

Prospects of prevention depopulation in Latvia

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Background. Different aspects of depopulation are discussed both on international and national level (Coleman and Rowthorn; Frejka and Gietel-Basten, Dahs, Krumins, Krisjane, Zvidrins). Since the restoration of independence in 1990, substantial socio-economic changes have occurred in Latvia accompanied by rapid decline in number of population (Table 1). Migration inflows, characteristic to the Soviet period, have turned into outflows. Fertility decline and growing life expectancy have been among determinants to increase mean age of population, which has turned natural increase of population into negative values.

Table 1. Population change in Latvia by five years periods and by demographic factors, 1991-2020

	In thousand			In percent		
	Net migration	Natural increase	TOTAL depopulation	Net migration	Natural increase	TOTAL depopulation
1991-1995	-137.4	-51.2	-188.6	-5.2	-1.9	-7.1
1996-2000	-45.8	-70.4	-116.1	-1.9	-2.9	-4.7
2001-2005	-66.2	-59.3	-125.5	-2.8	-2.5	-5.3
2006-2010	-109.2	-44.0	-153.3	-4.9	-2.0	-6.9
2011-2015	-65.5	-40.2	-105.6	-3.2	-1.9	-5.1
2016-2020	-31.5	-44.3	-75.7	-1.6	-2.2	-3.8
Total 1991-2020	-455.6	-309.4	-764.9	-17.1	-11.6	-28.8

Source: CSB database, table IRS030. Authors' calculations.

Almost 30 per cent of Latvia's population has been lost since 1990. According to the population loss Latvia has been among the leading countries in the world.

Objective of the study is to analyse changes in depopulation since the beginning of 1990s, its further development, reflections of depopulation on population policy measures (covering family and fertility, health and mortality, international migration) and on the opinion of population.

Data and methods. Register based Population census 2021 data, the analysis of relationship between GDP, unemployment tends and main demographic changes. Content analysis of the parliamentary debate corpus and policy documents dealing with demographic issues. Comparative analysis of population projection scenarios, and «Migration and Population Policy Survey» data of 2016 (n=2049, stratified random sampling) and of 2021.

Results

Fertility, family, reproduction. Demographic transition with further fertility decline on the territory of Latvia started in the second half of 19th century. Between WW1 and WW2 fertility was already on generations' under replacement level. Fertility was low during the Soviet period as well. Due to pronatalist measures drafted in the 1980s, for some years fertility rose to the level necessary for simple replacement of generations. Fertility continued to decline during socio-political changes of 1990s and transition to market economy. The number of births fell from 38 thousand in 1990 to 18 thousand in 1998, when the total fertility rate reached a record low level of 1.1, followed by slight improvement.

At the UN General Assembly meeting in 1999 all governments and parliaments were called to pay greater attention to assess demographic situation and promote measures to overcome an imbalance between socio-economic objectives and demographic characteristics in respective countries. In 1992, the Supreme Council of Latvia created a Subcommittee on Demographic Affairs, and in 1994 Demographic Committee of the Cabinet of Ministers. After the economic crisis in 2011 - the Council of Demographic Affairs (CDA - consultative and coordinating state institution under the leadership of the Prime Minister) was established. In 2012, the Latvian Academy of Sciences issued an extraordinary statement on unfavourable demographic situation and on insufficient public debate about worsening of demographic situation. Nevertheless, the CDA factually ceased to operate during 2018-2019. A demographic recovery program, which was envisaged in the 2014-2016 Cabinet of Ministers' declaration, has not been implemented. However a strategy document "The State Fertility Policy Guidelines for 2011-2017" was approved in 2011 and certain measures, specifically in the field of family support, were implemented.

In 2004 the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs was established and the government adopted an action plan "State Family Policy", which aimed to facilitate family formation, strengthening their stability and to increase fertility. A focus on family policies has been pronounced within the framework of the budgetary planning since 2014-2017. Latvia has a universal family benefits system, including a maternity leave, child care and parental benefit. Since 2019 a new type of allowance has been implemented - allowance for child adoption. However, Latvia still lacks comprehensive benefits that match the expectations of its citizens. Some measures have been designed as an aid to purchase the first dwelling for households by 2050.

By order of the Cabinet of Ministers of 27 August 2019, an expert group was established for working out of measures on family matters. The medium-term planning document National Development Plan of Latvia (2021-2027) approved in 2020 by decision of the Saeima (Parliament) expressed vision that the demographic situation will improve as a result of more active policy that supports childbearing and child welfare. Increasing birth rate is seen as a precondition for the existence of the Latvian nation.

Mortality and life expectancy. At the beginning of 1990s mortality substantially increased, resulting in very low life expectancy for both sexes 66.4 years (1994). At that time mortality due to external causes of death in Latvia was 3-4 times higher compared to developed countries of Europe. In succeeding years life expectancy systematically increased and on the eve of the 21st century approached the level which had been reached 40 years earlier (71 years). However, further progress was slow. Acceleration started 3-4 years after Latvia joined EU in 2004, by reaching consequently 76 years in 2019. The socio-economic growth is the principal reason for such an increase. Many deaths have been avoided through improvements in the public health system and in healthy life style. Declining mortality rate acts as moderating factor of population decline.

