DOI 10.22630/TIRR.2026.25.1

Irena Achonen✉**, Jolita Variakojienė**
Vilniaus Kolegija / Vilnius University of Applied Sciences

Disabled travel: finding an accessible hotel in Vilnius

Abstract. The rapid growth of the elderly population, coupled with a socially responsible approach to ensure equal service and quality of life for people with disabilities, has triggered a global attempt to adapt hotels to the emerging needs of these populations. In line with the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, accessible tourism has become both a human rights priority and an important market opportunity. Based on the results of a questionnaire survey, the purpose of the present study is to find out the accessible hotels in Vilnius for people with disabilities. The study is based on the analysis of three-, four- and five-star hotels with a capacity of 50 rooms, assessing accessibility across five key areas: main entrance, reception, guest rooms, restaurant, and bar. The study is based on questionnaire data collected from 15 hotels. All the hotels are based in Vilnius, Lithuania. The findings indicate that accessibility in Vilnius hotels remains fragmented and underdeveloped. Strengthening inclusive infrastructure, staff preparedness, and clear accessibility policies would not only ensure compliance with international standards but also enhance Vilnius's competitiveness as an inclusive and socially responsible tourism destination.

Keywords: disability, accessible tourism, accommodation, hotel

Introduction

According to data from the Lithuanian State Data Agency, 2.6 million domestic tourists and 1.4 million international tourists stayed in Lithuanian accommodation establishments in 2024 (Lithuania Travel, 2025). In recent years, Vilnius recorded a significant increase in tourist traffic – the number of travellers grew by 4% in 2024, compared to 2023, reaching more than 1.2 million (Go Vilnius, 2025).

According to the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of Lithuania, in 2024, there were about 230 thousand people with disabilities living in the country, which amounted to about 8% of the total population of the country (LR SADM, 2025). Many of these individuals may want to travel domestically, staying in hotels. Vilnius needs to ensure that it can provide suitable accommodation that meets the needs of all those who visit, including those with accessibility requirements.

A growing number of countries have recognised the value of developing accessible tourism. This market is an attractive segment for tourism and hospitality suppliers, but the specific needs of people with disabilities must be taken into consideration. Guests

Irena Achonen ORCID: 0000-0003-2791-1640; Jolita Variakojienė ORCID: 0000-0002-8533-3239
✉ i.achonen@vvf.viko.lt

with disabilities in hotels need tailored accommodation. It is essential to provide them with the maximum level of comfort and safety. Numerous areas should be designed to allow disabled people to navigate rooms freely and use the equipment.

In 2010, Lithuania ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, a fundamental legal act ensuring equal rights and opportunities for persons with disabilities in society (UN, 2022). At least for that time, it requires tourism suppliers to make adequate provision for disabled access.

Only a few legal acts or standards have been published since that time and might be applied to accommodation facilities. The Lithuanian Technical Construction Regulation establishes that all new buildings and territories must be accessible to all. The regulation is based on international ISO standards. It is stipulated that the architecture of a building must meet the requirements of universal design and be adapted to all members of society (Lietuvos Respublikos aplinkos ministro 2019 m. lapkričio 4 d. įsakymas Nr. D1-653). The requirements for classification of hotel services in Lithuania name 4 standards for accommodating persons with disabilities. These standards cover the convenient access to the hotel for a disabled person in a wheelchair (with or without the help of hotel staff) and accessibility for the visually or hearing-impaired persons (LR VVTATS, 2024).

Persons with disabilities remain among the most discriminated groups in Lithuania (Republic of Lithuania Resolution No. XIV-72). Lack of access to the physical environment and services is noted as one of the main issues. Regarding this, the improvement plan that covers adapting building infrastructure to the needs of persons with disabilities is mentioned. The Government promised to continue improving the adaptability of building infrastructure to the needs of persons with disabilities and to make accessible both the housing and living environment to all persons according to their needs.

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities also reports that Lithuania still needs to work on the rights of persons with disabilities. Their attention is directed to the accessibility of all facilities and services open to or provided to the public, including older buildings, with particular attention to public places and other areas (UN, 2023).

In 2024, the Law on the Fundamentals of Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities came into force (Lietuvos Respublikos neįgaliųjų socialinės integracijos įstatymo Nr. I-2044 pakeitimo įstatymas). It might facilitate Lithuanian institutions in implementing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and ensure the rights of persons with disabilities in every area of life.

