and coach transport and amending Regulation (EC) No. 2006/2004 Text with EEA relevance.¹⁵

In 2020, a study has been carried out by the National Institute of Social Integration on behalf of the Department of Persons with Disabilities at the Ministry of Social Security and Labor, aimed at analysing the efficiency and accessibility of transportation services for the persons with disabilities.¹⁶ The study identified that there is no one unifying legislative document that would regulate different issues related to the accessibility of transportation, and there is a lack of trans-institutional collaboration that would help addressing the issues of accessibility. This results in uneven deployment of strategies and the means required to make transportation measures more accessible: according to the study, each municipality is left to their own devices when it comes to regulating, for example, bus connections between the cities. As we notice in the section "Challenges" of this report, hence 4 years after the study mentioned, bus connection between the cities remains a challenge to people with mobility disabilities. The study identified that although international regulation is meant to be followed in order to regulate access to the means of transportation within and outside of the cities, due to lack of resources or lack of preparation some requirements remain unimplemented. Additionally, the study identified that there is neither a mechanism to actually evaluate the state of accessibility of the means and services of transportation because calculating the number of low-rise buses and trolleys does not give an accurate understanding of how many of them have the lift mechanism, and many are not equipped with it. Among a number of other issues found by the analyst of the study was the lack of the plan for a sustainable mobility system, meaning that although there are more accessible vehicles in public transport circulation, the lack of accessible infrastructure to get to bus stops precludes people with mobility disabilities from using them.

Accessibility of services as of 2025 is to be regulated by the European directive 2019/882, adopted on 17 April 2019¹⁷, also known as European Accessibility Act (further – Act), note the authors of the Report which assessed the results of integration of persons with disability and the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Lithuania over 2020 (Grigaitė, Jurevičiūtė, Laugalytė, 2021). This directive defines the minimum requirements for accessibility as well as aims at ensuring the uniformity of accessibility measures throughout the EU member states. Among the measures, products and services that fall under the requirements of this directive are ATMs, computers and software, smart devices, banking services, e-books, public transport services and ticketing services, emergency services, unified by the universal number 112 and so forth. Until present, ticketing concessions and access to private and public services in Lithuania are regulated by the following laws and recommendations:

¹³ Available: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32007R1371> (accessed on 13.10.2024.)

¹⁴ Available: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32010R1177> (accessed on 13.10.2024.)

¹⁵ Available: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32011R0181> (accessed on 13.10.2024.)

¹⁶ Available: <https://www.ndt.lt/wp-content/uploads/Transporto-paslaugu%CC%A8-pakankamumo-ir-efektyvumo-studija.pdf> (accessed on 19.10.2024.)

¹⁷ Available: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32019L0882> (accessed on 15.10.2024.)

- Law on Transport Concessions of the Republic of Lithuania, 30th of March 2000, No. VII-1605;¹⁸
- Recommendations on services for people with disabilities in the public and private service sectors, 31st of December 2012, No. V-37.

States members of the European Union were required to release local regulations that would ensure adherence to the Act. Aforementioned “National Progress Plan 2021-2030” and the aforementioned Programme for the Development of an Environment Accessible for People with Disabilities are part of these new regulatory measures.

As of the year 2024 there is a reform taking place that is redefining the concept and assessment of disability. As is explained in the webpage of the Ministry of Social Security and Labour, up to this reform, the notions of disability followed the medical paradigm. That meant that in evaluating the need for assistance the aspects that mattered most were those of physical health which sometimes led to evaluating some forms of disability as light although the persons with it needed a high level of assistance. After the reform, the Ministry of Social Security and Labour informs, disability is to be assessed according to individual needs, taking into account the mobility, level of social and physical self-sufficiency and other aspects. What is to be assessed is if the person has a need for technical means, work or personal assistant, accessibility measures in their home, social services, mobility services etc.

Legislation in Latvia

Similarly to legislation in Lithuania, in Latvia legislation concerning people with disabilities also follows the Convention and EU directives. The Convention which was ratified on 1st of March 2010. Following that since the 1st of January 2011 the main law in regards to people with disabilities in Latvia is Disability Law.

Accessibility of physical environment in Latvia is regulated by the following:

- Disability Law of the Republic of Latvia, 20th of May 2010;¹⁹
- Construction Law of the Republic of Latvia, 9th of July 2013.²⁰

In addition to accessibility requirements in construction regulation Ministry of Welfare invites construction specialists to follow Environmental Accessibility Guidelines for Public Buildings and Spaces and Public Outdoor Space created by Latvian People with Special Needs Cooperation Organization “SUSTENTO” (Latvijas Cilvēku ar īpašām vajadzībām sadarbības organizācija “SUSTENTO”) which is based on principles of universal design and provides detailed list of requirements and recommendations.²¹

However, overall, the legislation related to environmental accessibility and its implementation lacks determination. The report on accessibility self-assessment in state and municipal institutions showed that only 8% of these buildings are accessible, 26% are partially accessible, and 66% are inaccessible. Of all the state and municipal buildings in Latvia, the Riga region has the most accessible buildings. Partial environment accessibility is provided in health care and state defence institutions, culture and sports facilities, and municipal information and client service centres. Low level of accessibility is noted in municipal educational, governance, and cultural institutions.

¹⁸ Available: <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.033D686E8F1B> (accessed on 13.10.2024.)

¹⁹ Available: <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/211494-invaliditates-likums> (accessed on 02.03.2025.)

²⁰ Available: <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/258572-buvniecibas-likums> (accessed on 02.03.2025.)

²¹ Available: https://www.lm.gov.lv/sites/lm/files/data_content/pieejamiba_12042018_lm_vadlinijas1.pdf (accessed on 18.03.2025.)

(Blumberga, 2021) In the 2022 alternative report on the implementation of the Convention²², the Ombudsman of the Republic of Latvia noted that the minimal accessibility requirements in regulations include many exceptions, training of the involved parties is irregular, and there is no centralised, efficient supervisory mechanism which delays meaningful improvements in accessibility for people with disabilities.

Among NGOs that promote the idea of accessible cities are Association of People with Disabilities and their Friends “Apeirons” and Association “City for People”. Association “Apeirons” is a well-established NGO that advocates for people with disabilities and offers consultations, audits and monitoring of environment accessibility for the public and private sector. Association “City for People” whose mission is to “promote safe, comfortable, and fast travel whether you walk, cycle, drive, or use public transportation”.²³ Even though the association doesn’t include a focus on people with disabilities in their mission statement some of their initiatives also include people with disabilities.²⁴

Access and accessibility of transportation in Latvia is regulated by:

- Regulation regarding fare concessions, 22nd of June 2021, No. 414;²⁵
- Order of providing and using of public transportation services, 28th of August 2012, No. 599;²⁶
- Law on Social Services and Social Assistance, 31st of October 2002.²⁷

Minors, as well as young people who are continuing their formal education till the age of 24, and one accompanying person are exempt from paying the fare for the intracity or regional public transportation upon providing their ID.²⁸ There is a mandatory number of seats for people with disabilities in each type of public transport.²⁹ Seats meant for people with disabilities can be reserved at least 5 days before departure. People with disabilities who have reserved seats have a priority when entering the vehicle. If there is a need for an individual motor vehicle, people with disabilities can receive a state allocated allowance for an adjustment of a vehicle.³⁰ There is also compensation for transportation expenses (including fuel for privately owned vehicles). In order to have that they need to have the State Medical Commission’s for the Assessment of Health Condition and Working Ability decision on that. It is viewed as a technical aid under Law on Social Services and Social Assistance.

Accessibility of services in Latvia is regulated by:

²² Available: https://www.tiesibsargs.lv/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/crpd_alternativais_zinojums_lv_alternativa_1649682066.pdf (accessed on 18.03.2025.)

²³ Available: <https://www.pilsetacilvekiem.lv/par-mums/> (accessed on 02.03.2025.)

²⁴ A video of trip from home to a grocery store by a wheelchair-user during the winter. Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_CRWPs9L0FA (accessed on 02.03.2025.)

