



ERGP REPORT ON THE POSTAL SERVICE NEEDS OF VULNERABLE USERS

29 November 2024

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1 INTRODUCTION

The postal market has developed a lot, especially during these last few years, which has impacted the nature of the market. Traditional mail has dropped significantly, but e-commerce is growing, affecting the postal dynamics, especially for vulnerable users. However, not all users are in the same situation. Some users may require further support or regulatory developments to be integrated more into the postal world. It is important to understand the vulnerable users, their needs, and what is necessary or missing to cater to or protect them.

This ERGP report aims to provide insight into this matter, but further studies and the exchange of knowledge are necessary to ensure that vulnerable users are better integrated into society since postal services could be the only means of communication for those vulnerable users.

The report will identify the vulnerable users and analyse how their postal needs can best be met: by universal service requirements, other social measures, or even a combination of both types of measures.

The report is structured along the following sections:

- Section 1 is the introduction
- Section 2 gives the background of the study
- Section 3 concerns the methodology adopted
- Section 4 describes the current situation from a non-legal and legal perspective
- Section 5 provides insight into who are the vulnerable users and why
- Section 6 delves into the needs of the vulnerable users
- Section 7 provides an overview of the workshop
- Section 8 focuses on the main feedback obtained from the study and workshop
- Section 9 presents some country cases
- Section 10 reflects on the term of vulnerable users
- Section 11 provides a list of ERGP recommendations
- Section 12 is the conclusion of the report

2 BACKGROUND

This study aims to analyse and identify practices on how the needs of persons with special needs regarding postal services and public authorities' communication with such users could be met.

Vulnerable persons include, for example, digitally excluded people, people with different types of disabilities, the elderly, and/or inhabitants of rural areas. As more and more people become less dependent on letter mail services, indicating that the general requirements of universal letter mail services could be reviewed, vulnerable users still have a high dependence on these services.

The report will reflect how this gap in needs can best be bridged—by universal service requirements or other social measures directed at vulnerable user groups. A vital input for this report is the ERGP workshop on the protection of the most vulnerable users, which was held on 20 June in Vienna and captured the attention of various experts in the field.

The first challenge of this study is to identify the vulnerable users. Currently, the identified vulnerable users are at least the blind and the visually impaired; however, the concept is required to capture a broader spectrum of users, such as digitally excluded people, people with diverse types of disabilities, the elderly and/or inhabitants living in rural areas.

Letter mail trends indicate that volumes are dropping yearly, implying that fewer people are utilising this service, mainly due to the ongoing digital development. However, vulnerable users are more dependent on postal services.

Given the scenarios mentioned above, the study focuses on identifying gaps between the needs of vulnerable users and the current measures to assist them. The report will provide insight into these matters and recommendations.

3 METHODOLOGY

The subject is relatively new and vast, so research and input were necessary to build knowledge and expertise about it.

The first step required much desk research among the ERGP Consumer and Core Indicators WG members, which was discussed during the first working group meeting on 1 and 2 February in Vienna.

The second step involved designing two questionnaires to capture the various stakeholders' perspectives on vulnerable users, their needs, and what the future holds for them from a legal and non-legal perspective. One questionnaire was sent to the National Regulatory Authorities (NRAs), Ministries and other consumer entities or stakeholders representing vulnerable users. The other questionnaire was sent to the Universal Service Provider and other postal service providers via NRAs. The questionnaires were sent on 7 March 2024; the deadline was 5 April 2024.

For the questionnaire sent to the NRAs, Ministries, and other consumer entities, 28 NRAs provided feedback, and 17 other entities provided input. The ERGP WG received feedback from 46 stakeholders for the other questionnaire via the NRAs: 26 Universal Service Providers and 22 other postal service providers.

Given the various feedback obtained across the board, the ERGP decided to classify the responses based on country to provide a comparative and concise understanding of the submissions. Also, it was agreed that the replies would be clustered so that the major points are highlighted and identified when compiling the report.

The third step was a workshop on vulnerable users, held on 20 June in Vienna. The feedback submitted by various stakeholders constituted a significant input for the workshop since it assisted the WG in identifying the scope and areas that the three panels would discuss during the seminar.

The following is an analysis of the feedback received from stakeholders and NRAs and the outcome of the discussions held during the workshop.

4 CURRENT SITUATION

4.1 Current situation – market perspective

First, it is necessary to understand how the market, the NRAs, other entities, and postal operators perceive vulnerable users.

Note that among 28 answers from NRAs, 3 NRAs (BG, MD, RS) specified that they are collecting specific data related to vulnerable users. MK specified that the USP has to submit data on the number of items sent for (partially) blind persons. NO is collecting data based on age and geography, and 3 NRAs (BE, PT, SI) have reports that consider postal vulnerable users to some extent.¹

It is important to have enough information for future decisions. To this end surveys among EU countries about vulnerable users and their needs can be helpful and are not widely available at the moment.

Collaboration with other entities concerned with or specialised in vulnerable users can provide helpful input for future postal service decisions regarding vulnerable users and their needs.

4.1.1 Overview of the different categories of measures

The different NRAs and operators detected a set of measures already in place that can help vulnerable users, and in this section, we have clustered these measures for the different categories of vulnerable users.

Note that operators provided more generic measures/services that may be helpful for multiple categories of vulnerable users, but which are not specifically intended for vulnerable users. In fact, for vulnerable users it may be more useful (than for other users) to deal with operators offering those measures/services.

¹ In BE, the NRA's postal user study identifies needs of postal users with an emphasize on vulnerable users (<https://www.bipt.be/consumers/publication/the-bipt-carries-out-a-new-study-on-the-needs-of-postal-users>).

In PT, the USP submits to the NRA a report on how the needs and interests of particularly vulnerable users are being accommodated in the context of ANACOM's decision on the distribution of postal items at premises other than the home address.

In SI, the NRA examines the USP's monthly reports on exceptions to USO rules.

The following graph gives an overview of countries' measures for each category of vulnerable users:

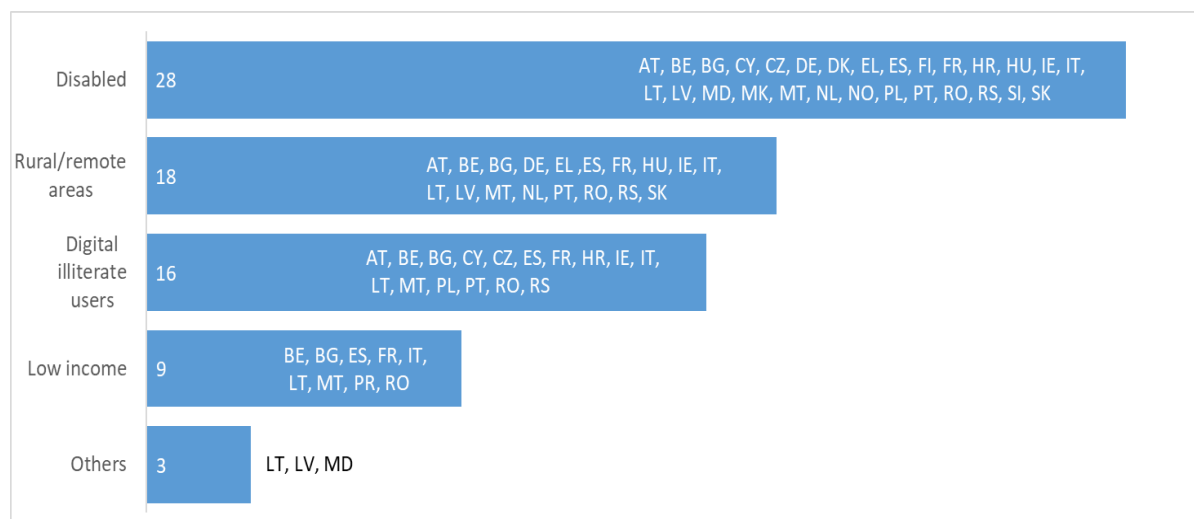


Figure 1: Measures already in place for vulnerable users.

4.1.2 The different categories of measures in detail

The different categories of measures will be presented in the following sub-chapters: measures in favour of users with disabilities (4.1.2.1), users living in rural or remote areas (4.1.2.2), digitally illiterate users (4.1.2.3), low-income users (4.1.2.4) and measures in favour of other vulnerable users (4.1.2.5).

4.1.2.1 Measures in favour of users with disabilities

For vulnerable users suffering from disabilities, the different measures can be grouped as follows:

First, Article 16, paragraph 3 of the Universal Postal Convention, stipulates that items for the blind have to be exempt from all postal charges. Consequently, 22 countries (out of 28) indicated explicitly free postal services for the blind and visually impaired through sending of cecograms (BE, CY, CZ, DE, ES, EL, FI, FR, HU, IE, IT, LT, LV, MD, MT, NL, NO, PT, RO, RS, SI, SK).

Eight countries (out of 28) mentioned general obligations that do not concern vulnerable users specifically, such as the general principle of equal treatment of / accessibility to all users (EL, FR, HU, LT, NO, PT, RO, SI).

Operators in 16 countries (out of 28) (AT, BE, BG, CZ, DK, ES, FI, FR, HR, HU, LV, MD, PL, PT, RS, SK) also provide specific home services. These services may include managing returns, admission of mail and parcels, withdrawing cash, paying taxes for administrations, paying invoices, paying VAT/customs duties of international shipments, requesting a vote by mail, purchasing packaging, selling lotteries, social payments, and pensions payments.

Three countries (out of 28) also mentioned a special form of collection or delivery at the door to people with disabilities or the elderly (DK, FI, PL) or specific delivery accommodations according to the recipient's preferences (to a family member, to a 3rd person, agreement with delivery driver, into building floor, notifications to guardians for judicial documents, the ability of modifying delivery date/time, delivery authorisation, consignment redirection) or delivery services with alternative delivery methods (boat, drones).

Accessibility to the postal infrastructure is also important and may help people with disabilities. Those specific features, reported by 22 countries out of 28, make postal points and post offices more accessible (AT, BE, BG, CY, CZ, DK, ES, FI, FR, HU, IE, IT, LT, MD, MK, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, RS, SI) with priority lines/services in post offices for specific users (ES, IT, LV, PL, PT, RO), or with obligation to inform about accessibility and/or priority measures (CZ, IT, PT, SK). Those accessibility features may include a ramp, wheelchair access, barrier-free design and guidance systems, a map for postal points with specific accommodations (FI), self-service stations, and parking spaces. Specific adjustments and technology can also be included in (and around) parcel lockers (LT, NO). This may consist of braille, adapted location and adapted processes. Accessible letter boxes are also available (PL).

Being a postal operator and providing his services goes along with customer assistance at post offices/postal points but also via phone or website/applications/chatboxes (reported by 16 countries out of 28; AT, BE, BG, CY, CZ, ES, FR, HR, IT, LT, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, RS). Specialised equipment such as tactile keyboards, magnifiers, hearing loops (CZ, RO) or trained personnel (sign language) (IT) can also be found in postal offices.

Digital solutions such as digital letters (ES, FR) or digital stamps (FR, IE) are also available for this category.



Figure 2: Measures in favour of users with disabilities.

4.1.2.2 Measures in favour of users living in rural or remote areas

For people living in rural or remote areas, measures can be grouped as follows:

Of course, some measures can be helpful and benefit different types of vulnerable users. Digital solutions (described in the previous section) also fall into this category.

Half of the countries reported that a vast network for collection/delivery of postal items could also be a good way of dealing with people living in rural/remote areas (AT, BE, BG, EL, ES, FR, IT, LT, MT, NL, PT, RO, RS, SK). It may include post offices, postal points, letterboxes, parcel lockers and community mailboxes, with incentives to keep the network broad (IT) (ban on closing post offices, e.g. in rural areas, islands, mountains), as well as mobile post offices (DE, HU, LT, LV).

