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Access to essential services for low-income people

Lithuania

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**ESPN Thematic Report on
access to essential services for
low-income people**

Lithuania

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Summary

The term “essential services” is not in use in national or subnational legislation or in documents regulating service provision in Lithuania. The general definition of a “low-income person” is provided in the Law on Cash Social Assistance for Low-Income Families (single residents) (1/6/2003, No. IX-1675). However, this definition is not always used in the context of the six “essential services” discussed in this report. The most direct application is in providing compensation for heating, cold and hot water.

The main measures aimed at facilitating access for low-income people to drinking water are compensation for water and assistance in connecting to the district water supply systems. The main measure aimed at facilitating access to sanitation is assistance in connecting to the sewerage system. Other measures include such services as shower, sauna and laundry vouchers. The main measure aimed at facilitating access for low-income people to energy is compensation for the costs of a dwelling’s heating and hot water. Lithuania has no measures aimed at facilitating access for low-income people to other types of energy, like gas or electricity.

As for public transport, there are no reduced fares, cash or in-kind benefits specifically intended for low-income people, apart from a few exceptions in some municipalities. However, reduced fares or free tickets are available to several groups of residents without income testing. Income-poor residents who belong to such groups are eligible for those discounts. Access to public transport is problematic due to gaps in the network, especially with regard to travel between municipalities and within municipalities with a predominantly rural infrastructure.

Digital public services can be accessed via the e-Government gateway. Services such as digital social security services, digital healthcare appointments, digital fiscal services (related to paying taxes), social insurance contributions and fees, as well as digital post are free, as are most of the other services accessible through the gateway. There are no reduced tariffs for the internet or telephone for low-income individuals. However, there is a network of public internet access points organised through public libraries.

Regarding financial services, the Law on Payments is a fundamental measure for implementation of Directive 2014/92/EU in Lithuania. The law guarantees the right of people to open and use payment accounts with basic features. The Bank of Lithuania sets a reduced monthly fee for the basic service package offered by commercial banks and credit unions for low-income clients.

Moreover, in 2018, the Law on Cash Social Assistance (1/6/2003, No IX-1675) legislated for the provision of targeted, conditional, lump-sum and other assistance for low-income people, to be provided at the discretion of municipalities. These types of additional social assistance made up around 10% of the total cash social assistance budget in 2018 and, in principle, could cover the costs associated with access to any of the essential services at issue. More detailed information is, however, unavailable.

There is no single policy framework, programme or strategy at either the national or the subnational level to regulate access to essential services, as defined in this report. Different spheres are regulated by different documents. The scope of ongoing or announced reforms is limited mostly to improving access to water and sanitation for low-income people and innovations in the sphere of financial services.

Access to sanitation services remains a challenge in Lithuania. Low-income people, rural residents and those with disabilities are especially disadvantaged in accessing sanitation services in Lithuania.

1 Overview of national/subnational measures aimed at supporting low-income people in accessing essential services

Check whether footnotes first section are there: "According to Principle 20 of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), everyone should have "the right to access essential services of good quality, including water, sanitation, energy, transport, financial services and digital communications". Moreover, support for accessing such services should be available for those in need.¹ The importance of ensuring access to essential services is also well established globally in the framework of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which was endorsed in 2015 by all UN countries including all EU countries.² This report investigates the extent to which Principle 20 of the EPSR has already been implemented in the six services under scrutiny in Lithuania. The group of "those in need" is restricted in the report to people on a low income and low-income households."

This first section provides information about access for low-income people to six essential services: water, sanitation, energy, transport, digital communications and financial services. We first discuss the definitions used in the report and then continue with a discussion of the measures facilitating access for low-income people to the six services in Lithuania.

1.1 Definition of "essential services"

The term "essential services" is not used in national or subnational legislation or in documents regulating service provision in Lithuania. Below we discuss the terms which are closely related to the definition and that are used in Lithuanian law.

Some of the national legal documents use the term "services of general interest" (Lithuanian: *bendro intereso paslaugos*). This term is used at the EU level and was established in the White Paper on services of general interest (COM/2004/0374). Compared to "essential services", the definition of "services of general interest" is broader, and includes not only public transport and postal services, but also health care, housing, employment services, etc.³ In Lithuania, this term is used, for example, in the Water Sector Development Programme 2017–2023 (1/2/2017, No. 88) and in the Law on Social Services (19/1/2006, No. X-493). The latter defines services of general interest as information, counselling, mediation and representation, social and cultural services, organisation of transportation, organisation of catering, provision of necessary clothes and footwear, etc.

Another term recently introduced into Lithuanian legislation is a "basic service package for families" (19/6/2019, No. 618). This term, however, is much further removed from those things defined as "essential services" in this report. The basic service package is targeted at all families, independent of income. It regulates a minimum range of social

¹ The EPSR was jointly proclaimed by the European Parliament, the European Council and the European Commission on 17 November 2017. For more information on the EPSR, see:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en.

² The SDGs and their targets seek to realise the human rights of all, by promoting an integrated notion of sustainable development aimed at creating synergies between economic, environmental and social policies and objectives. For more information on the SDGs, see: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>.

³ "Services of general interest are services that public authorities of EU Member States classify as being of general interest and, therefore, subject to specific public service obligations. They can be provided either by the state or by the private sector. Services of general interest include public transport, postal services, healthcare, housing, employment services, etc." (COM/2004/0374). URL: https://ec.europa.eu/info/topics/single-market/services-general-interest_en

services that should be available to families in all municipalities across Lithuania. These include child care, counselling, legal services, health care and much more.

