

# Older adults' digital inclusion: New challenges for Lithuanian social policy

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**Abstract.** Lithuania, as most of the EU countries, has an aging population- At the beginning of 2019, there were 552.4 thousand elderly people (aged 65 and older), or 19.8 per cent of the total resident population. Each seventh man and each fourth woman were aged 65 and older (Official statistics portal, 2019). The aim of the paper is to investigate possibilities of Lithuanian social policy to meet older adults' digital needs for better inclusion and active ageing. Paper is based on secondary data analysis including legal documents (EU and National Programmes, Strategies, Orders), scientific research, statistical (of older adults' population) and other data (results of national research). A significant proportion of older adults lack the skills to use digital technology, which are essential for successful functioning in society. The rapid development of technology and the recent Covid-19 pandemic have accelerated the transference of many services on the Internet. The importance of the use of technology for older adults was particularly evident during the Covid 19 pandemic. Various research works revealed that the telephone, and less often the computer, had become the main working tool for a significant proportion of close care workers. This situation points to a new need for the development of digitised social services and a new approach to social policy.

**Key words:** digital inclusion, digital transformation, older adults, policy.

## 1 Introduction

The European Commission has shown significant leadership in encouraging all countries to plan for the changing age demographics throughout the European Union (EU), by sharing good practices, developing related policies and legislation and encouraging members to address basic human rights requirements by providing adequate access to affordable quality care [1]. Rapid changes in demographic situation forced different organizations of the world to pay more attention to ageing of population developing Active Aging agenda. For example, World Health Organization (WHO) introduced the concept of Active Aging in 2002. World Health Organization (WHO) also emphasised that states have to invest and develop strategic policies in order to meet aging population needs and ensure healthy and active ageing in the countries [2]. In 2011, European Commission introduced The European

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Innovation Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing AHA aiming to foster innovative use of digital for active and healthy ageing. The Covid-19 pandemic led to the need to find new ways to solve the problem of ageing and digitalization of services looking for inclusive policy for older adults. Green Paper on Ageing [3] emphasised that social and technological innovation (as e-health, mobile health, telecare, integrated care or independent living), could substantially improve the efficiency of health and long-term care systems. The United Nations Roadmap for Digital Cooperation [4] next to other important key areas for action highlighted digital inclusion, capacity building, and the protection of human rights in the digital era. UNECE Policy Brief on Ageing No. 26 on Ageing in the Digital Era [5] presented policy actions for digital inclusion and empowerment of older persons in the digital era. They include ensuring of equal access to goods and digital services (e-Government, e-banking, e-commerce, e-learning and tele-health services), enhance digital literacy and reduce the digital skills gaps; leverage the potential of digital technologies for active and healthy ageing, well-being and empowerment of older persons; and ensure the protection of human rights of older persons in the digital era.

Lithuania as most EU countries has an aging population. At the beginning of 2019, there were 552.4 thousand older adults (aged 65 and older), or 19.8 percent of the total resident population. Each seventh man and each fourth woman were aged 65 and older. Compared to the beginning of 2018, the number increased by 0.6 thousand, or 0.1 percent [26].

Appropriate health and social services play an important role in empowering older adults to stay active in private and social lives. However, Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted access to services worldwide. Physical distance or 'stay-at-home' orders have been introduced in almost all regions to restrict personal contact in order to stop the spread of the disease. These bans have been the catalyst for information and communication technologies to become a necessity for working, communicating, and participating in social activities. New digital reality brought new possibilities as well as challenges for inclusion processes of the older adults' population.

Social policy can play a major role in increasing digital inclusion of older adults. EU Digital Strategy includes looking into the human and ethical implications of artificial intelligence, improving the working conditions of platform workers, strengthening the digital skills of Europeans and digitalising European institutions [6]. OECD in its various issues emphasizes the importance of transforming policies for improving lives using information and communications technology (ICT). However, in Lithuania, the policy is more focused on, for ex., health promotion than activation (Action Plan to Ensure Healthy Aging in Lithuania for 2014-2023) [7] there are health services that are being digitised, but older adults are becoming a marginalised group because their skills, computer equipment or internet connection may not be sufficient to use e-services. According to SEB Bank and TEO [8], many older adults have no skills and neither the intention nor the possibility to use digital devices which are critical for successful functioning in society. This situation showed the new emerging need for development of digitalized social services and new social policy approach. Social policy should shift its attention, to adopt new approaches and to develop a new service model that would be more effective for the all groups including older adults in society, especially during pandemic situation.

The aim of the paper is to investigate possibilities of Lithuanian social policy to meet older adults' digital needs for better inclusion and active ageing. Paper is based on secondary data analysis including legal documents (EU and National Programmes, Strategies, Orders), scientific research (on national and international levels), statistical (of older adults' population) and other data (results of national research).

