WITHOUT RESTRICTIONS

Be Part of the Picture

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These photos by the co-researchers of the project were displayed on billboards in public spaces in Kaunas and Klaipėda, as well as at bus and railway stations in Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipėda, Šiauliai and Panevėžys during the last weeks of June 2025. The aim of the exhibition was to highlight the infrastructure solutions that hinder young people with mobility disabilities from engaging and fully participating in public spaces, cultural events, education and other activities.

Photo by Laine Aleksandra Dovkante

Photo by Ruslan Nigmatullin

Photo by Laine Aleksandra Dovkante

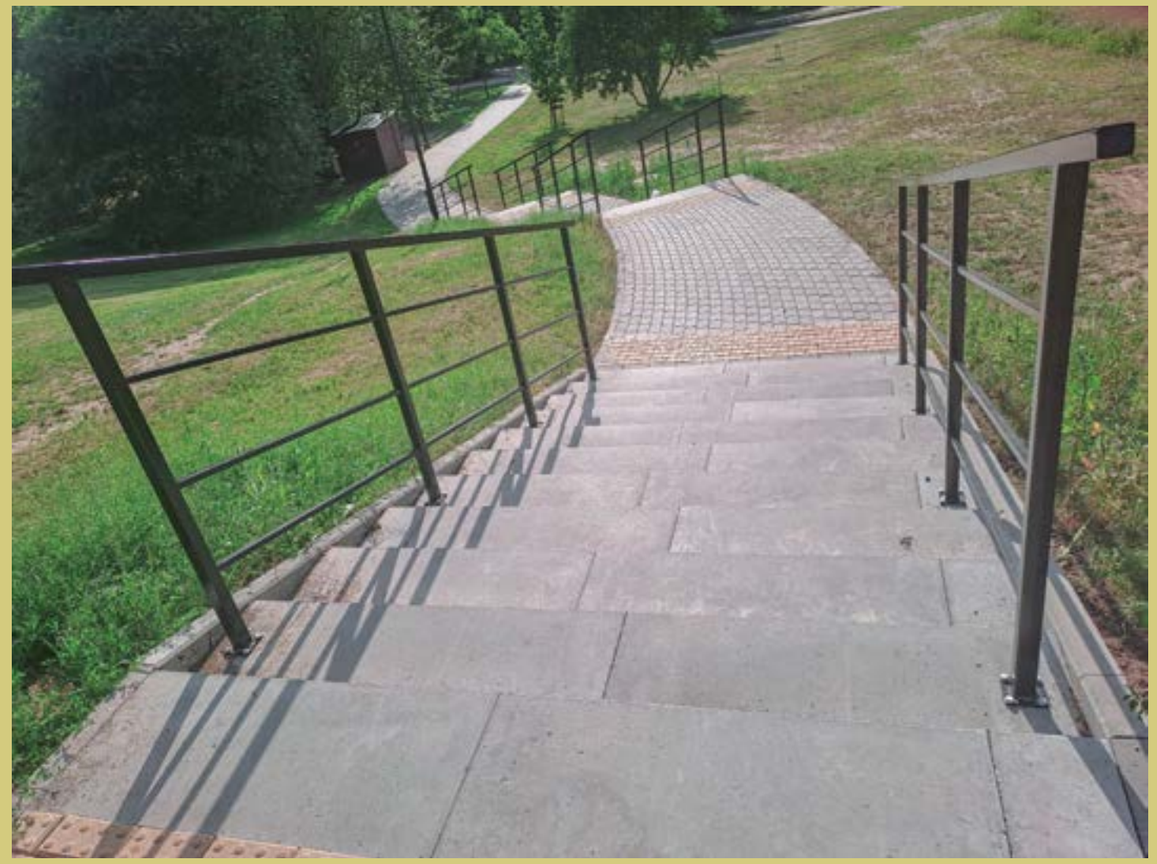

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Photo by Marta Skrube →

It‘s Not Lack of Access. It‘s Indifference

Ruslan Nigmatullin

Alienation: people constantly stare at me, making it uncomfortable to function. They emphasize me not being like them. People see me as someone so very different from them, as if the difference between me and them is the same as between them and a dog. If I found a way to express it as a numeric value, it would be high enough to present me as different species, an alien of some sort. In some sense, strangers pity me, which restricts them from interacting with me the way they would with healthy people. Again, this makes it feel like we are not the same, not even close. What is worse, me and people I know experiencing significant health issues prefer not to disclose them to other people. You just don‘t know what is driving their actions – is it a sense of pity? Or is it rather their regular behaviour, the way they treat you and behave around you? When it happens once it‘s not a big deal, you can laugh it off, but when it keeps on happening for years with everyone you know, it‘s like you live in a matrix, as if you’re stamped with „fragile, handle with extreme care“.

Such relationships have unpleasant consequences: it becomes difficult to react towards social interactions without a bias. As an example, for me personally, I never want to accept help from anyone because people think I’m incapable of doing some things myself. In addition, there are

← Photo by Ruslan Nigmatullin

moments when I can feel how people intentionally show support and/or want to cheer me up. In a normal scenario it would be a welcome, good way to support someone. I, however, see it as an attempt to accentuate my inability to do something, some weakness, which progresses with years and makes interaction with people less and less attractive.

I know that my comments are not related to the infrastructure struggle, but I wanted to point out that inaccessibility is not the main problem. Although it is one of many, it does greatly contribute to the life of people with mobility challenges, many of whom would dare to call it miserable. So, perhaps if the impact of this problem can be minimized, other problems that these people encounter would be easier to deal with.

One other point that was mentioned in this study is that many infrastructure facilities that are installed are installed in an absurd way or are done just to tick a box. I wanted to add that when the government assembles workers and makes plans to build accessibility measures, somehow they fail to ask people with limited physical activity what is the best way to do it, as it is done for them and will be used by them. The empirical design is intended for a certain group of people, and if that's so, why is this target group not consulted then? People that are tasked with building accessibility measures don't know the optimal parameters to make those ramps and other facilities usable. Just for the sake of experiment, the government could make a mini project and ask people with physical challenges to suggest where to build such infrastructure and how it should be built. Maybe the users of ramps could draw a picture of what the ramp should look like based on the place chosen.

All in all the main problem is indifference. Either people don't think about a possible need for a ramp, or they just don't care. This results in insufficient infrastructure to conveniently move around the city. This same indifference creates a paradox where I feel like I'm non-existent, not

recognized by society and at the very same time most of the people I encounter see me as an alien. Even when there are projects intended to build desired infrastructure there's no communication between the parties, which would actually yield much better results. Maybe I'm just being arrogant, but based on all the thoughts, feelings and things that I saw and experienced, I think people like me are just not viewed as people anymore, because most of the people at every level of social interaction just don't accept my existence as something natural. If you ask a random person in the street what is it like to be disabled or what do they think of such people, all they can say is that "I know there are such people" or "I guess it's not easy to live like this". They don't have to keep in mind how to interact with people with disabilities all the time, but at least they should be educated even if the slightest bit that our existence is not some sort of a nature's miracle. In school people are taught to keep low during a fire in the building. Most of us remember it to this day, even though very few had to apply this knowledge in their life. Perhaps assigning 45 minutes of school time once to talk about different abilities can give more insight to healthy people that we are not aliens but are the same human beings.

Recommendations

1. Provide more direct ways for young people with mobility disabilities 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 on 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 homepages of facilities and services—including information about accessibility, for example, maps.

5. Principles of Universal Design should be applied in order to ensure the accessibility of buildings and other spaces as sites where young people may fulfill their social, cultural, economic, needs and desires.

6. Provide information about accessibility in the physical environment in a detailed manner, for example, a poster detailing where to enter the building if you have mobility challenges.

