



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
1 March 2023

Original: English

Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Seventy-third session

Summary record of the 18th meeting

Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva, on Thursday, 23 February 2023, at 3 p.m.

Chair: Mr. Abdel-Moneim

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The meeting was called to order at 3 p.m.

Consideration of reports *(continued)*

(a) Reports submitted by States parties in accordance with articles 16 and 17 of the Covenant *(continued)*

Third periodic report of Lithuania (E/C.12/LTU/3; E/C.12/LTU/Q/3; E/C.12/LTU/RQ/3) (continued)

1. *At the invitation of the Chair, the delegation of Lithuania joined the meeting.*
2. **The Chair** invited the delegation of Lithuania to continue replying to the questions put by Committee members at the previous meeting.
3. **A representative of Lithuania** said that the new provisions on parental leave had come into force on 1 January 2023, which meant that parents were only just beginning to apply them. Her Government was planning to promote the notion of non-transferable leave for each parent in the course of the coming year and to raise awareness of the advantages of parental leave in general.
4. **A representative of Lithuania** said that the most recent statistics on the distribution of time and tasks in the home dated back to 2016. The figures had been close to the European Union average and shown that more women than men cared for children, grandchildren, older persons and persons with disabilities. Women also did more of the household tasks. In order to change perceptions, a successful nationwide campaign had recently been conducted, presenting positive examples of fathers taking care of their children.
5. His Government planned to ensure the availability of more up-to-date statistics in that regard and was also preparing a list of indicators in respect of equality in general, including intersecting identities, as a basis for evidence-based policies in areas such as multidimensional poverty.
6. The Action Plan for Domestic Violence Prevention and Assistance to Victims would remain in force for the current year and a new plan would then be adopted. Information for members of vulnerable groups, such as persons with disabilities, on ways of obtaining help was available in accessible formats and sign language, as well as in other languages such as English, French and Russian. The list of available languages would be extended with the entry into force of the new Law on Protection from Domestic Violence in July 2023, which was generally expected to bring about further positive change.
7. Funding for the specialized assistance centres for victims of domestic violence had steadily increased. Whereas in 2020, €1.54 million had been allocated and the centres had been able to help nearly 12,000 people, the increase awarded in 2022, partly in order to cope with the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, had taken their funding to €1.59 million, and help had been provided to more than 20,000 people. In an average of 105 cases a year, secondary legal aid was provided to women victims of violence, to a total of €35,000. More funds could be allocated if there were more applicants.
8. **A representative of Lithuania** said that, as of June 2022, 90,000 children and families had participated in projects under the Complex Family Services Action Plan. Since the initial estimate of uptake had been only 30,000 participants, it was clear that such projects were in high demand in all municipalities. An evaluation carried out in 2021 had revealed that the greatest demand was for positive parenting training, family mediation and psychosocial help; accordingly, funding for those services would be extended. Indeed, although the Plan had been set to run only until 2023, because of the high demand it would now run until 2029, with funding amounting to €60 million.
9. In order to guarantee quality services, the Methodological Centre for Complex Services for Families had been created to provide training and advice for service providers and develop methodological materials. The Centre would be run by one of the country's leading civil society organizations specializing in support to families and children and would be funded in the amount of €500,000.

10. With regard to deinstitutionalization and ensuring the quality of foster care, she said that there were more than 200 professional foster parents, who could care for more than 400 children. There were plans for innovative developments to the professional foster care system.

11. Every municipality had at least one foster care centre that was responsible for constant monitoring of the work of professional foster parents and was required to take appropriate action when challenges arose. Moreover, the centres themselves were evaluated by the relevant departments of the Ministry of Social Security and Labour, including the State Child Rights Protection and Adoption Service.

12. Alongside the initiatives to close down care institutions, measures were also in place to help prevent children from being separated from their families: they included case management, mobile teams working with families in crisis and the provision of temporary care when child rights violations were identified. In addition, the child rights protection system had been reformed, with the introduction of evidence-based programmes such as multidimensional family therapy. Innovative services had also been created in the legal system in order to better support families and children, not only in crisis situations but also as preventive measures.