## **2 Digital transformation of services for inclusion of older adults**

Older adults were increasingly using digital technology prior to the pandemic [9]. A wide range of studies have focused on older adults' access to technology [10, 11], their engagement with digital technologies [12], the ways in which older adults' quality of life, health and social relationships improve as a result of ICT use [13-15]. Evidence suggests that the conscious use of a range of ICT contributes positively to older adults' subjective well-being and healthy aging [16, 17]. It helps to maintain social ties, stay physically active and safe, maintain independence, and prolong a healthy life thus reducing social isolation [18].

The new pandemic situation has accelerated the process. A study by Sixsmith et al. [19] found that although the long-term consequences of the pandemic are not yet known, in the short term it appears that many older adults have adapted to a digital world and started to use digital tools more actively. However, although an increasing number of older adults recognize the necessity of using technology, most of them tend to use the functions they know rather than learn new ones [20]. It is important for adult educators to provide educational activities for this group of people, as the new ICT competences they acquire can improve their quality of life. Discussions between ICT professionals and educators [21] reveal that older adults need more encouragement to be involved in the process of learning new technologies and to use them on a regular basis [20]. Results from document analysis and interviews with educators indicate that digital competence still does not have a prominent position in the curricula, although attention to the discussion has increased over the last five years [22]. According to Muñoz-Rodríguez et al. [12], the creation and development of a person's digital identity should be activated if advanced technologies are expected to provide viable learning opportunities for older adults and to enable them to maintain the capacity for lifelong learning. Linking active ageing to the growing potential of learning technologies means that didactics need to be developed in order to enable and empower older adults to engage in lifelong learning [12]. Nahdatul et al. [16] revealed the importance of intergenerational learning for older adults as it can reduce older adults' anxiety about technology and possibly provide an opportunity for intergenerational exchanges of insights and understanding. Collaborative learning environments foster social relationships between learners, encouraging creativity and knowledge sharing. Older adult learners prefer an experiential learning approach in an active environment where they can share their life experiences, opinions, and expectations.

Digital inclusion requires efforts of various stakeholders not only on micro, but also on mezo and macro levels. Researchers use different terminology in analyzing the process. The most complex notion is digital transformation, however, most of the authors agree that the concept is not clearly defined in the literature [23-25]. The notion of digital transformation firstly was used in private [26] and then extended to the public sector. Digital transformation in the public sector means new ways of working with stakeholders, building new frameworks of service delivery and creating new forms of relationships [27]. However, in literature there is a confusion of definitions as it is associated with e-government, e-governance, digital government, and transformational government. Moreover, terms like digitization (downloading forms online), digitalization (filling out forms online), and digital transformation (full-service delivery online) are used interchangeably in the literature and usually focus on the first two - digitization and digitalization - only [23] while digital transformation is discussed less and is much more complex concept combining technological and human aspects.

Looking from technological side, three vectors of change are mentioned. One of them is automation of work (the replacement of human labour input by machine input for some types of tasks within production and distribution processes, usage of algorithmic control of

machinery and digital sensors, with ever-increasing computing power). The other is digitalisation of processes (the use of sensors and rendering devices to translate the physical production process into digital information and vice versa, to process, store and communicate information). The third is coordination by platforms (platforms mediate for-profit or not-for-profit economic activities by bringing together service users and providers with the aim of conducting specific tasks or solving specific problems) [28, 29].

However, various authors argue that the emphasis only on technologies is too simplified and has to be extended to the analysis of more essential changes. Tratkowska [26] next to technological (novelties in technologies and innovations) aspect adds organizational (organizational processes, value creation etc.) and social (networking, communication channels, new experience). Nadkarni, Prügl [30] discusses a technology-centric and an actor-centric perspective in digital transformation. Mergel et al. [23] highlights such elements as using technology to transform services delivery (mostly associated with e-government and focusing on efforts to make service delivery more efficient and accessible to citizens), using technology to transform organizational culture and relationship with citizens (meaning the change of paradigm and emphasising citizens' expectations of governments' ability to deliver digital services) as well as value creation as transformation outcome (transformation of services toward platforms, smart products, and customer needs). The authors emphasise that technology per se does not change organizations, rather the way organizations work and their use of technologies changes work practices. Mergel et al. [23] argue that the demands for digital transformation in the public sector are mostly driven by external rather than internal demands. Digital transformation forces governments to create new policies in looking for creating innovative frameworks of service delivery and new forms of relationships.