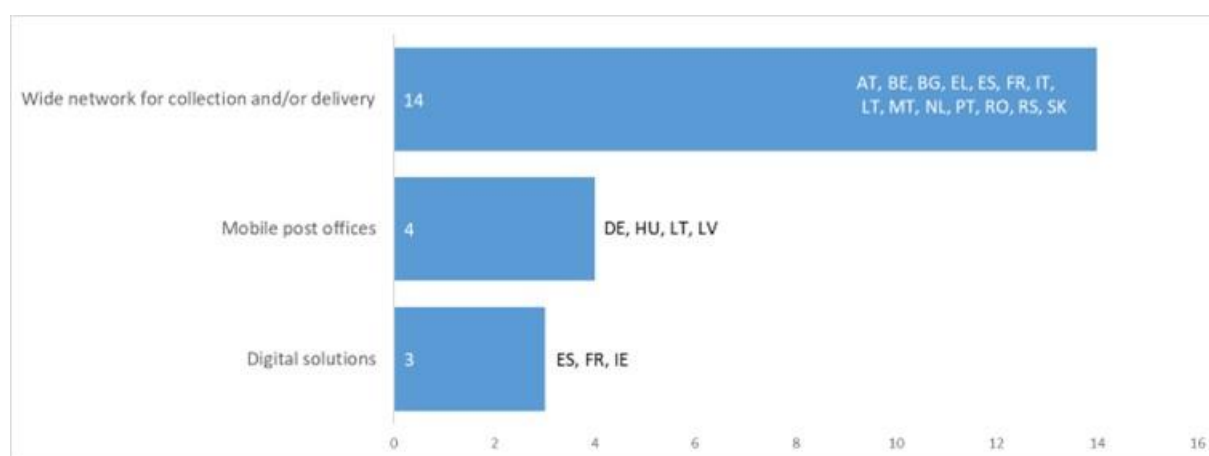


Figure 3: Measures in favour of users living in rural or remote areas.

4.1.2.3 Measures in favour of digitally illiterate users

For digitally illiterate users, some measures are also taken by operators:

- Customer assistance can also be helpful for those users, with all the measures described above and specific things such as digital tutors in post offices (FR).
- Maintaining paper-based services (IT) is also considered to help digitally illiterate users.
- Specific free-of-charge services at postal offices (BG, ES, IE) can also be more helpful, e.g. including tax pay, sending digitalised documents, and buying event tickets.

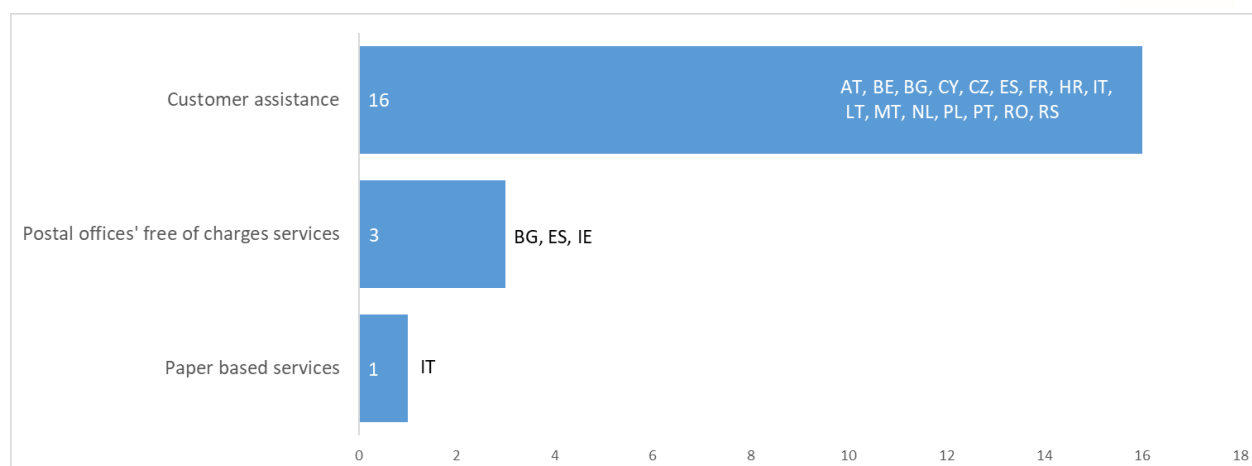


Figure 4: Measures in favour of digitally illiterate users.

4.1.2.4 Measures in favour of low-income users

For low-income users, NRAs or operators often mention that the US is affordable (BE, BG, ES, FR, IT, LT, MT, PT, RO; 9 out of 28 countries). Some operators also mentioned charging a discounted tariff in specific conditions (print label through the website).

4.1.2.5 Measures in favour of other vulnerable users

Three countries (LT, LV, MD) indicated explicitly free postal delivery for war prisoners. This tariff exemption is laid down in Article 16, paragraph 2 of the Universal Postal Convention and is based upon International Humanitarian Law (Geneva Conventions of 1949), so this applies to all member states.

4.2 Current situation – legal perspective

Based on the responses received from regulatory bodies, it is undoubtedly evident that none of the ERGP members has a specific definition of vulnerable users in their national Postal Services Act. Furthermore, certain countries (such as BE, FR, HR, HU, IE, IT, MK, NO and SK) have indicated in their responses that they have ensured universal service for blind and visually impaired users in their national legislation, while others also mentioned that, in addition to this, they ensure the protection of persons with limited mobility (such as FR, HR, HU, IT). As mentioned, it is important to note that NRAs do not specify the method by which this protection is provided in their responses. Some countries have also emphasised in their responses that certain population groups (e.g. residents living in remote rural areas, unemployed individuals, people with chronic illnesses, persons with reduced mobility, and elderly people) have already been supported by their government through various decisions (e.g., EL, IT), while LT has highlighted that the rights of vulnerable users could potentially be correlated with consumer rights related to social criteria and tariffs for the supply of electricity, gas, water and electricity.

Regarding the need to revise existing legislation to introduce a definition of vulnerable users into the EU system, we do not have clear answers. In this regard, it is emphasised that the majority of NRAs (CZ, HR, IT, LT, MK, MT, MD, PL, RS, SI and SK) unequivocally expressed the need to adopt a uniform legal definition of vulnerable groups among member states, which would define these users and their specific needs for all EU countries. However, a smaller number of NRAs (AT, BE, ES, NL and FR) stated concerning this question that in the short term, they do not see the need to revise existing national legislation for lack of such definition at the EU level and leave this possibility open exclusively for the future, depending on the development of the regulatory framework and future trends in the postal sector, i.e. how e-commerce and parcel delivery services will evolve.

As mentioned, DE, DK, FI and RO stated in their responses that they see no need to define groups of vulnerable users in national postal law, explaining that in such a case, there would be a risk that such a definition would conflict with other laws already existing in their legal systems that define vulnerable users. Unlike the NRAs mentioned above, fewer countries did not respond to the second question, referring to the need to revise existing legislation (BG, CY, LV and PT).

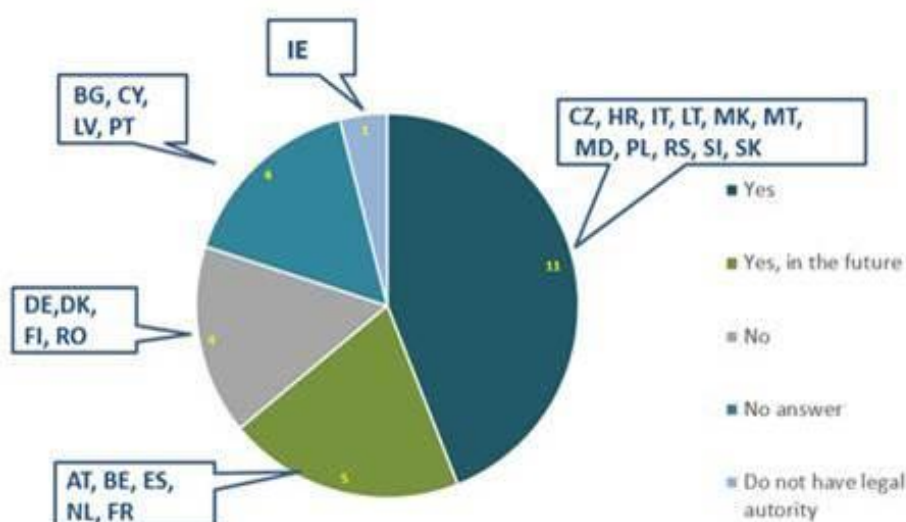


Figure 5: Need for a change in the existing national legislation

In conclusion, the issue of vulnerable users' needs to be elaborated through cooperation and dialogue between regulatory bodies, the Ministry, other policy decision-makers, providers and representatives of vulnerable user groups, especially if this would become an element of the review of the European postal framework or the national postal framework.

5 WHO ARE THE VULNERABLE USERS, AND FOR WHAT REASONS?

5.1 NRAs' and other entities' perspective

Until now, international law lays down that the universal postal service provider does not charge the provision of postal services regarding cecograms to the blind and visually impaired people nor postal services to prisoners of war and interned civilians specified in the international agreement².

Among the countries from the survey, postal items of up to 7 kg for blind and visually impaired people are free of charge except for the extra charge for airborne transportation sent by/to blind people and/or visually impaired people or by/to officially recognised institutions for blind people and people with sight difficulties and marked with the prescribed distinctive marks.

These two categories of users (the blind and the prisoners of war) were also the topic of our first reflections. In accordance with international agreements, the members agreed that these two categories have been treated as vulnerable users for decades.

Furthermore, there were different answers from the NRAs' perspective, which are clustered in the categories of potentially vulnerable consumers as sorted in the operators' questionnaire (consumers with physical/mental disabilities, consumers in remote areas, digitally illiterate consumers, and low-income users). But the answers also included some additional categories, such as people with a different mother tongue than the national languages³, women in advanced pregnancy⁴, illiterate people⁵, adults and children living in shelter centres and other foster centres for victims of domestic violence⁶.

The figure below reflects the composition of the responses. As vulnerable users, most countries (71%) considered disabled persons, 46% considered consumers living in remote areas and 46% the elderly population. People with low income and digital illiteracy had the same percentage, 32%.

² Geneva Convention dated August 12, 1949, for Protection of Civilian Persons in Times of War

³ BE

⁴ IT

⁵ FR

⁶ MK

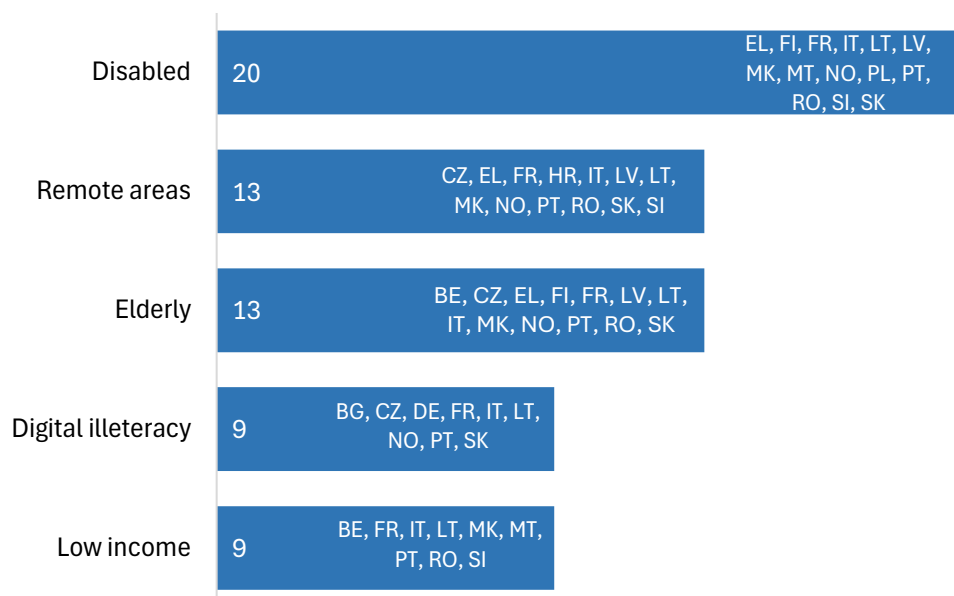


Figure 6: NRAs and Other Entities' perspectives of who the vulnerable users are

As to why consumers are considered postal vulnerable users, 18 NRAs⁷ provided feedback:

- For people with physical and/or mental disabilities

Difficulties are encountered in accessing postal points (post offices, post boxes, parcel lockers, etc.). For the category of wheelchair users, there is a lack of ramps or postal installations are set up too high; for the visually impaired/blind- there is a lack of instruction (including tactile and Braille signs, audio signs, etc.).