13. There had been positive developments in respect of support for young persons leaving care. Until 2022, the only support available had been financial in nature: beneficiaries received a set amount on leaving the care system, while those who were still in full-time education became the recipients of the foster care allowance paid to all children in foster care. Follow-up after-care support services, including accommodation if it was needed, were now also offered in order to help the young person start to lead an independent life. Such services were also available to young persons aged 16 or over from families at risk who wished to live independently. In all cases, an individual support plan was drawn up.

14. In 2022, a new centre for the development of professional competencies had opened to help strengthen social workers' skills by providing in-service training and offering advice. With a budget of €700,000, it was run by the Lithuanian Association of Social Workers and enabled social workers to consult other specialists in their field. It had already organized courses for 1,200 participants, and in 2023 it was expected that up to 8,000 social workers and other specialists would attend training.

15. **A representative of Lithuania** said that, in 2016 and 2017, the Department of National Minorities had organized a series of courses on Roma culture and traditions for social workers working with the Roma community. Such training was provided on demand, and in 2022 a municipality with a large Roma population had requested a course for social workers, persons working in education and municipal officials. The Department employed not only social workers but also Roma mediators, who provided various services to the Roma community, including help with seeking employment. There would be five mediators as from mid-2023, and there were plans to increase the number further. In addition, the Roma Community Centre, in partnership with various non-governmental organizations (NGOs), ran projects to promote Roma integration into the labour market.

16. **A representative of Lithuania** said that the number of homeless persons had steadily decreased since 2017, to stand at 1,439 persons in 2021. Short-term housing was available for homeless persons, and there were special services for those with addictions or in other critical situations, providing information, mediation and, if necessary, representation, as well as access to basic facilities for personal hygiene and health care. There were day centres where they could obtain immediate assistance, including food, and attend social events. The largest towns had municipal programmes to support the homeless; church parishes were also extremely active, providing hot food and sometimes clothing, and in some cases accommodation for a period.

17. Homelessness was a very complex problem, and it was important to pay attention to individuals' psychological well-being. Finding a job was extremely important, and great efforts were therefore made to cooperate with municipalities and encourage people to get back to work. However, when people were in debt, not only did they find it harder to obtain work but any earnings from employment were also impacted, since a portion could be

transferred in order to pay off the debt. Additional support had been made available to help people deal with such situations.

18. Ex-prisoners were at risk of homelessness and, as part of efforts to support independent living, counselling was provided in prison in order to help prepare them for life after their release.

19. Crisis centres also existed, providing support to victims of violence as well as social and psychological support, employment advice, skills development and access to health care. The ultimate aim was reintegration and a return to independent living.

20. Adequate provision for families with children with disabilities or raising three or more children was one of the country's long-term challenges. More targeted statistics were needed in order to establish the scale of the problem and formulate effective policies. However, under the Recovery and Resilience Plan and with around €90 million from the European Union structural funds, the supply of social housing for persons with disabilities and families with three or more children would be expanded.

21. Lithuania was currently conducting an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) study on ways of improving its housing policy and developing a long-term strategy.

22. **Mr. Šilinskas** (Lithuania) said that the proportion of individual income spent on housing was quite low, at around 20 per cent; Lithuania ranked third in Europe on that indicator. That was partly attributable to the very high rate of home ownership. Quality and accessibility of housing, particularly in cities, remained a challenge. A scheme was in place to assist first-time buyers with families.

23. **A representative of Lithuania** said that measures to address multidimensional poverty included not only social benefits but also goods and services in the fields of energy, health and education. To take the example of energy, allowances for home heating had been extended to cover households with average income, irrespective of the kind of fuel used. Given the energy crisis, the aim was to protect households from the need to spend a disproportionately large part of their income on heating. The average number of monthly beneficiaries had increased since 2021 by some 53 per cent and currently stood at 150,000.