1.2 Definition of “low-income people” used in the context of access to services

The general definition of a “low-income person” (*nepasiturintis gyventojas*) is provided when setting eligibility for social assistance in the Law on Cash Social Assistance for Low-Income Families (Single Residents) (1/6/2003, No. IX-1675). Eligible persons have to be permanent residents of Lithuania and satisfy the conditions of means testing, which include both property testing and income testing. The income test threshold is set in relation to the amount of the State-Supported Income (SSI). More concretely, the low-income threshold (as applied to income-testing in the social assistance system) is set at 100% of the SSI for the first family member, 80% for the second family member and 70% for every other family member.⁴ The amount of SSI is indexed annually; it was €122 per month in 2019 and is €125 per month in 2020.

However, this definition is not always used in the context of the provision of the six “essential services” discussed in this report. The most direct application is in the sphere of provision of compensation for 3 and hot water, as well as for the heating of dwellings (see Sections 1.3.1 and 1.3.3 for details). This compensation is defined in the same Law on Cash Social Assistance for Low-Income Families (Single Residents) (*ibid.*). Additional conditions may apply. For example, compensation for water is provided to persons eligible for cash social assistance and to those whose spending on water exceeds 2% of the family’s or the person’s income. In the case of compensation for heating, expenditure should exceed 10% of the difference between the family’s/person’s income and SSI; and in the case of hot water, expenditure needs to exceed 5% of the family’s/person’s income.

In the other spheres – i.e. sanitation, public transport, digital services and financial services – the above-mentioned definition is generally not applied, with some exceptions. For example, in the provision of financial services, a discount on the maximum monthly fee for the basic payment service package is available to people eligible for social assistance benefits. In the sphere of access to sanitation, Elektrėnai municipality provides such services as shower, sauna and laundry vouchers for people whose per capita family income does not exceed 200% of SSI, provided there is no shower in the dwelling. Hence, the SSI threshold is one of the more commonly used when defining low-income persons. Definitions of low-income persons are also provided in the summary tables of the report (see Annex).

1.3 Measures for facilitating access for low-income people to services

Below we discuss the measures for facilitating access for low-income people to the essential services addressed in this paper. In addition to the specific measures discussed below, it should be noted that in 2018 the Law on Cash Social Assistance for Low-Income Families (Single Residents) (1/6/2003, No. IX-1675) introduced an option for targeted, conditional, lump-sum and other additional assistance for low-income people to be provided at the discretion of municipalities. These types of additional social assistance can, in principle, cover the costs associated with access to any of the services discussed below. According to statistics for 2018, such additional payments amounted to around 10% of the general social assistance, and to around 6% when compared to the total amount of social assistance and compensation.⁵ Nevertheless, it is difficult to disentangle which part of these extra payments goes on improving access to the six essential services discussed in this report.

⁴ Children and adults are treated in the same way, i.e. they receive the same “weight”.

⁵ Data provided by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour on request.

1.3.1 Access to water

In Lithuania, the main measures aimed at facilitating access for low-income people to water are compensation for cold water and assistance in connecting to the district water supply systems (for those using water from wells).

The national definition of low-income families/persons is used when establishing eligibility for compensation for cold water. In addition, compensation is provided to people whose costs for cold water exceed 2% of the family's or person's income. Municipalities may also, in accordance with their own procedures, allocate resources from the municipal budgets in other cases not covered by the Law on Cash Social Assistance for Low-Income Families (Single Residents) (1/6/2003, No. IX-1675) to compensate for spending on cold water.

The same definition of low-income families/persons is also frequently (but not always) used by municipalities when providing assistance for residents to connect to the district water supply systems. In the latter case, the use of the national definition of "low income" is not mandatory, and so municipalities can opt for alternative ways to define low-income persons and families.

The right to compensation for cold water may be exercised by people who share or rent a common declared dwelling place, provided they meet the following conditions: 1) their joint wealth does not exceed a set limit; 2) any person aged 18 and over must satisfy at least one of the eligibility criteria for receipt of cash social assistance; 3) those with arrears on their water bill have a signed agreement with the service provider for partial repayment of the debt.

Compensation for the costs of cold water covers the part of the costs exceeding 2% of the income of the family or single resident (Law on Cash Social Assistance, 1/6/2003, No. IX-1675). The compensation covers the actual amount of water used, but may not exceed the limit set by the law. For the district water supply systems, the standard amount of cold water per month is set at 2 m³ for the first family member or a single resident; 1.5 m³ for the second family member; 1 m³ for the third and subsequent family member(s). When a different, non-district system is used, the rates are higher. Expenditure is estimated using the standard prices set by the water suppliers. Currently, there are 369 water suppliers in Lithuania. The price for water can thus differ substantially across municipalities; and the compensation varies accordingly.

Compensation for water is granted for a period of three months from the date of entitlement. The compensation is granted retroactively for up to two months preceding the month of submission of the application, provided the household is still entitled to the compensation at the time of application. Compensation can be paid in cash or in kind, i.e. by transferring money direct to the water suppliers. According to information provided by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, only two municipalities paid compensation in cash in 2018. In all, in 2018 28,600 people received compensation for water, totalling €470,700.

Another measure aimed at facilitating access for low-income people to water is municipal support in connecting to the district water supply systems. The Law on Water Supply and Wastewater Management (13/7/2006, No. X-764) and the Water Sector Development Programme 2017–2023 (1/2/2017, No. 88) state that there is a need to provide all residents with quality water and access to the sewerage system. According to the latter programme, access to water supply services should increase from 80% in 2015 to 90% in 2021 and 95% in 2023.

Currently, around 15% of the Lithuanian population does not have access to district water sources. Most often, these are low-income and rural people. The water supply network financed by the EU and national funds can be installed only up to the boundaries of a personal holding: further connection has to be financed by the property owner. Some municipalities compensate low-income persons for part (or all) of the costs of connecting to the district water supply system. Hence, not all residents are connected to

the district network, also considering the future fees for water supply and sewerage (Delfi.lt, 2016).