Based on the answers, it can be concluded that it is important for consumers with disabilities and chronic illnesses to have assistance and adequate support, such as audio and video instruction in postal offices where possible.

The Danish Postal Act contains rules regarding "Post to the Door." This scheme allows citizens to receive their mail directly to their front door following a municipal decision. A dispensation to get "Post to the Door" must be based on the recipient's physical and mental health, preventing the person in question from picking up mail in a letterbox. For a detailed description of the situation in Denmark, see Chapter 9.1.

⁷ BE, BG, CZ, DE, DK, ES, EL, FR, FI, HR, IT, LT, MK, MT, NO, PL, SI, SK

- Remote areas⁸

Poor road infrastructure and a lack of public and private transport often affect consumers who live in remote areas, excluding them from daily delivery. Usually, people living there are elderly people with lower incomes and digitally illiterate. Besides exclusion from daily delivery, fast and reliable postal service provision in these very remote areas constitutes a problem.

- The elderly population

The reason could be that special services are adapted to their needs, especially delivery directly to their front door. In the case of an age criterion for elderly vulnerable people, it should be transparent and clear.

According to postal law in Finland, the personal special needs of a recipient that may be considered when arranging postal delivery are, for example, mobility impairment or being older than 75. Persons with such special needs are entitled, on request, to an arrangement that deviates from the usual delivery method used in the area, such as delivery to an apartment-specific slot. The universal service provider must also ensure that transactions can be conducted at the service points without hindrance.

- Low income

Low-income people, who are already socially vulnerable, may find it financially challenging to pay for postal services. They often depend more on postal services for communication, bill payment and access to essential resources, as financially vulnerable users sometimes have no access to digital communications. Poverty may be an important factor associated with all the abovementioned categories.

- Digital illiteracy

People experiencing difficulties using digital tools - digital illiteracy - can be considered postal vulnerable users because their communication habits rely more on letters than those of other parts of the population.⁹ Furthermore, many postal services require the use of a smartphone, the Internet, or an app, which may be inaccessible to the poor or elderly¹⁰.

In Norway, post offices have been replaced by "Post in Shop" and parcel lockers, and more services are offered digitally. For example, postal services are cheaper when ordered online than when bought physically in a "Post in Store," so consumers need to be able to use digital tools.

Besides NRA, there are different associations, mainly related to consumer protection and competent ministries, answered the same questionnaire. The answers are very similar to the previous ones and are part of the annex.

⁸ does not necessarily include all people living in remote areas

⁹ FR

¹⁰ CZ

In Slovenia, the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities¹¹ identifies the following as vulnerable groups of the population facing a higher risk of social exclusion and unequal opportunities:

- people on low incomes who often depend on social transfers for their survival
- people with disabilities
- homeless
- migrants, refugees and asylum seekers
- children and adolescents with growing-up problems
- and other vulnerable groups (victims of violence, drug addicts, people with mental health problems, etc.)

In accordance with the regulations of the Ministry of Social Security and Labor of the Republic of Lithuania, the following persons need social integration: persons with disabilities, elderly (from 55 years old), political prisoners, deportees and their family members, foreigners, victims of violence, victims of human trafficking, persons suffering from addiction diseases, persons who have returned from places of imprisonment, other vulnerable and socially excluded persons.

In Italy, consumer organisations consider people with disability, sick people and elderly people as vulnerable users, and they point out reasons for each category¹², among them, if there is no assistance for blind, mentally/physically disabled persons or if they cannot go to the postal premises on their own. The lack of digital skills is also an issue for the sick and elderly.

The Portugal Consumer Organisation (DECO) defines vulnerable users as follows: elderly users, users living in remote and rural areas, users with low income, and users lacking digital skills or having reduced mobility. A similar answer was provided by a third-age university in Lithuania (vulnerable users due to mental, physical and psychological disability, elderly population).

The Austrian Labor Chamber pointed out that elderly and frail people, in particular, are dependent on reliable drop-offs at the front door or on an infrastructure of sufficiently large code-secured reception boxes in the hallways.

¹¹ The Operational Programme for the Development of Human Resources 2007-2013

¹² Annex 1.

5.2 Operators' Perspective

Thanks to the available data received from 22 countries and 46 operators (USP operators), there is enough information, which is analysed as follows:

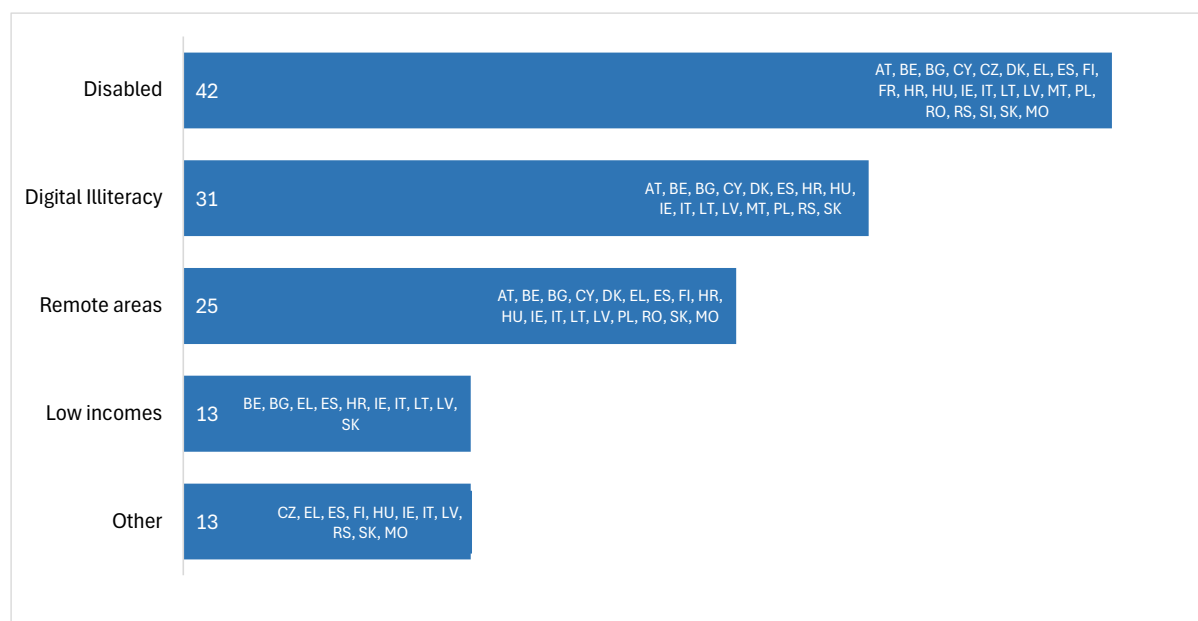


Figure 7: Postal operators' perspectives of who the vulnerable users are

It is evident that the vast majority of the operators, 91% (42/46), perceive as postal vulnerable users people with physical/mental disabilities. The second very important category for the operators is digital illiteracy, with 70% (32/46), followed by geographic constraints (remote areas), with 57% (26/46). The less important category is low income, with 30% (14/46).

It should be noted that operators from Portugal (PT) (CTT—Correios de Portugal) and Germany (DE) (Deutsche Post AG (DHL)) have different opinions.

So, CTT—Correios de Portugal explains, "In Portugal, we do not have a specific definition for vulnerable users. The postal service is free for blind and short-sighted people at national and international levels (except air transport surcharges). In addition, regarding postal services, the vulnerability depends on the level of digitalisation of communications, implementation of e-government services, etc. Currently, in Portugal, we consider that the relevant vulnerability factors are mostly digital literacy and reduced mobility."

Deutsche Post AG (DHL) also states that "German postal law does not distinguish between different types of "vulnerable" users."

The operators were also requested to provide feedback on why the people identified previously are considered vulnerable users. Thanks to the data from 23 countries and 42 operators (USP and other operators), there is enough information about why they are perceived as vulnerable postal users. The countries that replied to the question appear in the chart below.

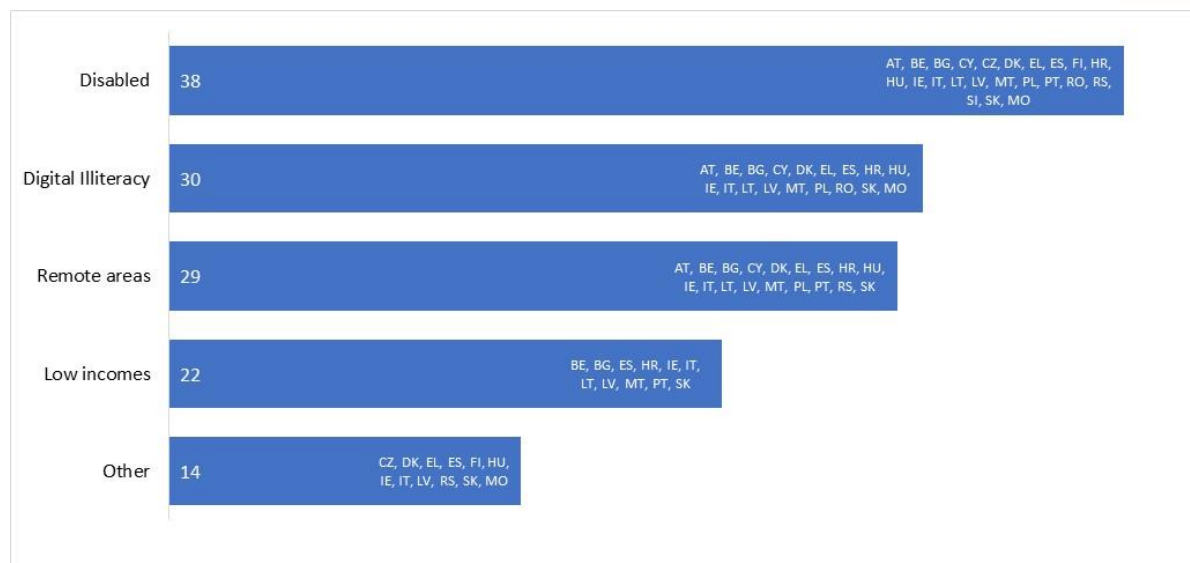


Figure 8: Postal operators' perspectives of why users are perceived as vulnerable.

The table below presents the main reason for each category.

Category of users perceived as postal vulnerable users	For what reason in each category are the users perceived as postal vulnerable users
Physical/mental disabilities	They cannot use all of the USP's access points in the same manner, i.e., they cannot use the service alone. The ones with mental disabilities need some authorisation given to third parties to perform the postal service on their behalf (e.g. institute of guardians and legal representatives). Inability to understand the delivery process, not receiving notifications about delivery, not having access to tracking and other services, and not being able to comprehend. The postal act merely regulates the free transmission of postal items for the blind and visually impaired, which suggests that, at present, only the blind and visually impaired receive special treatment. Blind or visually handicapped, physically handicapped people, persons aged 75 or older.