²⁵ Available: <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/324287-brauksanas-maksas-atvieglajumu-noteikumi> (accessed on 02.03.2025.)

²⁶ Available: <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/251480-sabiedriska-transporta-pakalpojumu-sniegsanas-un-izmantosanas-kartiba> (accessed on 02.03.2025.)

²⁷ Available: <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/68488-socialo-pakalpojumu-un-socialas-palidzibas-likums> (accessed on 02.03.2025.)

²⁸ Available: <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/324287-brauksanas-maksas-atvieglajumu-noteikumi> (accessed on 02.03.2025.)

²⁹ Available: <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/251480-sabiedriska-transporta-pakalpojumu-sniegsanas-un-izmantosanas-kartiba> (accessed on 02.03.2025.)

³⁰ Available: <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/68488-socialo-pakalpojumu-un-socialas-palidzibas-likums> (accessed on 02.03.2025.)

- Consumer Rights Protection Law, 18th of March 1999;³¹
- Law on the Accessibility of Goods and Services, 16th of March 2023.³²

At the time of writing this report there is only one law that somewhat addresses accessibility of products and services. According to Consumer Rights Protection Law, when offering and selling products and services, it is prohibited to discriminate against consumers based on their disabilities except if it is judicially justified. Differential treatment is permissible where it is objectively justified by a legitimate aim which the means chosen are proportionate to achieve, or where ensuring equal treatment imposes a disproportionate burden on the seller or supplier.

To implement the European Accessibility Act, the Law on the Accessibility of Goods and Services³³ and Requirements for accessibility of goods and services³⁴ will go into force on 28th of June 2025. Some of the changes will include, for example, the obligation of international passenger transportation providers to make available information about the physical infrastructure their companies are using; self-service terminals must be able to transform spoken words into text format; and audiovisual electronic media must have subtitles, audio descriptions; voice-overs and sign language translations must be precise and synchronous.³⁵

Plans for further development of services

On 21st of May 2024 Cabinet of Ministers accepted a “Plan for promotion of equal opportunities for persons with disabilities for years 2024-2027” (this document has not been officially translated by the State Language Centre so references to it might use different versions of the title.³⁶ It includes 5 courses of action:

- improvement of disability assessment system,
- improvement of support services for alleviating the consequences of disability at the intersectoral level,
- furthering inclusive employment opportunities,
- promotion of accessibility of environment, information and services,
- promotion of public awareness.

In regards to accessibility of environment, information and services, the plan mentions evaluation of accessibility of state and municipal buildings and medical institutions, improvement of accessibility in some of them (each category has a specific amount of buildings that need to be improved), provision of support for housing adaptations for persons with disabilities, improving accessibility to public transport (including improvements in physical infrastructure and services, like ticket purchasing), strengthening construction specialists’ understanding of accessibility requirements, promoting accessibility of private and public digital services, involving NGOs that represent people with disabilities in testing the accessibility of digital services etc.

Several other policy planning documents for 2021-2027 include accessibility improvements. These are plans for the development of a united and civically active society, culture policy, public health

³¹ Available: <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/23309-pateretaju-tiesibu-aizsardzibas-likums> (accessed on 02.03.2025.)

³² Available: <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/340554-precu-un-pakalpojumu-pieklustamibas-likums> (accessed on 02.03.2025.)

³³ Available: <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/340554-precu-un-pakalpojumu-pieklustamibas-likums> (accessed on 02.03.2025.)

³⁴ Available: <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/350121-precu-un-pakalpojumu-pieklustamibas-prasibas#nll> (accessed on 02.03.2025.)

³⁵ Available: <https://lvportals.lv/skaidrojumi/362211-jaiegulda-darbs-lai-preces-un-pakalpojumi-butu-pieklustami-ne-tikai-formali-2024> (accessed on 02.03.2025.)

³⁶ Available: <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/352154-plans-personu-ar-invaliditati-vienlidzigu-iespeju-veicinasanai-20242027-gadam> (accessed on 02.03.2025.)

policy, education development, sports policy, transport development, digital transformation and housing accessibility.

Methodology

Our research was based on the photovoice method. Photovoice is one of participatory action research methods which seek to renegotiate the relationship between the researcher and the participants and is done through giving them the choice of how to document their experiences by taking photos. This provides them with a different position regarding the research and shifts it from being a participant to a co-researcher, due to their active role in creating research data and also carrying out analysis. For this reason, we refer to our project participants in this report as co-researchers. These photos are then further discussed in group discussion sessions. This allowed us to explore these experiences in-depth and formulate actions for social change. Photovoice can be organised into the following phases:

1. Introduction to Photovoice and research ethics,
2. Take photos,
3. Discuss photos,
4. Process photos,
5. Community exhibitions and/or other social actions.

In our case, as the work was organised in an international setting this strategy needed to be adjusted for our situation. We organised Phase 1 through a workshop in Riga, where we presented the method and gave a brief introduction to research ethics. In this workshop we also worked with the co-researchers to develop our research question and listened to a lecture from a professional photographer in order to learn how to take better photos. Phase 2 took place separately in both countries with young people taking photos during their everyday lives with researchers assisting through consultations and video calls when necessary. Phases 3 and 4 took place in a workshop that was organised in Vilnius. During the workshop, we worked with the photos that the co-researchers had taken between the meetings and developed a qualitative coding system and applied it to the gathered data. In order to achieve this, we applied the SHOWED method which involves asking the co-researchers:

- What do you **see** here?
- What is really **happening** here?
- How does this relate to **our lives**?
- **Why** does this concern, situation or strength exist?
- How can we become **empowered** through our new understanding?
- What can we **do**?

This allowed us to structure our discussions around clearly defined questions that served as starting points for exploring the ideas and experiences that the co-researchers wished to share with us. Furthermore, we visited an opening of an art exhibition in order to get acquainted with artistic and curatorial practices behind exhibition making and explore novel ideas on how the way the work is exhibited can expand the concept of the work itself.

Finally, phase 5 is going to be realised in the following months by publishing this report, organising exhibitions in both countries as well as participating in public events such as democracy festivals in order to promote the results of the research to a wider audience.

Challenges

This chapter outlines some of the transport and physical environment challenges that prevent or limit access for people with disabilities in Lithuania and Latvia, as identified during organization of the in-person meetings. Anča and Neimane (2014) in their Practical Guide developed in the framework of the project “Green Routes Without Obstacles” (*Žalioji maršrutai be kliūčių*) note that among the obstacles that prevent people with mobility challenges from full access are those of “environment and society, architectural, transportation, information and culture”. Infrastructure that is only partially adapted to the needs of people with mobility disabilities was one of the main challenges in putting our meetings together.

International and local transport

The first problem that both teams faced was travelling between the countries, i.e., reaching Riga and Vilnius in a way that would be comfortable for the co-researchers who are wheelchair users. To comply with the project's values and Erasmus+ programme's priorities, we sought a sustainable transport option. The Lithuania-Latvia distance is short, so the main discussion was whether to take the train or the bus. At the time of the project, none of the bus companies operating between Vilnius and Riga offered international travel services for wheelchair users. This could mean anything from buses not being equipped with ramps and/or lifts to staff not trained to help a wheelchair user get on or off the bus. A train service between Vilnius and Riga was therefore the only option.

At the time of this project, the train from Vilnius to Riga and back ran once daily, leaving Vilnius at 6:30 and leaving Riga at 15:28. Ticketing services are accessible both in the train stations and online. However, the online ticketing interface of “Lietuvos geležinkeliai” (Lithuanian railway company, <http://ltg.lt>) does not allow booking more than one seat for a wheelchair user. If more wheelchair users are travelling, one needs to write an email well in advance to request the services to provide such a possibility (source-customer service information, 11/10/2024). The space for the wheelchair user(s) is allocated inside the carriage, which is equipped with a wheelchair-accessible toilet and a space for bicycles. When the bicycle racks are full, it is difficult to reach the wheelchair-accessible toilet. Boarding is only possible with the assistance from the part of the train crew, as the ramp is manual, as well as too steep for a person in a wheelchair to use it independently.

