

CHANGES OF ETHNIC COMPOSITION IN THE BALTIC STATES

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The purpose of this paper is to present changes in the ethnic structure in three Baltic States and to analyze the population change of the titular ethnicities and largest ethnic minorities. Although each of the Baltic State (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) has had a different history, they have experienced a broadly similar fate from the 18th century when they were absorbed into the Russian empire. These countries were able to remain politically independent only for two decades in the 1920s and 1930s and in the period after the regained political independence since beginning of the 1990s.

The Baltic States have historically formed traditions in the fields of counting of population and in analysis of ethnodemographic development (especially in Estonia and Latvia). As a result, we have the information about the ethnic structure in these countries for a longer period. The publication of the 2000 round censuses (in Estonia and Latvia in 2000 and Lithuania in 2001) makes it possible to analyze the dynamics of ethnic structure and patterns of minority population growth since independence and for the 20th century as a whole.

Being on the crossroads of long established trade routes, the Baltic areas always were strongly influenced by immigration waves and their population was ethnically mixed. During the 50 years of Soviet occupation the proportion of population of titular ethnicities (Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians) fell drastically whilst Russian, Ukrainian, Belarussian and other ethnic groups (minorities) from the other Soviet republics increased substantially, particularly in Latvia and Estonia which became the ones of the most ethnically diversified countries in Europe. A process of Russification was ensued under Soviet rules.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the regaining of political independence in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania cardinally changed social and economic conditions, the directions and intensity of migration and natural movement of population. The Baltic States from countries of immigration became countries of emigration. During the Soviet period three Baltic republics were ahead other European countries concerning high

relative net migration. The main migration inflows which were characteristic to the Soviet period turned into main outflows. The level of emigration and repatriation reached peak in 1992, when the former Soviet military forces and their family members left the Baltic region.

Another distinct feature of the demographic development of the Baltic countries in the 1980s was fertility increase. The mortality stagnation had reached an alarming stage, and natural growth was low, especially for the titular ethnicities. The Slavic peoples with fertility rates below replacement level gained a solid natural increase because of a younger age structure (as a result of the influx of predominately younger immigrants).

Around the turn of the millennium, contrary to the Soviet period natural movement balance is distinctly negative. The excess of deaths over births has been since 1991, and the greatest natural population losses are among minorities which are ageing faster than ethnic Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians.

As a result of ethnically selective migration movements and cardinal changes in nature of population reproduction in the last 17 years, the proportion of minorities population in all three states has decreased while proportion of titular ethnicities has increased.

A characteristic feature of the ethnodemographic development after regained independence is the decrease of the population (depopulation) both the titular ethnicities and minorities. The total number of population in the Baltics decreased from 7933 thousand in 1990 to 7011 in 2007, or by 11%. According to the last censuses, the population of three majority ethnoses has decreased from 5324 thousand to 5253, or by 3% but the population of different minorities has decreased more substantially (by almost 30%). At the beginning of 2007, in the Baltics lived 5,1 million ethnic Lithuanians (2,864 thousand), Latvians (1,347 thousand) and Estonians (about 900 thousand). The share of population for minorities which formed 33% of total population in the Baltics in 1989 has decreased to 27% in 2007 with a clear tendency to further drop. However, it is still high in comparison with many other countries, particularly in Latvia (about 40%). Minorities are weakly integrated in the societies therefore much attention in each republic is devoted to build up a common political identity for people living in these countries.

The largest ethnic minority by size in every Baltic State is Russians. Their total number within intercensuses period (1989 -2000) decreased by one third (almost by 600,000). However, their numerical strength is still impressive. The number of Russians (1,163 thousand in 2007) is only slightly less than the number of Latvians and exceeds almost 1.4 times the number of Estonians living in the Baltics. More than a half of the Russians residing in the region live in Latvia (about 650,000), 350,000 in Estonia and slightly less than 200,000 in Lithuania. In many cities, including the largest city of the Baltic sea region Riga and rural settlements there is a dominance of the Russian environment and language. This language is often used also by non Russians. At present, the former so-called „Russiantowns” and „Russian zones” are the most problematic from the point of view of integration.

The second largest minority by size is Poles. They number about 270,000 and have a weak tendency to decrease. The great majority (more than 80%) of them reside in Lithuania, about 55,000 in Latvia and only about 2,000 in Estonia.

The Belarussians are the third largest ethnic minority. In Latvia the Belarussian is even the second largest minority, and in Eastern Latvia (Latgale) they have their local national roots. The majority of them are Russian speakers. They have a negative net migration and natural decrease. Besides the Belarussian community has decreased due to assimilative processes.

The Ukrainians are the fourth largest minority and the seventh ethnic group by size in the Baltics. Half of them are residents of Latvia. In demographic terms, Ukrainians are a younger ethnic group and have slightly integrated in the Baltics. Approximately half of them speak only Russian and, similar to the Belarussians, about 90% families are ethnically mixed. The age structure of Ukrainians is relatively young, therefore their depopulation began a little later and it is not as profound when compared to other minorities. They are relatively well educated. Ukrainians living in the Baltic States were denied Ukrainian citizenship by their officials, and therefore their repatriation to the Ukraine was more marked than of other Slavic ethnicities to their home countries. For that reason the number of Ukrainians who have obtained citizenship in the Baltics, is very low.

The number of Jews in comparison with the abovementioned minorities is small and it has decreased substantially during the last decade. Since independence their number in the Baltics has more than halved. More than half of them reside in Latvia, mainly in Riga. Their fertility rate is very low and an old age structure can be observed; emigration was also extremely high. Among them the percentage of citizens is rather high.

Two other ethnic groups live in the Baltics whose numerical amount slightly exceeds 10,000 persons. These are Finns and Gypsies (Romanies). The number of Gypsies is slowly increasing while the number of Finns, who mainly live in Estonia (11,200 in 2006), is systematically declining.

Each Baltic State has a relatively small number of titular ethnicities of the neighbouring Baltic States. Lithuanians in Latvia make up the greatest number but Estonians in Lithuania account for the least number. Totally according to estimates there are about 40,000 representatives of such minorities from the neighbouring countries which account for only 0.6% from the total population in the Baltics. More demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of titular ethnicities and main minorities as well as results of projections of their development will be presented in the paper. The baseline demographic scenario indicates population decline for almost all ethnicities in each of the three Baltic States.