← Photo by Marta Skrube

The project “Without Restrictions” is run by the Latvian NGO Fonds Tavs Atbalsts and the Lithuanian Organization for Applied Anthropology Anthropos, since January 2024 and is planned to be finalized in July 2025. The Erasmus+ Small Scale Partnership scheme funds it. The aims of the project are twofold:

(1) Provide deeper knowledge and strengthen the skills of partner organizations in running international projects focused on young people with mobility disabilities.

(2) Empowering youth with mobility disabilities from both countries by involving them in developing and carrying out a research project in which their task is to document and convey the experiences of young people living with mobility disabilities.

This document is a report on the research component of the project. It provides the social and legislative context in which the project is developed; a description of the method used to collect data; the approach to analyzing the data; the analysis of the data; as well as a conclusion and a list of recommendations.

The framework and methodology used in the research was introduced by the anthropologists involved in the project. However, involving the participants and fostering their role as co-researchers was one of the project’s goals—i.e. the co-researches have actively participated not only in providing data but also in the stages of its coding and analysis; the final stage of the project will involve sharing the research results in the form of a photography exhibition. Such intensive involvement was possible due to continuous discussion facilitated by the researchers in Lithuania and Latvia during the research period. In the framework of this project, two meetings (in Riga and Vilnius) took place, both aimed at introducing the co-researchers to the foundations of qualitative research: the method of Photovoice in anthropology, photographic composition and production, research ethics, qualitative data coding, and so forth. Although this report is written by the anthropologists involved in the project, the final version of the report has been read and commented upon by some of the co-researchers. This version of the research report has been adjusted for readability by one of the co-researchers of the project.

Research Questions

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

What are the **differences** between the two countries?

What accessibility **challenges** are the most concerning?

What are the best **improvements** and **solutions**?

← Photo by Monta Vasara-Beķere

Photo by Ruslan Nigmatullin

Context

In the context of this research, we rely on the definition provided by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which stipulates that the 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.” In line with this, we state that accessibility is a widely defined right but we mostly define it as the ability to live independently and participate fully without limiting it to state institutions only, but also recognizing the right of people with disabilities to access public spaces.

Legislation in Lithuania

In general, the Lithuanian legislation regarding persons with disabilities follows the international guidelines, as Lithuania has ratified the 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on May 27, 2010. Furthermore, as a member state of the European Union, Lithuania must adhere to the regulations and directives adopted by the European Parliament.

On September 9, 2020, Lithuanian Government approved the “National Progress Plan 2021-2030”.[1] Responding to the task of implementing an accessible environment, the Ministry of Social Security and Labour (henceforth “the Ministry”) drew up a Program for the Development of an Environment Accessible for People with Disabilities (Neįgaliesiems tinkamos aplinkos visose gyvenimo srityse plėtros programa[2]) (henceforth “the Program”). In one of the documents that contextualize the need for such a program[3], the Ministry notes that while the overall level of poverty and social exclusion in Lithuania was 24,8% in 2020 (according to the EUROBAROMETER data), the rate for persons with disabilities was 43%.[4] The document concludes that this level of exclusion is linked to the lack of accessibility in both physical and informational environments: “Inaccessible physical and information environments limit disabled people’s access to education and their ability to participate in the

1 https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/d492e050f7dd11eaa12ad7c04a383ca0, accessed on 15.10.2024.

2 https://socmin.lrv.lt/lt/veiklos-sritys/strateginis-valdymas/aktualus-strateginiai-dokumentai/pletros-programu-pazangos-priemones/neigaliesiems-tinkamos-aplinkos-visose-gyvenimo-srityse-pletros-programos-priemones/, accessed on 15.10.2024.

3 https://socmin.lrv.lt/uploads/socmin/documents/files/veiklos-sritys/Strateginis%20valdymas/Neigaliuju%20PP/informacijos%20prieinamumas/PPP%20apra%C5%A1o%20pagrindimo%20forma%20.docx accessed on 16.10.2024.

4 “Poverty and Social Exclusion of Persons with Disabilities”, European Disability Forum, 2020, https://bit.ly/32s17Cl, accessed on 16.10.2024.

← Photo by Marta Skrube

labor 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."

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[5];
- Law on Social Integration of Persons with Disabilities of the Republic of Lithuania, 28th of November 1991, No.I-2044[6];
- Technical regulations for construction, approved by Orders of the Minister of Environment of the Republic of Lithuania.[7]

Documents contextualizing the need for the Program state that the existing regulation is often contradictory.[8] This leads to many buildings not meeting accessibility requirements. The documents show that the physical infrastructure accessibility index in Lithuania was 30% in 2019, and 43.55% in 2020. 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 centers providing social assistance, 32% of NGOs providing social assistance, 18.3% of social

5 https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.F31E79DEC55D, accessed on 13.10.2024.

6 https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.199156E4E004, accessed on 13.10.2024.

7 https://vtpsi.lrv.lt/lt/teisine-informacija/teises-aktai-2/statybos-techniniai-reglamentai/, accessed on 13.10.2024.

8 https://socmin.lrv.lt/uploads/socmin/documents/files/veiklos-sritys/Strateginis%20valdymas/Neigaliuju%20PP/Infrastrukturos%20priemone/PPP%20apra%C5%A1o%20pagrindimo%20forma%20tvirtinimui.docx accessed on 16.10.2024.

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, increasing to 992 in 2020 (the report states that the queue increases every year). Access to cultural facilities was found to be extremely limited, with only 16.6% of facilities being fully accessible to people with disabilities. The aim of the Program is to increase the index of infrastructure accessibility to 70% by the year 2030 (more than double from 2019).

The slow pace of change in legislation, implementation, and regulation has been met with community-led actions by groups of people with disabilities. One such group is the Facebook group "*Aplinkos prieinamumo teisinis reguliavimas*" (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 a municipal level in different cities, and some of them organize actions such as monitoring the compliance of outdoor terraces built by cafes and restaurants. When structures are found to be inaccessible, municipal authorities are informed and asked to take action.

Accessibility of the means of transportation and access to it in Lithuania are governed by the regulations of the European Union:

- 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 traveling by air (Text with EEA relevance)[9];

9 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[10];

- Regulation (EU) No 1177/2010 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 November 2010 concerning the rights of passengers when traveling by sea and inland waterway and amending Regulation (EC) No 2006/2004 Text with EEA relevance[11];

- 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.[12]

In 2020, a study aimed at analyzing the efficiency and accessibility of transportation services for persons with disabilities was 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.[13] The study identified that there is no one unifying legislatory document regulating different issues related to transportation accessibility (see p.66), and there is a lack of cross-institutional collaboration that would help address accessibility issues. This results in inconsistent implementation of strategies and means required to improve transportation accessibility: according to the study, each municipality is left to manage strategies independently—e.g., regulating bus connections between cities. As noted in section "Challenges" in this report, four years after the mentioned study, bus connections between the cities remain a challenge to people with mobility disabilities. The study found that although international regulations are intended to guide accessibility for transportation within and between cities, some requirements remain unmet due to a lack of resources or preparation. Additionally, the study highlighted the absence of a mechanism to properly assess the accessibility of transportation services. For example, counting the number of low-rise buses and trolleys doesn't provide an accurate picture of how many are equipped with lift mechanisms, as many do not have them. One of the key findings was the lack of a sustainable mobility system plan: while the number of accessible vehicles increases, the absence of accessible infrastructure leading to bus stops prevents 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 2019[14], also known as European Accessibility Act (henceforth "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 during 2020 (Grigaitė et al. 2021). This directive defines minimum accessibility requirements to ensure the uniformity of accessible measures across EU member states. It covers products and services such as 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 more. Currently, ticketing concessions and access to private and public services in Lithuania are regulated by the following laws and recommendations:

10 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32007R1371, accessed on 13.10.2024.

11 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32010R1177, accessed on 13.10.2024.

12 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32011R0181, accessed on 13.10.2024.