24. **A representative of Lithuania** said that the national health insurance scheme was based on compulsory membership and covered the entire population of Lithuania. Contributions were paid either by the individual or by the employer or the State. The State covered certain socially vulnerable categories of residents as determined by law, notably pensioners, unemployed persons, children and students, representing a total of around 50 per cent of the population. All those insured had the same right to free health-care services, while free emergency care was provided to all residents whether or not they were members of the health insurance scheme. Older persons and persons with disabilities received additional benefits such as free dental prosthetics and authorization to purchase certain drugs without additional payment. The insurance fund had spent some €16 million in 2021 to meet the needs of those social groups.

25. The health insurance fund also reimbursed medical and orthopaedic devices for persons with disabilities, benefiting, in 2022, more than 88,000 individuals, to a total reimbursement of more than €17 million.

26. Reproductive health services were an integral part of the health-care system and were available to all persons covered by compulsory health insurance. In 2021–2022, action had been taken to improve the availability and quality of reproductive health care. For example, girls and young women aged 15 to 20 years could now be reimbursed for contraception provided by a gynaecologist.

27. The legislation on assisted fertilization had been amended to provide for the storage of embryos for up to two years under the national health scheme. After that time, unless the partners stated otherwise, it would be assumed that they agreed to the embryo being donated.

28. Medical abortion and elective caesarean section had both been made available. Hospitals were required to inform women who had recently given birth about the symptoms of post-partum depression and provide contact information for health-care centres that

provided treatment. A programme of human papillomavirus vaccination for boys and girls had been introduced in February 2023.

29. The most pressing problem facing the health-care system was the high rate of mortality as a result of preventable and treatable diseases. The Government was currently reforming the system with a view to ensuring its resilience, improving the quality of public and personal health services, developing long-term care services, embracing digitalization and increasing mental health-care provision. An action plan for developing primary health care at the municipal level had been drawn up based on a list of the most frequently used services, and health-care centres were encouraged to form networks in order to provide a basic service package to local residents. To improve the provision of emergency assistance, the municipal-level ambulance services were being centralized, additional parking spaces for ambulances had been created, and 10 new ambulance brigades were planned. Health shuttle services for vulnerable persons had also been introduced.

30. The COVID-19 pandemic had posed acute challenges for the health-care system, owing to capacity and resource limitations and supply shortages. Following the adoption of a new model for the organization of care, one hospital with an infectious disease unit in each region had been appointed to coordinate the provision of health-care services, including drawing up methodological guidance for health-care centres in the region, managing mobile units, developing an integrated infrastructure and planning investments. Digital solutions were also widely applied.

31. During the first national lockdown, although emergency services and child rehabilitation services had continued to be provided, planned procedures had been postponed and adult medical rehabilitation services suspended. Outpatient services had been provided online, where possible. All health-care services, including vaccination and testing, had been covered by the health insurance fund; in 2022, the fund had paid out €2 million for COVID-19 diagnosis services, €225,000 for vaccination services and more than €3 million for inpatient treatment.

32. **A representative of Lithuania** said that, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Health had provided precise and up-to-date information, press releases and press briefings and had conducted a public campaign to combat misinformation. A centralized government website had been developed to provide information and statistics on testing and vaccination. In addition, the State Data Agency had developed an operational data management model to ensure the availability of reliable, harmonized and transparent data for use in decision-making.

33. An action plan had been developed to address the significant impact of the pandemic on mental health. Funding for emotional support hotlines had been doubled. New mental health services had been established in all municipalities to provide anonymous, low-threshold psychological support. Mobile teams had been created to provide community-based crisis support. In addition, the number of psychologists in primary health-care centres had been increased by 20 per cent since 2021.