Local transportation provided additional challenges. Organisers discovered that some trains in Lithuania are made accessible for wheelchairs, some are partially accessible (e.g., they have no accessible toilet), and some aren't accessible at all. On their webpage, ltglink.lt, “Lietuvos geležinkeliai” has included a scheme (see Annex 1) of accessible train stations and accessible train models. The recommendation, however, is to “contact the passenger information centre by telephone [...] every time you plan your train travel” due to possible exceptions.

Bus services between Lithuanian cities and towns are even less accessible. At the time of the project, only one bus company offered wheelchair accessible travel options. A page dedicated to information for travellers in wheelchairs on the website www.autobusubilietai.lt provides intercity timetables in Lithuania and the opportunity to buy tickets online. The page is only available in the Lithuanian version of the website. It suggests that travellers in wheelchairs should “travel Lithuania without restrictions”. However, these travellers must notify the company of their “need for assistance” by e-mail at least 36 hours in advance. Only a fraction of buses is accessible (accessible buses are marked with a symbol). One of the co-researchers who had used this service, recalled that the bus did not have a ramp or lift suitable for a wheelchair user thus the driver carried her onto the bus in his arms. Another of our co-researchers shared the following experience: “the drivers are ignorant or simply not informed well. They make you feel guilty for travelling as they have to leave their seat

to assist you, some of them even tried to tell me that I should always have an assisting person with me to help, when in reality helping a disabled person is their duty.”

A route that one of the project participants had to take had only one accessible bus on the day of the trip. However, it was a late bus and, therefore, unsuitable. The organisers called bus companies to ask about other possibilities for providing accessible transport, no other options whatsoever were proposed by the companies. Additional research showed that the regional bus company does not offer any service for wheelchair users. The only possibility was the bus service from the municipal Social Services department. However, even though the organisers' inquiries took place a month before the workshop, another wheelchair user had already booked the service for that day.

Transportation within the city proved equally challenging. Vilnius city public transport scheme is mostly trolleybuses and buses. None of the busses in the online schedule of the city transport ³⁷ are marked as accessible, however, some city areas are connected only via bus. Some of the trolleybuses have low floors and are equipped with ramps. However, some stops, as noticed on the weeks prior to the project event in Vilnius, are inaccessible due to either poorly built sidewalks or – as was the case during the days of the event – construction work on roads and sidewalks around the stop, leaving no space and access for persons moving in wheelchairs.

Following an exchange with the co-researchers, we would note that transport issues are one of the contributors to the anxiety and reduced participation of young people with mobility disabilities. Although services are offered, they are offered in a way that requires young people to plan well in advance, and even then, they can sometimes be left stranded with no travel options. There is no space for spontaneity with which many young people go about their lives.

Venues for activities and eateries

The search for a venue in Vilnius revealed that universal design guidelines, which allow access for all, are not followed in most rental office spaces. Spaces designed and equipped for wheelchair users were some cultural institutions (National Museum, National Library) and educational institutions such as universities. However, even in university buildings equipped for people with reduced mobility, there are still rooms and floors that are not accessible (some rooms have high thresholds, some floors in buildings built centuries ago are only accessible via stairs, etc.) The project event in Riga took place in “Eiropas Savienības māja” (European Union House), which has a lift suitable for a person in a wheelchair, accessible toilets and an accessible entrance. The event in Vilnius took place in the new building of the Vilnius Academy of Arts called “Titanikas” (Titanic), which is fully equipped for people in wheelchairs.

Dining out for a group of people in wheelchairs proved to be a complex issue in both Riga and Vilnius. This problem was mentioned by consultant and activist Lība Bērziņa who led a preparatory meeting preceding in-person events. In both cities, the restaurants and bars that met all the accessibility requirements (ramps, lifts, threshold-free access, accessible toilets) were located in shopping centres. Most of the restaurants, bars and bistros outside shopping centres that the organisers considered because of their proximity to the venue, especially in the old town areas, had no accessibility measures. Some had some accessibility measures: some had an accessible toilet (although no ramp to enter), some had a threshold-free, stair-free entrance but no accessible toilet. Each restaurant marked with an accessibility icon had to be contacted or visited in advance, and in many cases the claim that the place was accessible turned out to be either false or only partially true.

³⁷ Available: www.stops.lt/vilnius (accessed on 20.10.2024.)

Accessibility in the hotels and hostels also proved to be limited. Only several medium-range hotels had accessibility measures (such as lifts and accessible bathrooms), however, the co-researchers drew the attention at the fact that many of those were half-measures: they have documented high hangers, card-key slots and towel racks in the rooms defined as accessible.

Data analysis

Society of healthy people. Environment as tool of discrimination

R2³⁸: “And the fact that these places that are out of reach, these places of desire, this is his definition, they are the places that hold the sense of belonging. These are the good places, but they are beyond reach and very often in his photos as he was explaining they are in this darkness, in the shadow. They are impossible for himself or other persons have different movement challenges and others.”³⁹

The overall research data confirms what has already been well established in the scientific literature as well as policy planning documents that at the current stage both countries are often challenging places to live in for people with mobility disabilities (Kuznetsova, Yalcin, Priestley, 2017; Beliūnienė, 2022; Blumberga, 2021). This research however contributes to the existing knowledge base by turning towards the overall experience of young people without focusing on accessibility of only education, employment or state institutions but rather employing photovoice in order to allow the co-researchers to show not only what is being inaccessible but more specifically, what is missed. In order to analyse this in this chapter we look at the following codes that were established during the analysis process by the co-researchers: **“Unnecessary struggle. Psychological inconvenience. Stupid”, “Unreachability: Mission impossible”, “Why do we have stairs at all?”, “No choice”, “Without access - stairs the largest enemy”, “Done because it is required but done badly”, “Doing things in poor quality”, “Not that great”.**

The chapter is organised around the photos and accompanying discussions relating to these codes. We start by exploring cases which the co-researchers viewed as less offensive but no less impactful, exploring the many times and places where the young people must find a way to manoeuvre around obstacles that may not even be noticed by able-bodied people. Here we include photos coded with “Unnecessary struggle. Psychological inconvenience. Stupid”. Through this we illustrate how the daily life of young people with mobility disability is a compromise between public space that is challenging to access and their own ability to maintain their presence.

We follow this section by exploring the experiences that created the strongest negative feelings amongst our research co-researchers and created a clear sense of injustice and absurdity when reviewed during the analysis. In order to explore this, we look at the photos coded with “Unreachability: Mission impossible.”, “Why do we have stairs at all?” or “No choice” “Without access – stairs the largest enemy”.

It would however be unfair to claim that there are no attempts at trying to improve the current situation and as will be explored in the following chapters they are sometimes rather clever and useful. However, this should not obscure the daily reality that many of the ramps, support railings and similar structures are still constructed in a way that may fit within some guidelines but serve little if any practical purpose. In this section we look at some examples by reviewing photos under codes “Done because it is required but done badly” and “Doing things in poor quality”.

³⁸ For the purposes of abbreviation, citations from the discussion will be marked with CR1, CR2 etc., meaning co-researcher 1, etc.; and R1, R2 etc. meaning researcher 1, etc.

Finally, we explore a code category that we believe characterises an important part of how the discrimination is experienced and lived. In this section we explore what our co-researchers chose to call “not that great”, a phrase that in different variations was used throughout the discussions to describe the experiences of the co-researchers. It shows how the societal attitudes towards mobility disability in Latvia and Lithuania create a need to censor oneself regarding the shortcomings of the physical environment which ends up being perceived as problematic but, in a sense, inevitable. This prevents our co-researchers from taking a stand against the current state of affairs and allows the status quo to be maintained.

All of our co-researchers submitted photos that depicted situations that they themselves considered to be emblematic of the struggle of living with mobility disability in Latvia or Lithuania. These photos showed places that lacked accessibility and mostly included photos of different stairs and other man-made structures. The photos also showed rooms in hotels where rooms advertised as wheelchair accessible still had inaccessible mirrors, showers, shelves and other parts of the room. This shows that even in cases where there is a wheelchair accessible hotel room, the actual accessibility of the room can vary greatly.