13 https://www.ndt.lt/wp-content/uploads/Transporto-paslaugu%CC%A8-pakankamumo-ir-efektyvumo-studija.pdf, accessed on 13.10.2024.

14 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.[15]

- Recommendations on services for people with disabilities in the public and private service sectors, 31st of December 2012, No.V-37.

EU member states were required to implement local regulations to ensure compliance with the Act. Aforementioned “National Progress Plan 2021–2030” and the aforementioned Program for the Development of an Environment Accessible for People with Disabilities are part of these new regulatory measures.

As of 2024, a reform is underway to redefine the concept and assessment of disability. As explained in the Ministry of Social Security and Labour webpage, prior to this reform, the concept of disability followed the medical paradigm. That meant that, in evaluating the need for assistance, the focus was on physical health, which sometimes resulted in certain disabilities being considered mild, despite the persons with them requiring a high level of assistance. After the reform, the Ministry of Social Security and Labour informs that disability will be assessed based on individual needs, considering factors such as: mobility, social and physical self-sufficiency, and other aspects. The assessment will focus on whether the person has a need for technical means, work or personal assistance, accessibility measures in their home, social services, mobility services, etc.

15 https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.033D686E8F1B, accessed on 13.10.2024.

← Photo by Ieva Gaučaitė

Legislation in Latvia

In Latvia, the legislation concerning people with disabilities follows the Convention ratified on 1st of March 2010. Following that, the main law in regards to people with disabilities in Latvia is Disability Law since the 1st of January 2011.

In 2024, there were 41,409 people with mobility disabilities registered in Latvia, 558 of them are in the 18 to 29-year-old age group.[16]

Physical environment accessibility in Latvia is regulated by the following:

- Disability Law of the Republic of Latvia, 20th of May 2010[17];
- Construction Law of the Republic of Latvia, 9th of July 2013.[18]

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 (2018) 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 (Trent 2019) and provides a detailed list of requirements and recommendations.

16 https://data.gov.lv/dati/lv/dataset/pilngadigo-personu-ar-invaliditati-sadalijums-pec-funkcionalajiem-traucejumiem-invaliditates-grupas/resource/6fdd8b6e-7ac3-4244-ab9e-5a770a7fbe1f, accessed on 31.01.2025.

17 https://likumi.lv/ta/id/211494-invaliditates-likums, accessed on 31.01.2025.

18 *https://likumi.lv/ta/id/258572-buvniecibas-likums*, accessed on 31.01.2025.

The report on accessibility self-assessment in state and municipal institutions (2021) showed that only 8% of buildings are accessible, 26% partially accessible, and 66% inaccessible. Of all the state and municipal buildings in Latvia, Riga region has the most accessible buildings. Partial environment accessibility is provided in healthcare and state defense institutions, culture and sports facilities and municipal information and client service centers. Low level of accessibility is noted in municipal, educational, governance, and cultural institutions.

The Ombudsman of the Republic of Latvia noted in the 2022 alternative report on the implementation of the Convention that the minimal accessibility requirements in regulations include many exceptions; that the training of the involved parties is irregular; and lacking a centralized, efficient, supervisory mechanism meaningful accessibility and improvements are delayed for people with disabilities.

Accessibility of transportation means and access to them in Latvia are regulated by:

- Regulation regarding fare concessions, 22nd of June 2021, No. 414[19];
- Order on the provision and use of public transportation services, 28th of August 2012, No 599[20];
- Law on Social Services and Social Assistance, 31st of October 2002.[21]

19 https://likumi.lv/ta/id/324287-brauksanas-maksas-atvieglojumu-noteikumi, accessed on 31.01.2025.

20 https://likumi.lv/ta/id/251480-sabiedriska-transporta-pakalpojumu-sniegsanas-un-izmantosanas-kartiba, accessed on 31.01.2025.

21 https://likumi.lv/ta/id/68488-socialo-pakalpojumu-un-socialas-palidzibas-likums, accessed on 31.01.2025.

Minors within the 1st or 2nd disability group as well as young people within these groups who are continuing their formal education till the age of 24, and their personal assistant, do not have to pay the fare for the intracity or regional public transportation upon providing their ID.[22]

There is a mandatory number of seats for people with disabilities in each type of public transport.[23] Seats dedicated 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 an individual motor vehicle is needed, persons with disabilities may receive a state-provided allowance for vehicle adaptation.24 To receive it, individuals must have an attestation from the State Medical Commission for the Assessment of Health Condition and Working Ability. The adapted vehicle is considered a technical aid under the Law on Social Services and Social Assistance.

Accessibility of services in Latvia is regulated by**:**

- Consumer Rights Protection Law, 18th of March 1999[25];
- Law on the Accessibility of Goods and Services, 16th of March 2023.[26]

At the time of writing this report there was only one law that somewhat addressed accessibility of products and services. Under the Consumer Rights Protection Law, it is forbidden to discriminate against consumers

22 https://likumi.lv/ta/id/324287-brauksanas-maksas-atvieglojumu-noteikumi, accessed on 31.01.2025.

23 https://likumi.lv/ta/id/251480-sabiedriska-transporta-pakalpojumu-sniegsanas-un-izmantosanas-kartiba, accessed on 31.01.2025.

24 https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/68488, accessed on 31.01.2025.

25 https://likumi.lv/ta/id/23309-pateretaju-tiesibu-aizsardzibas-likums, accessed on 31.01.2025.

26 https://likumi.lv/ta/id/340554-precu-un-pakalpojumu-pieklustamibas-likums, accessed on 31.01.2025.

Photo by Ieva Gaučaitė

because of their disabilities when offering or selling products and services, unless legally justified.

To implement the European Accessibility Act, the Law on the Accessibility of Goods and Services and Requirements for accessibility of goods and services[27] will come into effect on 28th of June 2025. Some of the changes will include, for example, requirements for international passenger transportation providers to provide information about the physical infrastructure they use; spoken words into text conversion at self-service terminals; subtitles and audio descriptions of audiovisual media; accurate and synchronized[28] voice-overs and sign language translations.

On May 21, 2024, the Cabinet of Ministers approved the "Plan for the Promotion of Equal Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities for 2024-2027" (this document has not been officially translated by the State Language Center, so different versions of the title may be used[29]). It includes five key actions: (1) improving the disability assessment system; (2) enhancing support services for alleviating the consequences of disability at the inter-sectoral level; (3) expanding inclusive employment opportunities; (4) promoting accessibility of environment, information and services; and (5) raising public awareness. The Plan additionally focuses on: evaluating and improving accessibility in state and municipal buildings and medical institutions (with specific numbers of buildings identified for improvement); providing support for housing adaptations for people 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; and involving NGOs that represent people with disabilities in testing the accessibility of digital services, among other things.

Several other policy planning documents for 2021–2027 include accessibility improvements, covering areas such as the development of a united and civically active society, culture policy, public health policy, education development, sports policy, transport development, digital transformation and housing accessibility.

27 https://likumi.lv/ta/id/350121-precu-un-pakalpojumu-pieklustamibas-prasibas#nII, accessed on 31.01.2025.

28 https://lvportals.lv/skaidrojumi/362211-jaiegulda-darbs-lai-preces-un-pakalpojumi-butu-pieklustami-ne-tikai-formali-2024, accessed on 31.01.2025.

29 https://likumi.lv/ta/id/352154-plans-personu-ar-invaliditati-vienlidzigu-iespeju-veicinasanai-20242027-gadam, accessed on 31.01.2025.

Photo by Ieva Gaučaitė

Methodology

Our research was based on the Photovoice method: a participatory, action oriented, research model aimed at changing the relationship between the researchers and the participants. This method provides participants—in our case youth from Latvia and Lithuania—with various mobility disabilities, an opportunity to document their experiences by taking photos. This shifts their position from being a participant to a co-researcher. Through photography they take an active role in collecting the research data as well as analyzing it. That is why we call our project participants co-researchers. Further, the photos collected are discussed in group discussion sessions, which allowed us to explore experiences of co-researchers in-depth and develop actions for social change based on them. Photovoice can be carried out in following phases:

Phase 1– Introduction to Photovoice and research ethics;
Phase 2– Taking photos;
Phase 3– Discussing photos;
Phase 4– Processing photos;
Phase 5– Community exhibitions and/or other social actions.

