



Peer Review on “Social Protection Information System”

Host Country Discussion Paper – Lithuania

Facilitating social assistance provision through online management

Lithuania, 23 November 2017

DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

Unit C1 European Commission B-1049 Brussels

Contact: Dijana Ror Boone and Bent-Ole Grooss

E-mail: EMPL-SPSI-PEER-REVIEWS@ec.europa.eu

Website: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1024>

Peer Review on “Social Protection Information System”

DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

Peer Review on “Social Protection Information System”

Lithuania, 23 November 2017

**Europe Direct is a service to help you find answers
to your questions about the European Union.**

Freephone number (*):

00 800 6 7 8 9 10 11

(*) The information given is free, as are most calls (though some operators, phone boxes or hotels may charge you).

LEGAL NOTICE

The information contained in this publication does not necessarily reflect the official position of the European Commission

This document has received financial support from the European Union Programme for Employment and Social Innovation "EaSI" (2014-2020). For further information please consult: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/easi>

© European Union, **2017**

Reproduction is authorised provided the source is acknowledged.

Table of Contents

Executive summary	1
1 Situation in the host country	2
1.1 The Lithuanian Social Protection System	2
1.2 Social assistance recipients	4
1.3 Types of social support and social services	5
1.4 The standard procedure for receiving social assistance.....	6
1.5 Difficulties within the system	7
2 Policy measure	8
2.1 Policy measure objectives	8
2.2 History of the measure	8
2.3 How does SPIS operate?	9
2.3.1 SPIS for Individual Users	9
2.3.2 SPIS for Municipal Officers	10
2.3.3 SPIS Technical Capacities	11
2.3.4 SPIS Administration	11
2.4 Foreseen future developments	11
3 SPIS results	13
3.1 SPIS as an everyday tool	13
3.2 Improved procedure for requesting social assistance	13
3.3 Fraud prevention.....	14
3.4 Data provision	14
3.5 Improved cooperation.....	14
4 SPIS difficulties and constraints	15
4.1 Difficulties for individuals requesting social assistance.....	15
4.2 Difficulties for municipal officers.....	16
4.3 Difficulties for the Ministry	17
4.4 Other constraints	17
5 SPIS success factors and transferability	18
5.1 Success factors	18
5.2 Transferability.....	18
References.....	20

Executive summary

In Lithuania, the 60 local municipalities are responsible for managing the social assistance provision, whilst the Ministry of Social Security and Labour (SADM) is responsible for the formulation of the overall social protection policy and legal framework. There are over 70 types of social assistance measures and approximately 600 000 persons who receive some kind of social assistance each year. Prior to the introduction of the Social Protection Information System (SPIS) in 2005, the system of receiving and applying for social assistance was not sufficiently efficient mainly due to numerous legal requirements. Municipal officers often faced large amounts of paperwork and had difficulties to track the different social measures provided. Meanwhile, individual applicants struggled to submit social assistance applications or, in some cases, used to abuse the system by requesting social assistance at several municipalities at the same time. SADM could not oblige municipalities to provide data on social assistance provision, but required such data to improve the formulation of its social protection policy.

To help municipalities manage the provision of social assistance and to facilitate social assistance application procedures, the Ministry of Social Security and Labour initiated the creation of a Social Protection Information System (SPIS). SPIS is a complex database that enables municipal officers to collect, store, monitor and exchange information on social assistance provision between the municipalities and other public institutions. After a period of development, the system already offers online social assistance application services. This paper examines SPIS in more detail, elaborates upon its transferable merits and provides insights into lessons learnt from its implementation.

1 Situation in the host country

1.1 The Lithuanian Social Protection System

Lietuvos Respublikos valstybinio socialinio aprūpinimo sistemos pagrindų įstatymas (in English, The law of national social protection system foundations in the Republic of Lithuania)¹ lays out the legal provisions establishing the Lithuanian social protection system. It was adopted in October 1990 and remains mostly the same up to this day. It establishes the general system according to which social insurance, and social support and social services are provided to those in need. Numerous legal acts further specify the specific social protection measures and strictly define circumstances for granting them.

Box 1. Definition of terms

Social support refers to benefits in cash. Individuals receiving this kind of help are entitled to a certain sum of money paid either regularly throughout certain periods or only once.

Social services refer to social assistance delivered in kind. This could be free meal provision, transport provision, social care services, socio-cultural services or similar. Numerous institutions (e.g. care homes, hostels for the homeless etc.) that have a license to do so may provide social services.

Social assistance refers to any kind of social help received from governmental institutions. This could be social support, social services or any other assistance that does not fall within these categories.

Social care refers to social services such as care at day care centres, care provision for elderly or disabled persons and similar types of social assistance.

(Family) household refers to all persons living within a single home. This could be either a single person or a group of persons considered a family.

Child benefit refers to any type of social support granted to households with children. Child benefits could include allowances for families with new-borns, child custody benefits or allowances for expectant mothers. Child support benefit is a particular type that falls within this category and is paid to households per each child depending on household income or the number of children.

Social benefit refers to a specific type of social support paid to family households if each member receives less than the standard state-sponsored income per person.

Source: Own elaboration, based on official information available on SADM website (SADM, 2017b).

Social insurance and social support /social service expenses are financed from two separate budgets (see Table 1):

- Valstybinis socialinio draudimo fonas (Sodra) (The State social insurance fund) covers the social insurance expenditure, which operates under the standard pay-as-you-go system: employers and employees pay contributions, which are later redistributed to those in need (SADM, 2017).
- The state budget covers social support and social services, but municipalities make decisions about their specific spending. They individually administer and provide social support and social services within their budget limits.

¹ The full text can be accessed via the following link: <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.5B5E3D4666A4>

Table 1. The overview of the Lithuanian Social Protection System

Types of support within the Lithuanian social protection system	
Social Insurance	Social Support and Social Services
Who administers and provides this type of social protection?	
The State Social Insurance Fund	Municipalities or institutions that have the licence to do so (e.g. day care centres)
What kinds of services are provided under this type of social protection?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retirement pensions • Temporary unemployment benefits • Sickness and maternity insurance • Health insurance • Accidents at work and occupational disease insurance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child benefits and child support • Social services (e.g. social care) • Social support (various cash benefits) • Assistance for persons with special needs or the disabled • Other types of unspecified social assistance
Where does the financing come from?	
The State Social Insurance Fund Budget	Municipal Budgets
Who contributes to this budget?	
Employers on behalf of employed persons, employed persons together with other minor sources of income.	State budget allocates a portion of all collected tax, and some tax is collected directly by the municipalities.