Although accessible tourism has been widely examined at the international level, empirical studies focusing on the practical implementation of accessibility standards in Lithuanian hotels remain limited. This study addresses this gap by evaluating the level of accessibility in three-, four-, and five-star hotels in Vilnius, Lithuania.

The research is based on questionnaire data collected from 15 hotels and assesses accessibility across physical, sensory, and communication dimensions. The findings indicate that while most hotels report basic physical accessibility measures, significant gaps remain in the availability of adapted rooms, staff training, and services for guests with visual and hearing impairments.

Literature review

the word disability refers to an abnormality that interferes with function to a significant degree. Disability represents a departure from the norm in terms of performance of the individual, as opposed to that of the organ or mechanism. The concept is characterised by excesses or deficiencies of customarily expected behaviour or activity, and these may be temporary or permanent, reversible or irreversible, and progressive or regressive. The main types are: intellectual impairments and other psychological impairments; language impairments; aural impairments; ocular impairments; visceral impairments; skeletal impairments; disfiguring impairments; generalised; sensory; and other impairments (WHO, 1980).

Kaplan (2000) presents disability as a normal aspect of life, not as a deviance, and rejects the notion that persons with disabilities are in some inherent way 'defective'. Persons with disabilities are quite capable of participating in society.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Article 9 on Accessibility calls to take appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities have equal access to the physical environment, information, transportation and other facilities and services open or provided to the public. Furthermore, Article 30 on participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure, and sport also calls for ensuring that persons with disabilities enjoy the benefits of tourism (UN, 2006).

Accessible tourism means tourism equally accessible to all, including people with disabilities, people with temporary mobility problems, the elderly, families with children, and multi-generational families (Gonda, 2021). As noted by Moura et al. (2023), it also includes people with special needs, such as people with respiratory allergies, people with food allergies, and people with obesity.

Accessible tourism enables all people to participate in and enjoy tourism experiences. Thus, accessible tourism is the ongoing endeavour to ensure tourist destinations, products and services are accessible to all people, regardless of their physical limitations, disabilities or age. This includes publicly and privately owned tourist locations, facilities and services (UN, 2025).

According to Poria et al. (2011), many studies identify several reasons for studying the tourist experience of people with disabilities. One of the main reasons is the economic potential of the disabled market: beyond the large market size, the disabled market is characterised by strong brand loyalty. Additionally, certain studies indicated the indirect positive impact of attention to tourists with disabilities. Specifically, attempts to better serve the needs of people with disabilities resulted in improvements in service provision for people without disabilities. Finally, it is argued by the authors that the tourism and hospitality industries have a social responsibility to provide people with disabilities with adequate service experience.

United Nations World Tourism Organization predicted tourism will increase and experience sustained development, reaching 1.8 billion international tourists by 2030 (UNWTO, 2011). Accessibility is a central element of any responsible and sustainable development policy.

According to the World Health Organization, 1.3 billion people experience significant disability (WHO, 2023). This represents 16% of the world's population, or 1 in 6 of us.

It is estimated that by the end of 2025, demand for accessibility in Europe will reach approximately 160 million people. An analysis of the accessible tourism market size shows that 70% of the population demanding accessibility have both the financial and physical capabilities to travel, generating potential revenues of €88.6 billion by 2025 (Bowtell, 2015).

When people with disabilities travel, special requirements exist. Physical access is one of the most important and influential supply-side issues facing the tourism market (Bowtell, 2015).

Chen indicates that a very high percentage of the population with disabilities used accommodation facilities during their travel (Poria et al., 2011). Clearly, it is necessary to design the service cape in an appropriate way to accommodate people with disabilities. Due to Kaplan, such planning requires careful design of accommodation facilities (Pehlivanoğlu, 2019).

Darcy (1998) argues that facility design can be split into three dimensions:

1. Physical access, which involves people with physical impairments using wheelchairs or walking aids.
2. Sensory access, for example, tactile markings, signs and labels, hearing augmentation systems and audio cues for lifts and lights.
3. Communication access, which involves people who have difficulties with the written word and speech.

Many countries have implemented special hotel design features accommodating guests with special needs. However, there remain numerous practical and social obstacles that may prevent people with disabilities and their companions from experiencing a satisfactory hospitality experience (Pehlivanoğlu, 2019).