Since our project was organized in an international context, this strategy was adjusted. We completed Phase 1 during a workshop in Riga, where we introduced the method alongside research ethics. Together with co-researchers, research questions were defined. Co-researchers had a crash course in photography and a workshop with a professional photographer.

During Phase 2, co-researchers worked in their respective countries taking

photos of their everyday life with researchers assisting via text consultations and video calls when necessary.

Phases 3 and 4 took place in a workshop in Vilnius. During the workshop, we worked with the photos taken by co-researchers, developed a qualitative coding system and applied it in data analysis. The SHOWED method was applied, which involved asking co-researchers the following questions:

- 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**?

These questions helped structure our discussions and served as starting points for exploring the ideas and experiences that the co-researchers wanted to share. Additionally, we attended an art exhibition opening to familiarize ourselves with the artistic and curatorial processes involved in exhibition making, considering together how the public exhibition of the work could expand its meaning.

Phase 5 will be carried out by publishing this report, organizing exhibitions in both countries, and participating in public events, such as democracy festivals, to share the results of the research with a wider audience.

← Photo by Ruslan Nigmatullin

Photo by Ieva Gaučaitė

Challenges

This chapter outlines transportation and physical environment challenges, identified while organizing in-person meetings, that limit or deny access to living independently for people with disabilities in Lithuania and Latvia. Anča and Neimane,[30] in their Practical Guide developed in the framework of the project "Green Routes Without Obstacles" (*Žalieji maršrutai be kliūčių*), highlight that obstacles preventing full access for people with mobility challenges include issues related to "environment and society, architecture, transportation, information, and culture." One of the main challenges in organizing our meetings was the infrastructure, which was only partially adapted to the needs of people with mobility disabilities.

30 Anča and Neimane, *Praktinis vadovas tikslinėms grupėms.*

International and Local Transportation

The first problem encountered by both teams was traveling between the countries, i.e., reaching Riga and Vilnius in a way that would be comfortable for the co-researchers who use wheelchairs. To comply with the project's values and the Erasmus+ program's priorities, we looked for sustainable modes of transport. Given the relatively short distance between the countries, we limited options to either train or bus. At the time of the project, none of the bus companies operating between Vilnius and Riga offered international travel services suitable for wheelchair users. Therefore, a train service between Vilnius and Riga became the only option.

At the time of this project, the Vilnius-Riga train 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 the Lithuanian railway company (*Lietuvos geležinkeliai*), does not allow booking more than one seat for a wheelchair user. If multiple wheelchair users are traveling together, it is necessary to write an email well in advance to request the provision of additional accessible seating and assistance services.[31] The space for the wheelchair user(s) is allocated inside the carriage equipped with a wheelchair-accessible toilet and a space for bicycles. When the bicycle racks are full, however, it becomes difficult to reach the wheelchair-accessible toilet. Additionally, boarding is only possible with the assistance from the train crew, as the ramp used for boarding is manual.

Local transportation provided additional challenges. Organizers discovered that some trains in Lithuania are made accessible for wheelchairs,

31 source: customer service information, 11.10.2024.

Photo by Ruslan Nigmatullin →

some are partially accessible (e.g., they have no accessible toilet), and some are not accessible at all. On their webpage, ltglink.lt, they have published a scheme (see Annex 1) of accessible train stations and 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 travelers 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 travelers in wheelchairs should “travel Lithuania without restrictions”, yet requires travelers to notify the company of their “need for assistance” by e-mail at least 36 hours in advance. Only a fraction of buses are 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, so the driver carried her onto the bus in his arms.

One of the project participants needed to take a route that had only one accessible bus available on the day of travel. However, the bus operated late in the evening and was therefore unsuitable. The organizers contacted several bus companies to ask about alternative accessible transport options but no other solution was offered. Additional research showed that the regional bus company did not offer any service for wheelchair users. The only possibility was the bus service provided by the municipal Social Services Department. Despite the organizers initiating inquiry one month before the workshop, the service for that day had already been booked by another person.

Photo by Ruslan Nigmatullin →

Transportation within the city proved equally challenging. The public transport system in Vilnius mainly consists of trolleybuses and buses. While none of the buses in the online schedule of the city transport[32] are marked as accessible, a number of areas in the city are connected only by buses. 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 or access for people using wheelchairs.

Following an exchange with the co-researchers, we would note that transport issues are among the factors contributing 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 much in advance, and even then they can sometimes be left with no travel options. There is no space for spontaneity with which many young people go about their lives.

32 www.stops.lt/vilnius, accessed 02.10.2024.

← Photo by Marta Skrube

Venues for Activities & Eateries

The search for a venue in Vilnius revealed that most rental office spaces do not follow Universal Design guidelines. Some cultural and educational institutions, such as the National Museum, National Library, and universities, have spaces equipped for wheelchair users. However, even in these institutions, there are rooms or floors that remain inaccessible due to high thresholds or stairs. The event in Riga was held at European Union House (*Eiropas Savienības māja*), which had a wheelchair-accessible lift, toilets, and an accessible entrance (though only the service entry). The event in Vilnius took place at a new, fully accessible, building at the Vilnius Academy of Arts.

Finding solutions for dining out in both cities also proved difficult. As noted 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 centers. Many venues outside shopping centers that were considered because of their proximity to the work space, especially those in the old town, lacked accessibility measures. Some had partial accessibility, like accessible toilets without ramps or step-free entrances without accessible toilets. Each restaurant with an accessibility icon had to be verified in advance, and often the accessibility claims were either false or only partially true.

Accessibility in the hotels and hostels was also limited. Only a few medium-range hotels had accessibility measures such as lifts and accessible bathrooms. However, the co-researchers pointed out that high hangers, card-key slots and towel racks in the rooms were inaccessible.

Data analysis

Society of Healthy People. Environment as a Tool of Discrimination

> *CR1[33]: 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 a 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 who have different movement challenges and others.*

The research confirms what is already well known in scientific literature and policy documents: both countries remain challenging places to live for people with mobility disabilities.[34, 35, 36] However, this study adds to existing knowledge by focusing on the overall experiences of young people, not just the accessibility of education, employment, or state institutions. Using the Photovoice method, co-researchers were able to show not only what is inaccessible but also what is missing. To convey

33 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.

34 Kuznetsova, Yalcin and Priestley, “Labour Market Integration and”, 577.

35 Beliūnienė, “Protecting Persons with Disabilities”, 179.

36 Blumberga, “The Portrayal of Disability”.

this, the chapter examines the codes developed by the co-researchers during the analysis process:

- “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 organized around the photos and discussions linked to the codes. We begin with cases the co-researchers found less offensive but still deeply impactful, showing how young people often have to navigate obstacles unnoticed by others. Here we include photos coded as “Unnecessary struggle. Psychological inconvenience. Stupid.” Through examples, we show how daily life for young people with mobility disabilities is a constant compromise between difficult public spaces and their efforts to maintain their presence.

Next, we explore the experiences that triggered the strongest negative emotions among the co-researchers, highlighting a clear sense of injustice and absurdity during analysis. We focus on photos coded as “Unreachability: Mission Impossible,” “Why do we have stairs at all?”, “No choice,” and “Without access – stairs, the largest enemy.” It would be unfair to say there are no efforts to improve the situation, and as shown in the following chapters, some improvements are significant.

However, this should not obscure the daily reality: many of the ramps, support railings and similar structures, while meeting basic guidelines, still serve little practical purpose. In this section, we review examples through photos coded as “Done because it is required but done badly,” and “Doing things in poor quality.”