Lithuania has emergency services, whose functions include ensuring uninterrupted service provision, including the supply of water. However, they ensure the supply from a logistical, not a social point of view. There are no special measures to safeguard the provision of a basic/uninterrupted supply of water to low-income people. It is up to the municipalities to arrange a basic/uninterrupted water supply to their inhabitants.

Information about the compensation for water is available on the website of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, as well as on the web pages of municipal social assistance units. According to the law, residents have the right to apply for compensation, but there is no obligation to inform them of the availability of compensation. Information is provided at the municipal social assistance units when people apply for cash social assistance. There is no specific information available on assistance in connecting to the district water supply systems for low-income people. Any person can inquire about the available options on his or her own initiative.

1.3.2 Access to sanitation

The main measure aimed at facilitating access for low-income people to sanitation (i.e. systems for taking wastewater and other waste products away from dwellings in order to protect people's health) is assistance in connecting to the sewerage system. Other measures include the provision of shower, sauna and laundry vouchers for low-income people.

There is no national definition of low income for sanitation services. This service is organised at the municipal level, i.e. municipalities define who is eligible and under what conditions in their own legal documents. The most common definition of low income that is applied in municipalities in the context of sanitation services is the above-mentioned definition provided in the Law on Cash Social Assistance for Low-Income Families (Single Residents) (1/6/2003, No. IX-1675). In some municipalities, eligibility may depend on belonging to target groups, such as disabled people, elderly people, social risk families, etc. – i.e. with no direct application of income testing.

Municipalities are responsible for providing assistance to connect to the sewerage system. This support can be provided as partial or full compensation. There is no single compensation mechanism, as each municipality has discretion to define the rules for compensation. The required amounts are provided to applicants who submit all the necessary documents to determine their eligibility (Andrijauskas, 2019).

Additional state support is provided for municipalities to help the owners of private houses connect to the sewerage system (15min.lt, 2017). Although the plan was to have at least 95% of all residents connected to the sewerage system by 2015, this target was not reached. The new Water Sector Development Programme 2017–2023 (1/2/2017, No. 88) envisages that access to centralized sewerage system needs to increase from 72% in 2015 to 86% in 2021 and 95% in 2023. However, it remains difficult for those living in remote and rural areas, as well as for low-income persons, to access these services. There have been recent efforts to reduce the cost for residents to connect to the sewerage system, by cutting the cost of connection up to the boundary of the household. Nevertheless, an element of the population still avoids connection to the district system, since that implies ongoing regular monthly expense. Hence, municipalities and wastewater treatment firms are seeking ways to incentivise residents even more.

There is no special information available on the availability of assistance in connecting to the sewerage system for low-income people. Any person can take it upon him/herself to ask the municipal assistance unit about the available options.

1.3.3 Access to energy

In Lithuania, the main measure aimed at facilitating access for low-income people to energy is compensation for the cost of a dwelling's heating and its hot water (1/6/2003, No. IX-1675). The compensation is paid in the following cases:

- for heating, a family (persons living together) or a single resident shall pay no more than 10% of the difference between the income received and the SSI provided to a family (persons living together) or a single person; thus, the amount of compensation covers all the actual costs of heating in excess of 10% of this difference;
- for hot water, the compensation covers the costs in excess of 5% of the income of a family (persons living together) or a single resident. Compensation for hot and cold water is regulated by the same law (1/6/2003, No. IX-1675).

The standard size of accommodation for compensation is set at 50 m² for a single resident, 38 m² for the first family member, 12 m² for the second, and 10 m² for the third and subsequent family member(s).

The standard monthly amount of hot water consumption is set at 1.5 m² for the first family member and single resident; 1 m² for the second family member; and 0.5 m² for the third and subsequent family member(s).

Apartment owners in multi-dwelling buildings who apply for compensation to cover heating costs have to take part in any meeting called to discuss renovation (modernisation) of the multi-dwelling building, and to participate in any renovation work that is decided upon. At the same time, families or single residents that own an apartment in a multi-dwelling building and are entitled to such compensation are also entitled to support with the cost of any loan taken out to finance the renovation work.

Compensation for the costs of heating and hot water is granted for a period of three months from the date of entitlement. The compensation is granted retroactively for up to two months preceding the month of submission of the application, provided the single resident or the family is still entitled to compensation at the time of application.

The scheme for compensation for the costs of heating and hot water is centralised in terms of resource allocation, eligibility criteria, conditionality rules and the formula governing the amount of compensation. However, the scheme is administered by the local authorities (municipalities), which have some flexibility in terms of its application. Furthermore, municipalities may, in accordance with their own procedures, allocate resources from the municipal budget to other cases not provided for by the law and to provide more compensation for heating costs than the limits outlined above.

The administrations of municipalities are responsible for providing information and consultations for low-income people to facilitate their access to compensation for the costs of a dwelling's heating and hot water. About 4.3% of all households received compensation for the costs of heating, hot and cold water in 2019 (SADM, 2019).

Another measure aimed at facilitating access to energy is the reduced rate of VAT on district heating, hot water and cold water: 9%, compared to the standard rate of 21% (the reduced VAT rate has been applied since 1 September 2009). The measure does not focus on low-income households; however, it is designed with heating and hot water in mind as basic needs.

Lithuania has emergency services, whose function it is to ensure uninterrupted service provision, including the provision of energy. However, continuity is ensured from a logistical, not a social point of view. There are no specific measures aimed at ensuring the provision of a basic/uninterrupted supply of energy for low-income families.