Poria et al. (2011) examine published studies focusing on the tourist experience of people with disabilities in hotels. Based on the studies, people with disabilities identify difficulties in reservation procedures, as well as in the hotel room design due to the location and layout of certain room features, such as showers and bathtubs.

Frequently hotels do not have sufficient numbers of rooms suited to people with disabilities. They mention several logistical factors, such as shower seats and adjustable beds that should be in a hotel room specifically for wheelchair users (Poria et al., 2011).

A new UK consumer survey entitled Accessibility in hospitality found that a large majority (71%) of customers say that there isn't currently enough attention brought to accessibility in the hospitality industry (HGEM, 2022).

Research by MMGY Global (2022) on the needs, behaviours and concerns of U.S. travellers with mobility disabilities found that nearly all respondents (96%) experienced problems at hotels or other accommodations: more than half (54%) had been offered a room that did not match the one they booked. Most travellers with mobility issues (81%) have had to deal with inaccessible showers or tubs, while more than half (52%) have had to deal with beds that were too high for them to access.

The presence of different disabilities creates disparate and specific needs that require unique ideas and solutions. Understanding consumer preferences and attitudes is also necessary for potent supply development for people with disabilities as well (Gonda, 2021).

The ability to have access to the same experiences as travellers without disabilities should be a priority across the hospitality, travel and tourism industries, as travellers with mobility disabilities spend $58.2 billion per year on travel. They are going on leisure trips with nearly the same frequency as those without mobility issues, taking an average of 3.4 trips in the past 12 months and spending an average of $3,546 on leisure travel during that time frame (MMGY Global, 2022).

Research methodology

In recent years, accessibility has become a central focus in the development of sustainable and inclusive tourism. As populations age and awareness of disability rights increases, travellers with diverse needs are seeking equal access to accommodation and travel experiences. The hospitality industry, as a key pillar of tourism, must ensure that its services and infrastructure are inclusive, safe, and welcoming for all.

This research investigates the accessibility status of mainstream hotels in Lithuania, focusing on their capacity to serve guests with disabilities. The total population consists of 62 hotels, but this study specifically examines data from 19 hotels, excluding boutique hotels due to their individualised layouts, historic buildings, and often limited space, which makes standardisation less feasible.

The aim is to identify barriers to accessibility, measure the level of preparedness among hotels, and develop actionable recommendations that promote inclusive tourism development in the country.

The survey consisted of structured questions targeting essential accessibility domains:

- Number of wheelchair-accessible rooms.
- Physical accessibility of entrances, elevators, and parking areas.
- Staff training on disability awareness and emergency procedures.
- Support for guests with visual and hearing impairments.
- Policies on service animals.
- Availability of accessible transportation.

Responses were collected via an online form and analysed by aggregating frequency data across each accessibility category. The findings were expressed in numerical summaries and visualised through pie charts to highlight the distribution of ‘yes’, ‘no’ and ‘don’t know’ responses.

A total of 15 valid responses were collected. The results were presented through charts, allowing clear visibility of trends and deficiencies.

Results

The majority of hotels reported having wheelchair-accessible rooms, while a smaller proportion indicated that they do not provide such facilities. Very few establishments provide more than five such rooms (Fig. 1). This highlights a significant limitation

in accessible accommodation capacity, suggesting that hotels are not adequately equipped to meet the needs of travellers with mobility impairments, particularly during high-demand periods or for group bookings.

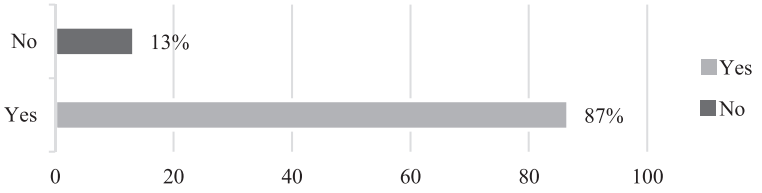


Figure 1. Availability of wheelchair-accessible rooms in hotels
Source: own research.

Figure 2 evaluates the physical accessibility of key infrastructure areas within hotels, including entrances, elevators, restaurants, and parking. Entrances and elevators show high levels of accessibility, with over 80% of hotels indicating they are barrier-free. Restaurants are somewhat less accessible, with approximately 60-70% compliance. Parking areas scored the lowest, with fewer than half of the hotels offering designated accessible spaces. This pattern indicates that while hotels have prioritised vertical and entry access, they may be neglecting holistic accessibility planning that includes dining and transportation-related facilities.

