

The Future of Latvian Community

The future of our nation and our best hope for creating a worthier future for our society rests with our children. They are the well spring of our aspiration for a better future for Latvia.

Given present trends, the demographic future of Latvia is not bright. In the longer term, its ramifications will be felt through all aspects of society, from economic development to social harmony and national security. If the present trend is not reversed, we may at some point in the not-too-distant future hit the tipping point of irreversibility.

Let's examine some facts and trends:

First, Latvia's population growth is negative, as death rates exceeded birth rates by an estimated negative 4.8 per 1,000 population in 2011. That is 9.1 births per 1,000 population vs. 13.9 deaths per 1,000 population. Total fertility rate was 1.34 children born per woman. The infant mortality rate was 6.6 deaths per 1,000 live births.

Second, emigration from Latvia, due to preferable and higher-paying job opportunities elsewhere and other social, economic and geographic factors, is a ruinous drain on society. Specifically, 2.34 migrants per 1,000 population are leaving Latvia and many more would do so given the opportunity.

According to the French press agency AFP, "a 2011 survey revealed the Latvian population shrank from 2.2 million in 2000 to just 2.0 million as of last year – plunging 13.0 percent in little more than a decade. Worse still, if nothing is done to tackle the exodus, the population could drop to 1.6 million by 2030, according to a recent economy ministry study."

Some of the people who have left Latvia are the best-trained minds, highly educated and skilled workers. Their departure not only contributes to the country's population decrease; it also puts a real dampener on economic growth. The countries to the north and west of Latvia will continue to be strong magnets for emigration out of the Baltic republics, given their much higher income levels, their need for a highly educated and skilled workforce, their better health and educational facilities, their more generous welfare provision and the brighter future they can offer their citizens amidst their own declining populations.

The competition amongst developed countries for attracting educated and skilled workers from other nations is growing, and present emigration statistics show that Latvia and other Baltic states are losing some of their best and brightest. If these demographic trends continue, which they will if remedial action is not taken right away, then the economic future of Latvia will not be favorable.

What can be done? These are some steps that can contribute to stabilizing or expanding Latvia's demographics:

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First and foremost we need to take better care of our children. At the end of 2012, there were 8,095 children in Latvia who were not living with their biological parents, for many different reasons including death, abandonment, alcoholism and parental abuse. Of the 8,095 children without biological parental care, 5,050 live with guardians, 1,155 live with foster families and 1,890 live in orphanages. Many philanthropic and caring people have donated their time and money to create charitable foundations in education and health to help those children less fortunate than their own. They have given these children a chance to create a better life for themselves and their families, in a caring and nurturing environment, and hopefully to become happy and productive citizens, contributing to their community.

Ilze Golvere, herself an orphan and a guardian, is the founder and managing director of Latvian Foster Family Society (LFFS). When asked about the feelings of guardians taking long-term care of children without biological parental care, she said: "There are different paths of life and different opinions about guardians and children taken into foster care and their relationships. Often this decision is guided by emotions when someone cannot stay indifferent towards the child's suffering, pain and helplessness, when there is a wish to help and say some consoling words. ... Even if emotions play the most part, we should always remember that these people have extended their helping hand to children who are longing for love, understanding and a positive attitude. The child has regained a home, family and relatives who could be called one's own people. Undertaking the care for children, one should always be ready to face many difficulties – the child's sense of insecurity, lack of confidence, controlling of how the guardians' emotions match their deeds, and the necessity of creating a family environment and new relationships. We cannot expect from the child an enthusiastic welcome of our good will; instead we have to be patient and very careful in building relationships. This is a long-term, gradual work – to open up children's hearts, healing with our attitude the wounds caused by their harsh lives. Years are needed for this."

One of the most important steps to take for these children is to move towards de-institutionalizing their care. That means increasing the role of guardians and foster families, through better economic incentives, and decreasing the role of orphanages. It is bewildering, when we look at the allocated financing, that orphanages are a higher priority than guardians and foster families. Currently, Latvian municipalities and the government, the largest contributors to the welfare of children, pay anywhere from 300 to 800 Lats per month per child in an orphanage. By contrast, 38 Lats per month is paid to a person for fulfilling duties of a guardian, the legal caregiver of a child without parental care (62 percent of all children who are left without parental care in Latvia are living with a guardian) and then only 32 Lats per child per month for maintenance. In 2007 the Ministry of Welfare estimated that the correct amount to be paid to a guardian should be 170 Lats per child per month. In 2008, the Ministry drafted a conception policy document according to which it was planned to increase the

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amount of benefit paid to guardians for the maintenance of a child. But due to the economic conditions of the time, the Cabinet of Ministers did not approve this policy document.