Lithuania has no measures aimed at facilitating access for low-income people to other types of energy, like gas or electricity.

1.3.4 Access to public transport

The discounts and exemptions in the sphere of public transport are regulated by the Law on Transport Privileges (30/3/2000, No. VIII-1605) and related legal acts. Lower fares for public transport, as set out in this law, are provided for people who use regular long-distance transport by bus, train, ship and ferry, as well as local bus and trolleybus transport.

The law (*ibid.*) does not envisage any concessions for low-income individuals. Instead, it defines the categories of people who are eligible for discounted or low-fare journeys with no reference to income testing. For example, transport privileges may be granted on the basis of age, disability or health status, educational status, merits to the state or for having been subject to state repression. In principle, all groups covered by the law have a higher probability of being income poor. Nevertheless, no income testing is in general applied to establish eligibility for lower transport tariffs.

The law also states that municipalities have the right to establish additional measures to improve access to transportation for population groups not covered by the law, including low-income persons. In this case, any additional costs covered on the basis of municipal decisions come from the municipal budgets. Some municipalities do apply such additional measures, targeted specifically at low-income families.

For example, in 2015, Šiauliai city municipality approved additional discounts for regular local transport for children from families at social risk who attend child day centres (27/8/2015, No. T-221). Electronic tickets are available (with a 99.95% discount) according to the lists of children attending day centres in this municipality. The remaining costs are covered by the parents or foster parents of the child. Kaunas city municipality has also introduced concessionary tickets for low-income pensioners, defined as persons who have reached retirement age and who receive social assistance pension from the Social Assistance Department.⁶ Pensioners who want to prove their eligibility for concessionary tickets need to apply for a certificate to the Social Assistance Department of Kaunas city municipality. Vilnius city municipality provides travel cards for overnight shelter users. Information on the available discounts and privileges is available online; it is up to the municipality to ensure that the target groups are aware of the existence of such measures. In general, such additional measures targeted specifically at low-income people are few and far between.

The Law on Cash Social Assistance (1/6/2003, No. IX-1675) does not provide for any additional special discounts or transport concessions for low-income persons. However, as mentioned in the introduction to this part of the report, municipalities can provide conditional, targeted or other optional support at their discretion.

Finally, it should be noted that the overall infrastructure and network of public transport is important when speaking about access to transportation by low-income people. Problems in accessing public transport due to gaps in the network, especially with regard to transportation between municipalities and within municipalities with a predominantly rural infrastructure, have been remarked upon in a number of studies addressing poverty issues in Lithuania (e.g. NSMOT, 2019; Zabarauskaitė and Gruževskis, 2015). While transport for schoolchildren in rural areas is organised via a yellow-bus system in Lithuania, there is no such service to improve access to pre-school facilities, except for a few initiatives at the municipal level. Moreover, there is still little information on access to public services using the public transport network in Lithuania.

To sum up, as regards the measures aimed at facilitating access for low-income people to public transport, none of these apply specifically to low-income people, apart from rare exceptions in some municipalities. However, reduced fares or free tickets are available to several groups of residents without the need for income tests (e.g. pupils, students, people aged 80 or over, people with disabilities, small children travelling with

⁶ Kaunas public transport, URL: <https://www.kvt.lt/en/tickets/lenqvatos/>

their parents, etc.). People who are income poor and belong to such groups can benefit from these discounts. Access to public transport, especially regarding transportation between municipalities and within municipalities with predominantly rural infrastructure, is problematic due to gaps in the network. There is, however, little information on this issue.

1.3.5 Access to digital public services

The majority of digital public services are accessible in Lithuania through a special web page called e-Government gateway. It can be accessed via banking ID, identification provided by the main mobile network providers, personal ID with a code-reader or a special ID provided by the Centre of Registers. In all, 560 services, in 24 categories, are available online through the gateway. These include digital social security services, digital healthcare appointments, digital fiscal services related to paying taxes, social insurance contributions and fees, and digital post. All the above-mentioned digital services are free, as are most of the other services available through the e-Government gateway (i.e. 426 of the 560 available digital services are free of charge for everyone). All the digital services offered by municipalities can normally be accessed via the e-Government gateway as well.

The cost of an internet connection to access these services needs to be borne by the person concerned: there are no cash transfers or discounts aimed at low-income people to cover internet costs. However, the internet can be accessed free of charge using a network of public libraries. There is a national project⁷ running from 2018 to 2021 aimed at updating and expanding the available infrastructure to reach 1,200 public internet access points organised through a wide network of public libraries. The project is funded by the EU Structural Funds' investments programme, within the second priority of promoting the information society (02.2.2-CPVA-V-524).

When accessing digital services by phone, special tariffs apply, irrespective of the caller's income. There are no measures to reimburse these costs for low-income persons.

According to statistical information, in 2018 only 76% of households had a personal computer at home and only 78% had internet access. While these figures are improving year by year, the ownership of personal EU computers and access to the internet in Lithuania are both among the lowest in the EU (NSMOT, 2019).

Research also shows that there is less access to computers, the internet and relevant skills among lower-income residents. While the level of digital exclusion is falling, more and more services are being transferred to the e-space, which increases the vulnerability and depth of digital exclusion among people with few (or no) means and skills (Šuminas et al., 2018).

1.4 Access to financial services (Directive 2014/92/EU)

The implementation of Directive 2014/92/EU in Lithuania is ensured by the Law on Payments (28/10/1999, No. VIII-1370). The law guarantees the right for consumers to open and use payment accounts with basic features (including withdrawals, bank transfers and debit cards). The authors of this report are not aware of any evidence of systematic violation of the law.

In 2017, the Bank of Lithuania set a maximum monthly fee limit of €1.50 for the basic payment service package offered by commercial banks and credit unions, and a reduced fee of €0.75 for social assistance benefit recipients.