Source: *The law of national social protection system foundations in the Republic of Lithuania.*

The Ministry of Social Security and Labour ensures the overall functioning of the social protection system and safeguards its legal framework. It is responsible for the social protection policy design and implementation, including the establishment of eligibility criteria and the standard application procedures for receiving social assistance. SADM also provides recommendations to various institutions² that implement social policies, develops the national programmes³, finances the research projects on social assistance⁴ and develops the technical capacities of municipal social support departments (SADM, 2017c).

Individual municipalities autonomously administer and manage social support and social services delivered to their residents. Municipal officers make decisions on who receives social assistance and may decide to provide additional types of social support or social services, covered from municipal budgets. In this, the municipalities are not accountable to the ministry. Furthermore, each municipality has its own method of administering social assistance within its social assistance departments⁵. Lithuanian seniūnijos (en. elderships⁶) are part of the social protection system only insofar as

² Such institutions include the Lithuanian municipalities, social care homes, social assistance centres etc.

³ Examples of such programmes include the National Youth Guarantee (Jaunimo Garantija), the Programme for Strengthening Social Inclusion (Socialinės apimtios stiprinimas), the Programme for Non-Governmental Organisation and Community Development (Nevyriausybių organizacijų ir bendruomenių plėtra).

⁴ An extensive list of research activities financed by SADM can be accessed via the following link: <http://www.socmin.lt/lt/tyrimai.html> (in Lithuanian)

⁵ Different municipalities have similar departments under different names, such as Socialinių paslaugų centras (en. Centre for social assistance), Socialinės paramos skyrius (Departament for social assistance) etc.

⁶ Elderships are the smallest administrative divisions within the Republic of Lithuania and function as municipal districts.

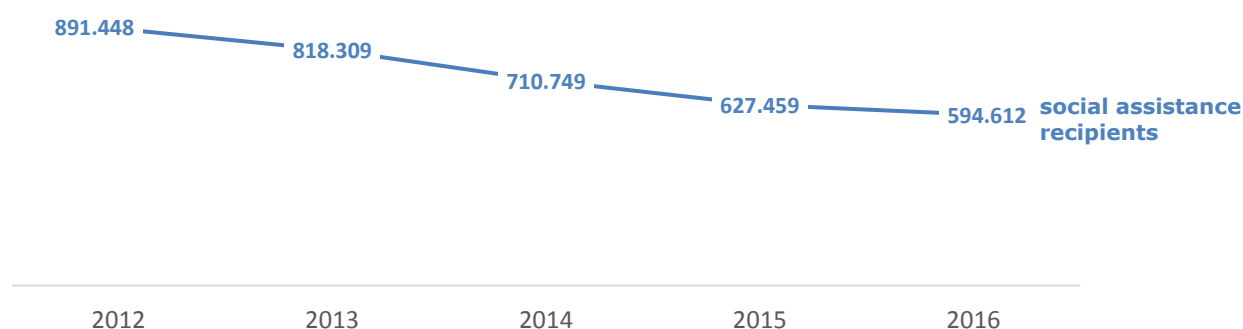
they receive individual requests for social assistance but otherwise have neither legal nor financial powers to grant it. Eldershops receive social assistance applications, assess household living conditions and inform municipalities about social assistance needs within their jurisdiction. Municipalities may use this information to make further decisions on social assistance provision. (Lietuvos Respublikos Valstybinio socialinio aprūpinimo sistemos pagrindų įstatymas, 1990).

1.2 Social assistance recipients

Social support and social services target the most vulnerable or disadvantaged individuals⁷. In most cases, they include children, survivors, the elderly, disabled persons, socially excluded persons, and households with income lower than the fixed minimum standard per each member⁸. There are additional social support benefits available to persons recognised as victims of USSR aggression or war survivors, but these are exceptional and relatively rare cases and are more often administered by state authorities rather than municipalities (SPIS, 2017). The overall goal of social support and social services is to grant necessary assistance to those who are unable to provide and care for themselves due to a variety of reasons.

At the start of 2016, the Lithuanian population collectively comprised 2 888 558 individuals, half (51%) of whom constituted the active labour force (Lietuvos Statistikos Departamentas, 2017). Approximately 990 000 applications asking for social support or social services were filed in 2016. Some individuals file applications several times, as they are often entitled to more than one type of social assistance or, alternatively, re-apply after their applications are rejected. Thus, roughly 600 000 individuals, or approximately 21% of all Lithuanian population, received some kind of social assistance during that year (SADM, 2017a). Figure 1 below on the number of individuals receiving social assistance over the 2012-2016 period shows a declining number of recipients over this period.

Figure 1. Total number of social assistance recipients 2012-2016



Source: SPIS, data from 2012-2016 by total number of social assistance recipients.

Around 100 000 individuals received some kind of social support benefits⁹ in 2016, and at least 122 000 child benefits in cash were handed out in the same year. These cases do not include multiple social services such as free meal provision or various types of social care. Furthermore, in 2016, almost 10 000 family households that are at risk of social exclusion were identified (Lietuvos Statistikos Departamentas, 2017). Such family households generally require multiple social services, including poverty relief, compensation for housing and utility expenses, child support benefits, temporary social care services or social services in developing social skills.

⁷ Vulnerable individuals are persons who need social assistance due to their limited capacities of individual conduct, such as children, the elderly or the disabled. Disadvantaged individuals are any impoverished or socially excluded persons.