Latvia has national health service system with universal coverage of population and tax-financed health provision. However, only 57% of all health spending is publicly funded (22 per cent points less than in the EU average). Several years ago, the government drafted the law to introduce new compulsory health insurance system, however, in 2019 the reform was cancelled. With insufficient proportion of public spending the national health care system remains underfunded. Despite steadily declining mortality, life expectancy remains one of the lowest in the EU. Gender gap in life expectancy is still almost 10 years and significantly exceeds the EU average. Covid-19 may have altered the patterns of all demographic processes and led to an excess number of deaths. By the mid-June 2021, the epidemic had infected about 140 thousand or 8% people and had claimed almost 2500 lives.

International migration. At the end of the Soviet period, on 14 February 1989 the government in office together with the labour unions adopted the decision “On measures to correct the unreasonable population growth mechanism and on regulation of migration in the Latvian SSR.” From the early 1990s, Latvia has pursued active diplomatic efforts to have Russian troops leave Latvia. The process was completed on 31 August 1994, Soviet army, large number of family members of officers and security personell left country. During 1991-1995 a negative net migration formed -137.4 thousand, which was the highest negative balance over three last decennials. According to the CSB estimates at least 660 thousand residents emigrated during the last three decades, mostly due to the high level of unemployment, especially due to its growth during the economic crisis of 2008-2010 (Figure 1).

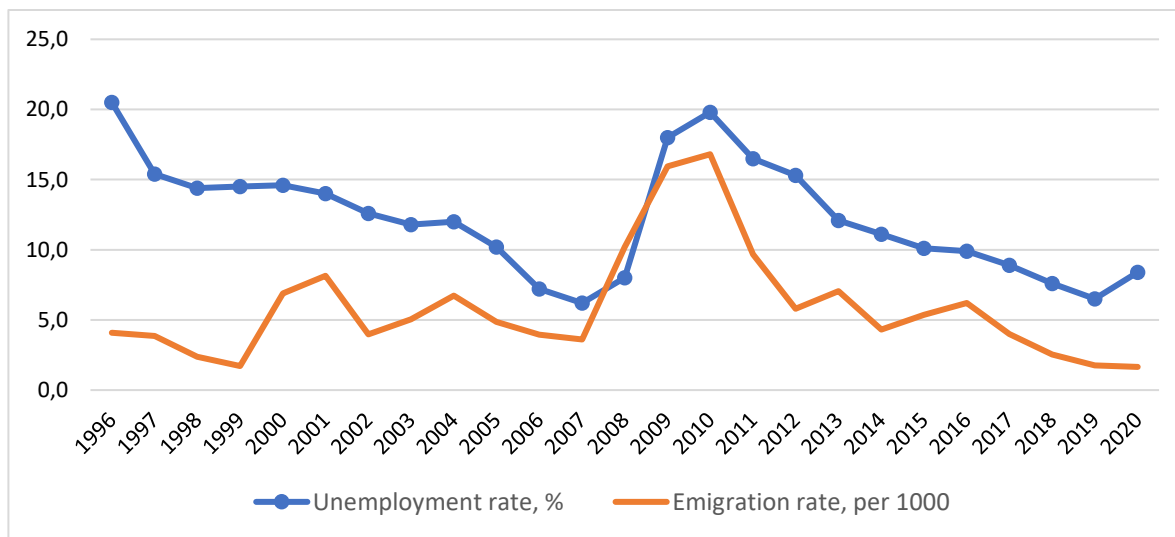


Figure 1. Unemployment rate (in %, age group 15-64) and emigration rate (per 1000 inhabitants) in Latvia 1996-2020 Source: CSB database, tables IRS030 and NBA0302. Authors' calculations.

Thus, emigration has been the dominant driving force for depopulation, which in 2013 stimulated the government to adopt the Return migration support measures plan for 2013-2016. Due to consecutive growth of GDP, declining unemployment and activities to stimulate return migration an impact of negative net migration in the depopulation diminished. Nevertheless, the survey confirmed that not all the population groups are in favour of growing number of population as a factor of growth of national economy (Figure 2).