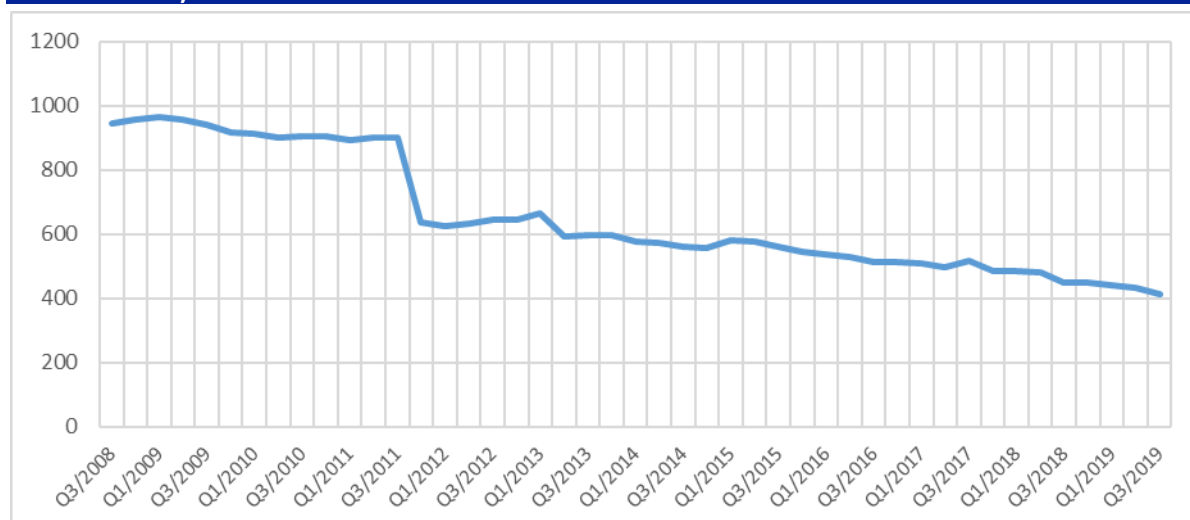
⁷ The title of the project is *Gyventojų skatinimas išmaniai naudotis internetu atnaujintoje viešosios interneto prieigos infrastruktūroje* [Promotion of smart use of the internet via updated public internet access infrastructure].

According to the Law on Payments, the fee is reviewed each year. The basic services included in the basic payment account package, as approved by the Bank of Lithuania, to be provided on a monthly basis at no additional cost, are:

1. opening of an account;
2. e-banking, a secure way of logging into and managing the account (code card and SMS messages, code generator, etc.);
3. unlimited crediting of payments received in euro;
4. unlimited depositing of cash using a method selected by a credit institution; payment card and payment transactions using a card;
5. no fewer than 10 online transfers of any kind (in euro) per month, including utility and bill payments, e-invoice payments, transfers within an institution and to other payment service providers, direct debit transactions;
6. cash withdrawals – no less than €550 per month within the network of the bank's ATMs or in the manner selected by a credit union (Bank of Lithuania, 2019a).

Elderly or poorly educated residents, who are more likely to live in remote areas, tend to have lower incomes. Access to financial services for these individuals is adversely affected by ongoing changes in the financial services industry, e.g. a switch to online services, a decline in the number of bank units and cash withdrawal points. Banks are undergoing a transformation, and their digitalisation is proceeding faster than ever before in Lithuania. The number of bank units has fallen from 783 in 2008 to only 252 last year (LRT.lt, 2019). The number of client service offices at credit institutions has decreased from 945 to 412 during the past decade (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Number of client service offices at credit institutions in Lithuania 2008–2019, thousands



Source: Bank of Lithuania (2019d). Payments statistics. URL: <http://bit.ly/2FNpEn3>

The decline of bank branches means that banks are optimising their business, says Marius Jurgilas, member of the board of the Bank of Lithuania (Diena.lt, 2019). Unfortunately, the way the digitalisation has been implemented reduces the convenience for users. Residents of small towns have to travel to other cities to get their money (Delfi.lt, 2019a). The withdrawal of cash is getting increasingly difficult with the decline in ATMs and bank branches (Delfi.lt, 2019b).

The Bank of Lithuania is taking steps to make services universally accessible in the face of technological change in the financial industry. It has announced its official position on payments and settlements in euro cash, taking into account changing consumer payment habits and developments in the payments market. It is also seeking greater clarity on payment and settlement in euro banknotes and coins, with regard to EU legislation and national legislation of the Republic of Lithuania that regulates the status and use of the euro as legal tender. The Bank of Lithuania considers cash and non-cash payments for goods and services equally acceptable, does not favour either of them, and aims to strengthen competition in the payment and settlement market for the benefit of business and consumers (Bank of Lithuania, 2019b).

This position was articulated by the Lithuanian central bank in response to some instances where local retailers had refused to accept cash in payment. According to the Bank of Lithuania, a refusal to accept cash (with an insistence on other lawful means of payment) is in conflict with existing legislation. The bank's position protects those customers who prefer cash and who are usually older or less well educated, and who belong to lower-income groups of the population.

2 National/subnational policy frameworks and reforms

2.1 National/subnational policy frameworks

There is no single policy framework, programme or strategy on either the national or the subnational level that regulates access to essential services, as defined in this report. Below we discuss several strategic documents relevant in the sphere.

The Action Plan for Increasing Social Inclusion for 2014–2020 in Lithuania (22/10/2013, No. A1-588) provides for the enhancement and modernisation of the infrastructure of social services, education, transport, health and other social services (art. 56.4.3). The plan does not mention other spheres covered by this report, such as access to water, sanitation, digital or financial services for low-income people. The latter spheres are regulated by other documents.