34. To address structural problems, the Government was reforming the mental health services, with support from OECD. While the suicide rate remained an issue, it had reduced significantly over the previous decade, especially among men of working age. A national suicide prevention plan had been adopted in 2020 and was currently under review. The primary goals of the reform were to reduce reliance on inpatient services in favour of community-based care and to improve services in the areas of suicide prevention, substance abuse and child and adolescent support. Day centres were subject to new quality requirements, and pre-service reimbursement for psychotherapy and psychosocial care had been increased significantly to improve accessibility. Over the coming months, funding would be allocated to support infrastructure development and create more posts for child and adolescent psychotherapists. Given the shortage of psychiatrists, €3.6 million had been allocated to the upskilling of other health professionals. In recent years, the State had funded a record number of psychiatry residency placements, all of which had been filled.

35. To reduce the use of involuntary hospitalization and physical restraints, in 2019 the Government had adopted the Law on Mental Health Care, which set out rigorous procedures that were aligned with international standards. The use of such measures was monitored at

the national level; since 2019, involuntary hospitalization had decreased by 25 per cent and the use of physical restraints by 30 per cent. In response to recommendations from civil society and international organizations, monitoring had been expanded to include cases of involuntary hospitalization that lasted less than three days. The Government also used the QualityRights framework to evaluate mental health institutions from a human rights perspective. It had trained domestic experts to conduct the evaluations and was developing a legal mechanism to extend the framework to all long-term health-care centres.

36. Treatment for HIV/AIDS was guaranteed for all and was covered by the national health insurance fund. Treatment services were decentralized and could be provided by the patient's family doctor for up to one month. The guidelines on the use of antiretroviral drugs had been updated in 2023, in line with those published by the World Health Organization and the European AIDS Clinical Society. Free testing was available for all vulnerable persons, including tuberculosis patients, prisoners and drug users. Urgent measures were applied in the event of an outbreak within a prison. The Government was developing a new HIV prevention action plan, in which it had requested the assistance of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control.

37. **Ms. Saran** (Country Rapporteur) said that she wished to know what the Government's response was to the letter dated 4 May 2022 from the Special Rapporteur on the negative impact of unilateral coercive measures on the enjoyment of human rights regarding the impact of sanctions to restrict the export of potash from Belarus on the right to food in other areas of the world, especially those that were experiencing food shortages. She wondered whether any steps had been taken to rectify the situation.

38. Given the persistent high rate of suicide, she would like to know whether any analyses had been conducted to identify which groups were at the highest risk of suicide and whether that included marginalized persons, prisoners and drug users. It would also be useful to learn what measures were in place to address the structural drivers of suicide.

39. **Mr. Windfuhr** said that he would like to know why the State Party had not yet ratified the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, and how the Convention compared with its national laws on domestic violence. Given the persistent gender gap in pension provision, he wished to know what the pension age was for women and whether the problems faced by older women in obtaining adequate housing were being exacerbated by the rising costs of housing and energy.

40. **Ms. Lee** said that, in the light of reports regarding the dire conditions faced by migrants and asylum-seekers in the State party, especially those who had been subjected to collective expulsion, she wished to know what steps had been taken to avoid the use of that practice and ensure that all migration and asylum applications were assessed on a case-by-case basis. She asked what measures were in place to ensure that all migrants and asylum-seekers living at accommodation sites had access to adequate food, clothing and health care, including psychosocial support, and to provide information on asylum procedures and legal aid in migrants' and asylum-seekers' native languages. She also enquired whether the State party had sought, or planned to seek, international cooperation in assisting migrants and asylum-seekers in its territory.

41. **Ms. Rossi** said that, in addition to the legislative changes on parental leave and the 2016 survey on the distribution of domestic tasks between men and women, it would be interesting to know what other measures had been taken to promote the equal division of care tasks. She wished to know whether State and private care services were available and whether the State planned to conduct additional surveys so that public policy could be based on up-to-date information. She also enquired whether the State provided services to support independent living for persons with disabilities, especially those living in poverty. In addition, she asked whether asylum-seekers and irregular migrants had access to health and education services while their applications were under consideration and whether drug users had access to health care.