Geographical constraints (remote areas)	Users in inaccessible and remote areas are in a less favourable position to use the postal services and have fewer opportunities to use the access points of the USP. Rural residents may face postal vulnerability because of their distance from post offices or the lack of regular postal service in remote areas. Longer delivery times delay in receiving mail due to logistical challenges in rural areas.
Digital illiteracy	The lack of knowledge or insufficient digital literacy can be a major disadvantage when using postal services. For example: inability to understand the delivery process, not receiving notifications about delivery, lack of access to tracking and other services.
Low income	Inability to understand the delivery process, not receiving notifications about delivery, not having access to tracking and other services, and not being able to comprehend
Other	Refugees, war prisoners, elderly people, victims of natural disasters, women in an advanced state of pregnancy, retired people: a specific approach to digitisation in general. Homeless individuals are considered postal vulnerable due to lack of a fixed address. Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and self-employed people may rely more heavily on the availability of essential postal services for their activities. Parents with small children may face challenges accessing postal services due to limited time available for visiting post offices and difficulties associated with physical accessibility, such as the absence of ramps and the presence of stairs, which can impede access for those with strollers.

6 POSTAL NEEDS OF VULNERABLE USERS

6.1 NRAs' and other entities' perspective

Various NRAs and other entities provided their views on what is perceived as persistent problems that vulnerable users are faced with. The scope of the questions was to understand how the difficulties varied when considering sending a postal item, receiving a postal item or using any other postal service. The feedback was grouped into various categories, and the following chart provides an overview of the five categories (physical access, digital knowledge, poverty, service quality/options and definition) identified and how the feedback is allocated. It is important to note that one response could fit various criteria.

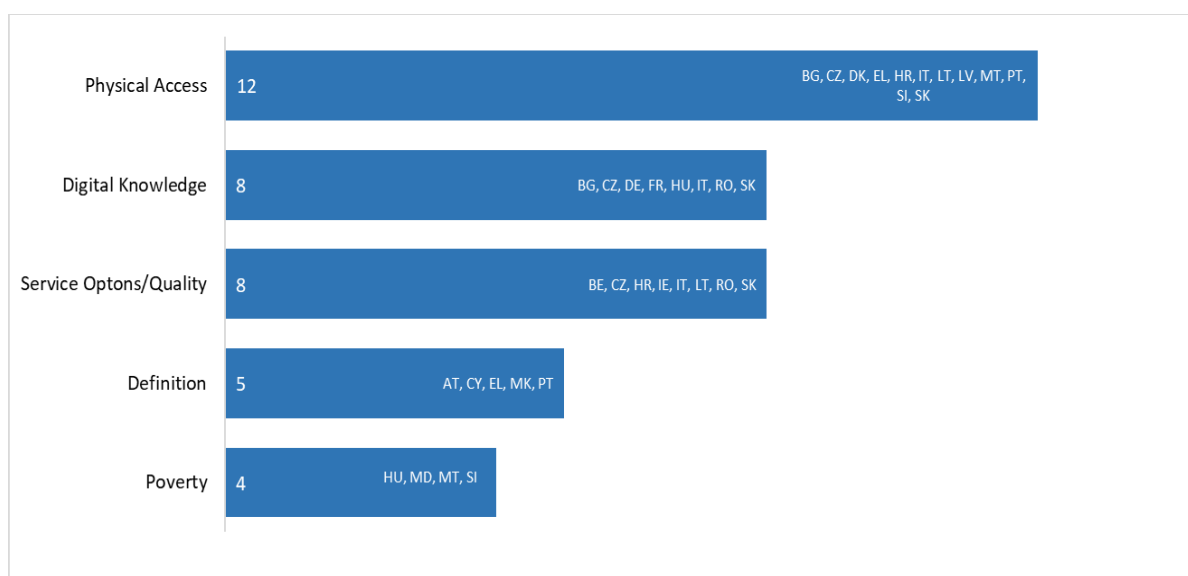


Figure 9: NRAs' and other entities' perspectives of the postal needs of the vulnerable users.

The categories reflected in the chart are defined as follows:

- Definition implies that a harmonised and legal definition is necessary to identify vulnerable users and ensure that the law protects them.
- Service Options/Quality implies that the issue identified is the lack of services available for these vulnerable users (such as lack of postal service in remote areas), and the other matter regards the quality of service, for example not all postal operators assist vulnerable users.
- Poverty implies that vulnerable users are subject to low income, and hence, the financial burden would be a major aspect, especially when dealing with other postal services.
- Digital Knowledge implies that vulnerable users require further insight and lessons on various digital skills to utilise postal services effectively.
- Physical Access implies restricted access to postal services, such as no proper access for those with physical disabilities or limited services for remote areas.

According to the feedback, the major obstacle encountered is physical access, which could be that the building is not easily accessible for a physically disabled person and/or in remote areas where postal services are limited.

The last consideration is the matter of poverty. However, the feedback varies depending on the service, such as the need for a harmonised/legalised definition for delivering postal items to vulnerable users. This is relevant because when a definition is set, it would be feasible to link the postal services and modes of delivery to these users. Similar considerations when sending a postal item include various delivery modes, such as home pick-up or alternative methods. Although the above chart does not show significance, the digital aspect is to be noted because some of the feedback indicated that a larger number of future services would be more digital-based, and hence, more teaching skills and assistance are necessary.

The next aspect dealt with what immediate changes could be made to assist more vulnerable users. The charts below reflect the various possibilities proposed.

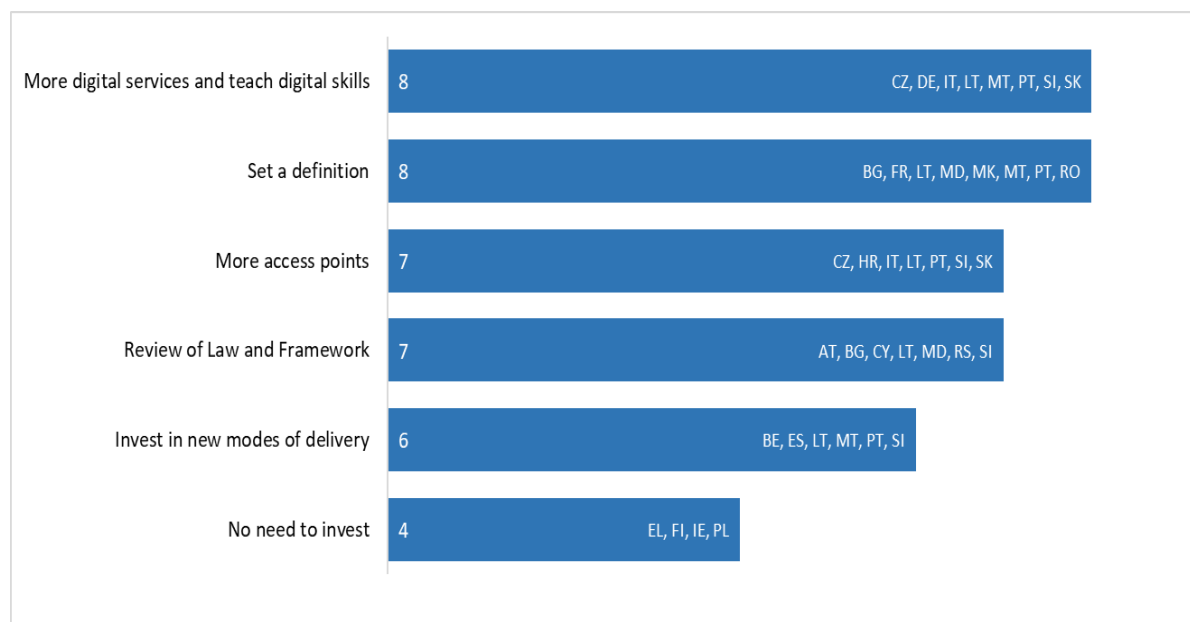


Figure 10: NRAs' and other entities' perspectives on the immediate changes that could be considered to assist vulnerable users.

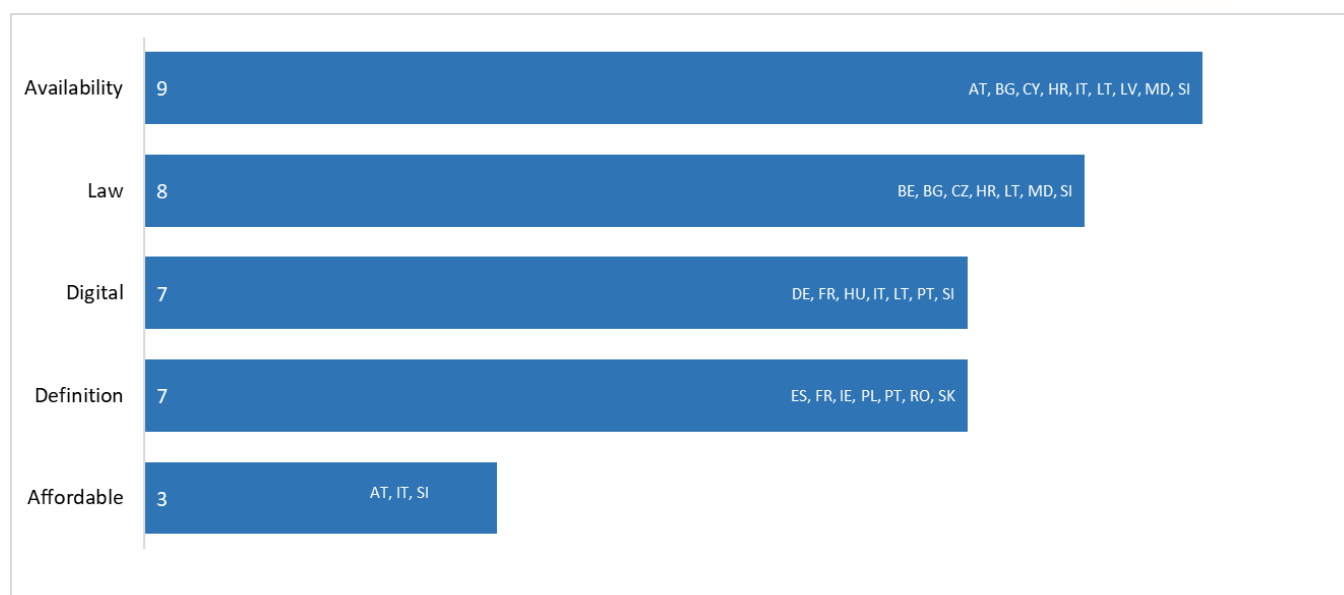


Figure 11: NRAs' and other entities' perspectives on the future changes required to assist vulnerable users.

The top consideration is that more access points are needed for people with limited physical abilities and those living in rural areas. Similarly, it is essential to set a definition that captures and identifies the vulnerable users so that there is a form of legal support. Also, more knowledge and support for digital skills are necessary because some current and future postal services will be IT-based.

On the other hand, some entities indicated that, as things stand now, there is no need for immediate intervention. However, when evaluating over a more extended period, all responses indicated that some action/change is necessary. The feedback shows that the focus is on the availability of postal services and a review of the national law or legal framework. The least highlighted were the affordability of the postal services and the financial sustainability of the vulnerable users.

6.2 Operators' Perspective

Similarly to the NRA and other entities, the operators were requested to provide their views on what could be possible and/or their future intentions to ensure that their postal services accommodate vulnerable users. Although most of the feedback was provided by the USP, it is interesting to note the similarities between the USPs and the alternative service providers. The following chart offers a grouping of what is considered as possible developments to accommodate vulnerable users.