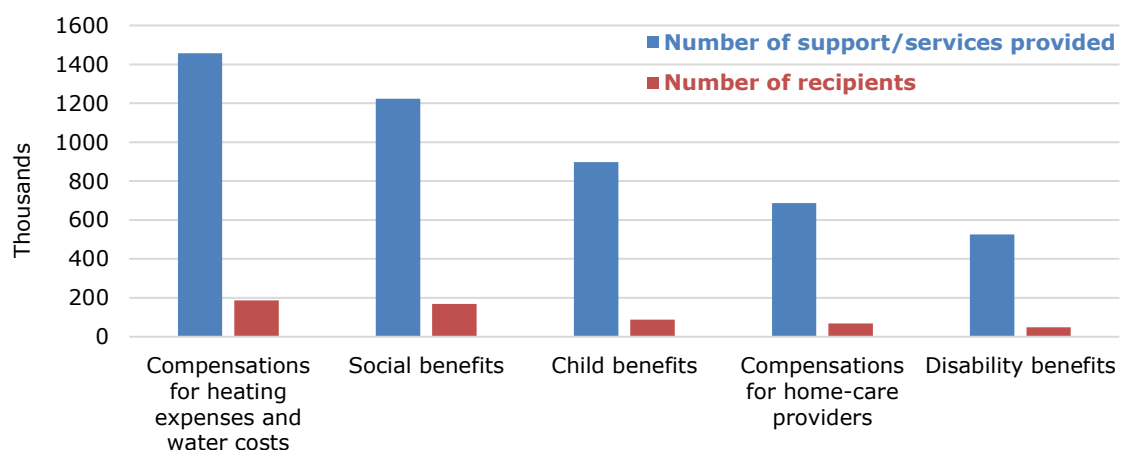
⁸ Currently the standard state-sponsored income per person amounts to EUR 102 per month.

⁹ This number includes both periodic and single payments. It does not include various compensations.

1.3 Types of social support and social services

The target groups may receive various types of compensations, social care services, technical assistance, social assistance or benefits in cash. Depending on the benefit type, they are distributed either depending on individual income or irrespective of it. Currently, there are approximately 70 standard types of social support and social services available throughout Lithuania and some additional social assistance measures specific to each municipality (SPIS, 2017). The approximate cost for covering most of these social assistance provision measures amounted to EUR 777 million for 2016 (SADM, 2017d). Figure 2 below lists the most used services. The total cost to cover these particular social assistance expenses amounted to approximately EUR 222 million.

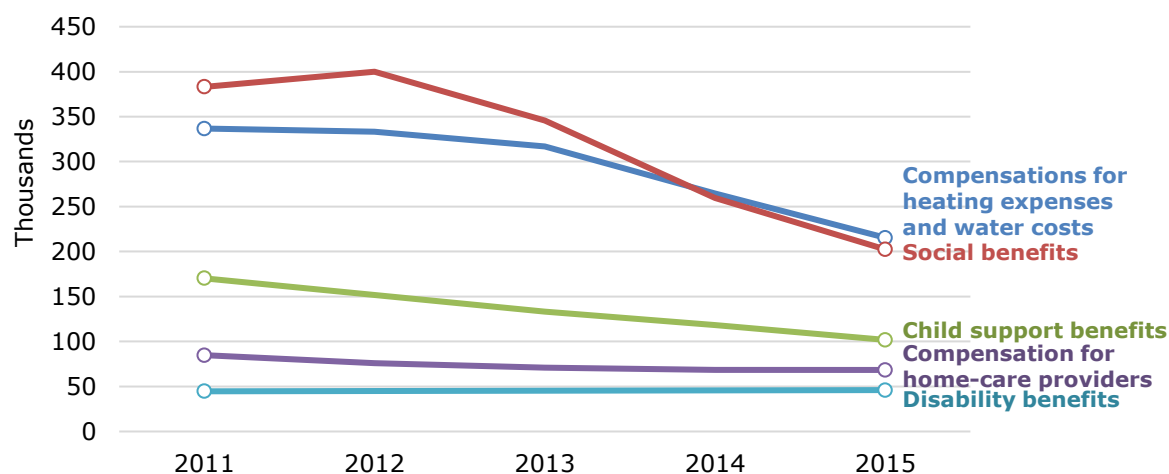
Figure 2. Most popular types of social support and social services in 2016



Source: SPIS, data from 2016 by types of social support and social services at municipalities.

The number of social support recipients for two most popular types of social assistance has been steadily decreasing during the last five years. This is mainly due to improving economic conditions following the aftermath of the economic crisis. The number of child benefit recipients has also decreased for similar reasons. The number of recipients for compensations for home-care providers and disability benefits remains stable. Figure 3 below illustrates these changes in detail.

Figure 3. Most popular types of social support and social services by number of recipients 2011-2015



Source: SPIS, data from 2011-2015 by social support and social service recipients at municipalities.

There are other, less popular, but also relatively common types of social support and social services. They include the following (SPIS, 2017):

- measures for assisting families in developing social skills,
- child custody benefits,
- household assistance to families at risk of social exclusion,
- support for purchasing school supplies,
- compensations for transport expenses,
- retirement pension benefits,
- orphan's pensions,
- poverty relief and social exclusion prevention measures (funded by the European Social Fund (ESF)).

1.4 The standard procedure for receiving social assistance

For some individuals, receiving social support and social services is a rather complex procedure. The general application (without using SPIS to apply online) involves the following steps (Vilniaus miesto savivaldybės administracija, 2017):

1. An individual in need of support has to make an appointment at the local municipal office and present him or herself in person.
2. The individual must fill certain forms, depending on his or her legal status, social position and the support requested. Currently, there are 17 different forms available. Some of them include up to eight additional supplementary forms.
3. In addition to official forms, each kind of social support requires several accompanying documents. These may include the following:
 - a) Additional forms or documents. For example, an income statement, legal documents affirming the right to custody, verification of living conditions under which assistance is granted, or, if the individual is requesting compensation for purchased items, the necessary receipt.
 - b) Eligibility proofs from relevant institutions. Depending on the support requested, the individual may need to submit proof of eligibility from other institutions. This may include full data on personal property and income, the extent of his or her disability, or similar. Such documents may be provided by Valstybinė mokesčių inspekcija (en. State tax inspectorate), Valstybinis socialinio draudimo fondas (en. State social insurance fund), Lietuvos darbo birža (en. Lithuanian labour exchange), Neįgalumo ir nedarbingumo nustatymo tarnyba (en. Disability and working capacity assessment office) and other institutions. In most cases, the individual is responsible for providing these documents himself or herself.
4. The individual needs to submit his or her application in written form either at the municipal office, or, in some cases, through the postal services or at the eldership office. This step is necessary to meet all authentication procedure requirements.
5. Once the individual submits all the necessary documents, municipal authorities assess the application and thoroughly evaluate whether the applicant qualifies for the support requested. This step involves checking whether the person meets the eligibility criteria and ensuring that he or she has submitted all the necessary documents and forms. Often this also entails looking at whether the individual has already received certain types of social assistance. Municipalities have their own methods of managing this procedure, but in all cases, each person has a personal file with all applications and decisions to grant social assistance.
6. After making the decision, a municipal officer issues a decision form. The municipal officer needs to fill all the necessary information to explain his or her

decision. It is included in the personal file. If the decision to provide social assistance is positive, officers pass on the necessary information to either the administration office or other relevant institutions.