The photos reveal that the various policies and plans do little to address the current situation of our co-researchers. Far from only noticing a few inconveniences, the number of photos in the code category “Unnecessary struggle. Psychological inconvenience. Stupid” show that these experiences are something that co-researchers experience daily and plan their life around them.

CR2: “So, I basically have a pile with pictures that have stairs in them. I think we already discussed the theme that stairs are the largest enemy for us, for people in wheelchairs. So, I have several institutions including a church [...] no apparent[ly] they [are not expecting] for anyone in a wheelchair to get into the church, because like churches apparently are not meant for people in wheelchairs.”

Stairs were acknowledged as the most visible form of inaccessibility which made them an often-mentioned problem. However, co-researchers also noticed that it is not always about the stairs themselves but rather about lack of alternatives which would make the spaces accessible to people with mobility disabilities as well. Co-researchers were realistic about the challenges they had to face. Their resilience in the face of an often-challenging world made them aware of how unreasonable the situations often were. Photos that were grouped under “Unreachability: Mission impossible.”, “Why do we have stairs at all?” or “No choice” “Without access – stairs the largest enemy” often depicted places or situations that were evidently absurd and included both public spaces such as concerts or shops as well as state and municipal institutions.

At the same time the situations that were depicted were rather mundane unlike those discussed above. Photos in this code family are therefore one of the more direct ways of showing the way discrimination is experienced in daily life. While a broken lift or stairs that lack any kind of ramp create immediate and present obstacles, the daily discriminatory experience is often much less dramatic and arises from places such as awkwardly placed street light that makes one struggle to squeeze past or sudden realisation that a concert will not have any space for people in wheelchairs making the experience highly limited. This type of exclusion is particularly impactful towards young people as they are more likely to not yet have established strategies to move in the space around them as they may not yet have the social networks that serve as points of support that help to maintain resilience in the face of such difficulties. The photos included in this section reveal the myriad microaggressions that may lead the person to avoid public space at all, therefore further deepening their isolation. The data correlates with wider research data (Putniņa et al., 2024) that indicates that the inaccessibility of physical environment leaves significant impact on the social ties of the young people even in the cases where the complications are surmounted.



Picture No. 1

The process of overcoming the uncooperative physical environment was often complicated by the way how the support mechanisms themselves were created and maintained. Co-researchers grouped photos depicting such places and situations under codes “Done because it is required but done badly” and “Doing things in poor quality” which both refer to cases where the built infrastructure either lacked any functional purpose or was unusable for other reasons such as in the picture No. 1.

The adjustments made to the stairs, in this case, are superficially functional while staying unusable for anyone using a wheelchair by themselves and also being an obstacle to manage for a person with assistance.

CR3: “[...] doing it for the requirements is just doing it and not thinking about it. Doing any nonsense, they get the checkbox and check and the poor quality it can be the lack of understanding.

Maybe there is willingness and effort to do it but not quite enough knowledge to do it.”

Co-researchers were divided on what they felt was the reason for these cases. As illustrated in the fragment above, on the one hand, they acknowledged that, in part, it may come down to the lack of knowledge while also being aware that this may be a result of callousness on the part of the business owners especially. In discussions, co-researchers drew a distinction between adjustments made by state and municipal institutions and private businesses, where state and municipal buildings were believed to be more likely to have sensible adjustments while businesses were more likely to simply implement cosmetic changes. This was sometimes the case even with otherwise seemingly well-wishing businesses. The mother of one of the co-researchers relayed a story of how they met the owner of one of their favourite cafes: he helped them enter the building, and promised that he would improve the access to the cafe. Years later, this still has not been done. Situations such as these were recognised around the room during the discussions and contributed to the sense of futility. Most co-researchers did not consider it worth their time to object to the way the space was organised or to demand better access which again illustrates the way how the constant presence of infrastructure that is not made to support the young person with mobility disability may contribute to self-exclusion and lack of engagement with wider society even regarding the issues that directly affects them.

The reluctance to engage with the issues that directly affect the lives of our co-researchers throughout the research process proved to be one of the most emblematic and at the same time hidden aspects of the way discrimination (did not) appear in the stories of our co-researchers. Throughout the time we spent with our co-researchers what was most striking was their ability to explain away any examples they themselves provided of the direct discrimination that is faced by people with mobility disabilities on a daily basis. One of the most often used phrases was “not that great” which was also established by our co-researchers as a separate code category. Both in the process of discussions and analysis this expression, “not that great”, kept coming up, even when the situations described were hard to interpret as anything else.

CR1: “[...] I didn't really want to say, that the ramp installed in some place is really, literally bulls*it, but I wouldn't want to say it like, I want to put it nicely, for some reason, I don't understand why.”

Continuing the discussion some of the co-researchers pointed out that part of the unwillingness to point out problems they encountered comes from the sense of guilt that they feel when interacting with others.

CR4: “Because rationally I understand that it's not my fault, but it's the feeling of... I can't like completely squash it that I feel [...] that I inconvenience this person.”

Our research data shows that this sense of shame is the result of both interactions with others where when asked for help people often act annoyed as well as due to the physical environment which creates the same unwelcoming feeling due to being inaccessible and complicated as explored above. The feelings of guilt may also serve as one of the explanations why the general discussions with co-researchers were very rarely touching upon the topic of discrimination directly and only appeared indirectly.

Feeling “excluded from the bigger picture”

In this part of the analysis, we will discuss the images that were grouped by the researchers as creating feelings of sadness, being unwanted and having one's dignity undermined. In this group are the photos that were coded as follows during the discussion with the co-researchers that followed the data collection: **“Feeling of being unwanted”, “Unwillingness to change things”, “Sadness”, “Sad realisation of how long things will take”, “Dignity or lack of it”**. As with other photos, some photos in these code groups could have several or only one of the codes, and this was discussed at length during the data coding workshop.

One such group of overlapping codes holds together photos coded with “feeling unwanted”, “unwillingness to change things” and “sadness”. The links between these codes are more or less direct, with one thing influencing the other. An example of such entanglement is the discussion of what feelings arise after observing the “unwillingness to change things”:

CR1: “I would say it's a mix of “unwillingness to change things” plus, well, points 2 and 3. [...] [“Sadness” is] to see that people don't really want to do anything, so just do the bare minimum which is not enough probably.”

Other co-researchers had similar explanations on how these codes overlap and why they should be grouped together:

CR2: “I have pictures in the category of “feeling unwanted” or “sadness” because [in] these pictures [...] either there's dark space at the end of the stairs for example, or there's like... these spaces cause a bit uneasy feeling and something is a bit like, you're not really wanted there. And here's like a way down, and this way down also emotionally feels like, okay, you can go down there and possibly meet your end at this pathway.”

CR3: “[Co-researcher] [...] wrote down this picture to the 2nd category, but also then she used it for the 3rd. And she still hasn't decided. And this is the picture.”

CR1: “My situation is pretty much the same because the photos that I chose somehow relate to feeling of being unwanted as there is some work done but not enough or barely to be [accessible].”

The feeling of being unwanted comes from the feeling of not being able to access things because of what the co-researchers defined as half-measures, half-baked solutions. Several examples of this were documented in the pictures taken by the co-researchers, and the descriptions given by the co-researchers thicken the visual data with the emotional:

CR3: “So this is [...] an entrance to a coffee shop [...] it is new. And as I was a coffee lover and this was a new place I was very happy that it appeared and I was unhappy about the stairs. But then I went around the building [...]. There is another entrance and it had no stairs and I was clapping my hands like “now I’m going for a coffee in a new place” and I tried to open the door and it was locked. So again we have [access] but we don’t. But then this first attempt happened some time ago [...]. And now as I was taking this exact picture I went there again and I tried to open that same door again and then it was open. So it’s like a lottery - you go there and it’s either locked or not locked, who knows why. So you go to the place and you’re unsure that you will access it and it makes you kind of feel unwanted and unwelcome, uncertain, and additional stress let’s say. Which makes you feel excluded in a bigger perspective.” See picture No. 2 and 3.