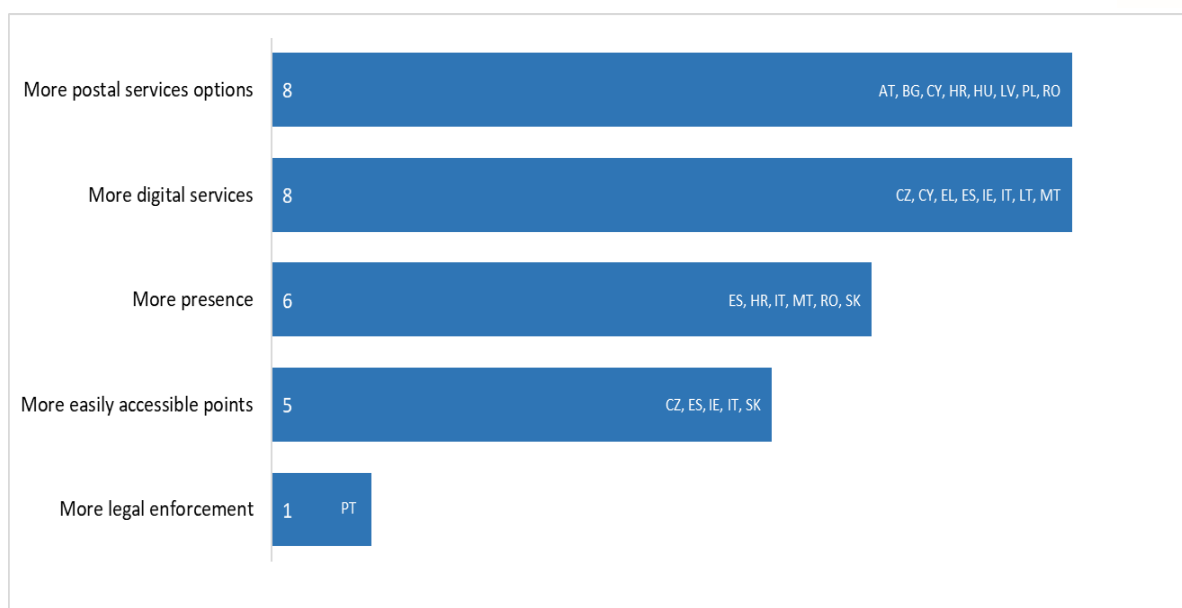


Figure 11: Operators' perspectives on the future changes required to assist vulnerable users.

As depicted above, most operators are opting to provide alternative solutions, such as specific postal services that cater to the needs of vulnerable users or particular services that are nationwide affordable and home delivery. Other considerations are the development of more digital services and, at the same time, providing educational services to assist vulnerable users in using the services. The least considered was the possibility of endorsing more legal enforcement to ensure that service providers deliver/provide postal services that support vulnerable users.

7 OUTCOME OF THE EXTERNAL WORKSHOP

7.1 Overview of the workshop

On 20 June, during the ERGP's first plenary meeting, an open workshop was held to discuss vulnerable postal users. The workshop title was:

“Vulnerable users in the postal world: Who? Which needs? What’s next?”

The workshop comprised three panels, each focusing on a specific spectrum related to vulnerable users.

The first panel, titled *“Potential Vulnerable Users & Persons or Associations Involved”*, focused on vulnerable users and why they are considered vulnerable in the postal market. The discussion also focused on understanding their needs when dealing with postal services and what is currently lacking to support them.

The second panel, *“Operators and Association of Consumers”*, focused on the operators' and consumer associations' perspectives on vulnerable users. This panel discussed the postal services currently offered by the operators. However, the discussion also raised the question of what postal operators can implement or adopt to support vulnerable users.

The final panel, titled *“Authorities and Policymakers”*, discussed vulnerable users from the authorities' and policymakers' perspectives regarding the regulatory and legal framework. Similarly, the discussion focused on how vulnerable users perceive what is lacking and what can be done from the regulatory and/or legal aspects to assist these users further and ensure that they are protected within the postal market.

7.2 Session 1: Potential Vulnerable Users & Persons or Associations Involved

In the first panel of the workshop, presentations were given by Bruno Basalisco (Copenhagen Economics), Daniele Marano (Austrian Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired) and Johannes Pressl (Austrian Association of Municipalities). ERGP chair Mr Dan Sjöblom, ERGP Chair 2024 (PTS), led this session.

The general message of the presentations was that in the future, the issue of vulnerable users will be considered much more broadly through various aspects, with an emphasis on viewing postal services as a form of social safety net on the one hand and a support system, particularly in crises and in the event of a digital services collapse on the other hand. It was also emphasised that it is important to consider all the differences that exist not only between consumers and citizens but also between countries. This led to the query of whether the universal postal service should be limited to physical services or if it should also include digital services, which are incorporated as part of modern postal services.

Most speakers agree that digital solutions will be of great significance in the future when providing postal services, especially for vulnerable user groups. Therefore, working on

empowering and educating vulnerable user groups regarding digital skills is paramount. Additionally, the issue of rural residents, who face numerous challenges and problems related to the use of postal services in those areas, should also be considered when addressing the issue of vulnerable user groups.

Bruno Basalisco of Copenhagen Economics viewed the issue of vulnerable postal users through four main criteria:

- dependency on service,
- lack of service,
- lack of accessibility,
- poverty.

Furthermore, according to Bruno Basalisco, a pan-European user needs survey and analysis would be advisable, considering not only the differences between consumers and citizens but also differences within the countries.

Daniele Marano, Austrian Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired, stated, "Accessibility is a right, not an option". In this perspective, according to Daniele Marano, two groups of users need higher service levels, namely the people with reduced mobility and visually impaired persons and they need authority support, especially for postal delivery. An example is the "unlock4all" project in Austria, which promotes accessible parcel lockers with tactile elements, audio navigation and high contrast for monitors, which is often referred to as a multi-sensorial approach (optic, tactile and auditive solutions).

According to Daniele Marano, digital education should be strengthened, considering the different needs of different user categories. For example, voice-guided digital assistants working with artificial intelligence could play an important role. Also, the EU Accessibility Act will come into force in 2025 and harmonise accessibility rules in Europe for vulnerable people.

Johannes Pressl of the Austrian Association of Municipalities stated that municipalities manage 270 of 1700 postal offices in rural Austria. There are many challenges and difficulties in rural areas, e.g. difficulties in maintaining the postal infrastructure; parcel shipping is increasing exponentially, but on the other side, in rural areas, there is a lack of Post providers and their partners who are offering services in that area. From this perspective, equal access to postal services should be guaranteed for rural areas. Some of these problems may be solved through various digital solutions, e.g. 24/7 self-service stations, the establishment of contact points or service centres for people with disabilities and enabling all stations of universal service providers to be available to all other service providers. By creating partnerships with municipalities, postal operators could provide local digital assistance for postal and non-postal (e.g. administrative) services.

7.3 Session 2: Operators & Association of Consumers

Session 2 focused on operators' current and future measures, based on the interests of vulnerable users previously identified. ERGP vice-chair Petros Galides (OCECPR) led the panel. Margriet Keijzer (PostNL & PostEurop) and Thorsten Freers (Amazon Germany) represented the postal operators, while Daniela Zimmer (Austrian Chamber of Labour) advocated for the consumers' point of view.

The panellists agreed that no one is immune to becoming vulnerable one day or another. Vulnerability is not necessarily a permanent state, but it may be temporary. Elderly and disabled people might depend more on the quality of postal services than other users. Vulnerable users have in common that they are at risk of being excluded from postal services. However, different vulnerable users may have different or conflicting interests. For example, elderly people often value non-digital solutions, whereas persons with reduced mobility may benefit from digital solutions.

It was discussed whether e-commerce customers are vulnerable postal users per se. Daniela Zimmer argued that recipients are structurally in a weak legal position as they have no direct contractual link with the postal operator. When buying online, they often cannot even choose the postal operator. Strengthening the recipients' legal position is crucial in this perspective. Furthermore, delivery at home should be guaranteed, and there should be no price differentiations at the expense of vulnerable users.

As concrete measures, some solutions implemented by universal service providers were presented: lower letterboxes accessible for wheelchair users, adaptations of post offices and pick-up stations to improve their accessibility for the visually impaired, and joint service points in rural areas for postal and administrative services. Besides, the Amazon e-commerce platform allows customers to select a parcel locker according to their needs at the time of purchase, e.g., lower lockers, audio-guided lockers, or screen-guided lockers.

Finally, the panel debated the question of whether the needs of vulnerable users should rather be addressed by universal service, sector-wide or horizontal regulation. Margriet Keijzer pointed to the existing instruments, such as the EU Accessibility Act, entering into force in June 2025. She stated that vulnerable users are best served with policy that supports the sustainability of the universal service while leaving enough flexibility at national level for targeted measures. Thorsten Freers of Amazon replied that the needs for the postal users are the same, whether the items are carried by a universal service provider or by an alternative operator. Daniela Zimmer emphasised that the recipient does not normally choose the operator, so the regulations should apply indistinctively to all postal service providers.

7.4 Session 3: Authorities and Policy Makers

In the third section of the workshop, four experts shared their views about Authorities and Policymaking: Ruth Enthofer-Stoisser (Austrian Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection), Line Elikhofer (Trafikstyrelsen), Robert Pochmarski (European Commission), Paul Schoorl (Universal Postal Union). ERGP vice-chair Dr. Spyros Pantelis (EETT) led the discussions.

Ruth Enthofer-Stoisser, an Austrian Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection representative, pointed out that the legal framework should ensure the consumer's choice (home delivery or pick-up point).

In this perspective, she highlights three legal challenges, namely:

- A specific factor in the postal sector is the difference in legal statuses of senders and addressees (weaker legal position of addressees).
- Furthermore, it is necessary to extend the existing rights on information and transparency (e.g., telephone hotline, quick and efficient communication, contact information, complaint management) and to improve the service provider's general terms and conditions.
- It is important to improve it to achieve a more harmonised European approach and special regulations should address the needs of vulnerable users.

Line Elikhofer from Trafikstyrelsen explained that in Denmark, the general rule is that all citizens receive letters from public authorities digitally as a matter of principle. Some citizens may be exempted from that rule, e.g., those with reduced physical or psychological ability, those without access to a computer or phone, those who do not speak Danish, or those who live in an area without Internet and cannot obtain a digital ID ("MitID"), but they need to show ID and sign the statement. Only 6% of the population has asked for such an exemption.

Also, the Danish Postal Act provides for "post to the door" for persons who cannot collect items from their mailbox. Local authorities decide whether a person benefits from this service, and the NRA distributes the data to the operators. Since 2024, there has been no designated universal service provider. However, the distribution of items for blind people and postal services to small islands must be guaranteed.

Robert Pochmarski from the European Commission highlighted that the current Postal Service Directive already contains some elements that protect vulnerable users. The next Commission (2024-2029) must address whether there is a need for harmonised definitions and rules concerning vulnerable users in the case of a legal framework reform.

Paul Schoorl of the Universal Postal Union underlines that a trend of shrinking population in rural areas coincides with a trend of increasing age in the same regions. The question raised is whether vulnerability concerns only humans or small businesses dependent on postal services. Approaches to dealing with vulnerable users may be universal (USO regulation), targeted (by codifying specific groups and corresponding service conditions), and/or horizontal (EU Accessibility Act). From a UPU perspective, involving stakeholders in addressing the issue broadly and successfully is important.

8 MAIN TAKEAWAYS

8.1 The questionnaire's main points

As to the NRA and Other Entities questionnaire, 28 Member States answered the questionnaire and provided insight into who is considered a vulnerable user. The composition of the responses is as follows:

- 71% of the responses indicated disabled persons,
- 46% of the responses considered those consumers living in remote areas,
- 46% of the responses indicated the elderly population,
- 32% of the responses mentioned people with low income, and
- 32% of the responses indicated consumers who are digitally illiterate.