The meeting was suspended at 4.05 p.m. and resumed at 4.15 p.m.

42. **Mr. Šilinskas** (Lithuania) said that the sanctions restricting the export of potash from Belarus had been imposed by the European Union – not by Lithuania alone – in response to

human rights violations in Belarus. Lithuania had also been severely affected by the potash shortage, in particular as many workers in the rail transportation sector had been laid off in response to the drop in income. While his Government would welcome the resumption of trade, the Government of Belarus first needed to address its human rights violations.

43. **A representative of Lithuania** said that persons experiencing schizophrenia were one of the groups most at risk of mental illness and suicide. Depression and anxiety were underdiagnosed, dementia was on the rise, and steps were being taken to improve the diagnosis of developmental disorders such as autism. The main structural problems in the current system were the historical reliance on inpatient services, the lack of specialist skills among health-care professionals, the inaccessibility and low quality of services and the stigma surrounding mental illness. The Government had launched a long-term campaign to combat stigma in cooperation with Time to Change, in addition to a mental-health ambassadors programme.

44. **A representative of Lithuania** said that persons with severe mental illness were among the most vulnerable in society, and their life expectancy was some 20 years lower than that of the general population. Many of the mental health reforms were therefore geared towards improving their situation. For example, the use of a case management model would be piloted starting the following month, and community treatment teams would begin work on 1 January 2024. Additional funding had been allocated for pay-for-performance schemes based on targets relating to the prevention of hospitalization.

45. Alcohol abuse was a major issue in Lithuania and one that the Government was seeking to address through the creation of inpatient psychosocial rehabilitation programmes in each administrative region. Any outpatient forms of rehabilitation service would be provided as close as possible to the patient's base, and the number of substance abuse counsellors would also be increased.

46. Primary mental health-care and general practitioner services were provided within prisons, while any prisoners requiring more specialist mental health care were treated by facilities nearby.

47. Migrants had full access to psychiatric care, and mobile units offering essential health-care services had been set up at registration centres. Furthermore, the Lithuanian Psychological Association had signed an agreement with the Lithuanian Red Cross for the provision of health and psychosocial support services for migrants. At one point, more than 10 psychologists specializing in intercultural communication had been available to provide therapy to migrants, who could be prescribed psychotropic drugs where needed, following a thorough assessment by a psychiatrist to prevent abuse of such drugs.

48. **A representative of Lithuania** said that, in 2022, an algorithm had been created to assist with the timely detection of the use of psychoactive substances by prisoners, thereby facilitating the provision of comprehensive medical and psychological treatment. Prisoners had been able to access opioid substitution therapy since 2021, and 165 were currently receiving methadone substitution therapy. Since 1 October of that year, all prisoners had had the option of receiving a naloxone kit upon their release, although just seven had opted to do so in 2022. Additional social workers and counsellors had been employed to identify and care for prisoners with addiction issues, while facilities to treat addiction were being developed in all prisons. For example, large rehabilitation centres had been set up in five prisons, and a further three had opened post-rehabilitation centres. A centre for long-term rehabilitation had also been established in 2022.

49. The Ministry of Health and the Republican Centre for Addictive Disorders had recently developed a model for cooperation as part of which the Centre would provide methodological guidance and specialized training and conduct external assessments of measures taken to address addiction. Moreover, in 2022, around €580,000 had been allocated to five NGOs helping to tackle addiction issues. That amount had been increased to €800,000 for 2023, and a call for proposals for projects addressing addiction would be launched later that year.

50. **Mr. Šilinskis** (Lithuania) said that women received smaller pensions than men as they had spent more time out of work due to maternity leave. To help remedy the situation,

a single-person benefit had recently been introduced; it was expected that older women would be among the main beneficiaries since they tended to outlive men.