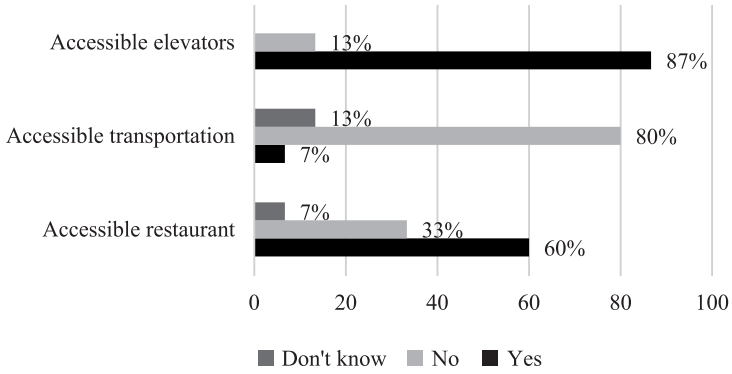


Figure 2. Accessibility of entrances, elevators, restaurants, and parking areas
Source: own research.

Figure 3 addresses whether hotel staff are trained in disability awareness and emergency response procedures. The results reveal a significant training gap: the majority of hotels lack trained personnel. A notable portion of responses indicated uncertainty about whether such training exists, pointing to a broader issue of poor internal communication or lack of formal policy. This absence of staff readiness may jeopardise the safety and comfort of guests with disabilities, particularly in emergency situations.

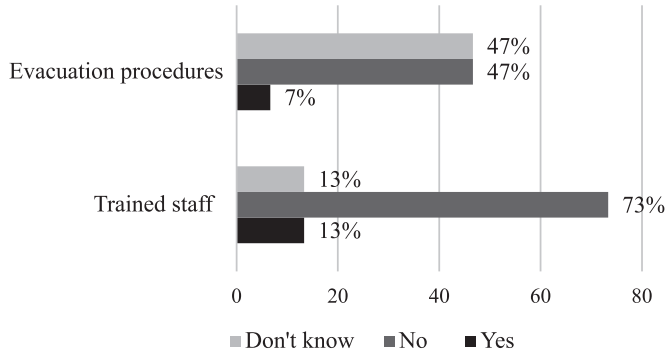


Figure 3. Staff training on disability awareness and emergency procedures
Source: own research.

Figure 4 examines the support systems available for guests with visual and hearing impairments. The data shows an alarming lack of accommodations, such as Braille signage or hearing aid-compatible devices. In addition, many respondents selected 'don't know', which suggests that either such resources are not visibly available or staff are unaware of their existence. This underlines a serious deficiency in inclusivity, effectively marginalising guests with sensory disabilities.

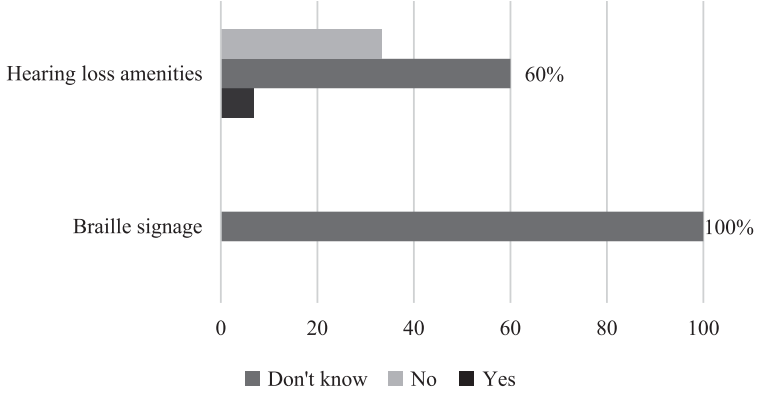


Figure 4. Support for guests with visual and hearing impairments
Source: own research.

Figure 5 reviews hotel policies on allowing service animals. While some hotels reported that they accept service animals, a significant number either do not allow them or do not have a clearly defined policy. This inconsistency could lead to discriminatory practices, as refusing entry to service animals may conflict with international and local disability rights laws. Establishing a clear and inclusive policy would mitigate this issue and improve guest experience.