7. The individual receives social support or service.

1.5 Difficulties within the system

SADM was aware that the process of applying and receiving social assistance was very inconvenient for both those in need of social support or social services and for municipal officers. The introduction of the Socialinės paramos šeimai informacinė sistema (SPIS) (in English, Social Protection Information System) in 2005 was a policy measure to respond to these difficulties. Initially it was a tool for municipal officers. However, further upgrades allowed integrating online social assistance application services for individual applicants (SADM, 2017a).

Difficulties for individual applicants

Requesting social assistance required the individual to physically present him or herself at the municipal office, or send the required forms by post. Filling out the necessary forms by hand was confusing, time consuming and stressful. However, presenting all the necessary eligibility proofs from relevant institutions was the most frustrating because an individual had to make an appointment at every relevant office and personally collect all the required documents. This was discouraging for most people, especially the elderly, the disabled and families with small children – the main target groups.

For example, an individual who requested disability support had to provide eligibility proofs from institutions such as the Disability and working capacity assessment office, a social care institution where he or she receives social care services, or educational institution if he or she is in education. The applicant also had to provide proof of other social support or social insurance payments received from responsible institutions etc. (Vilniaus miesto savivaldybės administracija, 2017).

Difficulties for municipal officers

Municipalities had to administer all social assistance requests manually. This was very inefficient and time consuming. In many instances, municipal officers could not find relevant data and had to call other institutions or other municipal departments in which case municipal officers had to clearly document this decision and spend time doing this. Social assistance applicants would then have to re-apply. Even if authorities did not decline a request, crosschecking facts with other municipalities was a lengthy process that made the provision of social assistance ineffective. Municipalities did not have a single national database where they could access such information. Most often, municipalities used paper document files for each person who ever requested social assistance at that particular municipality and, if the person made another request, they would have to look through that file. In addition, a person could receive benefits from more than one municipality, given that they could not check if that person already had a file in the remaining 59 municipalities. This was especially problematic, as some individuals would abuse the social assistance system, exhausting the financial resources that municipalities could use to provide assistance to others, according to municipality representatives.

2 Policy measure

2.1 Policy measure objectives

The general goal of SPIS was to ensure adequate provision of social support and social services across all 60 Lithuanian municipalities. The lack of data at the municipality level on the services requested and provided prevented efficient social assistance management. SADM conceived SPIS as a solution to this issue. The following specific objectives are its underlying key elements:

- collect, provide and summarise information on all social support and social service provision at the municipality level;
- strengthen cooperation between the national state authorities and municipalities in providing social assistance;
- prevent citizens from simultaneously receiving social support from several different municipalities;
- simplify the application for social support and social services through an online service that operates under a single window principle (SADM, 2017a; Dėl Socialinės paramos šeimai informacinės sistemos nuostatų ir Socialinės paramos šeimai informacinės sistemos duomenų saugos nuostatų patvirtinimo, 2008).

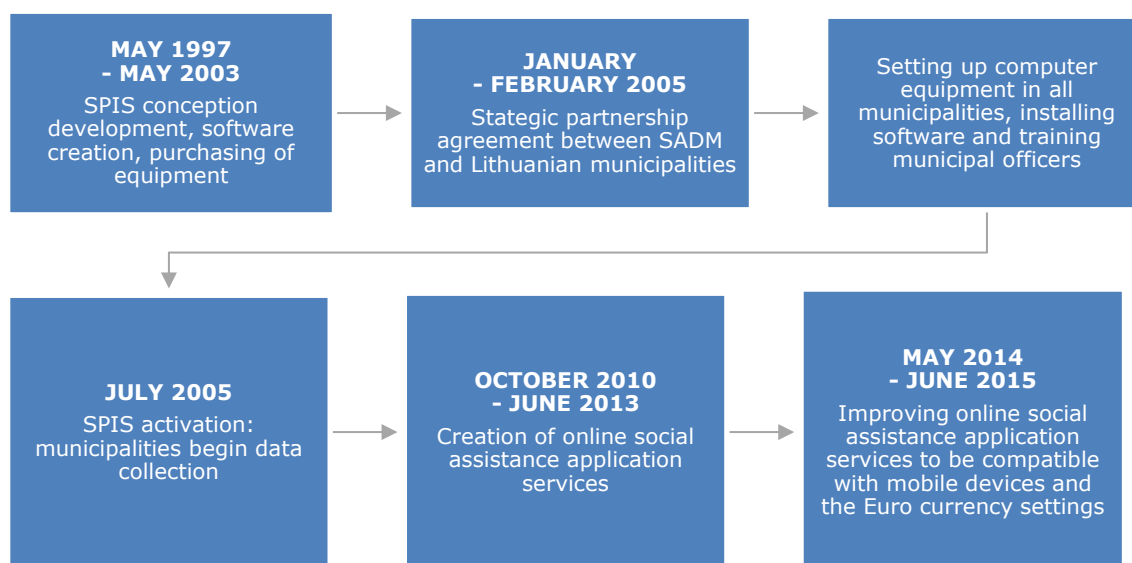
While SPIS primarily targets municipalities, which in turn, target individuals in need of social assistance, its attempts to systematically involve all actors within the provision of social assistance. This includes SADM officials, municipal officers, schools, elderships, various institutions and individual social assistance recipients.

2.2 History of the measure

The project relies upon a strategic partnership agreement between SADM and all 60 Lithuanian municipalities. SADM began working on SPIS in 1997. The starting phases of the project defined the conception and scope of the information management system. This phase lasted until 2003. During this time, extensive discussions in working groups took place between the municipality representatives and SADM. Then, during the later phases, the primary version of SPIS was developed. SADM supplied municipality social assistance departments with the necessary technical equipment and provided training courses for municipality officers. The system went fully functioning in July 2005, when municipal officers started collecting data on social assistance provision in their respective municipalities.

The latest SPIS developments took place between October 2010 and June 2013 and then between May 2014 and June 2015. These changes were in line with a need to modernise and expand the SPIS operational capacity, including online social assistance provision. The Figure 4 on the next page illustrates the various SPIS development stages in detail.

Figure 4. SPIS development stages



Source: Information provided by SADM representatives, 2017.