51. **A representative of Lithuania** said that while the pension age was currently 64 years and 6 months for men and 64 years for women, it would be increased to 65 years for both sexes in 2026. In 2021, the average pension received by a man was €71 higher than that received by a woman, which represented a difference of around 15 per cent, marking a decrease of approximately 1 per cent from 2020.

52. **A representative of Lithuania** said that Lithuania had faced hybrid attacks from the Belarusian regime in response to its support for the Belarusian opposition and the sanctions imposed on the country by the European Union. For example, it had seen mass influxes of migrants arriving at the border between the two countries. In the event of a declaration of war, a state of emergency or an emergency due to a mass influx of migrants, asylum applications could be submitted at border control points, in transit zones, to the Migration Department or to diplomatic missions and consulates. Asylum-seekers attempting to submit applications elsewhere received guidance on the asylum procedure and were redirected to border control points or diplomatic missions. Applications submitted by migrants who had entered the country legally could be accepted depending on their specific circumstances and level of vulnerability, and it was also possible to apply for asylum during court proceedings.

53. Accommodation for asylum-seekers continued to be improved. Facilities in registration centres were being adapted according to residents' wishes, and separate centres had been set up for vulnerable asylum-seekers, families with children and unaccompanied children. All children residing in such centres were guaranteed an education and were being integrated into the country's school system.

54. Legal aid was guaranteed for all asylum-seekers. Information on their rights and duties had been displayed in registration centres, which also offered them opportunities to contact lawyers, representatives of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other organizations offering specialist legal assistance. Interpretation services were provided by the European Asylum Support Office. However, most migrants arriving in Lithuania did not wish to seek asylum in the country: of the more than 4,000 who had crossed the border in 2021, only 180 remained.

55. **Mr. Šilinskis** (Lithuania) said that the country's failure to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence was mostly due to a translation issue; the Lithuanian language did not distinguish between "sex" and "gender", and the translation of the references in the Convention to "gender-based violence" was therefore a highly controversial matter. There had been much misinformation surrounding the Convention, whose ratification remained under discussion in the Seimas (parliament).

56. **Mr. Emuze** (Country Task Force) said that he would appreciate an update on how many Roma children, migrant children, children with disabilities, children in rural areas and children from low-income families had been integrated into general education schools. He wished to know whether preschool education and non-formal education activities had been introduced in the municipalities where such children resided and, if so, how many children had participated in those activities. How many children with disabilities were educated in special schools as of January 2023? The delegation might specify how the Government intended to tackle the barriers faced by disadvantaged families in using childcare and education services. He would also like to know how it planned to improve the training of early childhood care and education teachers.

57. Furthermore, he would welcome information on how the State Party intended to enhance the quality of services provided to children with special educational needs in municipalities experiencing overcrowding in kindergartens and nurseries; meet the needs of children with disabilities, children from ethnic minorities or refugee children who lacked proficiency in the national language; tackle the gender inequalities affecting single mothers, whose ability to participate in the labour market was restricted by a lack of access to free childcare services; ensure equal enrolment in childcare across the country; and facilitate the successful integration of vulnerable children such as Roma children and children with disabilities.

58. He wondered how the State party was working to reduce disparities among schools, with a focus on rural areas and those where minority groups were overrepresented. How was it addressing the unequal distribution of learning support specialists, laboratory access and high-quality teachers? The delegation might indicate why children from low-income families had been segregated into underperforming schools in urban neighbourhoods and whether a strategy had been drawn up to address the needs of migrant and refugee children and Roma children, taking particular account of their cultural and linguistic diversity.

59. He would appreciate information on the implementation and outcome of the Action Plan for the Policy of Preservation and Updating of Cultural Heritage for 2020–2024 and the Action Plan for the Representation of the History of National Minorities in Lithuania for 2020–2022. It would be useful to know whether the Department of National Minorities envisaged changing the mention of “Minorities” in its name to “Communities”, in line with the Constitution. Lastly, he wondered when the State Party intended to sign the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and why several bilateral treaties concluded with neighbouring countries failed to refer to the Roma community despite containing provisions on other minority groups.