Health and social sectors are in the digital economy strategy and undergo digital transformation as well. A wider range of available digital procedures has opened up a broader dimension regarding research, therapies, interventions, and social networks [40]. Digital transformation includes technology, people, health and social service agencies providing digital service on digital platforms such as a smartphone, tablet, laptop, and any other computing devices [31]. It is perceived as a potential solution to the rising need for care of ageing populations [24], it offers more effective ways to organise public services and care workers' time and tools for self-care [32]. Social services are increasingly moving to digital platforms to reach bigger numbers of people spread across vast geographic regions, which results in cost savings and better social services management, and better use of agencies resources [33]. Binder [34] suggests that during the pandemic, social services agencies have shown incredible resolve and innovation to deliver on their mission in uniquely difficult circumstances. Rogelj et al. [25] provide examples of the programs for elderly population at municipality's level that should undergo digital transformation. They are development of integrated care, development of independent living solutions, development of age-friendly environments, development of urban facility management for the maintenance of a safe environment, development of a prescription adherence programme, development of a falls prevention programme, and development of lifespan health promotion and prevention of age-related frailty and disease programmes.

The transformation to e-government has a positive effect on efficiency, accountability, and transparency as well as for enhanced engagement of citizens in the governments' strategic decision-making processes [35]. It opens new potentials but also poses challenges and problems [36]. As Pedersen [37] points out, recent disruptive changes in society, condition that e-government might become part of the problem and not a part of the solution. Such vulnerable groups as older adults require special attention from governments to address their needs, and first of all, to increase their digital inclusion.

### **3 Digital inclusion of older adults in Lithuania**

Digital inclusion helps ensure that all people, regardless of social class, ethnicity, religion, or economic power, have access to technological means of communication and information. E-inclusion is just one aspect of a broader range of policies to promote social inclusion and cohesion. On the one hand, it is generally true that marginalized people tend to experience limited access to ICT, but on the other hand, the information society may offer many opportunities and even clear benefits for groups at risk. Policies promoting e-inclusion can be part of a broader set of policies to promote social inclusion, and can be the first route to inclusion of certain groups. Lithuania's e-inclusion policy and other public and private initiatives are designed to strengthen the information society and to tackle the digital divide, which affects the most vulnerable, such as people with disabilities, older adults, minorities, etc. The data presented by European Commission on Digital Economy and Society Index [38] show that Lithuania is among those countries (Austria, Germany, Luxembourg, Ireland) that chose to invest more than 30 percent of their Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) allocation to digital having DESI index a little bit more than EU average.

Digital inclusion requires a computer, internet access, and skills. According to the data of the Lithuanian Statistics Department [39, 40], in 2022 80 percent households had personal computers at home and 88 percent had Internet access (in 2021 – 81 and 87 percent, respectively). In the city, 84 percent households had computers at home, 90 percent had Internet access, but in the countryside, 73 and 82 percent of households, respectively. Of the households, 99 percent used the Internet at least once a week. In 2022, 88 percent of population aged 16-74 used the Internet (87 percent in 2021). Older adults use the Internet less than young people do. Hundred percent of the 16-24-year-old population and 57 percent of the 65-74-year-old population used the Internet. In comparison to 2021, the share of the 65-74 years old population using the Internet increased by 2 percentage points.

The virtual platform 'The world of seniors [41] conducted a research "Computer use by seniors" and surveyed 360 persons of which 54 percent were over 65 years of age. The vast majority (73 percent) of respondents communicate with seniors by phone, but even one in five communicates via computer. Seventy percent of seniors have a computer and use it, however almost 5 percent have such device but do not use it. Only a very small number of seniors are illiterate and unwilling to learn how to use a computer. Over 6 percent of seniors would like to use a computer, but do not have one. Eighty-four percent of all respondents answered that they have older people as friends on social networks, with whom they keep in touch, follow their news, and exchange family information. A third of respondents follow news online, almost 20 percent look for entertainment, 14 percent look for other useful information, for example, about medical facilities.

Department of Statistics [39, 40] latest population survey shows that older adults are using digital technologies the so-called digital divide among older adults is closing, but perhaps not as fast as expected. For example, among 65-74-year-olds, internet use has risen by 6 percent in a year to 4 percent. The survey shows that 33 percent of them use the internet daily. In addition, an increasing number of older adults go online more than once a day. Two years ago, only around 20 percent of them did so, but in 2021 the figure has risen to 24 percent [42].

Digital skills are one of the most important prerequisites for digital inclusion. According to data of European Commission [38], almost 50 percent of Lithuanian people have basic digital skills. According to the proposed 2030 target of the Path to the Digital Decade, at least 80 percent of citizens should have at least basic digital skills. EY Connected Citizens [43] research data showed that the vast majority of Lithuanians believe in the positive impact of technology and the empowerment of people, but at the same time, they are worried about inequalities and exclusions that it brings. Even a third of people would like a

stricter control of technology companies. Of Lithuanian residents, 63% would like to participate in state training programs for improving digital skills, which is possibly a sign of the digital divide. Although 58 percent of Lithuanians are confident in their ability to use the latest technology, the remaining 42 percent are not confident in their skills, and 27 percent believe that technology is developing too quickly.

