

Reshaping population policies during the depopulation: case of Latvia

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Abstract

Background: Latvia, like many transition countries, faced depopulation both due to natural decrease and negative net migration since beginning of transition to market economy in 1991. Latvia among the 28 EU countries has the largest decline of population since the beginning of 1990s – ¼ of initial number. Depopulation took place in all regions of the country and in all republican cities, it affected both native and foreign-born population, all major ethnic groups. Maximal decrease of population (over 40 thous. per year) was registered in the years of massive economic recession (1992-1994 and 2009-2010). Decline of fertility affected steep reduction of number of children, but emigration influenced decrease of working age population. Only number of population in age 65 and over has increased, which led to growing pressure on retirement and health care systems. A need for serious revision of previous attitude towards demographics issues and further developments appeared on political and societal arena.

Objective of the study is to analyze parliamentary, governmental and NGO's responses to fast decline in total number of population in Latvia and its demographic and societal sub-groups particularly focusing on population policies implications.

Data and methods: Current statistics, population register and socio-demographic survey data are analysed on national and regional level, and by subgroups of population (e.g. by country of birth, ethnicity, citizenship, education etc.). Content and linguistic analysis of the parliamentary (Saeima) debate corps and several strategy and policy documents touching depopulation and population policy issues is performed over the pre- and post accession years to the European Union, with particular emphasis to recent economic crisis.

Results: During the 1990s population policy mostly was focused on overcoming consequences of fast economic downturn, reduction of inequality, strengthening social protection and creation of new retirement schemes. No intervention to affect the population growth was declared (Table 1).

Table 1. Assessment of demographic situation and population policy directions in Latvia, 1996 and 2013.

	1996	2013
Population growth	Too low	Too low
Policy	No intervention	Raise
Fertility	Too low	Too low
Policy	Raise	Raise
Life expectancy	Unacceptable	Unacceptable
Immigration	Too high	Satisfactory
Policy	Lower	Maintain
Emigration	Too low	Too high
Policy	Raise	No intervention
Encouraging the return of citizens	Yes	Yes

Source: World population policies 2013. UN, 2013.

<http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/wpp2013/>

At the beginning of 21st century the main socio-political goal was to join the European Union, which realized on the 1st May of 2004. Economic growth during successive years allowed to invest resources to activate population policy. That was stopped by recession during 2008-2010. Second decennial was characterised by purposeful activities aiming to overcome crisis and to draw scenarios for further socio-economic growth.

In April 2011 Cabinet of Ministers decided to establish Council for Demographic matters, since that time having regular meetings under a supervision of prime-minister. Later, since November 2014 Parliamentary (Saeima) Subcommittee of the Budget and Finance (Taxation) Committee started to fulfil specific tasks to activate population policy. National Development Plan of Latvia for 2014–2020, approved by a decision of the Saeima on 20 December 2012 draw scenarios to minor improvements of demographic situation. National Development Plan is in line with several other national policy documents – Public Health policy, State Family policy, Active Aging Policy. Many NGOs (Latvian Civic Alliance, Nakotnes Fonds and others) are involved in population policies debate.

Contribution: This study adds to previous rather fragmented literature on population policies issues in country severely affected by depopulation and recent economic crisis a new integrated insight in reaction to demographic crisis made by different policy makers and actors.

Conclusions: Findings suggests that in spite of many population policy documents and action plans, supported by almost all political parties and governments, consequent and efficient population policy actions to terminate natural and migratory decrease has not succeeded yet. Envisaged future scenarios of expected demographic developments are not optimistic. More efficient socio-economic measures oriented towards return migration, integration of asylum seekers and other immigrant groups together with greater support for families and couples with children could improve a demographic situation and to terminate depopulation.

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