According to the Water Sector Development Programme 2017–2023, the intention is to provide further access for Lithuanian residents to a quality water supply and sewerage system, as well as to reduce pollution of the environment with wastewater. Access to water supply services should further improve from 80% in 2015 to 90% in 2021 and 95% in 2023. Access to sewerage systems will rise from 72% in 2015 to 86% in 2021 and 95% in 2023. The programme makes no explicit reference to ensuring these services for low-income persons. However, municipalities are responsible for increasing access to water supply and access to sewerage systems for all their residents. Hence, they are incentivised to promote access to these services for low-income groups.

In line with the National Progress Strategy “Lithuania 2030” (No. 61-3050), the Lithuanian government approved in 2012 the national progress programme for 2014–2020. This is aimed at reducing the digital exclusion of adults by increasing informal education options (art. 1.1.3.3). Priority is given to those experiencing social exclusion, older people and rural residents. Yet, there are no measures to specifically target the low-income group.

The same programme also aims to advance digital public services in the spheres of health, transportation, territorial planning, etc. (art. 5.3.3). The aim is to increase the share of residents who use digital public services from 34% to 60% by 2020. Responsibility for this has been given to the Ministry of Transport and Communications and the Information Society Development Committee. Around 1% of the EU Structural Funds is used for this purpose. Currently, a new National Progress Programme is being prepared.

In the sphere of transport, the National Programme on the Development of Transport and Communications for 2014–2022 (18/12/2013, No. 1253) aims to synchronise urban and suburban public transport schedules and to improve their links with private means of transportation. The aim is also to increase access to, and availability of, public transport, especially in rural areas. The latter aim is challenging, due to low population density and inadequate infrastructure. Yet, the programme does not aim to improve access to public transport specifically for low-income people.

2.2 Ongoing or announced reforms

There are no ongoing or announced reforms of the measures directly aimed at enhancing effective access to energy, water and sanitation services for low-income people. Nevertheless, state actions in improving the supply of water and connection to the sewerage system should contribute to more effective access to water and sanitation services for low-income people.

The European Commission has started an infringement procedure against Lithuania in 2017 on the grounds of its failure to ensure an adequate supply of water and wastewater treatment services in high-density areas. This is in violation of Council Directive

91/271/EEC of 21 May 1991 concerning urban wastewater treatment.⁸ The Ministry of the Environment of the Republic of Lithuania has prepared a concrete plan on how the violation is to be rectified and the directive implemented. Moreover, the government has adopted the Water Sector Development Programme 2017–2023 (01/02/2017, No. 88), which aims to promote access to water and sewerage systems. Most municipalities use the resources available from the EU Cohesion Fund to renovate the water supply and sewerage systems and to increase access to these services for low-income people.

In the field of financial services, the Bank of Lithuania announced a draft National Payments Strategy in 2017 (Bank of Lithuania, 2019c). In it, the bank seeks to make innovative payment methods available to Lithuanian residents and enterprises, thus improving competitiveness in the payments market and increasing the involvement of payment service users. The document establishes three strategic directions:

- development of infrastructure that enables extensive use of contactless and instant payments;
- an increase in the involvement of payment service users in (and an increase in their impact on) decisions related to payment services available on the market; and
- building payments service user trust in electronic payments and encouraging their use.

Having implemented this, the bank does expect to achieve the strategy's main goal: to ensure that by 2020, contactless, instant electronic payments that are closely integrated into business models and that meet the needs of consumers and businesses alike are made available to Lithuanian residents and become widely used. However, the strategy contains no special focus on access to financial services for low-income customers.

No reforms are ongoing or announced for facilitating access to other types of essential services discussed in this report.

⁸ Council Directive 91/271/EEC of 21 May 1991 concerning urban wastewater treatment. URL: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:31991L0271>

3 A focus on access to sanitation services

According to a UN report, inequities in access to sanitation services are related to sociocultural differences, socio-economic factors and regional context (UNESCO, 2019). Access to sanitation services remains a challenge in many Eastern European countries, and in Lithuania in particular. According to statistics, the low-income population is especially disadvantaged in terms of access to sanitation services in Lithuania (see Table 1).

Table 1: Share of population above and below the median equivalised income having neither a bath, nor a shower, nor an indoor flushing toilet in their household in Lithuania, 2008–2018, %

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Above 60% of median equivalised income	11.6	10.0	10.9	11.0	9.8	7.9	7.0	5.4	5.8	5.9	4.6
Below 60% of median equivalised income	41.0	34.9	27.4	31.8	31.7	27.9	27.4	28.7	33.9	27.6	24.0

Source: [ilc_mdho05] EU-SILC survey, URL: <http://bit.ly/30hOxk9>.

The Ministry of the Environment acknowledges that the main obstacles to connecting to the district sanitation services are financial: (a) the cost of connecting to the centralised system, and (b) the monthly fees for using the system (Delfi.lt, 2017). In the first case, support from the EU Regional Development Fund and Cohesion Fund is being used to modernise and develop the network of water supply and sewerage. In the second case, there are some standards to ensure affordability of sanitation services in Lithuania – i.e. the state supports the cost of cold water in excess of 2% of household income and the cost of hot water in excess of 5% (Law on Cash Social Assistance, 1/6/2003, No. IX-1675). This also includes the cost of wastewater treatment. Although the share of the population with neither a bath, nor a shower, nor an indoor flushing toilet has fallen from 41% to 24% over the past 10 years among people in the low-income group, one person in four in that group still lacks all three amenities (see Table 1).

Hence, insufficient state support and gaps in its organisation remain among the main barriers to low-income people accessing sanitation services. Institutional structures, multi-stakeholder dialogue and cooperation are essential to ensure equitable access to sustainable water supply and sanitation services (UNESCO, 2019).