Picture No. 2



Picture No. 3

Half-measures become exclusionary, discriminatory measures that do not allow for the participation in common social and cultural spaces, or that allow participation only for some people, instead of providing access and participation to all. The feeling of being excluded - even at the point of planning the infrastructure - and not being allowed in leads to a feeling of sadness, because ultimately it is about feeling part of the social fabric and belonging. The co-researchers not only addressed these feelings verbally, but also tried to use compositional tools to convey the feeling of not being able to reach what CR1 defined as “places of desire”. He explained that he used shadow and light as instruments to emphasise the distance between people with mobility disability and these “places of desire”:

CR1: “So here you can see a museum, or whatever that is here. Its massiveness and brightness represent the place of desire, because of the light it is in and how much space it occupies on the canvas. Stairs here represent an obstacle to your place of interest. Again – bad infrastructure. Bad infrastructure leads to exclusion. Exclusion from places of possibilities.”

Talking about another picture, the same co-researcher explains how reaching the destination, the above mentioned “places of desire”, is an experience of going through the passage which he describes in the following way:

CR1: "So here you can see a museum, or whatever that is here. Its massiveness and brightness represent the place of desire, because of the light it is in and how much space it occupies on the canvas. Stairs here represent an obstacle to your place of interest. Again - bad infrastructure. Bad infrastructure leads to exclusion. Exclusion from places of possibilities." See picture No. 4.

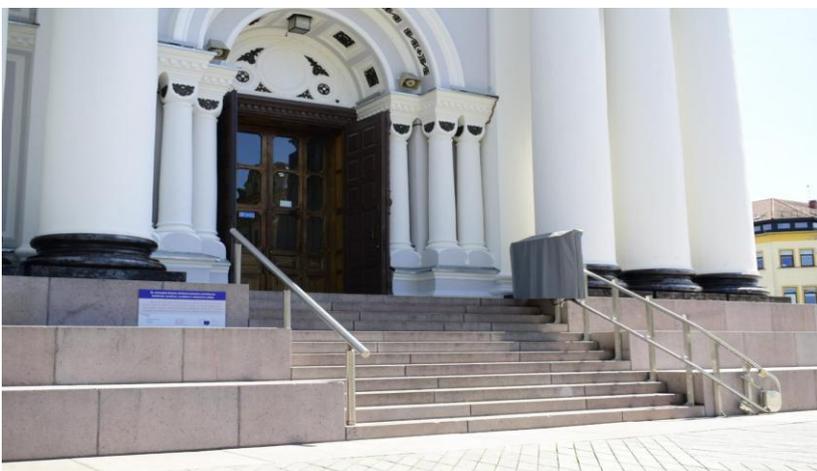


Picture No. 4

The code of "Sadness" connects the photos that were grouped with "Feelings of being unwanted," "Unwillingness to change things," and photographs in the group coded "Sad realisation of how long things will take". The sadness comes from both the lack of access now, and the reality that the changes needed – including societal changes in understanding the need for measures of accessibility – will take a long time or have taken a long time. One of the co-researchers told the story of when she was living and

studying in one of the Lithuanian towns and was very curious to see one of the main churches in the town. The church had previously been inaccessible because of the stairs leading up to the door. She was carried up the stairs when she needed to be in the church to attend a lecture, but she notes that it was "not because [she] wanted to be there at that moment, but because [she] had to be there". The inaccessible infrastructure prevented her from being an agent in her environment, from making decisions for herself and acting on them independently of others, and made her dependent. On a recent visit to the city, she noticed that a ramp had been installed (picture No. 5):

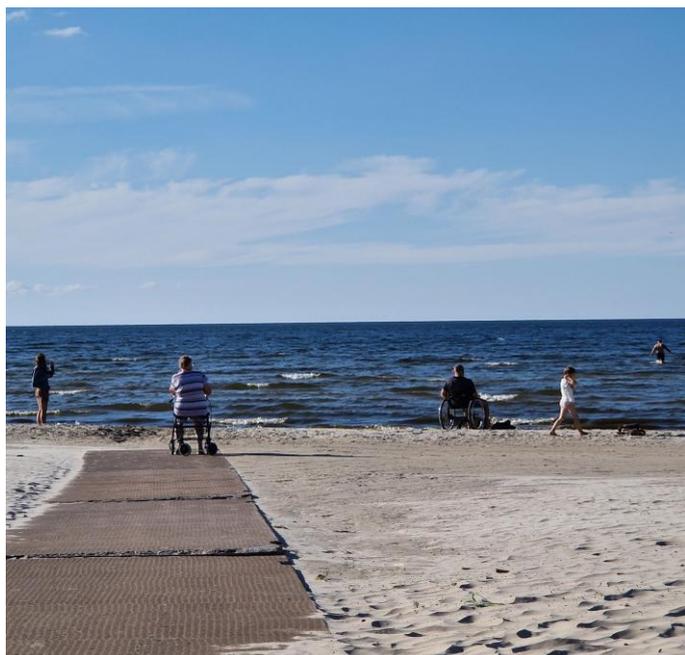
CR3: "And you can see a ramp here, it's covered but it's there and it appeared only recently, I think last Sep and it makes me wonder. When I saw it at first, I was amazed and wasn't sure if it's permanent or made for a temporary time. And it made me realise how slow we are improving when it comes to accessibility stuff, how slow we are.



Picture No. 5

How we skip the most important parts of cities a lot of times. Such as Soboras, let's say the main object. How many years it takes to come to conclusions and make the decisions to make it accessible. And it was a bit beautiful that it's [the ramp] there but sad realising how long it took for the decision to be made."

Although the change is good, previous experience provides an opportunity to measure the time it takes to make the city available, especially, as the co-researcher points out, “the most important parts of cities”. Here and elsewhere, it would be interesting and important to think further about how



Picture No. 6

the way spaces are designed is conducive to certain affordances and not others. For example, an environment that is only accessible by stairs is an ableist, exclusionary environment that is only accessible to able-bodied people, to the exclusion of a variety of other bodies or ways of participating in the environment of the city and beyond.

Latvian seaside and swings were examples of the environments beyond the city, which people consider important to participate in, because through participation in those environments they become part of cultural and national space. According to the researchers and co-researchers, Latvians perceive themselves as "people of the sea", it is part of the cultural and national identity.

Therefore, the opportunity to be at the seaside, in a way that both expresses and consolidates one's identity as a Latvian, is perceived as extremely important. However, access to the seaside is complicated for people in wheelchairs due to poorly constructed or short ramps (picture No. 6), or can be dangerous if the passages, which in both the Lithuanian and Latvian seascapes are made of untreated wood, are wet and slippery (picture No. 7). Similarly, it is not possible to participate in contemporary rituals, such as swinging on a swing at Easter to "ward off" mosquitoes in summer, a tradition from Latvian folklore, if there are no swings with adaptations for people in wheelchairs (picture No. 8).

The inability to participate in a tradition that is perceived as something all Latvians do leads to feelings of exclusion, and thus to sadness.



Picture No. 7



Picture No. 8

CR4: “These are actually my pictures. And I chose these because I think we, at least most of us, have seen in other countries that there are wheelchair [accessible] beaches, accessible swings and

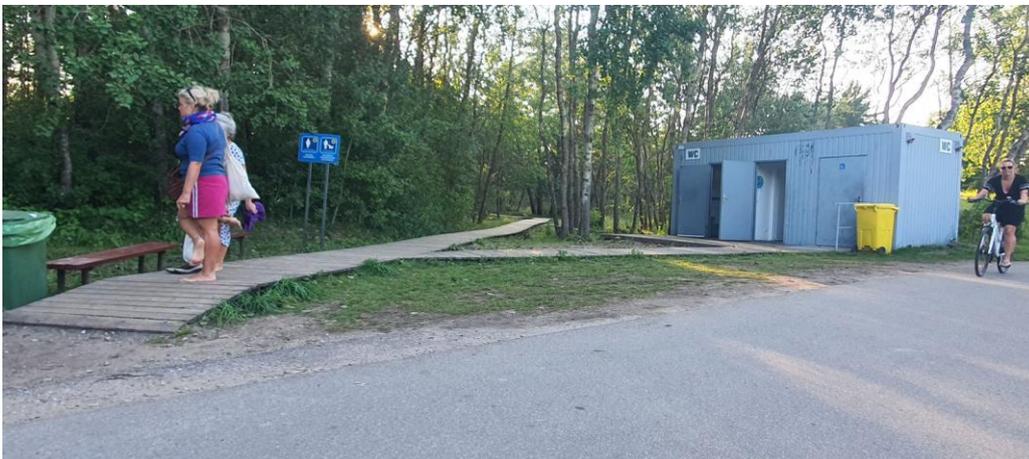
so on. And I know these things exist and they will come to us, but it is sad, sad realisation how long it takes. That it is not going to be soon, I think I know it will happen but probably not soon.”