About the reason why consumers are considered as postal vulnerable users, 18 NRAs¹³ provided feedback with a wide variety of answers.

As for the Operators Questionnaire, feedback was received from 22 countries, which comprise 46 operators (USP and other operators). The input provided indicates that:

- 91% perceived people with physical/mental disabilities,
- 70% perceived users that are digitally illiterate,
- 57% perceived customers with a geographic constraint (remote areas) and
- 30% perceived low-income customers as vulnerable users

The operators were also asked what initiatives could be taken now to assist the vulnerable users and those that could be considered as such in the future. The first initiative is to grant more access to remote areas and to those who are physically disabled. The second initiative is to develop more digital tools to assist vulnerable users and, at the same time, teach those digitally illiterate users how to use the service. Another important aspect is that a definition is necessary to adequately capture vulnerable users so that there is consistency between who is considered vulnerable and who is not.

The most considered option for the future is to develop more postal services and digital services that assist vulnerable users. On the other hand, developing more legal enforcement to support vulnerable users was the least considered option.

¹³ HR, SI, GR, BG, CZ, BE, DE, IT, SK, ES, FR, PL, MK; DK, FL, MT, NO, LT. The answers are listed in annex 1.

8.2 Workshop main points

The workshop comprised three sessions that discussed different aspects of vulnerable postal users. The following are the primary outcomes of these sessions.

Panel 1:

The general message was that in the future, the issue of vulnerable users will be considered much more broadly through various aspects, with an emphasis on viewing postal services as a form of social safety net on the one hand and a support system, particularly in crises and in the event of a digital services collapse on the other hand.

There was consensus that digital solutions will be of great significance in the future when providing postal services, especially for vulnerable user groups. Therefore, working on empowering and educating vulnerable user groups regarding digital skills is of utmost importance.

Additionally, rural residents, who face numerous challenges and problems related to using postal services in those areas, should also be considered when addressing the issue of vulnerable user groups.

Panel 2:

An important message delivered was that anyone could become a vulnerable user, most likely due to age and/or, as a consequence, less mobility. Also, different groups of vulnerable users may have conflicting interests, especially concerning digitisation. Providers have implemented some solutions to support vulnerable users in their countries.

During the discussion, two significant questions were raised:

- Question one was whether it is necessary to have a European harmonised approach or if market solutions or national solutions are sufficient;
- Question two is whether regulation supporting vulnerable users should be horizontal, sector-specific or limited to the universal service.

Panel 3:

The discussion hinted that in the current Postal Service Directive, there are some shortcomings or inconsistencies in consumer protection, which should be addressed¹⁴. For the new Postal Service Directive, it is proposed that it should reflect on the need for more specific rules regarding vulnerable users such as harmonised definitions and rules concerning vulnerable users.

The next Commission (2024-2029) must address whether there is a need for harmonised definitions and rules concerning vulnerable users in the case of a legal framework reform.

¹⁴ ERGP Report on the contractual relations of consumers:
<https://ec.europa.eu/docsroom/documents/48515>

It is recognised that there are different approaches to dealing with vulnerable users:

- focus on the universal service obligation (USO regulation),
- consider specific measures targeting the vulnerable users (by codifying specific groups and corresponding service conditions) and/or
- pursue a horizontal approach (EU Accessibility Act).

However, such a decision requires discussions and involvement of all relevant stakeholders to identify the best approach to address this complex issue.

9 COUNTRY CASES

9.1 The Danish market

During the workshop, the Danish NRA presented its postal market situation, especially concerning vulnerable users, mainly the visually impaired. However, given the market developments, a new framework is targeted to cater to those living in rural areas (people living on small islands).

The figure below shows the Danish letter market's trend from 2001 to 2021 and indicates its ongoing decline.

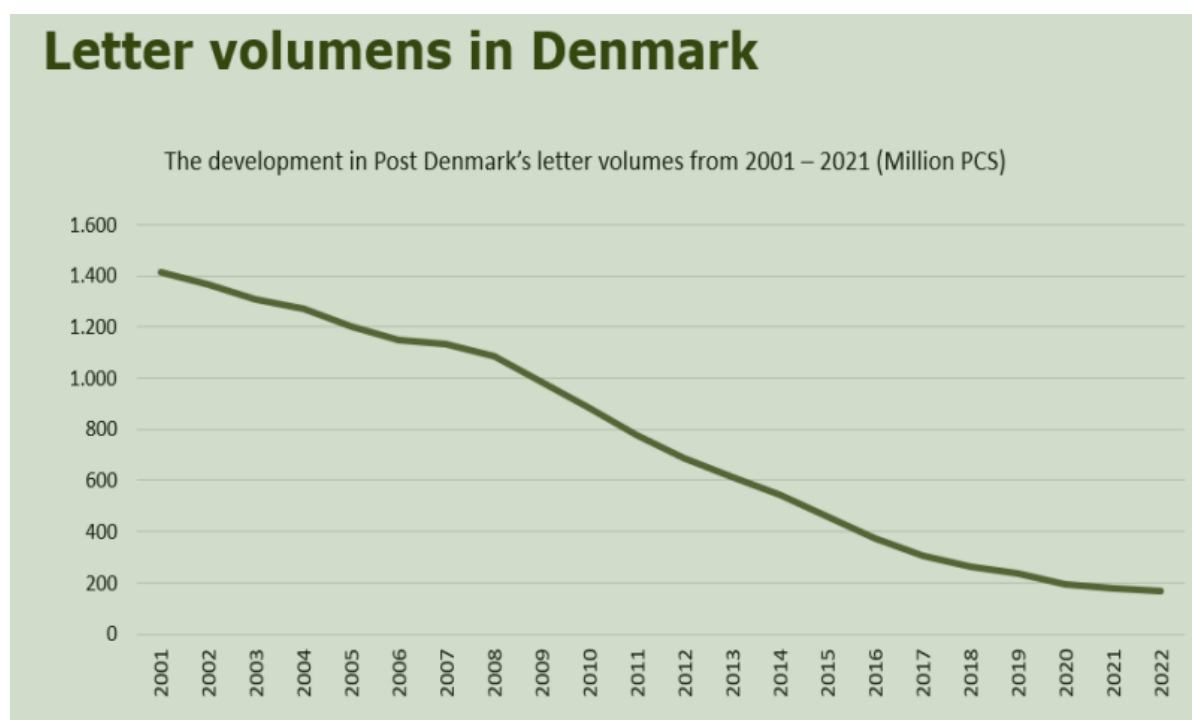


Figure 12: Danish letter volumes trend

In 2014, the Danish government passed the Law of Digital Post from Public Authorities, which states that public authorities shall communicate with individuals and businesses electronically. In the forehand, the Danish government established a platform for the common digital posts. This shifted the postal market since all citizens have a private digital mailbox that receives mail from public authorities in electronic format.

However, there are situations in which people are exempted from this digital approach and hence count on the physical format of the mail. Such cases include persons who have reduced physical ability, persons who lack psychological ability, those who have no computer or mobile access, those who live in areas with no Internet access, people who do not speak Danish and those who cannot obtain the required subscription details.

The current Postal Act indicates that a mailbox must be at the entrance of buildings and villas. In blocks of apartments, there must be a mailbox system next to the entrance of the building.

Even for locations in rural areas, the mailbox must be at the entrance of a public road or private shared road. Therefore, customers are required to pick up their mail from their mailbox; however, vulnerable users (users with physical and mental special needs) have the right/option to have the mail delivered to the door. For the so-called “post to the door” service, the grant is provided by the municipalities who know about the user and can guarantee his or her need for such a postal service. The NRA then collects the data from the municipal authorities and distributes them to the operators.

Since 1 January 2024, the Danish postal market has changed significantly. There is no longer a Universal Service Provider, but the market operators will ensure that the mail is delivered to the customers. However, the government still considers some form of regulation necessary, especially when dealing with distributing mail items to the blind and to small islands.

9.2 Vulnerable users in the new German Postal Act

The new German Postal Act entered into force on 19 July 2024. Just like the former Postal Act from 1997, it does not take a general approach to the situation of vulnerable postal users. Consequently, there is no definition of postal vulnerable users. However, two very specific provisions take into account the interests of some postal users who could be considered vulnerable.

The first provision (§13 Section 3 of the German Postal Act) deals with parcel distribution and applies to all operators. If a parcel cannot be delivered at home, the operator may deposit it at the next post office or in a parcel locker after leaving a notification card for the recipients.

Recently, operators have increasingly installed parcel lockers that can only be used via app. Under the new act, the operator must enable the recipients to object to the deposit in an automated station that can only be used with a technical device of their own. The recipient's objection may apply to the individual case or permanently. The notification card left with the recipient must inform him of the right to object and must contain the operator's contact details to exercise that right. These provisions are intended to allow recipients not using smartphones to pick up their parcels in case the delivery at home has failed.

The second provision (§17 Section 2 of the German Postal Act) only applies to the universal service provider who, unlike before, is designated by law. Under the Postal Act, the universal service provider is obliged to run post offices throughout the nation, e.g. in every municipality with more than 2,000 inhabitants. Since recently, the regulator BNetzA may allow the universal service provider to run an automated station instead of a post office at certain places, notably in rural areas, under the condition that the station is barrier-free (accessible for persons with disabilities) and useable without any technical device (e.g. smartphone). These two conditions are intended to guarantee that the automation of postal infrastructure is not at the expense of persons with disabilities or persons not using smartphones.

10 REFLECTIONS ON THE TERM VULNERABLE USERS

After depicting the questionnaire results and the workshop outcome, the present chapter aims to develop reflections on the term “vulnerable users.”

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, “vulnerable” means “able to be easily physically or mentally hurt, influenced, or attacked”.¹⁵ “Vulnerable road users” are legally defined as “non-motorised road users, such as pedestrians and cyclists as well as motorcyclists and persons with disabilities or reduced mobility and orientation”.¹⁶ In EU asylum law, there are specific provisions for vulnerable persons “such as minors, unaccompanied minors, disabled people, elderly people, pregnant women, single parents with minor children, victims of human trafficking, persons with serious illnesses, persons with mental disorders”.¹⁷ In several countries, during the COVID-19 pandemic, groups of persons with an elevated mortality risk in case of an infection were commonly denominated vulnerable.¹⁸

In the prior examples, the vulnerability relates to a physical or mental risk. In contrast, postal services do generally not create a special risk to the users’ well-being. Therefore, it is questionable whether the term “vulnerable” is an accurate denomination for specific groups of postal users. As an alternative, one could use the term “postal users with special needs” or “postal users who need additional support in accessing basic services”. However, the term “vulnerable user” is quite flexible. For example, the Consumer Rights Directive refers to “*specific needs of consumers who are particularly vulnerable because of their mental, physical or psychological infirmity, age or credulity in a way which the trader could reasonably be expected to foresee*”.¹⁹ Meanwhile, the Directive on the Internal Market of Electricity as well as the Directive on the Internal Markets for Gas oblige the Member States to define “*the concept of vulnerable customers which may refer on energy poverty*”.²⁰ Thus, the notion of vulnerable postal users depends rather on its definition than on the term itself.

The reasons why certain groups of users might be considered being “vulnerable” or having special needs differ: Persons with disabilities may have difficulties to use postal services because of their individual physical or mental situation that deters them objectively from equal access to postal services. Elderly people may also have physical difficulties to access postal services in some cases, but this is due less to their individual situation than to the inevitable fact of ageing. Whereas digital illiteracy is not objectively inevitable but might be surmounted by learning. A lower quality of service in rural areas does not concern users individually but all the users in the same region. Finally, poverty is a general social problem and does not specifically affect the access to postal services but to all goods and services.