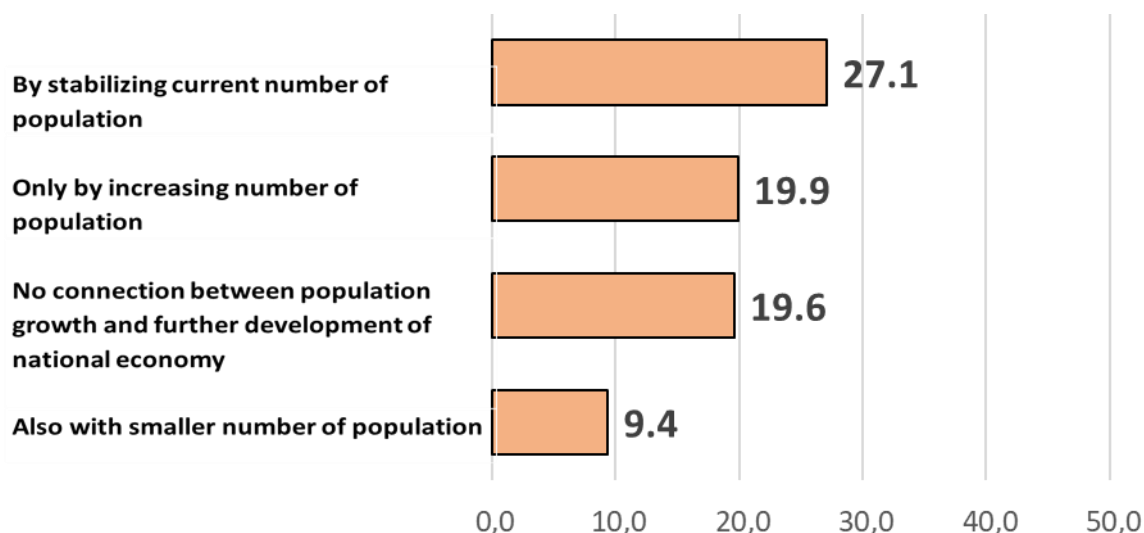


Figure 2. Respondents' perception concerning relationship between the population growth and further development of the national economy in Latvia (n=2049; one answer is provided by each respondent. All answers 100%, Difficult to answer and no answer 24.0%). Authors' calculations

The comparative analysis of different population projections, including the Eurostat population projections (Figure 3) proofs that in a foreseen future unfavourable depopulation trends will continue.

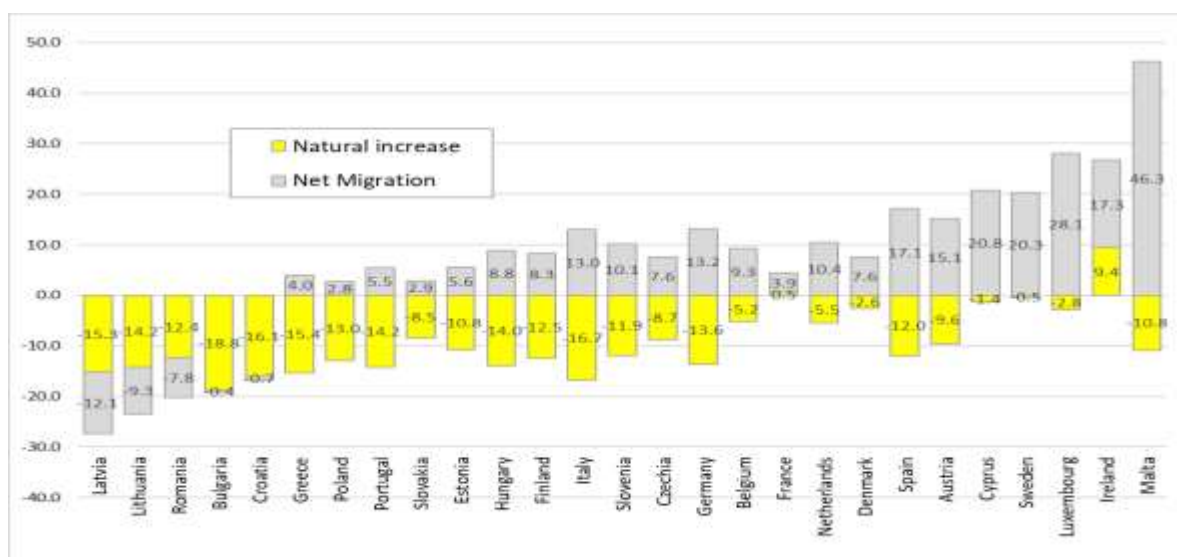


Figure 3. Projected population change in 2019-2050 by demographic factors, EU-27 (as % of the number at the beginning of 2019). Source: Eurostat – EUROPOP2019 population projections (PROJ_19NP). Authors' calculations.

The negative natural increase component exceeding negative net migration could be maintained during the next decennials. Content analysis of the national policy planning documents and relevant legal acts in the area of population and regional policy support conclusion that on the legislative level delayed response to emerging demographic issues is observed (Dahs, 2017). More effective population policy has to be implemented targeted in priority for sustainable development of the state. Latvian National Development Plan for 2021-2027 identifies reduction of emigration and overcoming unacceptable demographic problems as activity area of national interests.

Conclusions

Despite the policy documents and action plans consequent and efficient population policy actions to prevent further depopulation have not succeeded yet. The reaction of parliament and the government has not been adequate in the face of pronounced rate of depopulation. Almost ½ of survey respondents believe that growth of national economy might be ensured by increasing and stable number of population. According to a medium term population projections, depopulation in Latvia can't be prevented. Radical change could be expected by joint efforts of politicians, scholars and positively oriented young, economically active and innovative generations.

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