In different ways, the above issues and problems relate to both respect and dignity of the person. The way in which the infrastructure limits access to full participation in the physical and virtual environments demonstrates a lack of respect for bodies that do not conform to the normative, standardised body, but also impacts on the sense of dignity of people who find such environments a constant challenge. We use “dignity” here as defined by our co-researcher:

CR2: “Dignity is more how I keep my own worthiness, and respect is how I act towards other, do I act respectfully towards others.”

The two are connected: lack of respect towards the other can undermine the dignity of the person that feels, perceives the lack of respect.

Two photos have been placed under the code "Dignity or lack of it", both showing toilet facilities. One of the toilets is an outdoor toilet in a seaside town in Lithuania (picture No. 9). The facilities give the impression of being dirty. However, and no less importantly, access to the facilities is complicated because there is more than half a metre of dirt and gravel between the pavement and the boarded walkway, as well as an incline that could be uncomfortable or dangerous for a person in a wheelchair. In the event of rain, the entire path would be slippery for the wheelchair and the person in it would be at risk of slipping and falling onto the grass on either side of the path.



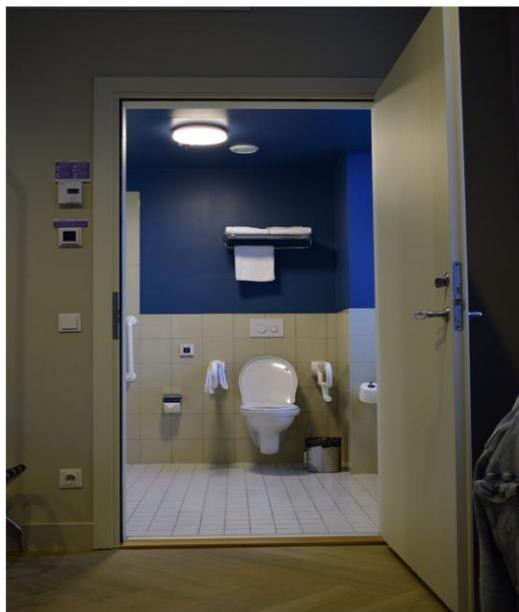
Picture No. 9

The next photos are of a toilet in one of the hotels where the co-researcher stayed during one of the phases of this project (picture No. 10 and 11). The hotel marked this room as 'wheelchair accessible', implying that all facilities are either universal or adapted for people with disabilities. However, the towel rack is placed at a height that is out of reach for a person in a wheelchair. It is precisely this half-measure and thoughtlessness that the author of the picture wishes to draw attention to. It is the lack of consideration for the dignity of people living in different bodies that is the common denominator between the two situations.

Interestingly, another comment by one of the co-researchers, discussing another set of photographs, resonates here:

CR4: “On the second thought, looking at the pictures, maybe some of these places are made for the healthy people, and they just happened to be semi-accessible to us. That’s also how I see that, not that bad, like we can use them, they can use them, but we still have some things that we would like to make different.”

The co-researcher suggests thinking of some environments as having been designed without consideration for people with mobility problems, as having been designed for able-bodied or, as she suggests, “healthy” people.



Picture No. 10



Picture No. 11

An important discussion took place among the co-researchers about the understanding of what is or could be identified as 'unwillingness' to change things or to create / allow access (to bars, shops etc.) on the part of those who build the infrastructure. In this context, the co-researchers discussed the intentions and resources - not only financial, but also in terms of know-how - that enable and prevent the creation of more accessible environments. The co-researchers noted that it is possible to identify cases where there is "willingness and effort [to create access], but not enough knowledge to do it" (CR3). These are very different from the cases where accessibility is poorly done and just to respond to "the requirements" (CR3). Other co-researchers noted that resources play an important role in creating accessible infrastructures and environments, but that access to these resources varies:

CR4: "If this is like a government building then they have the resources to know if it's right or wrong, but if it's like a small business, then I think it's probably because they don't know, they don't have the professionals who can advise them."

To conclude this section, we should add that the feelings of "sadness" and "undesirability" experienced in the face of infrastructure that is not implemented with the idea of universal access, and the feeling that one's dignity is undermined, are related to the difference between "not only surviving but also living as a disabled person" (CR4), as expressed by one of the co-researchers. We would suggest, following on from her statement, that being able to enter and use toilets, to access certain places and to move from one point in space to another without hindrance should be seen as a mere baseline, that of “surviving”. However, "living" means leading a dignified life, such where one is able to have one's needs - cultural, social, economic - met and one where they are feeling part of and able to contribute to the social fabric. And this is where non-physical access is crucial:

CR4: "[...] these few pictures that I showed of websites... [...] I think the big part about accessibility these days is not just physical [environment], it's also about information accessibility. That is the age of technology, it is very important and very tremendous. Because we also talked about how there's no way of completely knowing if something is accessible or not and this is a big part of it. If there was reliable information on the internet it would be a lot easier. So that is one point, and the 2nd point is that [...] not just surviving but also living as disabled people. It is important not just to talk

about all these ramps and everything, yes it is of course important of course, but it is also important to talk about the concerts, the swings, the rollercoasters idk, something that brings us joy not just the everyday things.”

The power of the right mindset

This section will include co-researchers' opinions of what are good examples of infrastructural and digital design. First, discussion will be about photographs linked with codes **“Respect”**, **“Safety”** and **“Smart design”**. Then thoughts on **“Independence”**, and then – **“The power of the right mindset”**.

Co-researchers viewed codes “Respect”, “Safety” and “Smart design” as related. The group of photos coded with these codes contained photographs with gentle ramps that have handrails from one or both sides (picture No.12). These ramps lead to an information centre, hospital, social services office, municipality, parking lot - places that provide essential services in co-researchers' neighbourhoods or areas that they are visiting as tourists. There were also photographs of wide, smooth, newly renovated sidewalks and businesses that are easy to enter because instead of steps and ramps there is a gentle incline of the sidewalk that leads to the entrances (picture No. 13).



Picture No. 12



Picture No. 13

Co-researchers noted that well-built, truly accessible infrastructure makes them feel respected and safe:

CR3: “[..] because safety is based on respect for some group of people. [...] safety is doing the right things the right way.”

CR1: “Well, yeah! If you want to make something good, you also think about respect and safety.”

Respect is about how one acts towards another. Respect is about acknowledging that the person exists, that their wellbeing, their particular needs and wishes, their participation in societal life matters. Suppose a place is built keeping in mind that people from all socioeconomic and cultural groups should be able to use it and respecting people’s different needs. In that case, it seems evident that the building’s design would have to follow universal design principles. That, in turn, would reassure people that they are welcome, safe, and can easily reach their “places of desire” and focus on the activities they plan to do in those places. Feeling respected by the people who plan and build infrastructure ensures that young people with mobility disabilities can move in society with dignity.

If a specific infrastructural solution goes beyond “doing the right things the right way”, if there is some new approach to providing accessibility of buildings and environments, then one of the co-researchers’ offered the term smart design. Smart design might include electric devices that facilitate entry into a building or a space, like a wheelchair lift or call button. It might be the design of a ramp that takes up less space next to a walkway. However, one must be careful in attributing this term. As co-researchers themselves noted, places like shops, banks, hospitals or schools, should be accessible because they are essential places for physical, emotional, and social wellbeing of members of society. There was a discussion about whether the access to these places show respect towards people with mobility disabilities and can be considered part of smart design or is it just an infrastructural design that should be a standard practice due to the services that are provided in them being crucial for members of a society.