The meeting was suspended at 4.45 p.m. and resumed at 4.55 p.m.

60. **A representative of Lithuania** said that the few migrant children who had remained in the country were fully integrated into its preschools and general education schools. While data on non-formal education activities were unavailable, all migrant children had the right to participate in such activities. Over 75,000 students in the country had special educational needs; 4,800 (6.5 per cent) of them were taught in special schools.

61. Individual municipalities could opt to make preschool education compulsory for certain vulnerable children, such as children of single mothers from national minority groups, children with disabilities from low-income backgrounds and migrant children. Under that initiative, all costs incurred for extra educational support, transport for students and meals would be covered by the State.

62. To enhance the inclusivity of education, the Government had created a free course, worth 10 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System credits, to be delivered by universities for teachers who wished to gain a further qualification in inclusive education. The first cohort of teachers would be admitted in April 2023. The process of selecting educational establishments to act as regional special education centres would be completed by the end of February 2023 and the establishments selected would begin operating as such in September of that year. They would provide specialist support for teachers working with a child with disabilities, which would be tailored to the specific needs of the child concerned. Moreover, a national inclusive education centre had begun operating in 2023, with the aim of offering expertise and support in all areas relating to disability, with a particular focus on learning disabilities.

63. Over the previous four years, the Government had more than doubled its spending on educational support from €61 million in 2019 to €136 million in 2023, enabling it to recruit more specialists such as, inter alia, psychologists, special education teachers and speech therapists. The number of teaching assistants for students with disabilities had also been doubled, increasing from 1,600 in 2017 to 3,500 in 2022. Nonetheless, further improvements in the provision of specialists and educational support services for schools were required.

64. The Government provided additional Lithuanian language lessons to students who lacked proficiency in the language, including children from national minorities, migrant children and Lithuanian children who had returned to the country from abroad. Classes began at the preschool level and were key for enabling those children to fully participate in education.

65. In order to help reduce the urban-rural disparities that persisted in preschool provision, more than €27 million was to be allocated, in the period leading up to 2028, to the creation of additional preschool places where shortages existed.

66. The “quality basket” initiative, which had been launched in 2019 to level up educational achievements in urban and rural districts, had seen more than €30 million of targeted funding allocated and the participation of nearly one third of all public schools. The

Millennium Schools Programme, which had been allocated €210 million of funding and was open to all schools with at least 200 pupils, would now build on the success of that project. Focusing on leadership, inclusivity, cultural education and science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics (STEAM) subjects, it would strengthen existing schools and develop the skills of their managers and teachers. The infrastructure, laboratories, learning tools and non-formal education activities enjoyed by participating establishments would also be accessible to pupils and teachers from other schools.

67. Analysis indicated that smaller schools and class sizes could have a detrimental effect on educational achievements. In order to mitigate that, the school system was undergoing reforms to improve learning conditions and subject options, especially at the upper secondary education level. Schools were also being given additional funding to provide further academic support to pupils who had failed the national examinations.

68. Another core issue that needed to be addressed in order to combat educational inequalities was the lack of provision of early education, particularly at preschool level. The Law on Education had been amended to provide universal preschool education from the age of four years as from 2023, and from two years in 2025.

69. The suggestion that children from low-income families tended to attend lower-quality schools was surprising because the budgets of most schools were determined based on their pupil numbers to ensure that schools were adequately staffed and equipped.

70. Lithuania was proud to support its national minority schools. The Belarusian school was the only one of its kind outside Belarus. The fact that national minority schools made up 10.5 per cent of all public schools but accounted for only 8.9 per cent of pupils indicated that they provided learning conditions more favourable than the country's Lithuanian-language schools. National minority schools also received between 20 and 25 per cent more government funding than the latter.