There is a huge imbalance here that needs to be addressed so that as many children as possible are raised in caring and nurturing foster families instead of institutionalized care homes. The question to help address this imbalance is quite simple: would you want to have your child taken care of at low cost within a nurturing family or at a much higher cost in an orphanage? Of course, the need for orphanages will always be there, as unfortunately there will always be unwanted children with severe functional disorders, for whom the best care arrangement can be ensured only in an institutional environment.

Second, we need to create better financial incentives for families to have more children. Incentives, such as cash payments per child through the early years, free medical care and better mortgage terms for newlyweds or expecting parents, can be constructive. These incentives can be extended to help prevent Latvians from leaving their homeland and might encourage Latvians who have emigrated to come back to their country.

Third, we must create a better standard of basic healthcare for newborn babies and infants (there were 6.6 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2011). More beneficial educational facilities that enhance rather than detract from the creativity of students can greatly contribute to healthier, more innovative and productive citizens.

Fourth, we need wise immigration policies that take into account the Latvian cultural disposition and workforce needs, in order to have a more integrated and harmonious society.

Fifth, we should create societal recognition by giving annual awards to accomplished humanitarians, philanthropists, and caregivers, including guardians and foster families, who best exemplify the spirit of giving and caring.

The issue of demographics has been recognized for some years by experts and government officials. Yet the problem persists. One way forward would be to form an effective partnership between the leaders of government and all NGOs and concerned philanthropists to seek a workable solution for this very critical issue confronting present and future Latvians.

Study after study has shown how healthcare and education during children's early years are very important to their well-being and development as healthy, productive and well-educated citizens. These include one published in 2012 by the OECD which states: "Family and community engagement in early childhood education and care can greatly contribute to ensuring continuous early development experiences for young children. Additionally, it can enhance children's early development and mitigate the negative effects of family background."

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*These ideas were highlighted and described in great detail in a recent book by Paul Tough, *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity and the Hidden Power of Character*. In its review of this book in January 2013, *The Economist* states:*

“The part of the brain most affected by early stress is the prefrontal cortex, which is critical for regulating thoughts and mediating behavior. When this region is damaged – a common condition for children living amid the pressure of poverty – it is tougher to suppress unproductive instincts. Studies show that early nurturing from parents or caregivers helps combat the biochemical effects of stress.”

Unfortunately, according to a report from the EU statistical bureau Eurostat, 43.6 percent of children in Latvia are at risk of poverty and social exclusion. Very sobering!

In order to realize its full potential, Latvia needs to fully focus on its demographic issues. It needs to enact more effective laws and regulations and create further financial incentives, in order to stabilize and then increase its population. Latvia’s hope for a sustainably prosperous future is totally dependent on its people, particularly its children. In less populated communities, the health, education and well-being of every individual means more to the development of that community than its equivalent in more populated places. Therefore, a program to help Latvia’s people, and especially its children, become healthy, educated, innovative and productive citizens is now of paramount importance.

Creating a vision and values that the people can unite behind and bond through, to escape the yoke of creeping cynicism in youth, is invaluable – creeping cynicism brought about by an education system that emphasizes rote learning, stifling creativity; the ever-present perception of corruption, which seems to be lessening; and a lack of transparency exacerbating the lack of participation in the civil affairs of society, which may ultimately lead to emigration. Greater empathy for the disadvantaged, tolerance for differences, understanding and integrating diversity, a better balance between the spiritual and material wealth of all citizens, particularly the more fortunate ones and greater transparency in all governmental, civil and corporate affairs are noble and very doable pursuits.

If you, the reader, care for the future of Latvia, a country that has great potential but currently lacks sufficient resources for all its programs, please contribute by contacting your representatives. Urge them to enact more favorable laws and regulations for present and future guardians, foster families and caregivers of disadvantaged children, so they may grow up in healthier environments. The issues are complex and ought to be balanced between various needs and what is financially possible. We need to further refine and enact laws and regulations to balance the needs of biological parents, who may want their children back, versus guardians, who have taken loving care of their adopted children and don’t want to part with them; to properly select responsible guardians from the available volunteers without too many

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constrictions; and to develop the necessary infrastructure, including family court judges and social workers, for better conflict resolutions and implementation of these laws and regulations.

We, the undersigned, beseech all caring Latvians to please contribute at the earliest opportunity financially, in kind, or through volunteer work to any of the NGOs that help Latvia's disadvantaged children, such as Ronald McDonald House Charities, Latvian Foster Family Society, Latvian Children's Fund, and many others. This way you will be contributing to a worthier future for Latvia.

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Latvian Children's Fund, Vaira Vucane, Vice President
European Scout Foundation, Dr. Juris Ulmanis, Vice-Chairman
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