According to the results of the questionnaire and the workshop, it seems that persons with disabilities could be considered as vulnerable. In this regard, there already exists the rule of tariff exemption for the blind and partially sighted persons, recognised by the Postal Service

¹⁵ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/vulnerable>.

¹⁶ Article 4.7 of [Directive 2010/40/EU on Intelligent Transport Systems](#).

¹⁷ Article 21 of [Directive 2013/33/EU laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection](#).

¹⁸ UK: <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/1003/covid19-supporting-the-vulnerable-during-lockdown>; LU (French) :<https://covid19.public.lu/fr/sante-protection/personnes-vulnerables.html>; DE: <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2022/kw27-de-covid19-pandemie-902418>.

¹⁹ Recital 34 of [Directive 2011/83/EU on consumer rights](#).

²⁰ Article 28.1 of [Directive \(EU\) 2019/944 on common rules for the internal market for electricity](#) ; Article 26.1 of [Directive \(EU\) 2024/1788 on common rules for the internal markets for renewable gas, natural gas and hydrogen](#).

Directive in its Article 12. Furthermore, it should be mentioned that Article 26 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union grants person with disabilities a right *“to benefit from measures designed to ensure their independence”*. These could possibly include measures designed to ensure their independence in using basic postal services.

Article 25 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union attributes to the elderly a right *“to lead a life of dignity and independence”*. In contrast to Article 26, however, no reference is made to the design of specific measures. Besides, a possible lack of independence in using postal services is less obvious for the elderly compared to persons with disabilities. It could result from digitisation in the access of postal services (e.g. online purchase of stamps, app-controlled parcel lockers), but only for those of the elderly that have difficulties in using digital devices. Certainly, the percentage of digital illiteracy might generally be higher in the group of the elderly than in other age groups. Nonetheless, the impact on the elderly's access to postal services differs from region to region and depends on various factors: the degree of digitisation in general, the degree of digitisation concerning postal services, the general acceptance of digitisation, the age structure and the social structure in the respective region. Therefore, it could be difficult to find a common approach concerning the elderly and the digitally illiterate.

Furthermore, the needs of certain groups of users are already tackled by universal service obligations. The *“permanent provision of a postal service of specified quality at all points in their territory at affordable prices for all users”* (Article 3 Postal Service Directive) benefits users in rural areas as well as users with low income. Therefore, it should be discussed whether perceiving these two groups as vulnerable would not create confusion between vulnerable users' needs and universal service obligations. In this context, it might be considered that in some Member States, postal users living under geographical conditions face lower quality standards than other users, in accordance with Article 3.3 of the Postal Service Directive.

In the end, it is up to policymakers to decide which user groups should be considered vulnerable. A solution to the problem of definition could be to determine some certain groups of vulnerable users (e.g. persons with disabilities) while leaving it to the Member States to recognise other supplementary groups as being vulnerable (e.g. the elderly), respecting the principle of subsidiarity.

11 RECOMMENDATIONS

As presented, the topic regarding vulnerable users is vast and constantly evolves based on user needs and developments. The feedback, discussions and research presented above have led to several non-binding, non-legal, and legal suggestions.

The following suggestions are the initial steps that could be considered to assist vulnerable users further. However, it is proposed that further studies and initiatives be undertaken to expand and/or develop these concepts. The aim is for vulnerable users to be more catered to in the operators' operational aspects and national and cross-border regulatory matters.

11.1 Non-legal suggestions

The ERGP proposes that the list of non-exhaustive, non-legal suggestions should be considered before considering the potential implementation of the legal ones.

Suggestion 1: Monitoring the needs of the vulnerable users

The ERGP recommends the monitoring and data collection of vulnerable users and their needs because these factors will influence future decisions to review postal services and provide better quality and protection for vulnerable users.

Apart from each Member State gaining insight into its national market developments, it is suggested that regular knowledge exchange across Member States would be beneficial in developing a harmonised study and better understanding, which could lead to best practices across Member States.

Suggestion 2: Education of digital skills

The ERGP proposes that postal operators, local authorities or other entities promote the education of digital basic skills²¹, e.g. by organising sessions on the digital services provided by postal operators.

Suggestion 3: *Education* of postal employees concerning vulnerable users

The ERGP proposes that operators provide instructions to their postal employees and create awareness about the needs of vulnerable users and how to assist them.

Suggestion 4: Collaboration and exchange of knowledge among entities

The ERGP recommends that the competent authorities collaborate nationally and internationally to share information and expertise on the best practices focusing on vulnerable users.

²¹ See also the European Commission's Report on the State of the Digital Decade (2023) : <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/2023-report-state-digital-decade>.

Suggestion 5: Postal operators – operational system developments

The ERGP recommends that postal operators review their infrastructure to cater to vulnerable users. For example, parcel lockers can be designed to be more accessible for those who are physically limited or visually impaired.

The ERGP counts that operators develop or design specific mail services for vulnerable users.

11.2 Legal suggestions

Based on the feedback obtained, the following are some potential legal suggestions that could be considered.

Suggestion 6: Further discussions among stakeholders

The ERGP recommends that before adopting a new regulatory framework this topic should further be explored with various stakeholders such as national regulatory bodies, national universal postal operators, other postal operators, other expert bodies, and all other interested parties. The focus of these discussions would be:

- to identify users who could potentially be vulnerable;
- to specify their basic needs related to postal services;
- if any additional legal intervention is needed, to decide which type. Shall there be a harmonised approach or not? Shall regulation be horizontal, sector-specific or limited to the universal service?
- What is the relationship between “vulnerable user” and the universal service provision?

In this perspective, one should be aware of the existing European legal framework, namely the Consumer Rights Directive²² and the Accessibility Act²³. Before creating sector-specific measures, it should be examined whether the needs of persons can be better met by extending the application of these acts to postal services.

Furthermore, it should be considered that the concept of universal service generally aims to provide a basic service to everyone, regardless of any special needs. Creating additional quality standards for specific user groups risks contradicting this concept.

Suggestion 7: A harmonised definition and regulation?

Based on the considerations of Chapter 10, the ERGP proposes developing an acceptable definition of vulnerable users. The definition could contain harmonised elements but could also confer flexibility to national specificities in determining vulnerable users’ needs. It should give legal security and prevent confusion between the concept of vulnerable users and universal service obligations.

The details of regulation could be left to national legislation. It could be advisable to identify examples of specific types of postal services that could best meet vulnerable users’ needs

²² [Directive 2011/83/EU on consumer rights](#).

²³ [Directive \(EU\) 2019/882 on the accessibility requirements for products and services](#).

and measures that would facilitate the more accessible use of postal services by vulnerable users.

Suggestion 8: Vulnerable users' rights

The ERGP considers it beneficial to emphasise the rights of vulnerable users when contracting and using postal services, in line with the suggestions developed in the ERGP report on postal users' contractual relationships²⁴. On the one hand, consumers' rights against universal service providers should also apply to other postal providers. On the other hand, it is advisable to revise the existing position of the addressees to have equivalent consumer rights as the senders.

Suggestion 9: Review of the complaint and appeal process

The ERGP recommends simplifying the existing complaint and appeal process for all users, taking into account the needs of vulnerable users. It would be advisable to discuss the minimum quality standards that should also cater for vulnerable users when providing postal services.

²⁴ ERGP Report on the contractual relations of consumers:
<https://ec.europa.eu/docsroom/documents/48515>

12 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the ERGP proposes that the suggestions below may be considered for reviewing the postal directive and national legislation. However, it is necessary to weigh and analyse the impact of these suggestions to monitor their effect on the market.

Below is the list of non-legal suggestions. The details of these suggestions are explained in detail in chapter 11:

- Monitoring the needs of the vulnerable users
- Education of digital skills
- *Education* of postal employees concerning vulnerable users
- Collaboration and exchange of knowledge among entities
- Postal operators – operational system developments

Below is a list of some potential legal suggestions that could be considered. The details of these suggestions are explained in detail in Chapter 11.2:

- Further discussions among stakeholders
- A harmonised definition and regulation?
- Vulnerable users' rights
- Review of the complaint and appeal process

The suggestions above are actions that could be considered to further assist vulnerable users regardless of the obligations required by the universal service, which generally aims to provide a basic service to everyone. In the case we apply the concept of vulnerable users in parallel to the concept of universal service, it is necessary not to overlap the provisions set by the universal service obligations and those of the vulnerable users' requirements. However, it is proposed that further studies and initiatives be undertaken to expand and/or develop these concepts. The aim is for vulnerable users to be more catered to in the operators' operational aspects and national and cross-border regulatory matters.

The ERGP proposes that the list of non-exhaustive, non-legal suggestions should be considered before considering the potential implementation of the legal ones. These non-legal and legal suggestions focused on ensuring the accessibility and affordability aspects of postal services for vulnerable user groups. It is also worth considering the differences in the national legal frameworks. However, all legal measures should be neutral regarding the effect on competition and reflect on all postal operators.

13 ANNEX 1

13.1 Other entities that provided feedback

Three organisations from Slovenia:

- Foundation for the Financing of Disabled and Humanitarian Organisations in the Republic of Slovenia (FIHO)
- Pensioners' Associations of Slovenia (ZDUS)
- Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities (MDDSZ)

Three organisations from Lithuania:

- Ministry of Social Security and Labour (MSSL)
- Agency on the Rights of Persons with Disability at MSSL
- The third-age university.

Two consumer associations from Italy:

- Consumer Association 1 & 2

Two consumer organisations from Portugal:

- DGC (Directorate-General for Consumers)
- DECO (Consumer Association)

Other institutions:

- Austria - Austria Labour Chamber;
- Czech Republic - Council of Seniors;
- Slovakia - Union of the visually impaired and blind people (UNSS);
- Spain - Balearic Consumer Association;
- France - French Ministry in charge of postal services (DGE).

13.2 Operators' feedback

13.2.1 (a) Who do you perceive as the postal vulnerable users?

42 operators perceive as postal vulnerable users persons with physical/mental disabilities.

These operators are from Austria (AT) USP (Österreichische Post), from Belgium (BE) USP (bpost), from Bulgaria (BG) USP (Bulgarian Posts plc) and Econ Express OOD, from Cyprus (CY) USP (Cypost) and ACS Courier, from the Czech Republic (CZ) USP (Česká pošta) and PPL, from Denmark (DK) USP (Post Nord Denmark), DAO and GLS, from Greece (EL) USP (ELTA), from Spain (ES) USP (Correos) and Akropost, from Finland (FI) USP (Posti Distribution Ltd), from France (FR) USP (La Poste), from Croatia (HR) USP (HP-Hrvatska pošta d.d.) and GLS, from Hungary (HU) USP (Magyar Posta Zrt.) and "other operator", from Ireland (IE) USP (An Post), from Italy (IT) USP (Poste Italiane), Fulmine and Integraa, from Lithuania (LT) USP (Lietuvos paštas (Lithuanian Post)), DPD Lietuva and Itella Logistics, from Latvia (LV) USP (Latvijas Pasts VAS), from Malta (MT) USP (MaltaPost), Airswift and DHL, from Poland (PL) USP (Poczta Polska SA), FedEx Express Poland sp. z o.o. and DPD Polska, from Romania (RO) USP (Romanian Post), from Serbia (RS) USP (Post of Serbia), from Slovenia (SI) USP (Posta Slovenja) and GLS, from Slovakia (SK) USP (Slovenska pošta) and Cromwell, from Moldova (MO) USP (Posta Moldovei) and Nova Pošta.