ESF and SADM collectively financed the creation and launching of SPIS online social assistance application services. This stage of SPIS development took place between October 2010 and June 2013. The ESF contributed the majority of resources with a total sum of EUR 3 211 000, while SADM provided additional EUR 567 000 (LR Finansų Ministerija, 2017). The maintenance of SPIS costs around EUR 553 000 annually, but expenses may be higher in periods when the system is being updated. The majority of round EUR 472 000 of annual maintenance costs include the SPIS administrative expenses, consultation services and the upkeep of infrastructure (servers, databases, network equipment and security measures). Municipalities do not share these costs as they are covered exclusively by SADM (SADM, 2017a).

2.3 How does SPIS operate?

In general, SPIS is a complex database that integrates data on social assistance recipients, mainly used by municipal officers. However, the social assistance provision database is accessible to the public without registering on SPIS. Municipalities may access data on the type of social assistance provided in each month of every year, starting from 1997. However, pre-2006 data is scarce and unsystematic because its official collection only began in July 2005 (SADM, 2017a).

The system also operates as an online service provider for individual users. It follows a six-pillar structure that encompasses all types of social assistance. These pillars include:

- child protection (children's rights)
- school pupils' support
- cash benefits
- social services
- assistance to persons with special needs or the disabled
- housing support benefit.

The different users of the system are described below.

2.3.1 SPIS for Individual Users

Individuals in need of social assistance may use SPIS to request and receive some types of social support and social services without leaving their homes. Anyone may register on SPIS, provided they have access to the overall e-Valdžios Vartai (en. E-Government Gateway). The E-Government Gateway operates as an authentication

platform for individual users. Once connected to the system, an individual needs to fill in certain forms about him or herself and his or her household (e.g. indicate the number of children etc.). These forms correspond to otherwise standard forms issued by SADM. Having filled all personal information, an individual must then fill a particular social assistance application form, depending on the assistance requested. Once an individual completes all the necessary steps, he or she may submit the application (SPIS, 2017).

According to the Lithuanian E-Government concept, online public services operate at five levels of interaction. SPIS provides the social support and social services at four levels of interaction¹⁰ (Elektroniniai valdžios vartai, 2017):

- First level. An institution provides online information about its activities.
- Second level. An institution provides certain forms and documents online. Users may download, print and manually fill social assistance application forms or documents at home, then submit them in person or via postal services.
- Third level. A user's ID is identified through an online authentication system (E-Government Gateway) and he or she may request social assistance via online application forms. However, since not all necessary documents are accessible online, the individual needs to submit the remaining documents in person or via postal services.
- Fourth level. The service is fully available online. An individual can submit an application for social assistance and receive it online.

The fourth level of interaction brings the greatest benefit to individual users. Currently, there are six types of social assistance available at this level from all the social assistance types available online (currently 26). Although not the most popular, these types of assistance do not require such extensive number of additional documents as other types of social assistance and are therefore fully available online. Municipal officers are able to access all the necessary information through the SPIS database and then make their decision based on it. Another 20 types of social assistance are available at the third level of interaction because municipal officers cannot access the personal data they need to make a decision. All types of social assistance are available at the second level. Video instructions are available to those who have never used SPIS and wish to submit their application.

In addition to online social assistance application services, SPIS also includes an online social assistance calculator¹¹. An individual who wishes to receive one of the two types of social support, social benefit or compensation for heating expenses and water costs. may use this tool to check whether he or she is entitled to receive this specific assistance (SPIS, 2017).

2.3.2 SPIS for Municipal Officers

Municipal officers use SPIS on a daily basis to manage social assistance provision. Each officer has an individual user ID that is in line with strict data confidentiality regulations. Each officer may access particular user applications and view particular databases with specific information on each individual. For example, if a disabled individual requests child support benefit through an online application form, a municipal officer responsible for this particular benefit will be able to access the online application form and other relevant databases such as the Disability and Capacity Assessment Office database. The officer can then grant this type of child support benefit based on this information.

Not all municipal officers may access the same information. Some types of social support are only available at the third level of interaction because a municipal officer

¹⁰ The fifth level of interaction does not apply to services administered by SPIS.

¹¹ The online social assistance calculator for two types of social assistance is available via the following link: <https://www.spis.lt/Skaiciuokles>

has no access to all necessary documents and therefore the individual needs to submit additional documents in person.

Municipal officers on SPIS register each individual request so they can monitor who received what type of social assistance. If the individual returns to municipal office and requests another type of social assistance, a municipal officer may easily check whether he or she is entitled to receive it based on his or her application history.

2.3.3 SPIS Technical Capacities

Currently, SPIS integrates approximately 23 public institutions' databases. However, the exact number is bound to change because some databases will no longer be operational and additional ones will be included. There were some initial challenges due to different ways of aggregating and presenting the relevant data. However, most of these difficulties were resolved in due time and currently SADM representatives report no significant technical barriers (SADM, 2017a).

2.3.4 SPIS Administration

SADM personnel are responsible for SPIS administration. Currently, three persons work with the SPIS at the ministry itself. SADM contracts other services, such as the SPIS maintenance and help hotline from external suppliers. SADM only partly acts as a consulting body, with one person working with SPIS every day and two persons providing additional assistance (SADM, 2017a).

2.4 Foreseen future developments

There are multiple SPIS developments foreseen in the near future. They should simplify the management and provision of social assistance even further. These steps include the following (SADM, 2017a):

- *Increased scope of available social assistance applications online.* Currently only 26 out of approximately 70 social support and social services types are available online. However, within the next three years, SADM expects to include all the remaining types. Specific social assistance measures, used by individual municipalities, will also be included. This means increasing the scope of online applications available both in general and at the fourth level of interaction.
- *Document digitalisation.* In certain instances, the applicant needs to submit very specific kinds of documents that are not issued by institutions or registry bureaus using SPIS. For example, sometimes a person must bring a receipt as proof of purchase in order to receive a compensation for his or her expenses (e.g. when a disabled person purchases a wheelchair). Legalising the submission of scanned or digital documents as original copies would greatly facilitate social assistance provision. Currently, it is possible to apply and receive social assistance through online services if and only if information required to grant specific assistance is already available to municipal officers within the electronic system. In other words, municipal officers may only access already integrated databases. Applicants or beneficiaries must bring other documents to the municipal office in person. While this kind of development would greatly increase the effectiveness of the system, a monitoring authentication system must exist due to a risk of fraud. However, this should not be problematic.
- *Integration of other databases to improve services.* Some municipalities made suggestions to integrate additional databases that could help improve services. In the near future, SPIS will integrate Lietuvos teismų informacinė sistema (en. Lithuanian judicial information system, LITEKO) and e-Sveikata (en. e-Health). These databases will enable municipal officers to access a wider range of information on social assistance applicants, especially related to determining whether the person suffers from disability or has legal incapacity.