Finally, we explore a code category which characterizes an important part of how the discrimination is experienced and lived. We focus on what our co-researchers called “not that great”: a phrase that in various forms was used throughout the discussions to describe the experiences of our co-researchers. It shows how the societal attitudes towards mobility disability in Latvia and Lithuania create pressure to downplay the shortcomings of the physical environment, making them seem problematic yet inevitable. This, in turn, discourages co-researchers from challenging the situation and helps maintain the status quo.

All of our co-researchers submitted photos that they felt captured the struggle of living with a mobility disability in Latvia or Lithuania. Most photos showed places lacking accessibility, often featuring stairs and other man-made obstacles. Some also showed hotel rooms advertised as wheelchair accessible but with inaccessible cupboards, sinks, and other features. This highlights that even when wheelchair-accessible rooms are available a rare find in both Riga and Vilnius), their actual accessibility can vary greatly. The photos reveal that current policies and plans do little to improve the situation for the youth with mobility disabilities. Instead of just a few inconveniences, a great number of photos in the code category “Unnecessary struggle. Psychological inconvenience. Stupid.” highlight that these are daily experiences that co-researchers must plan their lives around.

> *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 [inaud.] 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 recognized as the most visible form of inaccessibility, making them a frequently mentioned issue. However, co-researchers also pointed out that the issue is not always the stairs themselves, but the lack of alternatives that would make spaces accessible to people with mobility disabilities. Co-researchers were realistic about the challenges they faced. Their resilience in an often-challenging world made them aware of how unreasonable many situations were. The photos under categories “Unreachability: Mission impossible,” “Why do we have stairs at all?”, “No choice,” and “Without access – stairs the largest enemy,” often depicted absurd places or situations, including concerts or shops, as well as state and municipal institutions. At the same time, the depicted situations were more mundane compared to those discussed earlier. Photos in this code family are among the most direct ways to show how discrimination is experienced in daily life. While a broken lift or stairs without a ramp create immediate obstacles, daily discriminatory experiences are often less dramatic. They arise from things like awkwardly placed streetlights that force one to squeeze past, or the sudden realization that a concert won’t have space for people in wheelchairs, limiting the experience. This type of exclusion may be particularly impactful for young people, as they might not yet have developed strategies for navigating their environment. Some people with mobility disabilities may also lack the social networks that could offer support and help them maintain resilience in the face of such challenges. The photos in this section highlight the many small, subtle, obstacles that may cause a person to avoid public spaces altogether—deepening their isolation. This data aligns with broader research (Putniņa et al., 2024), which shows

that the inaccessibility of the physical environment has a significant impact on young people’s social connections, even when they manage to overcome the challenges.

The process of overcoming an uncooperative physical environment is often made more complicated by how the support mechanisms themselves are created and maintained. Co-researchers grouped photos of such places and situations under codes: “Done because it is required but done badly” and “Doing things in poor quality.” Both codes refer to cases where the built infrastructure either lacks any functional purpose or is unusable for other reasons, as shown in Picture no.1. The adjustments made to the stairs in the picture appear functional at first glance. However, they are unusable for someone in a wheelchair alone and difficult to navigate even with assistance.

CR5: [..] 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 had different opinions about the reasons behind cases such as the one in the picture. Some co-researchers recognized that, on one hand, such cases might result from a lack of knowledge. They were also aware that such constructions show carelessness, particularly on the part of business owners. In discussions, co-researchers distinguished between adjustments made by the state and municipal institutions and private businesses. State and municipal buildings were seen as more likely to offer sensible adjustments, while businesses were more often believed to make only cosmetic changes, even when their intentions appeared well-meaning. The mother of one of the co-researchers shared a story of how they met the owner of one of their favorite cafes.

Picture no. 1, by Markuss Bluķis

The owner helped them enter the building, and promised to improve access to it, yet nothing improved to this day. Stories like this were familiar to many co-researchers and contributed to a sense of futility. Most co-researchers felt it was not worth their time to challenge how spaces were organized or to demand better access. This illustrates how the constant presence of infrastructure that does not support young people with mobility disabilities can lead to self-exclusion and reduced engagement with society, even when these issues directly affect them. The reluctance to engage with such issues proved to be one of the most telling—yet often hidden—aspects of the way discrimination appeared (or did not appear) in the stories of co-researchers. What stood out most during the time we, researchers and co-researchers, spent together, was the ability co-researchers shared to explain away the examples of direct discrimination. One of the phrases used most often was “not that great”, which was established as a separate code category. This phrase kept coming up both in the process of discussions and analysis, 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 bullshit, but I wouldn’t want to say it like, I want to put it nicely, for some reason, I don’t understand why.*

The need to maintain this careful, thoughtful atmosphere may have been partly caused by the way the workshops were run. As illustrated by the fragment above, co-researchers gradually became aware of self-censoring during the discussion, but felt that changing this approach was almost impossible. As the conversation continued, some co-researchers noted that part of their reluctance to point out problems came from a sense of guilt they felt 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 [inaud.] that I inconvenience this person.

Our research shows that this sense of guilt arises both from interactions with others—where people often react with annoyance when asked for help—and from the physical environment, which feels equally unwelcoming due to its inaccessibility and complexity, as discussed earlier. This guilt may also explain why discussions with co-researchers rarely addressed discrimination directly.

Feeling "Excluded from the Bigger Picture"

In this part of the analysis, we will discuss what images evoke feelings of sadness, being unwanted and having one's dignity undermined. These photos were coded during the post-collection discussion with the co-researchers as follows: "Feeling of being unwanted", "Unwillingness to change things", "Sadness", "Sad realisation of how long things will take", "Dignity or lack of it". Some photos in these groups contained one or several of these codes, which was discussed in depth during the coding workshop. One group of overlapping codes includes "feeling unwanted", "unwillingness to change things" and "sadness". These codes are closely linked, with one influencing the other. For example, the feeling of "unwillingness to change things" often leads to feelings of sadness, as illustrated in the following discussion.

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.

Picture no. 2, by Laine Aleksandra Dovkante

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

> *CR2: I have a picture 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: E. [...] 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 stems from the inability to access things due to what co-researchers described as half-measures or inadequate solutions. Several examples of this were captured in the photos, with the co-researchers' descriptions adding emotional depth to the visual data:

> *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. [pic. 3 and 4]*

Half-measures become exclusionary and discriminatory, preventing people with mobility disabilities from fully participating in social and cultural spaces; or allowing access only for some, rather than providing equal access for all.

The feeling of exclusion—starting from the planning stages of infrastructure—leads to sadness, as it reflects a deeper sense of not belonging to the social fabric. The co-researchers expressed these feelings not only through words but also through visual tools, such as shadow and light, to highlight the distance between people with mobility disabilities and what CR1 referred to as "places of desire." He used these compositional elements to emphasize this separation:

> *CR1: So here you can see a museum, or whatever that is here. Its massiveness and brightness represents 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.*

Picture no. 3, by Ieva Gaučaitė

Picture no. 4, by Ieva Gaučaitė

Talking about another picture, the same co-researcher explains how reaching the above mentioned “places of desire” is an experience of navigating through the passage, which he describes as follows:

> *CR1: [The] passage [to reach the destination] is dark, chaotic, you can see a lot of violent colors and shapes if you look into it. The passage represents challenges that people with special needs have to overcome in order to get to their destination, which are good things and that is pretty much the common thing for all of my pictures. [pic.5]*

The “Sadness” code links photos categorized under “Feelings of being unwanted (2),” “Unwillingness to change things (3),” and “Sad realization of how long things will take (4). The sadness stems from both the current lack of access 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 already taken too long. One co-researcher shared a story from her time living and studying in a Lithuanian town. She had long wanted to visit one of the main churches, but it was previously inaccessible due to stairs at the entrance. 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 stripped her of her autonomy, making her dependent on others for access. On a recent visit to the city, she noticed that a ramp had been installed:

> *CR3: And you can see a ramp here, it’s covered but it’s there and it appeared only recently, I think last September 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 realize how slow we are improving when it comes to accessibility stuff, how slow we are. How we skip the*

Picture no. 5, by Ruslan Nigmatullin

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 realizing how long it took for the decision to be made. [pic. 6]

Although the change is positive, the previous experience offers a measure of how long it takes to make the city truly accessible, particularly in relation to what the co-researcher calls: "the most important parts of cities." This situation invites further reflection on how space design can encourage or restrict certain affordances. For example, an environment that is only accessible by stairs is inherently ableist and exclusionary, accessible to certain people only (e.g. people who can move around without a wheelchair); thereby excluding a range of other bodies and modes of participation in urban and social spaces.