25 operators perceive as postal vulnerable users persons facing geographical constraints (remote areas). These operators are from Austria (AT) USP (Österreichische Post), from Belgium (BE) USP (bpost), from Bulgaria (BG) USP (Bulgarian Posts plc) and Econ Express OOD, from Cyprus (CY) USP (Cypost), from Denmark (DK) USP (Post Nord Denmark), from Greece (EL) USP (ELTA), from Spain (ES) USP (Correos) and Akropost, from Finland (FI) USP (Posti Distribution Ltd), from Croatia (HR) USP (HP-Hrvatska pošta d.d.) and GLS, from Hungary (HU) USP (Magyar Posta Zrt.) and "other operator", from Ireland (IE) USP (An Post), from Italy (IT) USP (Poste Italiane), from Lithuania (LT) USP (Lietuvos paštas (Lithuanian Post)), and Itella Logistics, from Latvia (LV) USP (Latvijas Pasts VAS), from Poland (PL) USP (Poczta Polska SA), and DPD Polska, from Romania (RO) USP (Romanian Post), from Slovakia (SK) Cromwell, from Moldova (MO) USP (Posta Moldovei) and Nova Pošta.

31 operators perceive as postal vulnerable users digitally illiterate persons.

These operators are from Austria (AT) USP (Österreichische Post), from Belgium (BE) USP (bpost), from Bulgaria (BG) Econ Express OOD, from Cyprus (CY) USP (Cypost) and ACS Courier, from Denmark (DK) USP (Post Nord Denmark), DAO and GLS, from Spain (ES) USP (Correos) and Akropost, from Croatia (HR) USP (HP-Hrvatska pošta d.d.) and GLS, from Hungary (HU) USP (Magyar Posta Zrt.) and "other operator", from Ireland (IE) USP (An Post), from Italy (IT) USP (Poste Italiane), Fulmine and Integraa, from Lithuania (LT) USP (Lietuvos paštas (Lithuanian Post)), DPD Lietuva and Itella Logistics, from Latvia (LV) USP (Latvijas Pasts VAS), from Malta (MT) USP (MaltaPost), Airswift, Express Trailers and DHL, from Poland (PL) USP (Poczta Polska SA), FedEx Express Poland sp. z o.o. and DPD Polska, from Serbia (RS) USP (Post of Serbia), from Slovakia (SK) Cromwell.

13 operators perceive as postal vulnerable users low-income persons.

These operators are from Belgium (BE) USP (bpost), from Bulgaria (BG) USP (Bulgarian Posts plc), from Greece (EL) USP (ELTA), from Spain (ES) USP (Correos) and Akropost, from Croatia (HR) USP (HP-Hrvatska pošta d.d.) and GLS, from Ireland (IE) USP (An Post), from Italy (IT) USP (Poste Italiane), from Lithuania (LT) USP (Lietuvos paštas (Lithuanian Post)) and Itella Logistics, from Latvia (LV) USP (Latvijas Pasts VAS), from Slovakia (SK) Cromwell.

13 operators state that there is also another reason to be perceived as postal vulnerable users.

These data are analysed in question 2 (b). These operators are from the Czech Republic (CZ) PPL, from Greece (EL) USP (ELTA), from Spain (ES) USP (Correos), from Finland (FI) USP (Posti Distribution Ltd, from Hungary (HU) USP (Magyar Posta Zrt.) and “other operator”, from Ireland (IE) USP (An Post), from Italy (IT) USP (Poste Italiane), from Latvia (LV) USP (Latvijas Pasts VAS), from Serbia (RS) USP (Post of Serbia), from Slovakia (SK) Cromwell, from Moldova (MO) USP (Posta Moldovei) and Nova Pohta.

Table: categories of vulnerable users according to operators

Categories of vulnerable users	Operators
Physical/mental disabilities	Österreichische Post, bpost, Bulgarian Posts plc, Econ Express OOD, Cypost, ACS Courier Cyprus, Ceska posta, PPL, Post Nord Denmark, DAO and GLS Denmark, ELTA, Correos, Akropost, Posti Distribution Ltd, HP-Hrvatska pošta d.d., GLS HR, Magyar Posta Zrt. and “other operator”, An Post, Poste Italiane, Fulmine and Integraa, Lietuvos paštas (Lithuanian Post), DPD Lietuva, Itella Logistics, Latvijas Pasts VAS, MaltaPost, Airswift, DHL Malta, Poczta Polska SA, FedEx Express Poland sp. z o.o. , DPD Polska, Romanian Post, Post of Serbia, Posta Slovenja, GLS Slovenja, Slovenska posta, Cromwell, Posta Moldovei, Nova Pohta
Geographical constraints (remote areas)	Österreichische Post, bpost, Bulgarian Posts plc, Econ Express OOD BG, Cypost, Post Nord Denmark, ELTA, Correos, Akropost, Posti Distribution Ltd, Hrvatska pošta d.d., GLS HR, Magyar Posta Zrt. and “other operator”, An Post, Poste Italiane, Lietuvos paštas (Lithuanian Post), Itella Logistics, Latvijas Pasts VAS, Poczta Polska SA, DPD Polska, Romanian Post, Cromwell, Posta Moldovei, Nova Pohta

Digital illiteracy	Österreichische Post, bpost, Econ Express OOD BG, Cypost, ACS Courier Cyprus, Post Nord Denmark, DAO and GLS Denmark, Correos, Akropost, HP-Hrvatska pošta d.d., GLS HR, Magyar Posta Zrt. and “other operator”, An Post, Poste Italiane, Fulmine, Integraa, Lietuvos paštas (Lithuanian Post), DPD Lietuva, Itella Logistics, Latvijas Pastas VAS, MaltaPost, Airswift, Express Trailers, DHL Malta, Poczta Polska SA, FedEx Express Poland sp. z o.o., DPD Polska, Post of Serbia, Cromwell.
Low income	bpost, Bulgarian Posts plc, ELTA, Correos, Akropost, HP-Hrvatska pošta d.d., GLS HR, An Post, Poste Italiane, Lietuvos paštas (Lithuanian Post), Itella Logistics, Latvijas Pastas VAS, Cromwell.
Other	PPL (CZ), ELTA, Correos, Posti Distribution Ltd, Magyar Posta Zrt. and “other operator”, An Post, Poste Italiane, Latvijas Pastas VAS, Post of Serbia, Cromwell, Posta Moldovei, Nova Pohta.

13.2.2 (b) For each category of perceived postal vulnerable users, for what reason are they perceived as postal vulnerable users?

The main reasons to perceive as postal vulnerable users people with physical/mental disabilities are the following:

Users with physical disabilities cannot use all of the USP's access points in the same manner, i.e., they cannot use the service on their own. In addition, persons with mental disabilities need to give authorisation to third parties in order to perform the postal service on their behalf (e.g. institute of guardians and legal representatives).

Those with physical disabilities, visual impairments, or other special needs may encounter difficulties in using traditional postal services without appropriate accommodations.

The Republic of Slovenia does not define vulnerable groups of users in the Postal Services Act and its by-laws. The Act merely regulates the free transmission of postal items for the blind and visually impaired, which suggests that at present, only the blind and visually impaired receive special treatment.

In certain cases disable users may need assistance to send or receive a parcel. Physically handicapped persons (wheelchair users) may have difficulty accessing postal establishments.

Physical/mental illness makes it difficult: a) to pick up the parcel at a pick-up point b) to handle a heavy parcel into the apartment/house c) to communicate with the delivery service (driver, customer service, etc.).

People with physical/mental disabilities may not be able to lift or collect the parcel (e.g. due to its weight or size). Some other users may not be able to read the information on the label to see if the package is for them. Some users may not be able to sign on their device or provide a PIN to verify delivery. Some users may have prevented or difficult access to reception areas or parking spaces. In the case of entities cooperating with postal operators (e.g. parcel shipping/delivery points, broker locations), they may also not have locations adapted to the needs of such users.

They need accessible locations to receive parcels in parcel lockers. Also, people suffering from blindness and vision impairment need special letters to use parcel machines.

The Republic of Slovenia states that the Act merely regulates the free transmission of postal items for the blind and visually impaired, which suggests that at present only the blind and visually impaired are a category of the population that receives special treatment.

The main reasons to perceive as postal vulnerable users persons experiencing geographical constraints (remote areas) are the following:

Users in inaccessible and remote areas are in a less favourable position to use the postal services and have less opportunities to use the access points of the USP.

Remote or rural areas may have limited access to postal services, leading to longer delivery times or higher costs for residents in these regions.

Residents of rural areas may face postal vulnerability because of distance from post offices or lack of regular postal service in remote areas. Longer delivery times delay receiving mail due to logistical challenges in rural areas.

The main reasons to perceive as postal vulnerable users digitally illiterate persons are the following:

The lack of knowledge or insufficient digital literacy can be a major disadvantage when using the digital tools e.g. application for access to the postal service and this more and more in common service for documents delivery.

Inability to understand the delivery process, not receiving the notifications about delivery, access to tracking and other services, comprehension.

Possible difficulties in accessing online services (website, app) of the postal operators.

Inability to use the digital communication channels offered (including managing the place and time of delivery without contact, e.g. by phone with the service provider)

Ageing population may find it hard to rely on digital platforms.

Some users may not be able to use all digital methods to create a shipment and track its status. If they do not have access to the Internet, a computer or a telephone, they will not receive all notifications informing about the status of the shipment, they will not be able to change the delivery method or the delivery day.

When ordering courier services online, especially through brokerage platforms, some users may not be able to recognise with whom they are actually concluding a contract for a courier/transport service; the user may be convinced that he or she is ordering the service directly from the postal operator, while the direct order takes place between an intermediary and the operator, and not between the user and the operator.

The main reasons to perceive as postal vulnerable users persons with low income are the following:

Users with lower incomes will hardly have access to the highly valuable, quality and fast (especially parcel) services and due to their lower financial capabilities, they will have to choose a simpler, i.e. slower and lower quality, service.

They are not able to use services other than the universal postal service.

Low income can be a constraint to buy postal products. However, the yearly postal spending for stamps is negligible in the global spending of a household (< 1 EUR/month in 2020 - based on bpost figures).

People who face economic hardship cannot afford alternative postal services or advanced digital technologies, making them heavily dependent on traditional postal services for their communication and correspondence needs.

The other reasons to be perceived as postal vulnerable users.

Elderly, women in an advanced state of pregnancy, refugees, war prisoners, Elderly, victims of natural disasters - access difficulties, retired people.

Elderly people (>65 years old are considered elderly, and vulnerability increases with age); People with reduced mobility, either because of health conditions or lack of transport options; Pregnant women in advanced pregnancy or risky pregnancies; Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and self-employed people



who may rely more heavily on the availability of basic postal services for their activities. According to the Spanish Consumer Protection Law, vulnerable consumers are defined as "those natural persons who, individually or collectively, due to their characteristics, needs or personal, economic, educational or social circumstances, are found, even if territorially, sectorally or temporarily, in a special situation of subordination, defencelessness or lack of protection that prevents them from exercising their rights as consumers under equal conditions."

Homeless individuals are considered postal vulnerable for lack of a fixed address. There are difficulties in receiving mail or packages without a stable residence. Postal services are essential for communication and deliveries.

Parents with small children may face challenges accessing postal services due to limited time available for visiting post offices and difficulties associated with physical accessibility, such as the absence of ramps and the presence of stairs, which can impede access for those with strollers.

14 ANNEX 2

Country codes used in the report

COUNTRIES	COUNTRY CODES
Austria	AT
Belgium	BE
Bulgaria	BG
Cyprus	CY
Czech Republic	CZ
Germany	DE
Denmark	DK
Estonia	EE
Greece	EL
Spain	ES
Finland	FI
France	FR
Croatia	HR
Hungary	HU
Ireland	IE
Italy	IT
Lithuania	LT
Luxembourg	LU
Latvia	LV
Moldova	MD
Montenegro	ME
North Macedonia	MK
Malta	MT
The Netherlands	NL
Norway	NO
Poland	PL
Portugal	PT
Romania	RO
Serbia	RS
Sweden	SE
Slovenia	SI
Slovakia	SK
Türkiye	TR