- *Creation of an individual e-File.* Currently municipalities still print out various files related to individual requests to receive social assistance and create a physical personal file. Creating an electronic individual e-File would greatly reduce the amount of paperwork to both individual assistance applicants and municipal officers. The system would become more efficient and user-friendly.
- *Social service provision.* There are plans to improve the system for social service provision. For example, SADM aims to provide social workers with tablet computers, which they can carry while visiting individuals in need of help. Social workers will be able to enter all information directly after having provided certain services and will no longer need to fill lengthy documents. Furthermore, social workers will be able to help individuals in need to request social assistance through online services, making the process easier and more efficient. Currently, the plan is to purchase around 100-200 tablet computers in the hope that social workers using them will set a good example and encourage municipalities to buy additional units.

Currently, SADM is implementing one project related to the technical SPIS development and two other relevant projects are at preparation phase. Most of these developments should be complete within three years' time.

3 SPIS results

The SPIS has become the standard working tool in most Lithuanian municipalities. Several municipalities report that they can no longer imagine providing social support and social services without it. The establishment of the SPIS was an ambitious, yet a necessary task that is starting to show positive results.

3.1 SPIS as an everyday tool

During interviews, municipality officers expressed general satisfaction with the SPIS. Several officers report that SPIS was a very welcome initiative given that municipalities could not have individually set up anything like it due to their limited capacity. Most municipalities are quite small and therefore lack the necessary financial or human resources to introduce the technical innovations of this kind.

Approximately 6 000 municipal officers use the SPIS for their daily tasks. They use it to collect, manage and monitor data on social assistance provision. These activities include report writing and carrying out various administrative and organisational tasks. Furthermore, municipal officers use SPIS to help individuals start submitting their social assistance applications. For example, when a person in need of social assistance makes an appointment at the municipal office, an officer may check the system to see which services that individual may receive before he or she even submits an application. Such assistance is very efficient and greatly appreciated by most individual applicants, according to the municipal officers.

Other institutions, such as the Valstybės vaiko teisių apsaugos ir įvaikinimo tarnyba (en. National service for child rights' protection and adoption) and the Techninės pagalbos neįgaliesiems centras (en. Centre for Technical Assistance to Disabled Persons) also use the SPIS database. They provide certain social services and therefore benefit from being able to access personal data on received social assistance as well as register what services they provided. About 1 400 schools use the system to monitor which pupils receive social assistance. Most Lithuanian eldership offices (546 in total) use SPIS to identify social assistance recipients within their jurisdiction and help individuals request social assistance (SADM, 2017a).

In general, SPIS has reduced the manual labour workload at the municipal social assistance departments and other institutions. A municipal officer from Alytus reported in an interview that *'It would be chaos without SPIS. I do not even understand how we could ever do our jobs without it'*.

3.2 Improved procedure for requesting social assistance

Currently, 26 types of social support and social services are available on SPIS online application services. An additional two types of social support should soon become available, namely compensation for heating expenses and water costs, and social benefit. These are the most popular types of social support and they will be available at the fourth level of interaction. Municipalities expect to receive very large numbers of online applications for both of them.

Data from 2015-2017 clearly shows an increasing number of people are using SPIS online application services to request social assistance, although the numbers are relatively modest. In 2015, around 8% of all social assistance applications available at the fourth level of interaction were submitted online. In 2016, this proportion rose to 11.1% and to 17% in 2017. This constitutes more than 21 000 applications for social assistance in 2017 (SADM, 2017a).

The online application procedure is convenient and relatively easy, especially for young families. Municipal officers report a clear pattern regarding online social assistance requests: the most popular type of social support at the third level of interaction is the single allowance for expecting mothers. Around 8.5% of all social assistance applications for this type of child benefit are submitted online. Furthermore,

around 60% of young parents seeking to claim the single payment for new-borns submit applications online. This type of social assistance is very popular and is available at the fourth level of interaction. On the other hand, municipality officers report having received very few or no social assistance requests by the elderly (SADM, 2017a.). Such trends are not surprising, given the lack of digital skills related to age.

3.3 Fraud prevention

The SPIS contributes to higher transparency in the provision of social assistance. Due to thorough data collection and extensive information sharing between municipalities, individuals can no longer abuse the system and receive payments from several municipalities at once. Right after the launch of SPIS, officers identified a number of such cases and cut their social support provisions. Due to improved monitoring through SPIS, it has become significantly more difficult to cheat, especially when an individual claims social support (SADM, 2017a). Municipalities were able to cut duplicate spending and allocate the money elsewhere. Therefore, the fraud prevention is a positive result.

3.4 Data provision

The Department of Financial Support under SADM uses the SPIS database when drafting legislation, estimating the number of social assistance recipients, monitoring which types of social assistance are the most popular and calculating the expenditure estimates. Municipalities also use SPIS to manage this data but currently there is no information as to whether they use it for decision making other than direct social assistance provision.

The Lithuanian Department of Statistics also uses the data supplied by SPIS, but it conducts its own surveys following its own legal obligations. In the future, this duplication should be resolved. However, currently municipalities are not obliged to enter all data into SPIS, making its data less comprehensive.

3.5 Improved cooperation

During interviews, both the SADM representatives and municipal officers reported improved cooperation. The process of social assistance provision is more efficient and there are fewer causes for dissatisfaction. The SADM can easily monitor which types of social assistance municipalities provide and use this information for decision making without pressuring municipalities to account for their activities separately. Municipalities are also satisfied with SADM providing technical support and assistance to social assistance departments within municipal offices, both according to the SADM and interviewed municipality officers.

4 SPIS difficulties and constraints

While SPIS seems to function fairly well, both individual users and municipal officers would benefit from certain improvements. There are challenges difficult to solve through technical means alone, such as the lack of digital skills amongst the elderly recipients of social assistance or the legal constraints. However, other difficulties could be resolved with sufficient technical capacity. These challenges are analysed in turn below.