Examples such the Latvian seaside and public swings were instances of non-urban sites, which people consider essential to participate in. These spaces hold cultural and national significance, as through engaging with them, individuals become part of the cultural fabric and national identity. According to the researchers and co-researchers, Latvians perceive themselves as "people of the sea", the core of their national identity. Therefore, access to the seaside—an experience that affirms one's identity as a Latvian—is seen as crucial. However, access to the seaside is complicated for people in wheelchairs due to poorly constructed or short ramps (pic. 7), or can become dangerous if the passages, which in both the Lithuanian and Latvian seascapes are made of untreated wood, are wet and slippery (pic. 8). Similarly, participating in contemporary cultural rituals, like swinging on a swing at Easter to "ward off" mosquitoes in summer, a well-known Latvian tradition, becomes impossible if the swings are not adapted for wheelchair users (pic. 9). The inability to participate in such traditions, widely shared by Latvians, fosters feelings of exclusion, which in turn leads to sadness.

Picture no. 6 by Ieva Gaučaitė

Picture no. 7 by Laine Aleksandra Dovkante

Picture no. 8 by Monta Vasara-Beķere

Picture no. 9 by Laine Aleksandra Dovkante

> *CR4: [T]hese 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 a sad realization how long it takes. That it is not going to be soon, I think I know it will happen but probably not soon.*

The issues outlined above are fundamentally linked to both the respect and dignity of individuals. The limitations of inaccessible infrastructure show a lack of respect for bodies that don't fit the standard, and they also impact the dignity of people who struggle with these environments. 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 or perceives it.

Two photos have been categorized under "Dignity or lack of it", both showing toilet facilities. One of the toilets is an outdoor toilet in a seaside town in Lithuania (pic. 10). The facilities appear dirty. More importantly, access to the facilities is complicated by half a meter 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 rainy weather, the path becomes slippery, increasing the risk of the wheelchair user falling onto the grass beside the path.

Picture no. 10 by Ieva Gaučaitė

Picture no. 11 by Ieva Gaučaitė

The second photo is of a toilet in one of the hotels where the co-researcher stayed during one of the phases of this project (pic. 11). The hotel labeled this room as ‘wheelchair accessible’, implying that all facilities are either universal or adapted for people with disabilities.

However, the towel rack is placed too high for someone in a wheelchair to reach. This half-measure and lack of thought is what the author of the picture wants to highlight. It is the lack of consideration for the dignity of people, which ties the two situations together. Interestingly, another comment by one of the co-researchers about a different set of photographs, connects to this:

> *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 that some environments seem to be designed with only able-bodied or “healthy” people in mind, without considering the needs of those with mobility issues. An important discussion among the co-researchers focused on understanding what constitutes “unwillingness” to create or allow access to spaces like bars or shops on the part of those who build the infrastructure. They explored both the intentions and resources—financial and knowledge-based—that either enable or hinder the creation of more accessible environments. The co-researchers noted that there are cases where there is “willingness and effort [to create access], but not enough knowledge to do it” (CR3), which differs from cases where accessibility is poorly implemented just to meet “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: [I]f 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 note that feelings of "sadness" and "undesirability" arise when infrastructure does not prioritize universal access. These feelings are connected to a sense of one's dignity being undermined. This relates to the difference between merely "surviving" and truly "living" as a disabled person, as expressed by one of the co-researchers. Following her statement, we argue that being able to enter and use toilets, access certain places, and move freely through space without hindrance should be considered the baseline of "surviving." However, "living" means leading a dignified life, where one is able to have one's needs—cultural, social, economic—met and where they feel part of and are able to contribute to the social fabric. This is where non-physical access become crucial:

CR4: [...] these few pictures that I showed of websites... [inaud.] 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 [inaud.] 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 on 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 finally "The power of the right mindset".

Co-researchers saw "Respect", "Safety" and "Smart design" as interconnected. Photos coded with these labels showed gentle ramps with handrails (pic. 12), leading to important places like an information center, hospital, social services office, municipality, parking lot—vital services in local neighborhoods or for tourists. The photos also included wide, smooth, newly renovated sidewalks (pic. 12) and businesses with easy access, where gentle inclines replace steps and ramps, making entrances more accessible (pic. 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. [inaud.] 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.

Picture no. 12 by Ieva Gaučaitė

Picture no. 13 by Ruslan Nigmatullin

Respect means acknowledging someone's existence, wellbeing, needs, wishes and participation in society. A place designed using universal principles ensures that people from all backgrounds can use it, respecting their different needs. Such design would make people feel welcome, safe, and able to access their "places of desire", to actualize diverse activities. Feeling respected by those who plan and build infrastructure helps young people with mobility disabilities move through society with dignity. Smart design goes beyond just "doing the right things the right way"; it involves innovative solutions for accessibility. One of the co-researchers' offered the term smart design. This could include electric devices like wheelchair lifts or call buttons, or ramps that take up less space next to walkways. However, co-researchers cautioned against exceptionalizing these features as "smart design" as they should be considered elements of standard design. Places like shops, banks, hospitals or schools should be accessible because they are essential places for physical, emotional, and the social wellbeing of the members of society. The question arises: is providing access to these places a sign of respect and part of smart design, or just a basic infrastructural standard given the services they offer?

> *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 should eventually feel normal, seamless, and almost unnoticeable over time.

Co-researchers had differing opinions on what qualifies as smart design. Their interpretations of photos often differed from the meanings assigned to them by the authors in the descriptions. The author of the Picture no.14 noted that the ramp leads to their local social services office and

is overgrown with weeds which they felt indicated that the office didn't prioritize the needs and safety of clients with mobility issues. However, another co-researcher saw the same ramp as a well-designed one, noting its curve allowed it to take up less space. While the lack of context can highlight certain features of infrastructure, understanding its context can reveal long-term issues observed by those who regularly use it.

A discussion also arose about a photograph showing a bathroom stall with a call button and camera, allowing a guard to remotely open the door for people with disabilities (pic. 15). When the call button is pressed, a guard in the booth can remotely open the doors. The discussion turned to topics 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, especially with the camera placed higher than the wheelchair user. Additionally, the guard's understanding of disabilities could determine whether or not the person is allowed access. On the other hand, an inconveniently placed call button and camera can still be seen as a respectful and innovative solution, especially compared to having to track down an employee who holds the bathroom key.

> *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.14 by Markuss Bluķis

Picture no. 15 by Laine Aleksandra Dovkante

People with mobility disabilities have different mobility needs and preferences regarding the best solutions for accessibility. These differences should be considered when planning infrastructural improvements.

Another key topic that emerged when discussing good examples was the independence of young people with mobility disabilities. The code “Independence” was applied to photographs of ramps providing access to 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. 14). 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 selected as good design examples highlighted the creative ways young people with mobility disabilities navigate their environment. Even municipal infrastructure projects not originally designed for people with mobility disabilities can still be used for their needs. A case in point is Picture no. 16, coded under “Independence”, it depicts a cyclists’ path next to a long flight of stairs. Despite the steep incline, people with mobility disabilities can more easily navigate the path with assistance than the stairs. This example shows that an alternative to stairs is appreciated. Symbolically, the photo shows how the mobility needs of various social groups can be addressed in a single project. However, a design based on Universal Design principles would ensure the structure is accessible and safe for everyone.