In Lithuania, municipalities are responsible for organising sanitation services and for providing various compensation mechanisms for vulnerable or low-income people to facilitate their access to water and sanitation services. As stated above, expenditure on sanitation includes the cost of infrastructure and connection, as well as regular charges for operation and maintenance. One way of increasing affordability is to reduce the cost of providing the service. Some municipalities cover the expense of connecting to the district water supply and sewerage systems in full, while others only cover the planning costs (Delfi.lt, 2017). Moreover, problems in accessing sanitation services are related not only to infrastructure and connection, but also to assistance in purchasing the necessary equipment and recurring monthly fees for using the services. It should also be noted that awareness and understanding of the importance of using a district water supply and sewerage systems among vulnerable groups is essential, as people are often less prepared to pay for these services than they are to pay for other services (15min.lt, 2017). The solution here could be information and capacity-building among disadvantaged groups, inclusion of non-governmental organisations in community work,

and the active involvement of social service providers in this work – something that currently does not happen.

Of those people with poor access to sanitation services, one particularly disadvantaged group is low-income families in rural areas.⁹ More than a quarter of the rural population has neither a bath, nor a shower, nor an indoor flushing toilet, compared to 1% of people in big cities and 5% in other towns (Table 2).

Table 2: Access to sanitation (settlement type) in different regions in Lithuania, 2018, %

	Big cities	Other towns	Rural areas
No indoor flushing toilet	1	5	27
No bath/ shower	1	6	25

Source: Statistics Lithuania: EU-SILC survey <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize#/>

There is no evidence on how this reduced (lack of) access to services impacts on the overall social inclusion of low-income people in Lithuania. However, if one is to rely on global studies, then sanitation for disadvantaged groups is recognised by international human rights instruments and agreements as helping to address the causes – and to alleviate the impact – of poverty and social inequity. Implementation of the human right to water and sanitation requires the services to be available, physically accessible, affordable and safe. Studies show that improved sanitation services for vulnerable groups change their self-perceived social status and dignity. Global cost-benefit studies have demonstrated that sanitation and hygiene services are socially and economically cost effective (UNESCO, 2019).

Therefore, inequities in access to sanitation services, and a lack of effective financing and motivation mechanisms to support vulnerable groups to become users of centralised sanitation services, are the main barriers to the implementation of human rights in accessing these services in Lithuania.

⁹ The share of persons living at risk of poverty or social exclusion in rural areas is much higher than in cities.

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Annex

Table A1: Essential service – Water

1) Definition of “low income” used in the context of the delivery of the service in the country:¹⁰

Those people for whom the cost of cold water exceeds 2% of the income of the family (persons living together) or single resident.

2) Measures aimed at facilitating access for low-income people to water (for hygiene purposes, to cook...) in the country:

	National (*)	Subnational	
		Regional (only if <i>no</i> for national) (**)	Local (only if <i>no</i> for national) (**)
Reduced tariffs	No	No	No
Cash benefits	Yes		
In-kind benefits	Yes		
Advice/training or information services	No	No	Yes-all
Provision of a basic/uninterrupted supply	No	No	No

(*) For each measure: Does the measure exist in the country at national level (“Yes”/“No”)?

(**) **Only** if the measure does not exist at national level **and** if the service is organised at subnational level: Does the measure exist at regional level (Yes in all regions; Yes in most regions; Yes but only in a few regions; No)? And at local level (Yes in all local entities; Yes in most local entities; Yes but only in a few local entities; No)? Important: if a measure exists as a **general social support measure**, not specifically aimed at facilitating access for low-income people, the answer is “No”.

¹⁰ **National definition** used in this context (most frequently used definition if there is more than one definition). **Only if** there is no national definition **and if** the service is organised at subnational level, most common definition used in this context at regional (if any) or local (if any) level.

Table A2: Essential service – Sanitation

- 1) Definition of “low income” used in the context of the delivery of the service in the country:¹¹

Those people for whom the cost of hot water exceeds 5% of the income of the family (persons living together) or single resident, and for whom the cost of cold water exceeds 2% of the income of the family (persons living together) or single resident.

- 2) Measures aimed at facilitating access for low-income people to sanitation (i.e. systems for taking dirty water and other waste products away from dwellings in order to protect people’s health) in the country:

	National (*)	Subnational	
		Regional (only if <i>no</i> for national) (**)	Local (only if <i>no</i> for national) (**)
Reduced tariffs	No	No	No
Cash benefits	Yes (***)		Yes-all (****)
In-kind benefits	Yes (***)		Yes-all (****)
Advice/training or information services	No	No	Yes-all

(*) For each measure: Does the measure exist in the country at national level (“Yes”/“No”)?

(**) **Only** if the measure does not exist at national level **and** if the service is organised at subnational level: Does the measure exist at regional level (Yes in all regions; Yes in most regions; Yes but only in a few regions; No)? And at local level (Yes in all local entities; Yes in most local entities; Yes but only in a few local entities; No)? Important: if a measure exists as a **general social support measure**, not specifically aimed at facilitating access for low-income people, the answer is “No”.

(***) Yes, for wastewater treatment.

(****) Yes, for connecting to district networks.

¹¹ **National definition** used in this context (most frequently used definition if there is more than one definition). **Only if** there is no national definition **and if** the service is organised at subnational level, most common definition used in this context at regional (if any) or local (if any) level.

Table A3: Essential service – Energy

- 1) Definition of “low income” used in the context of the delivery of the service in the country:¹²

Those people for whom the cost of hot water exceeds 5% of the income of the family (persons living together) or single resident. In the case of compensation for heating, expenditure should exceed 10% of the difference between the family’s/person’s income and SSI.