4.1 Difficulties for individuals requesting social assistance

Lack of digital skills

Many individuals who are in need of social assistance lack digital skills. This includes disabled persons, the elderly or socially excluded individuals. The Survey of Adult Skills, carried under the OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), showed that a large share of Lithuanian adults had low problem-solving skills in technology-rich environments (OECD, 2016). These findings concern those who are generally not in need of social assistance but given the average profiles of socially disadvantaged groups, such negative results paint a worrying picture. Lack of digital skills is more prevalent among the elderly and people with lower education (European Commission, 2017). Furthermore, municipal officers notice that such people are sometimes in serious need of help and are worried about of submitting invalid applications. Interviewed municipal officers stressed that such state of mind prevents them from even trying to use the online application services.

Lack of clarity and need for better instructions

Municipal officers reported receiving large numbers of incomplete online social assistance requests. They believe that this could be due to the lack of clarity and insufficient information provided to those who are using the online SPIS application services. One municipal officer noted that for a long-time people requesting certain types of benefits online were not clearly informed about the fact that in order to receive these benefits, they need to meet certain property requirements. Many individuals believe that their income statement is sufficient in order to receive certain benefits, but in fact, other data such as the amount of property owned, or their occupation type is also necessary.

Furthermore, SPIS application services could be more intuitive and user-friendly for social assistance applicants. Currently, the forms closely resemble the standard official ministry forms that are rather confusing and inconvenient for those who are not familiar with multiple legal aspects of social assistance provision. Individual applicants sometimes prefer to come to the office directly where municipal officers instruct them on application procedures. Some municipal representatives suggest creating comment threads or live online help, because the call service is costly and inconvenient, and the online video instructions take too long.

Need for more online application services at the fourth level of interaction

Although a large share of those in need of social assistance do not have the necessary digital skills, a substantial share of individuals would benefit from the possibility of submitting more types of social assistance applications without leaving their homes. For example, in some instances a social worker may help to file a social assistance application. In such cases, these workers could help the elderly or disabled persons to submit online applications without needing to receive any additional documents from relevant institutions and without these persons needing to leave the comfort of their homes.

4.2 Difficulties for municipal officers

Lack of technical capacity

In some municipalities, municipal officers are still relatively unfamiliar and uncomfortable with using digital technologies. The lack of skill and trust prevents municipal officers from using the SPIS in its full capacity. Some municipality representatives interviewed for this paper indicated that change of municipal office personnel also causes disruptions: new officers are sometimes not fully aware of their responsibility to use the database and they do not always get adequate instructions due to the lack of time.

Inaccessible information

Municipal officers cannot access all the information they need in order to grant social assistance. This is a relatively common issue and happens for two reasons: either the information is not available because other municipal officers have not entered the necessary data, or the information is confidential.

The first instance is largely a matter of work ethics. SADM cannot oblige municipalities to enter data, including data on social service provision. Municipalities must provide all data on social support in cash, but all the other types of social services provision are not strictly regulated. Representatives of municipalities interviewed for this paper stated that they do not enter data because at times, they do not have the technical capacity to do so (cf. above). Some other institutions also do not enter the necessary data to their databases due to similar reasons.

The second issue is possibly the greatest and the main problem for the institutional SPIS users. This is the main reason why so many types of social assistance are not available at the fourth level of interaction: even if the personal data is already available in various registries and databases, the municipal officers may not have access to it. Many officers express a wish to gain access to all databases and all registries, so they could grant social assistance without needing additional documents and individual applicants could indeed benefit from the single window principle. Furthermore, both municipal officers and individual users would greatly benefit from the additional database integration, as this would allow expanding the provision of social assistance even further. However, granting access to personal information to various databases is a complex legal matter because such personal information may be confidential and subject to strict data protection rules. Municipal officers report that resolving this issue should not be difficult given that most of them already have the legal right to work with most confidential information. However, securing access to personal data is complicated. Another challenge is the data ownership. In some instances, database managers may either refuse to provide access to their data or request payment for doing so. This significant issue is challenging for SADM and municipalities to resolve.

Time-consuming process for rejecting applications

Municipal officers report spending large amounts of time checking the invalid applications. Some users either do not take the online application service seriously or use it incorrectly and many individuals submit incomplete or invalid applications. As reported, the workload to assess additional requests has increased significantly. Some municipality officers interviewed for this paper indicated that they spend many extra hours to look through all of them. Municipal officers believe that a simple technical solution could resolve this problem, namely that submitting an incomplete or invalid application would be impossible. This is especially important if the number of social assistance applications at the fourth level of interaction is to be increased in the future.

4.3 Difficulties for the Ministry

Legal constraints

The SADM representatives indicated that the greatest challenge was to ensure that the SPIS meets all the legal requirements and the ministry regulations. The early SPIS version was not fully in line with the legal system, and harmonisation between the SPIS and legal acts was a major challenge. Currently, adapting the SPIS to constant legal changes in social protection system is an important issue. For example, if a new law foresees the introduction of a new social assistance application form or an additional supplementary form, it needs to be determined how these forms will appear within the electronic system. This procedure is sometimes very complex and takes a considerable amount of time (SADM, 2017a). Related to this problem, interviewed representatives of municipalities mentioned that they cannot enter and register such information within the system but need to administer it manually for a certain period. Once the service becomes available online, they need to return to administering services on the electronic system.

Additional difficulties

SADM representatives may also have difficulties to take full advantage of the data provided by municipalities mainly because not all municipal officers register social services provided under their jurisdiction. Data gaps limits potential for making adequately informed policy decisions and providing evidence-based recommendations. Furthermore, SADM representatives also cannot easily resolve certain problems indicated by municipal officers due to legal obstacles for obtaining data, such as data property regulations or confidentiality. They do not fall within SADM jurisdiction and therefore complicate the process of developing the SPIS.

4.4 Other constraints

Lengthy response to the feedback

While some municipal officers are very happy with improved cooperation between SADM and their municipalities, others complain about the lengthy feedback process. Some municipalities file requests and suggestions for improving the system but complain that the ministry takes too long to respond to their feedback. In some instances, municipal officers notice that they have asked to include databases that contain information on individuals' incapacity to work or information on legal incapacity for the last five years but to this day, these databases have not been integrated. This may also be related to difficulties in obtaining rights to access such databases.

5 SPIS success factors and transferability

5.1 Success factors

The greatest success factor in establishing the SPIS was mutual consent based on the mutual partnership agreements between SADM and all 60 municipalities. Given the fact that municipalities are not legally obliged to account for social assistance provision to SADM and are not in any way required to provide such extensive data, reaching a consensus through non-binding measures regarding the SPIS database exemplifies a major achievement within the context of social assistance provision in Lithuania.