Using e-health services is a challenge for many older adults. According to the research, conducted by Centre for Health Education and Disease Prevention [6] in 2018, health literacy level of 60 percent of adult population was sufficient or excellent, and 40 percent was limited (inadequate or problematic). Most of the population with insufficient health literacy level, lived in the countryside, they were older [6]. Kazlauskienė et al. [44] after analysing the health literacy of ambulatory patients treated in Lithuania found that the low health literacy of patients is determined by older age (70 years and over), low level of education and gender (in particular male).

Lithuania has made significant progress in terms of the acquisition of new skills and access to learning. Legal documents have been adopted to regulate the development of lifelong learning in Lithuania. An example is the Law on Non-formal Adult Education and Continuing Learning [45]. It defines legal guarantees for individuals to exercise their natural right to lifelong learning; to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for professional activity, to discover new meanings in life and to spend their leisure time in a meaningful way, and to promote active participation in democratic society. It is important to mention that the law devotes a separate article to Third Age Universities, which are actively involved in the inclusion of older people in active society. The National Progress Programme 2013-2020 underlines the need to focus on the quality of non-formal education for working and socially excluded older people, linking resources to learners' needs. Though there are no goals for the education of older adults in the Strategy of State Education 2013-2022 [46], Lithuania's 2030 Strategic Growth Agenda sets the goal of creating an effective lifelong learning system, with efficient use of information communication and new technologies. Important steps were made in solving digital exclusion issues of older adults involving public libraries to serve as the free Internet public access points and digital literacy skills laboratories.

Regardless positive moments in the policy for older adults in Lithuania, the country lags behind such EU indicators as average life expectancy and expected healthy life expectancy, as well as aged population's social and economic activity. In the National Progress Program 2014-2020 [47, 48], population aging is identified as one of the threats that reduces education and increases demand for health care services. Health policy more focuses on health promotion than activation [7]. In Lithuanian Health Strategy 2014-2025 most attention is paid to all residents of Lithuania expecting them to be healthier, their life expectancy to be extended, their health improved and the health inequalities reduced. However, there is a lack of attention on how to improve the health of older adults unless they promote physical activity habits, by preparing specialized health promotion projects to encourage physical activity of people of retirement age and the disabled. There are no goals or objectives directly related to older adults in the Programme for Development of National Public Health Care 2016-2023 (2014) either.

More actions are taken to improve social care services for older adults. With the Integral Assistance Development Programme, financed from the European Social Fund, in 2013 Lithuania started implementing integral assistance (nursing and social services) for the disabled and elderly people in their homes as well as consultations to their family members who take care of these persons. The new Action Plan for Integral Assistance Development 2016-2019 was approved.

In the Strategy for Demography, Migration, and Integration Policies 2018-2030, one of three strategic goals is devoted to integration of older adults to society by ensuring the

participation of older persons in social and political life. It includes also participation of older persons in the labour market and their financial security, lifelong learning opportunities, improving the quality and accessibility of health care for older adults in order to reduce their morbidity and mortality from major non-communicable diseases and from external causes, as well as strengthening intergenerational relations and develop voluntary activities of older persons.

In 2021 October 21, The Ministries of Social Security and Labour, the Ministry of Health Protection, the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports, the Ministry of Culture, the Association of Lithuanian Municipalities, and six non-governmental organizations [49], uniting older citizens, signed the agreement aiming at creation of the most favourable conditions for seniors to live a fulfilling personal, social, professional and cultural life, to involve older adults in making decisions related to them. It was also agreed to prepare a national program for overcoming the consequences of aging, using the accumulated experience in Lithuania and the countries of the European Union.

## 4 Conclusions

In summary, a significant proportion of older adults lack the skills to use digital technology, which are essential for successful functioning in society. The rapid development of technology and the recent Covid-19 pandemic have accelerated the transference of many services on the Internet. The importance of the use of technology for older adults was particularly evident during the Covid 19 pandemic. Various researches revealed that the telephone, and less often the computer, had become the main working tool for a significant proportion of close care workers. Policies in response to the Covid-19 crisis (limiting services, providing them remotely) limited the availability of services or were inappropriate and unacceptable to people. As a result, the demand for services has increased significantly and has become particularly acute since the end of the quarantine. It should be stressed that many of the services were of particular importance to people because they were concerned about their health and securing a decent socio-economic life.

This situation points to a new need for the development of digitised social services and a new approach to social policy. Social policy should refocus, adopt new approaches, and develop a new service model that is more effective for all groups in society, including older adults, especially in complex situations such as pandemics.

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