Picture no. 16 by Ruslan Nigmatullin

Now, turning to examples that created strong positive feelings, one important example co-researchers offered was a raised flower bed next to a paved walkway, accessible to people in wheelchairs. This case inspired the code “Power of the right mindset”. Picture no.17 showed co-researchers that gardening is a possibility for those interested, even with mobility disabilities. One co-researcher who uses a wheelchair shared that although she grew up in a rural area where gardening is common, she never considered it an option for herself. This photograph revealed a new possibility for her, sparking interest in a new activity and offering the potential for joy and connection with others.

> *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 [is] the mindset when you have to adapt to an environment where you are limited in some kind.*

When new knowledge shows that an activity, once thought impossible because of the way a body is usually imagined to move, has become possible and accessible, it can make people feel excited and amazed. The author of Picture No.17, in a separate discussion, emphasized the need to talk about the joys that people with mobility disabilities can experience. She was the only one to voice this, and considering that most discussions focused on the daily challenges faced by young people with mobility disabilities, it shows that joy and carefree activities are rare for co-researchers. The activities that bring joy are the ones that allow people to live, not just survive.

Picture no. 17 by Laine Aleksandra Dovkante

People with mobility disabilities usually, if not always, have to plan ahead when leaving their homes. To make the trip easier, they need to consider obstacles like clothes for specific weather, terrain, road surface, stairs, access to a bathroom, etc., beforehand. The more information is available, the more likely the person will visit the venue.

> *CR4: I think the big part about the accessibility these days appears not just physical it's also about the information accessibility. That is the age of technology, it is very important and very tremendous. Because we also talked about how's there 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.*

A good example of information availability and accessibility is the conversation festival Lampa in Latvia providing an environment accessibility map (pic. 18). The map is available online. It has information on the terrain, stairs, inaccessible constructions, bathrooms, and other necessary sites. By combining it with the festival map that shows stages and events, one can plan which activities they can attend.

Festival organizers offer a chance to provide feedback on accessibility through three questionnaires: one for people with: 1) visual impairments, 2) hearing impairments, and 3) mobility impairments (pic. 19). If taken seriously, this feedback can improve accessibility by making it easy for those with smartphones and computers to offer quick suggestions. It also influences the design of temporary festival infrastructure. This informational accessibility helps individuals feel secure, knowing they are prepared for potential obstacles, and allows them to plan their visit with an assistant. Ultimately, this fosters independence and the chance to enjoy an experience beyond daily survival needs.

Despite the positive examples of good design offering hope for better accessibility, given their exceptionality, they still lead to frustration and sadness. The co-researchers questioned why there are so many poorly designed infrastructures and so few good ones. 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 but inside, there was a flight of stairs and no lift, making the ramp ineffective. Mixed feelings of hope and disappointment reflect the issue of half-measures: improvements that are either poorly executed or incomplete. Although the co-researchers have seen examples of good design, they feel there is still a long way to go before their mobility needs are fully met.

Picture no. 18

Picture no. 19

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 the two countries?

The research data shows no significant difference between Latvia and Lithuania regarding experiences of disability and discrimination. However, informal discussions with co-researchers revealed an interesting point: while some Lithuanian co-researchers viewed Riga positively, the Latvian participants admired the infrastructure 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. It highlights the importance of international cooperation and travel for enhancing the confidence and self-assurance of project participants.

Most photos taken by co-researchers focused on everyday challenges, particularly the inaccessibility of certain places and services due to poor design. Infrastructural challenges might hinder access to essential services, such as education, healthcare, financial services as well as leisure activities like going to concerts, visiting the beach, gardening, etc.

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. Without this information, young people with mobility disabilities may not even attempt to access services in person, as they face multiple obstacles that may be manageable individually but overwhelming together. When information is available, however, it allows them to plan their visits based on the resources they have. The issue of accessible local and international public transport also relates to these challenges, as discussed in the “Challenges” section of this report under “International and Local Transportation,” which outlines the difficulties faced by project participants.

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. Nevertheless, our co-researchers showed remarkable resilience in overcoming these challenges and demonstrated the ability to critically and realistically assess the research data.

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.

Photo by Markuss Bluķis

Photo by Monta Vasara-Beķere

Photo by Markuss Bluķis

Photo by Monta Vasara-Beķere

Photo by Ruslan Nigmatullin

Photo by Ruslan Nigmatullin

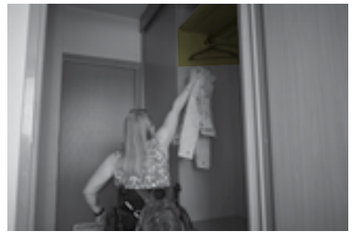


Photo by Ieva Gaučaitė

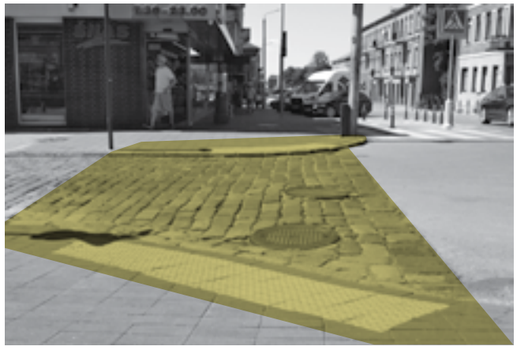


Photo by Ieva Gaučaitė

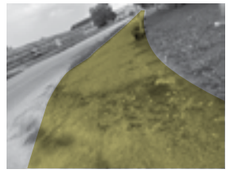


Photo by Reinis Bērziņš

Photo by Marta Skrube

Photo by Laine Aleksandra Dovkante

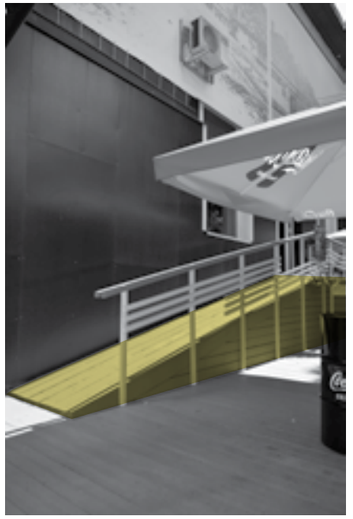


Photo by Ieva Gaučaitė

Photo by Markuss Bluķis

Photo by Laine Aleksandra Dovkante

Photo by Marta Skrube

Photo by Ruslan Nigmatullin

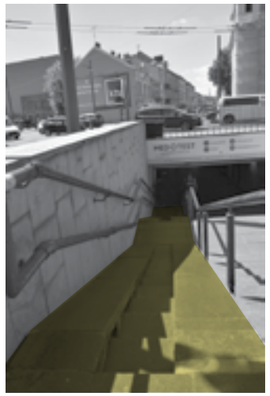


Photo by Ieva Gaučaitė

Photo by Ruslan Nigmatullin

Photo by Ruslan Nigmatullin

Photo by Emilija Miliauskaitė

Photo by Ieva Gaučaitė

Photo by Ruslan Nigmatullin

Photo by Marta Skrube

Photo by Ieva Gaučaitė

Annex 1

The schemes were retrieved on the 11th of October 2024 at the following link

Lietuvos geležinkeliai provides two schemes informing passengers in wheelchairs: 1) information regarding the possibilities to board certain trains and 2) accessibility measures in railway stations across Lithuania.

