

SCOPE OF POPULATION POLICY IN LATVIA: 1990–2024

DEMOGRĀFISKĀS POLITIKAS TVĒRUMS LATVIJĀ 1990. – 2024.g

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Abstract

Since the restoration of the independence of Latvia (and even before that) the demographic situation and the elaboration of demographic policy, despite varying intensity and different focuses on problems, have always been on the political agenda.

So far, the focus has been set on promoting the birth rate and improving family wellbeing, with the belief that this support will improve Latvia's demographic situation. Recently, a common understanding has been reached between the state institutions and researchers on viewing demographic policy as a cross-sectoral policy implemented in multiple policy areas, for example, in education, employment, health, the environment, etc.

It is necessary to strengthen both demography as an interdisciplinary science and scientifically based development of policies; therefore the author has set the goal of studying the topicality and importance of demographic issues between 1990 and 2024 in order to identify changes in approaches to demographic policy. The task has been set to analyse government declarations since 1990, as well as supplementary documents related to their implementation, in addition to materials available from the Council of Demographic Affairs. To reach the goal and fulfil the tasks set for this study, the author has analysed various historical documents and theoretical findings from recent decades. The author concludes that policymakers should first identify the most important demographic indicators (for example, predictable mortality reduction, fertility improvement, healthy life expectancy etc.) that would be impacted by purposeful policies. Then demographic projections should be conducted to enhance demographic processes using scientifically based predictions. Equally important is the smart management of population renewal and a shared understanding that the implementation of cross-sectoral demographic policy has long-term significance.

Keywords: *demographic policy, population renewal, concept of family, interdisciplinarity of demography*

Introduction

Since the restoration of independence of Latvia (and even before that) the demographic situation and the elaboration of demographic policy, despite varying intensity and different focuses on problems, have always been on the political agenda.

Demography as a science explores population change (natural – fertility, mortality, nuptiality – and movement–migration) events, as well as the sex-age structures of the population and interconnections between them. The explanation of the concept of demography given by Professor Zvidriņš in the *Latvian National Encyclopaedia* (Zvidriņš, 2024), explains demography as a science that clarifies the regularities of population reproduction and develops demographic concepts, theories and policy, as well as providing forecasts of demographic trends.

On the other hand, demographic policy (Krūmiņš, 2024; Zvidriņš, 2001) means purposeful action by state institutions and non-governmental organisations to regulate the processes related to population change, realising social, economic, legal and other aspects of it.

The review of the Parliament (Saeima) of the Republic of Latvia concerning demographic policies and their role in promoting and increasing the birth rate has recognised that in order for demographic policies to be effective, they should be based on a flexible, comprehensive approach (Valtenbergs & Vārpiņa, 2019).

In 2018 at the European Population Conference, organised by the European Association for Population Studies, highly recognised researchers (such as Wolfgang Lutz from the Wittgenstein Centre for Demography and Global Human Capital, Livia Olàh from Stockholm University, Emilio Zagheni from the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, and others) discussed how to promote interdisciplinarity in demography, as well as what the future of demography is. The researchers agreed that demography is an independent yet interdisciplinary scientific field, while also recognising that we need more collaboration with other disciplines so as to be able to comprehensively understand changes in the world and to progress together. In particular, L. Olàh emphasised the importance of concrete research, which has enormous potential to support policymaking. She gave an example by referring to a study that proved the difficulties of defining the concept of family. Professor Jane Falkingham from the University of Southampton in the United Kingdom also stressed that demographers should be more proactive by promoting more educational activities to policymakers in order to make the discipline more embedded in the policy world.

Encouragement to draft this publication came from recent and ongoing discussions taking place at the Council of Demographic Affairs, which was called by Prime Minister Evika Siliņa and later in the parliamentary sub-commission for demography, family and children's affairs. Within this council, regardless of criticism from the non-governmental sector and the stance of conservative politicians, other dimensions of demographic politics were emphasised, including the interconnection of economics, health promotion, education, etc. The prime minister initiated the work to produce proposals for new initiatives concerning the development of demographic policies to be subject to wider discussions. The Ministry of Welfare, which is the institution which has main responsibility for demographic policy in Latvia, has elaborated a proposal to set out a number of activities that, if implemented, would impact the demographic situation in Latvia. The proposal includes three main areas or themes: every child benefits society, a quality living environment, population migration and promotion of return migration. Meanwhile the parliamentary sub-commission for demography, family and children's affairs at the meeting on 11 September 2024, criticised the delay in developing a birth promotion policy (and also advocated pursuing a narrowed approach).