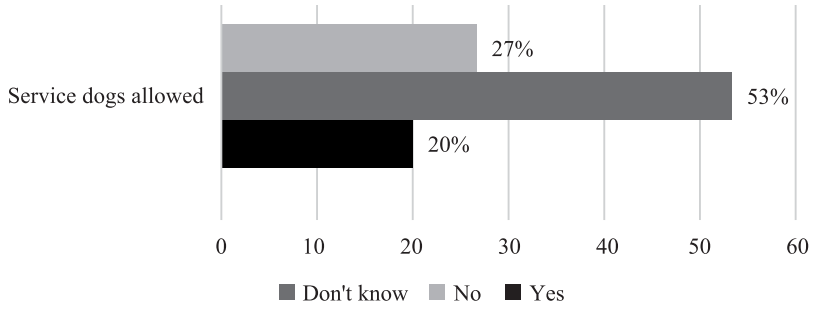


Figure 5. Policies on service animals

Source: own research.

Figure 6 focuses on the availability of accessible transportation provided by the hotels. The analysis shows that nearly all surveyed hotels do not offer transportation adapted for guests with disabilities. This presents a major barrier to mobility and independence for guests with accessibility needs and significantly impacts their overall travel experience.

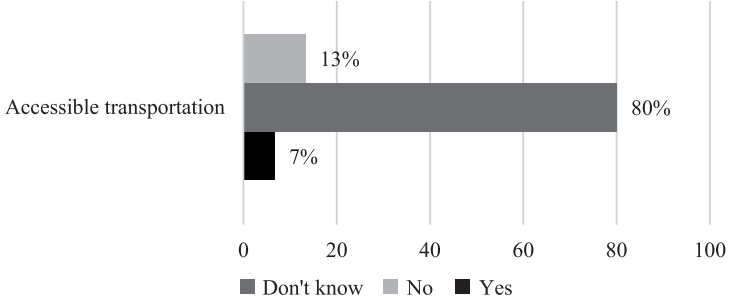


Figure 6. Availability of accessible transportation

Source: own research.

Conclusions

Based on the research findings and analysis of accessibility in Vilnius hotels, several key insights have emerged. These conclusions highlight both the progress made and the critical gaps that remain in ensuring inclusive travel experiences for people with disabilities. The following points summarise the most important outcomes of the study.

1. Most hotels in Vilnius lack a sufficient number of wheelchair-accessible rooms and often fail to provide full accessibility across all key areas, such as parking, restaurants, and entrances.
2. Support for guests with visual or hearing impairments is minimal, with little availability of Braille signage, hearing aid-compatible systems, or staff trained in alternative communication methods.

3. There is a critical gap in staff training on disability awareness and emergency procedures, which compromises both guest safety and the overall hospitality experience for travellers with disabilities.
4. Unclear or non-existent hotel policies on service animals and accessible transport reflect weak implementation of national and international accessibility regulations.
5. Improving accessibility is not only a human rights imperative but also an untapped economic opportunity, as the accessible tourism market continues to grow across Europe and globally.

Overall, the results suggest that accessibility implementation in Vilnius hotels remains partial and inconsistent. Strengthening infrastructure, staff preparedness, and intersectoral cooperation is essential for advancing inclusive tourism development. The study contributes to a better understanding of accessibility practices in emerging European destinations and provides practical recommendations for improving accommodation services.

References

Bowtell, J. (2015). Assessing the value and market attractiveness of the accessible tourism industry in Europe: a focus on major travel and leisure companies. Journal of Tourism Futures, 1(3), p. 203-222. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1108/JTF-03-2015-0012

Darcy, S. (1998). People with a Disability and Tourism: A Bibliography. Retrieved from: https://www.academia.edu/2621263/People_with_a_Disability_and_Tourism_Bibliography?auto=download (access: 4.04.2025).

Go Vilnius (2025). Vilnius stiprina tarptautini patraukluma. Retrieved from: https://www.govilnius.lt/visos-naujienos/vilnius-stiprina-tarptautini-patraukluma (access: 11.04.2025).

Gonda, T. (2021). Travelling habits of people with disabilities. GeoJournal of Tourism and Geosites, 37(3), p. 844-850. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.30892/gtg.37315-717 (access: 10.04.2025).

HGEM (2022). Accessibility in hospitality. Retrieved from: https://www.hgem.com/opinion/accessibility-in-hospitality (access: 19.03.2025).

Kaplan, D. (2000). The Definition of Disability: Perspective of the Disability Community. Journal of Health Care Law and Policy, 3(2), 5. Retrieved from: https://digitalcommons.law.umaryland.edu/jhclp/vol3/iss2/5/ (access: 10.04.2025).