Maršrutas	Traukinio modelis	Traukinys turi išskleidžiamas/ pastatomas rampas nejgaliajam su vežimėliu įvažiuoti	Vieta traukinyje nejgaliajam su vežimėliu**	Universalus tualetas (WC pritaikytas vežimėliui)	Vaizdinė informavimo sistema	Garsinė informavimo sistema	Lytiminė informavimo sistema
Vilnius–Kaunas–Vilnius	EJ575	●	●	●	●	●	●
Vilnius–Trakai–Vilnius							
Vilnius–Klaipėda–Vilnius	730ML	●	●	●	●	●	●
Vietiniai Lietuvos maršrutai	630M	●	●	●	●	●	●
Vietiniai Lietuvos maršrutai	620M		●		●	●	●
Radviliškis–Panevėžys–Radviliškis	RA-2		●		●	●	●
Radviliškis–Klaipėda–Radviliškis							
Vietiniai Lietuvos maršrutai	DR1A		●			●	●
Kaunas–Kybartai–Kaunas	DR1AM		●			●	●
Vilnius–Turmantas–Vilnius	DR1AMv		●		●	●	●
Vilnius–Varėna–Vilnius							
Kaunas–Šiauliai–Kaunas							

● * Lentelėje pateikiami dažniausiai nurodytu maršrutu važiuojantys traukinio modeliai, tačiau gali pasitaikyti išimčių. Kiekvienu kelionės planavimo atveju rekomenduojame susisiekti su keleivių informacijos centru telefonu +370 700 55111 ir pasidomėti, ar specialiai Jūsų poreikiams pritaikytas traukinys važiuos konkrečią dieną ir valandą.

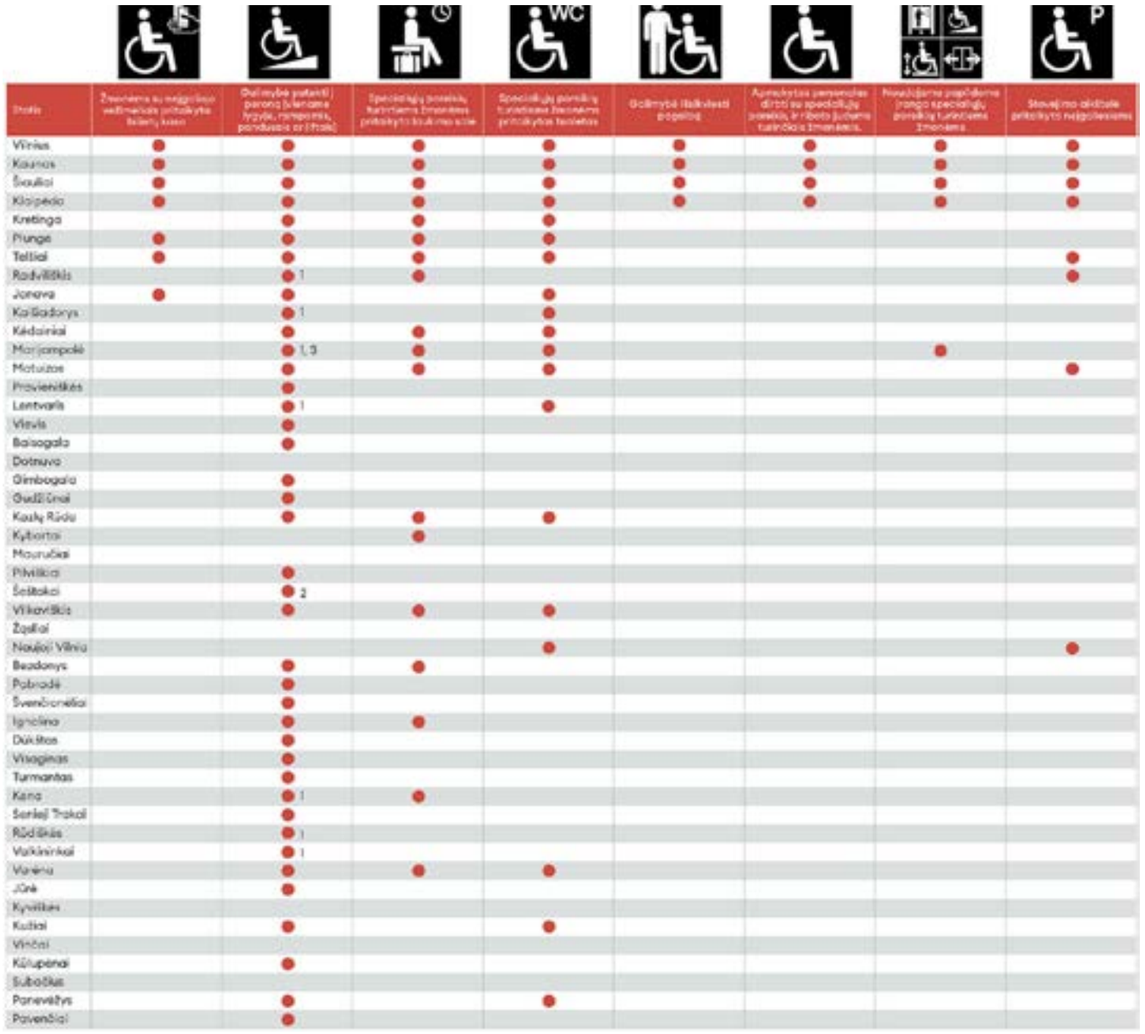
● ** Patekimo į traukinį ir išlipimo iš jo paslauga dėl infrastruktūros ar konstrukcinių ypatumų nėra galima 620M, DR1AMv, RA-2 traukinių modeliuose. Kiekvienu kelionės planavimo atveju rekomenduojame susisiekti su klientų informacijos centru telefonu +370 700 55111 ir pasidomėti, kokios galimybės patekti į traukinį ir iš jo išlipti Jūsų planuojamos kelionės pradinėje ir galinėje stotyse.

Numeracijų paaiškinimai:

● 1 - Galimybė patekti į pirmąjį peroną,

● 2 - Galimybė patekti į antrąjį peroną,

● 3 - Galimybė patekti į trečiąjį peroną



Stotis	Žmonėms su neįgaliojo vežimėliais pritaikyta išlipti kaso	Galimybė patekti į peroną (vienams lygyje, rampomis, pandusais ar liftais)	Specialiųjų poreikių turintiems žmonėms pritaikyta tualetas	Specialiųjų poreikių turintiems žmonėms pritaikytas tualetas	Galimybė išsikviesti pagalbą	Aprūpintas personalas dirbti su specialiųjų poreikių ir ribotų judumo turinčiais žmonėmis	Neužujamo papūdomo įrango specialiųjų poreikių turintiems žmonėms	Stovėjimo aikštelė pritaikyta neįgaliesiems
Vilnius	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Kaunas	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Šiauliai	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Klaipėda	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Kretinga		●	●	●				
Plungė	●	●	●	●				
Telšiai	●	●	●	●				●
Radviliškis		● 1	●					●
Jonava	●	●		●				
Kaišiadorys		● 1		●				
Kėdainiai		●	●	●				
Marijampolė		● 1, 3	●	●			●	
Matuizos		●	●	●				●
Provieniškės		●						
Lentvaris		● 1		●				
Vievis		●						
Baisogala		●						
Dotnuva								
Gimbogala		●						
Gudžiūnai		●						
Kaulų Rūdu		●	●	●				
Kybartai			●					
Mauručiai								
Pilviškiai		●						
Šeštokai		● 2						
Vilkaviškis		●	●	●				
Žąsliai								
Naujoji Vilnia				●				●
Beadonys		●	●					
Pabradė		●						
Švenčionėliai		●						
Ignalina		●	●					
Dūkštas		●						
Visaginas		●						
Turmantas		●						
Kena		● 1	●					
Senieji Trakai		●						
Rūdiškės		● 1						
Valkininkai		● 1						
Varėna		●	●	●				
Jūrė		●						
Kyviškės								
Kužiai		●		●				
Vinčai								
Kūlupėnai		●						
Subačius								
Panevėžys		●		●				
Pavenčiai		●						

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