CR2: “I don’t know if you can call the fact that you are able to go to the bank or shop as respect?”

R2: “But also you cannot call it smart design because it should be...”

CR2: “Yeah, it should be [accessible]. Essential places.”

Well-built and accessible infrastructure in time should feel normal, even seamless, unnoticeable.



Picture No. 14

There were differing opinions among co-researchers on what counts as smart design. Often co-researchers’ interpretation of photos differed from the meaning that was attributed to them by the authors in the descriptions of photos. The author of the picture No. 14 noted that the ramp leads to their local social services office and is overgrown with weeds. According to him, it shows that the social services don’t care enough about the needs and safety of their clients who have mobility issues to take care of the upkeep of the ramp. For another co-researcher this ramp was an example of a well-designed ramp due to its curve because it needs less space for it to be built on. On the one hand, sometimes the lack of context of an infrastructural object can emphasize its strong features. On the other hand, the knowledge of the context shows long term issues that the person who has been using the structure has observed.

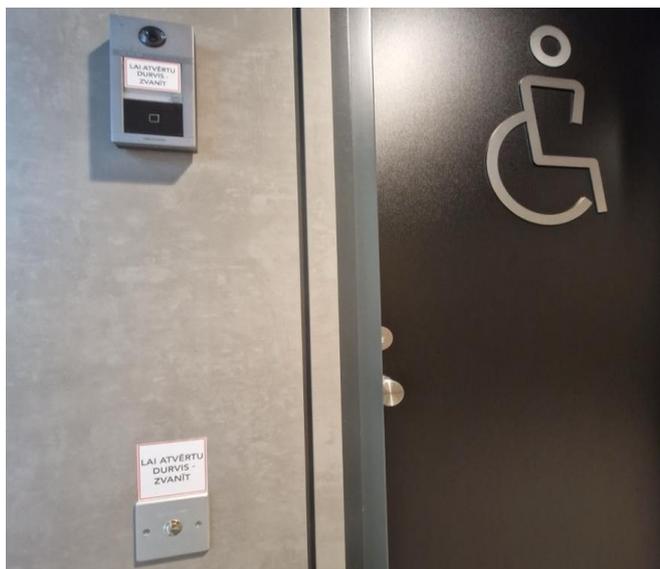
Similarly, there was a discussion about the photograph of a public bathroom with a call button and a camera for a guard who lets in people with disabilities (picture No. 15). When the call button is pressed, a guard in their booth can remotely open the doors. The discussion turned to themes like convenience and respect. On the one hand, the fact that a person with mobility disability needs to call someone and wait to be let into a bathroom might feel degrading. The situation is not made better by an inconveniently placed camera that is placed higher than the person who is using a wheelchair. Also, the guard and their understanding of disabilities is what stands between a person with disabilities and the possibility to get into the bathroom. On the other hand, a call button and camera can still be seen as a respectful and innovative solution compared to a situation when a person with mobility disability needs to find the specific employee who has the key for the bathroom themselves.

R3: "I remember there was this button in the bathroom that you can push it and somebody will come or something. I remember the discussion from yesterday, that it was inconveniently placed. How it can be safe, if not being convenient?"

R1: "And there's the question - is it respectful that I need to push a button to get into the toilet?"

CR3: "It is. It is more respectful than going around looking for a janitor who has the key."

CR2: "[..] or I also remember that we talked the same picture, the same idea, that you push the button and someone comes to you and someone said it's like a dog who tries to get into the room and someone comes and let you in."



Picture No. 15

People with mobility disabilities have different mobility needs and ideas of what is the better solution. This should be taken into account when planning infrastructural improvements.

Another important theme that emerged when discussing the good examples is independence of young people with mobility disabilities. Code "Independence" was added to photographs of ramps that allow a person to enter a clothing store, pizzeria, bank, theatre, higher education institution, pharmacy, library, gymnasium, municipality, local market, or church. The accessibility of a building also means better access to the services young people with mobility disabilities need or want. That creates a feeling of independence. Independence can mean both: 1) the feeling that comes from the possibility of physically accessing a building with or without an assistant, and 2) the feeling that results from using the services that are provided in the said building, like education, leisure activities, financial prowess, etc.

Two of the photographs within this category show weeds or shrubs sprouting through the ramps (example in pic. 15). Despite the maintenance issues, these ramps by most of the co-researchers were viewed as easy to use independently, which makes co-researchers feel safe and respected. Some of the photographs that were chosen as good examples of design showed the creative thinking that young people with mobility disabilities have to use in order to move in their environment.

Some municipal infrastructure projects that weren't built for people with mobility disabilities still can be used by them for their mobility needs. A case in point is a picture No. 16 of a cyclists' path next to a long flight of stairs that was coded with "Independence". In this particular case even though the cyclists' path is quite steep, people with mobility disabilities with assistance can tackle the steep path more easily than the stairs. This example shows that an alternative to stairs is appreciated. When looked at symbolically, the photo shows a way how needs and wishes of freer mobility of various social groups can be combined in one infrastructural project. The approach that would make it even better, is a design that is based on universal design principles so that the structure could be safely and easily used by any of the residents or visitors.



Picture No. 16

Now turning to examples that created strong positive feelings. An important example that co-researchers appreciated was a raised flower bed next to a paved walkway and accessible to people in wheelchairs. This also inspired one of the codes - the eponymous “Power of the right mindset”. Picture No. 17 showed co-researchers that it is possible to try out gardening if they have an interest in doing so. One of the co-researchers who uses a wheelchair said that even though she has grown up in a rural place - a place that is usually associated with people working in their gardens - she never had an opportunity or even an idea to plant something and take care of it. She didn’t know it was possible for her. This photograph opened up a possibility and an interest for a new activity to try out. It gave the potential of joy and a new way to connect with people.



Picture No. 17

*CR3: “[...] the name “the power of right mindset” and I have two pictures. One is of a small irrelevant shop but still like welcoming, no stairs, no sh*t, no anything. And the other picture is really interesting, you can even make gardening accessible...”*

R2: “Mm, yes, raised beds.”

CR3: “I’ve never done that even though I grew up in a village, so for me it even looks super great, innovative and shows how important the mindset when you have to adapt to an environment where you are limited in some kind.”

When new knowledge reveals that an activity, previously considered impossible due to the specific ways a body is typically imagined to be positioned or moved during it, has become possible and accessible, it can evoke feelings of excitement and wonder. The author of picture No.17, in a different discussion, emphasized the need to talk about the joys that people with mobility disabilities can experience. The fact that she was the only one who found it important enough to say it aloud and taking into account that most of the discussions revolved around the challenges young people with mobility disabilities encounter daily, shows that joy, carefree activities is a rarity for co-researchers. The activities that bring joy are the ones that allow people to live, not just survive.

People with mobility disabilities usually, if not always, have to think ahead when going outside of their homes. To make the trip more comfortable or doable they need to plan for all the possible obstacles beforehand: clothes for specific weather, terrain, road surface, stairs, access to a bathroom, etc. The more information is available, the more likely the person will visit the venue.

A good example of information availability and accessibility is the conversation festival Lampa in Latvia with its environment accessibility map (picture No. 18). The map is available online. It has information on the terrain, stairs, inaccessible constructions, bathrooms, and other necessary sites. When used together with the festival programme that includes stages and events, one can plan which events they can participate in.



Picture No. 18



Picture No. 19

On the festival webpage there is an opportunity to give feedback to the festival organizers about the accessibility (picture No. 19). There are three questionnaires aimed at people with 1) visual impairment, 2) hearing impairment, 3) mobility impairment. If the feedback is taken into serious consideration, it promotes accessibility in the way recommendations can be given by making it quick and easy for those who can use smartphones and personal computers, and also in the way temporary infrastructure for the festival is built. What is even better, is that clicking on each of the

buttons it shows a list of events that are specifically accessible to each of the groups of people.⁴⁰ This informational accessibility can create a sense of security in being prepared for the infrastructural obstacles that will be present, and in being able to discuss the plan of attending the event with one's assistant. This, in turn, promotes independence and the possibility of experiencing joy by doing something that is not considered essential for daily survival.