Lietuvos Respublikos aplinkos ministro 2019 m. lapkričio 4 d. įsakymas Nr. D1-653 „Dėl statybos techninio reglamento STR 2.03.01:2019 „Statinių prieinamumas" patvirtinimo. TAR, 2019-11-05, Nr. 2019-17624. Retrieved from: https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/dcb43cb3ffaf11e990d5d63c859a8aa7 (access: 4.04.2025).

Lietuvos Respublikos neįgaliųjų socialinės integracijos įstatymo Nr. I-2044 pakeitimo įstatymas. TAR, 2023-01-04, Nr. 2023-00135. Retrieved from: https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/e56258b08c0b11ed8df094f359a60216/asr (access: 11.04.2025).

Lithuania Travel (2025). Turizmo statistika. Retrieved from: https://lithuania.travel/lt/profesionalams/tyrimai-ir-duomenys/turizmo-statistika (access: 11.04.2025).

Ministry of Social Security and Labour of Lithuania (LR SADM) (2025). Egalios reforma ir asmenu su negalia itrauktis statistika. Retrieved from: https://socmin.lrv.lt/lt/veiklos-sritys/socialine-integracija/negalios-reforma-ir-asmenu-su-negalia-itrauktis/statistika-2/ (access: 10.04.2025).

MMGY Global (2022). Portrait of Travelers with Disabilities: Mobility & Accessibility (report). Retrieved from: https://www.mmgyglobal.com/news/portrait-of-travelers-with-disabilities/ (access: 12.03.2025).

Moura, A., Eusébio, C., Devile, E. (2023). The 'why' and 'what for' of participation in tourism activities: Travel motivations of people with disabilities. Current Issues in Tourism, 26(6). Retrieved from: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13683500.2022.2044292 (access: 12.03.2025).

Pehlivanoğlu, B. (2019). Hotel Adaptation for Travelers with Disabilities (TWD): A Design Oriented Analysis. Online Journal of Art and Design, 7(5), 7510. Retrieved from: https://www.adjournal.net/articles/75/7510.pdf (access: 11.04.2025).

Poria, Y., Reiche, A., Brandt, Y. (2011). Dimensions of hotel experience of people with disabilities: an exploratory study. International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management, 23(5), p. 571-591. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1108/09596111111143340

Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania Resolution No. XIV-72 on the Programme of the Eighteenth Government of the Republic of Lithuania. Retrieved from: https://lrv.lt/media/viesa/saugykla/2023/11/OPyc0AiJKPA.pdf (access: 12.03.2025).

State Consumer Rights Protection Authority of Lithuania (LR VVTAT) (2024). Viešbučių klasifikavimo naujovės Lietuvoje: svarbiausi pokyčiai nuo 2025 m. Retrieved from: https://vvtat.lrv.lt/lt/naujienos-ir-pranesimai-ziniasklaidai-377/viesbuciu-klasifikavimo-naujoves-lietuvoje-svarbiausi-pokyciai-nuo-2025-m/ (access: 24.03.2025).

United Nations (UN) (2006). Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Retrieved from: https://social.desa.un.org/issues/disability/crpd/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-crpd (access: 4.03.2025).

United Nations (UN) (2022). Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Retrieved from: https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g22/590/32/pdf/g2259032.pdf (access: 19.03.2025).

United Nations (UN) (2025). Promoting accessible tourism for all. Retrieved from: https://social.desa.un.org/issues/disability/disability-issues/promoting-accessible-tourism-for-all (access: 4.03.2025).

United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (2011). Tourism towards 2030. Global overview. Retrieved from: https://www.globalwellnesssummit.com/wp-content/uploads/Industry-Research/Global/2011_UNWTO_Tourism_Towards_2030.pdf (access: 19.03.2025).

United Nations. Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) (2023). List of issues in relation to the combined second and third periodic reports of Lithuania. Retrieved from: https://hrmi.lt/en/uncrpd-list-of-issues-lithuania-2023/ (access: 11.04.2025).

World Health Organization (WHO) (1980). International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities, and Handicaps. Retrieved from: https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/41003/9241541261_eng.pdf?sequence=1 (access: 22.02.2025).

World Health Organization (WHO) (2023). Disability and health. Retrieved from: https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health (access: 19.03.2025).