- 2) Measures aimed at facilitating access for low-income people to energy (to light dwellings, heat or cool dwellings, use home appliances) in the country:

	National (*)	Subnational	
		Regional (only if <i>no</i> for national) (**)	Local (only if <i>no</i> for national) (**)
Reduced tariffs	No	No	No
Cash benefits	Yes		
In-kind benefits	Yes		
Advice/training or information services	No	No	Yes-all
Provision of a basic/uninterrupted supply	No	No	No

(*) For each measure: Does the measure exist in the country at national level (“Yes”/“No”)?

(**) **Only** if the measure does not exist at national level **and** if the service is organised at subnational level: Does the measure exist at regional level (Yes in all regions; Yes in most regions; Yes but only in a few regions; No)? And at local level (Yes in all local entities; Yes in most local entities; Yes but only in a few local entities; No)? Important: if a measure exists as a **general social support measure**, not specifically aimed at facilitating access for low-income people, the answer is “No”.

¹² **National definition** used in this context (most frequently used definition if there is more than one definition). **Only if** there is no national definition **and if** the service is organised at subnational level, most common definition used in this context at regional (if any) or local (if any) level.

Table A4: Essential service – Public transport

1) Definition of “low income” used in the context of the delivery of the service in the country:¹³

No low-income definition is applied at the national level. At the local level, there are a few exceptions with different definitions.

2) Measures aimed at facilitating access for low-income people to public transport in the country:

	National (*)	Subnational	
		Regional (only if no for national) (**)	Local (only if no for national) (**)
Reduced tariffs	No	No	Yes-few
Cash benefits	No	No	No
In-kind benefits	No	No	No
Advice/training or information services	No	No	Yes-few

(*) For each measure: Does the measure exist in the country at national level (“Yes”/“No”)?

(**) **Only** if the measure does not exist at national level **and** if the service is organised at subnational level: Does the measure exist at regional level (Yes in all regions; Yes in most regions; Yes but only in a few regions; No)? And at local level (Yes in all local entities; Yes in most local entities; Yes but only in a few local entities; No)? Important: if a measure exists as a **general social support measure**, not specifically aimed at facilitating access for low-income people, the answer is “No”.

¹³ **National definition** used in this context (most frequently used definition if there is more than one definition). **Only if** there is no national definition **and if** the service is organised at subnational level, most common definition used in this context at regional (if any) or local (if any) level.

Table A5: Essential service – Digital public services

1) Definition of “low income” used in the context of the delivery of the service in the country:¹⁴

No low-income definition used.

2) Measures aimed at facilitating access for low-income people to digital public services (e.g. digital post, digital fiscal services, digital social security services, digital health care appointments...) in the country:

	National (*)	Subnational	
		Regional (only if <i>no</i> for national) (**)	Local (only if <i>no</i> for national) (**)
Reduced tariffs	No	No	No
Cash benefits	No	No	No
In-kind benefits	No	No	No
Advice/training or information services	Yes		
Provision of a basic/uninterrupted supply	No	No	No

(*) For each measure: Does the measure exist in the country at national level (“Yes”/“No”)?

(**) **Only** if the measure does not exist at national level **and** if the service is organised at subnational level: Does the measure exist at regional level (Yes in all regions; Yes in most regions; Yes but only in a few regions; No)? And at local level (Yes in all local entities; Yes in most local entities; Yes but only in a few local entities; No)? Important: if a measure exists as a **general social support measure**, not specifically aimed at facilitating access for low-income people, the answer is “No”.

¹⁴ **National definition** used in this context (most frequently used definition if there is more than one definition). **Only if** there is no national definition **and if** the service is organised at subnational level, most common definition used in this context at regional (if any) or local (if any) level.

Table B1: Essential services – Summary table

- 1) Measures aimed at facilitating access for low-income people to different services that exist at national, regional and/or local level in the country
- 2) Broader policy framework under which all or some of these measures are organised in the country¹⁵
- 3) Ongoing or announced reforms of the measures and/or related frameworks aimed at (further) enhancing effective access to the service for low-income people in the country

	1. Measures (NAT, SUBNAT, BOTH, NONE) (*)	2. Policy framework (**)		3. Ongoing or planned reforms (Yes/No)
		National (Yes/No)	Subnational (Yes/No)	
Access to water	BOTH	Yes	No	No
Access to sanitation	BOTH	Yes	No	Yes
Access to energy	BOTH	Yes	No	No
Access to public transport	SUBNAT	No	No	No
Access to digital public services	NAT	Yes	No	No
Access to basic financial services (***)	Not applicable	Yes	No	Yes

(*) This column summarises the response provided in Tables A1-A5 above. "NAT" means that all the measures that exist in favour of low-income people are national measures; "SUBNAT" means that there are no national measures but some of/all the measures that exist are subnational measures; BOTH means a mix of NAT and SUBNAT; "NONE" means that there are no measures, be it at national or subnational level.

(**) Is there a broader national policy framework under which all or some of these measures are organised in the country for some of/all the services under scrutiny ("Yes"/"No")? **Only if** there is no such national framework for one service **and if** the service is organised at subnational level: Is there a broader subnational policy framework under which all or some of these measures are organised for this service ("Yes"/"No")?

(***) Open and use payment accounts with basic features (Directive 2014/92/EU).

¹⁵ Is there a broader national policy framework under which all or some of these measures are organised in your country for some of/all the services under scrutiny? **Only if** there is no such national framework for one service **and if** the service is organised at subnational level: Is there a broader subnational policy framework under which all or some of these measures are organised for this service? Thus, the column "Subnational" is to be filled in only if you replied "no" for the national policy framework.

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