Lengthy discussions and numerous debates enabled successfully reaching mutual consent. While such deliberations took a long time, they were necessary for building a strong ground for later mutually beneficial decisions. A partial success of introducing this measure through a strategic partnership agreement is due to the nature of SPIS itself. This information system was a necessary tool for most municipalities and the benefits of SPIS exceeded any individual interests. Some large municipalities, such as the Vilnius city municipality, even considered creating their own information system, which would have been easier and more convenient in the short-term. However, all stakeholders reached an agreement that focuses on long-term goals, continuous improvement and cooperation.

Sometimes, municipal officers seem dissatisfied with the SPIS service provision and express opinions on what ought to be different. This feedback originates from a deep sense of SPIS ownership, given that they are its main users and participated in its development. Overall, municipal officers are feeling much more enthusiastic towards the SPIS and look forward to improving it in any way they believe would benefit social assistance provision.

It seems that SPIS is continuing to be developed and many improvements need to be added to make it operational in the highest capacity. However, both SADM representatives and municipal officers have already worked side by side on SPIS for a number of years, building mutual trust and laying the ground for successful future cooperation. There are many suggestions for the SPIS improvement made on behalf of Lithuanian municipalities and, given the partnership approach, they will hopefully be taken on board in due time.

5.2 Transferability

The SPIS has significant potential for transferability to other EU Member States as a good practice example. There are two main reasons for doing so: the SPIS exemplifies a good model of digital social assistance management and, in addition, the SPIS demonstrates a good result that is rooted within a legally complex system where stakeholders must rely on non-binding measures.

Providing social assistance

Efficient social assistance provision is a relevant matter to many EU Member States, given the fact that most of them exemplify a welfare state model and provide social assistance in accordance to it. Social assistance provision can be difficult to manage on a number of levels. First, large numbers of recipients and large numbers of social assistance types need to be systematically addressed and monitored. Furthermore, a complicated legal framework and a sophisticated, yet burdensome, bureaucratic mechanism often prevents implementing straightforward technical solutions. Finally, large numbers of institutions involved in the provision of social assistance also need to be included in social assistance management. The SPIS serves as a good example on how to address and tackle all these issues within a single policy measure. Social assistance provision can become more efficient and more effective with digital technologies. While there are certain legal constraints of which each country should be aware of when integrating various institutional databases, it is nonetheless possible and, in the long-term, beneficial to do so.

Reaching consensus

SPIS exemplifies a project that accomplishes objectives through thoroughly inclusive, yet non-binding partnership agreements. This is especially relevant for EU Member States where the national government organisations have limited legal power to enforce certain activities on autonomous regions, counties, institutions or other stakeholder bodies. In the Lithuanian case, SADM encouraged the municipalities to provide information to the database through persuasion that SPIS is not something to be primarily used by SADM but rather is a tool to be used by the municipalities themselves. This approach by mutual consent is a valuable lesson for other countries willing to adopt similar policy measures.

References

- Dėl Socialinės paramos šeimai informacinės sistemos nuostatų ir Socialinės paramos šeimai informacinės sistemos duomenų saugos nuostatų patvirtinimo (2008). 2008 May 29, Nr. A1-172. Valid from 2008-06-06. Available at [accessed 24-10-2017]: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.321513>
- Elektroniniai Valdžios Vartai (2017). Elektroniniai valdžios vartai. LRS Naujienos. Teisės aktai. Available at [accessed 24-10-2017]: <https://www.epaslaugos.lt/portal/content/24424>
- European Commission (2017). Europe's Digital Progress Report (EDPR) 2017 Country Profile Lithuania. Available at [accessed 24-10-2017]: http://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/document.cfm?doc_id=44318
- Lietuvos Respublikos valstybinio socialinio aprūpinimo sistemos pagrindų įstatymas (1990). 1990 October 23, Nr. I-696. Valid from 1991-01-01. Available at [accessed 24-10-2017]: <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.5B5E3D4666A4>
- Lietuvos Statistikos Departamentas (2017). Oficialiosios statistikos portalas. Rodiklių duomenų bazė, Gyventojai ir socialinė statistika. Available at [accessed 24-10-2017]: <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize#/>
- LR Finansų Ministerija (2017). ES Struktūrinė parama 2007-2017. Elektroninių paslaugų sukūrimas socialinės paramos šeimai informacinėje sistemoje. Available at [accessed 24-10-2017]: <http://www.esparama.lt/paraiska?id=21544&pgsz=10>
- Municipalities of Alytus, Elektrėnai and Trakai (2017). Interviews with representatives conducted on 19-20 October, 2017.
- OECD (2015). Skills Matter: Further Results from the Survey of Adult Skills. Country Note: Lithuania, Key results. Available at [accessed 24-10-2017]: <http://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/Skills-Matter-Lithuania.pdf>
- Socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministerija (SADM) (2017). State social insurance system. Available at [accessed 24-10-2017]: <http://www.socmin.lt/en/social-insurance-1975/state-social-insurance-system.html>
- SADM (2017a). Socialinės paramos šeimai informacinė sistema. Information provided by ministry representatives during interview and additionally provided related data. 16 October, 2017.
- SADM (2017b). Socialinė parama šeimoms ir vaikams. Available at [accessed 24-10-2017]: <http://www.socmin.lt/lt/seima-ir-vaikai/soc-parama-seimoms-vaikams.html>
- SADM (2017c). Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministerijos nuostatai. 1998 July 17, Nr. 892, edited 2010 October 13, Nr. 1463. Available at [accessed 25-10-2017]: <http://www.socmin.lt/lt/veikla/nuostatai.html>
- SADM (2017d). 2016 metų veiklos ataskaita. 2017 kovo 1d. Nr.D5-87. Available at [accessed 25-10-2017]: [file:///C:/Users/xxx/Downloads/sadm-veiklos-ataskaita-2016%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/xxx/Downloads/sadm-veiklos-ataskaita-2016%20(1).pdf)
- SPIS (2017). Available at [accessed 24-10-2017]: <https://www.spis.lt/>
- Vilniaus miesto savivaldybės administracija (2017). Kreipimosi socialinėms išmokoms gauti tvarka. Available at [accessed 24-10-2017]: <http://www.vilnius.lt/index.php?682701166>