71. **A representative of Lithuania** said that nearly all Roma children attended mainstream schools rather than special schools. Efforts to improve the integration of Roma children into the education system could be seen at the Roma Community Centre in Vilnius, which provided preschool education for Roma children. Teaching assistants were also provided in some municipalities, and a pilot project was under way at one school, providing additional teaching support to Roma pupils in Lithuanian language and mathematics lessons. Non-formal education was also being leveraged to help integrate Roma children into the education system, and the Department of National Minorities allocated funding to several day-care centres working with Roma children and adolescents.

72. The Action Plan for the Representation of the History of National Minorities in Lithuania had been extended into 2023. Each year, its budget helped support approximately 100 projects run by different non-governmental organizations.

73. The sum of approximately €500,000 was allocated to national minority cultural centres each year, and cultural cooperation efforts had been reinforced in south-east Lithuania, where the largest national minority populations lived. Financial support was also allocated to media projects featuring national minorities. Events such as seminars, round-table discussions and exhibitions on the historical heritage and culture of national minorities attracted funding amounting to €1 million. The seven-year budget for projects carried out under the Culture and Creativity Development Programme was €4.5 million.

74. There were no plans to change the name of the Department of National Minorities to reflect the wording "national community" used in the Constitution. The Department of National Minorities already included a division called the Relations with National Communities Department.

75. The Government promoted the linguistic rights of national minorities at the highest level, in line with its existing international obligations. Ratification of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages had not been requested by national minority bodies and was not a subject of discussion in the Government.

76. Cooperation between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania on issues relating to the Roma community was in fact very strong. Together, the three countries organized training for Roma

women, young persons and mediators. Lithuania was also an active participant on the Council of Europe Committee of Experts on Roma and Traveller Issues and had a European Commission national Roma contact point.

77. **A representative of Lithuania** said that legislation on the spelling of names and surnames had entered into force on 1 May 2022. It allowed Lithuanian citizens, including children, who were of non-Lithuanian origin to write their names and surnames in their original form, including with the Latin alphabet. To date, more than 500 permits to change names and surnames had been issued, including 187 to Lithuanian citizens of non-Lithuanian origin.

78. **Ms. Saran** said that she would like to know whether, since the previous year, any changes had been made that might restrict the rights of national minorities to be educated in their mother tongue. It was unclear whether educating national minorities in their mother tongue meant only that the national minority language itself was taught or also that other subjects were taught through the medium of that language.

79. Information would be welcomed as to whether people faced any restrictions to Internet access.

80. Lastly, the Committee would like to receive information about reports that the Russian Cultural Centre in Vilnius had been either closed down or demolished.

81. **A representative of Lithuania** said that changes to regulations and restrictions in recent years had applied to all schools, including those dedicated to national minorities. In practice, however, exemptions had been applied to national minority schools in order to allow pupils to continue to study in the national minority languages.

82. School language policies varied depending on the school and the community served. National minority schools usually delivered all lessons in the national minority language, apart from Lithuanian language lessons and classes on civic education and the history and geography of Lithuania. Meanwhile, national minority pupils attending schools that taught in the Lithuanian language had the opportunity to learn their national minority language.

83. Internet access was provided to all pupils whenever required for distance-learning purposes.

84. **Mr. Šilinskas** (Lithuania) said that legal proceedings that had been ongoing since 2015 had recently culminated with an order to demolish the Moscow House cultural centre in Vilnius owing to a failure to comply with construction laws. The building had never opened.

85. The delegation appreciated the constructive dialogue with the Committee and wished to stress that the Government was striving to accommodate not only the short-term challenges it faced but also to implement long-term reforms.

86. **The Chair**, thanking the delegation for its attendance and contributions, said that he wished to highlight that, while the notion of progressive fulfilment applied to some of the areas monitored by the Committee, such as the right to work or the right to social security, that the elimination of discrimination was an immediate obligation to which that notion did not apply.

The meeting rose at 5.40 p.m.