All in all, although the infrastructural objects that the co-researchers saw as examples of good design give hope for further infrastructural improvements and for more opportunities to do the essential or pleasurable tasks more easily, even the positive examples give way to frustration and sadness. The co-researchers wondered why there were so many examples of poorly designed infrastructure and so few good examples that they came across. Moreover, ramps that are easy to use can be deceptive, giving the false impression that a place is accessible to people with mobility disabilities. Just because there is a ramp next to an entrance doesn't mean that spaces in the building are accessible. For example, one co-researcher described one library which has a gentle ramp with handrails on both sides. However, when people get in, they face a flight of stairs and no lift. This paradox makes the positive example of a good ramp useless. Mixed feelings of hope and disappointment relate back to previously discussed half-measures – something is done to improve accessibility but it's done poorly, haphazardly, or not completely. The co-researchers have encountered examples of good design in their daily lives but they feel that there is still a long way to go till their mobility needs are satisfied.

⁴⁰ For example, when clicking on the "hearing impairment" button it lists events that have a sign language interpreter or real-time text. It is great because it gives information and provides a solution to each of the group's needs without generalising disability.

Conclusion

In this research we set out to answer the following questions:

- What are the ways **disability** and **discrimination** is experienced by young people in contemporary Latvia and Lithuania?
- What are the **differences** between two countries?
- What **challenges** to accessibility are most pressing?
- What are the best **improvements** and **solutions**?

The research data does not indicate any significant difference between Latvia and Lithuania in terms of experiences of disability and discrimination, but there are minor differences in the legislation. However, an interesting and significant point was made during informal discussions with the co-researchers. While some of the Lithuanian co-researchers viewed Riga more favourably, the opposite was true for the Latvian young people, who expressed admiration for the infrastructure available in Vilnius. What this shows is that while the objective difference in physical accessibility may be negligible, the opportunity to visit another country gave our co-researchers a different perspective on both the physical environment and their own abilities. This illustrates the importance of international cooperation and travel in enhancing the confidence of project participants.

Most of the photos taken by co-researchers were focused on practical situations in their daily life showing how a particular place or service is inaccessible due to poor design. Infrastructural challenges might hinder access to essential services, such as education, healthcare, financial services and to leisure activities, such as going to concerts, visiting the beach, gardening.

Another challenge is the lack of publicly available information – both online and on site - about the accessibility of buildings and surrounding environments that young people need or want to visit. Lack of information means that young people with mobility disabilities may not even attempt to get access to the services in-person because there are a lot of possible obstacles that individually the young person might be able to tackle but when taken together are too much to handle at once. However, when information is available, then the young person is able to plan the visit according to the resources they have.

Connected to the previously mentioned challenges is also the issue of accessible local and international public transport. It has been discussed in the chapter “Challenges” of this report, under the section “International and local transportation”, describing in detail the challenges that the participants of this project were confronted with.

Research data shows that the experiences of young people with mobility disabilities are far from uniform even if the challenges they face are similar. The discrimination experienced by our co-researchers was rarely overt or direct, but rather something our co-researchers saw as unavoidable, such as a lack of investment in accessible infrastructure. However, our co-researchers also demonstrated a significant resilience in the face of the challenges and the ability to critically and realistically evaluate the research data.

The discrimination they experience makes young people feel sad and excluded, and has a negative impact on their self-esteem. We conclude that the stereotypes young people face are not verbalised or overt, and instead young people talk about them indirectly, focusing on the inaccessibility of the environment.

Turning to the broader objectives of the project, youth work emerges as an important element in involving young people in planning and decision-making processes, both to promote young people's

self-confidence and willingness to get involved, and to ensure better integration and accessibility of people with disabilities.

This project demonstrates how the involvement of young people with mobility disability can be achieved and the benefits it brings to the production of shared knowledge. Collaborative processes also contribute to the skills of the young people involved and improve their ability and desire to participate in the democratic process in the future.

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Annex

“Lietuvos geležinkeliai” provides two schemes informing passengers in wheelchairs: one informs regarding the possibilities to board certain trains and the other - regarding the accessibility measures in railway stations across Lithuania.

The schemes have been retrieved on the 11th of October 2024 at the following link: <https://ltglink.lt/en/accessibility-of-stations-and-railway-platforms-for-people-with-disabilities-and-reduced-mobility>.

Accessibility of train models for people with disabilities and reduced/restricted mobility



Route	Train model	A train should be unfolded/ Wheeling ramps should be stowed in the wheelchair in order a disabled person to be able to board the train	A wheel-chair space in the train**	Universal toilet (wheel-chair accessible WC)	Visual warning system	Sound warning system	Sensor-based warning system
Vilnius–Kaunas–Vilnius	EJ575	●	●	●	●	●	●
Vilnius–Trakai–Vilnius		●	●	●	●	●	●
Vilnius–Klaipėda–Vilnius	730ML	●	●	●	●	●	●
Local Lithuanian routes	630M	●	●	●	●	●	●
Local Lithuanian routes	620M		●		●	●	●
Radviliškis–Panevėžys–Radviliškis	RA-2		●		●	●	●
Radviliškis–Klaipėda–Radviliškis							
Local Lithuanian routes	DR1A		●			●	●
Kaunas–Kybartai–Kaunas	DR1AM		●			●	●
Vilnius–Turmantas–Vilnius	DR1AMv						
Vilnius–Varėna–Vilnius			●		●	●	●
Kaunas–Šiauliai–Kaunas							

● * Train models running most frequently on the specified route are listed in the table; however, there may be exceptions. We recommend you contact the passenger information centre by telephone +370 700 55111 every time you plan your train travel and ask whether a train specifically adapted for your needs will run on the particular day and time.

● ** The train access and disembarkation service is not available on 620M, DR1AMv, RA-2 train models due to infrastructure or design features. For each trip planning, we recommend contacting the passenger information center by phone +370 700 55111 and find out what are the options for getting on and off the train at the start and end stations of your planned trip.

Accessibility of stations and railway platforms for people with disabilities and reduced mobility

Station	 The booking office accessible for people in wheelchairs	 The possibility to access platform (in one level, by ramps, or by elevators)	 The waiting room accessible for disabled persons	 The WC accessible for disabled persons	 The possibility to call for help	 Staff trained to work with people with special needs and reduced mobility	 Additional equipment is used for persons with special needs	 Parking accessible for disabled persons
Vilnius	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Kaunas	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Šiauliai	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Klaipėda	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Kretinga	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Plungė	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Telšiai	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Radviliškis	●	● 1	●	●	●	●	●	●
Jonava	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Kaišiadorys	●	● 1	●	●	●	●	●	●
Kėdainiai	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Marijampolė	●	● 1, 3	●	●	●	●	●	●
Matuizos	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Pravieniškės	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Lentvaris	●	● 1	●	●	●	●	●	●
Vievis	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Baisogala	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Dotnuva	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Gimbogala	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Gudžiūnai	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Kazlų Rūda	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Kybartai	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Mauručiai	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Pilviškiai	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Šeštakai	●	● 2	●	●	●	●	●	●
Vilkaviškis	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Žšaliai	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Naujoji Vilnia	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Bezdonys	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Pabradė	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Švenčionėliai	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Ignalina	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Dūkštas	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Visaginas	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Turmantas	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Kena	●	● 1	●	●	●	●	●	●
Senieji Trakai	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Rūdiškės	●	● 1	●	●	●	●	●	●
Valkininkai	●	● 1	●	●	●	●	●	●
Varėna	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Jūrė	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Kyviškės	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Kužiai	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Vinčiai	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Kūlpėnai	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Subačius	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Panevėžys	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Pavenčiai	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●

- 1 - the possibility to access the first railway platform
- 2 – the possibility to access second railway platforms
- 3 – the possibility to access third railway platforms.