In a recently published review article, Janna Bergsvik (from Statistics Norway), Agnes Fauske (from the University of Oslo) and Rannveig Kaldager Hart (from the Norwegian Institute of Public Health) provided a systematic discussion of policy effects on fertility since 1970 in Europe, the US, Canada and Australia. In this study, the authors concluded that family-friendly policies *do* contribute to high fertility. Differences in fertility across countries have emerged, at least partly, because of family policies, and higher fertility especially results from policies that prioritise in-kind services such as affordable childcare and healthcare over cash transfers and longer periods of parental leave. However, these results emerge only when we put the most weight on those studies that are limited to policy reforms plausibly large enough to impact fertility.

As has already been pointed out, it is necessary to strengthen both demography as an interdisciplinary science and scientifically based development of policies, and therefore the author has set a goal of studying the topicality and importance of demographic issues, to identify changes in demographic policy approach, and the task of analysing government declarations since 1990 and measures related to their implementation as well as the available materials from the Council of Demographic affairs. The central research question of this paper is to find out whether the scope of demographic policy can be determined by focusing only on fertility and mainly on family support policies, or if there are other equally important and relevant aspects to be considered.

It is also worth mentioning the importance of the theory of demographic transition as a theoretical basis for demographic changes in population. However, in order to characterise the political directions of Latvia's demography, the governmental declarations and initiatives which have been political guidelines and priorities for the Cabinet of Ministers in the period 1990–2023, the protocols of the Council of Demographic Affairs sessions, planning documents and legal acts have been analysed as well. In certain aspects of analysis of historical documents, the author goes back as far as the 1970s, when some of the documents setting further development of demographic policies were endorsed and approved.

The most visible authors and researchers in Latvia who have contributed significantly to the development of demographic science and policy, and its interdisciplinarity, are P. Eglīte, P. Zvidriņš, J. Krūmiņš, Z. Krišjāne, Z. Vārpiņa and others.

Data and methods

Scientific methods have been applied in addressing the tasks behind this research. There is an extensive literature on the development of demographic transition theory and demography as a field of science, as well as national-level scientific literature and research on demographic policies in Latvia in general, and state policy on supporting the family in particular. Scientific literature and theoretical analysis of results of other research conducted are used to clarify the theoretical basis for development of state policies, and in addition a content analysis of the governmental action plan, the materials of Commission of Demographic Affairs and legal acts has been applied. Since the understanding of legal acts requires specific methods of analysis, interpretative methods distinctive to legal science have been applied to the legal acts. The historical research method was also used to determine different inter-dependencies of the analysed events within a set timeframe, the development of the content of Latvia's demographic policies, and characteristic features of that time. Migration had completely different characteristics and significance during the Soviet occupation of Latvia, and so migration either within or outside the borders of Latvia during that time is not seen as affected by locally made policy. At the same time, it must be admitted that Soviet-era migration influenced changes in society in terms of numbers and its ethnic composition, and has been indicated as a priority for demographic policies after the regaining of independence.

Results

Theoretical and historical aspects of demographic policy

Changes in the whole society have been described already starting from the beginning of the last century by A. Landry (1909 –1934), W. Tomson (1929), D. van de Kaa and R. Lesthaeghe, (1986); Coleman (2006), etc., giving a name of demographic revolution or in other sources – demographic transition, which is multi-level process. It is also acknowledged that necessity to separate family policy as a different policy field to promote fertility, family composition and stability, is historically developed. The demographic transition, mentioned for the first time by scientist W. Thompson in 1929 (Thompson, 1929) referred to the historical shift from high birth rates and high death rates to low birth rates and low death rates, as societies' reaction to technology, education (especially of women) and economic development. In Latvia, the first demographic transition to a rational mode of population reproduction took place in the 19th century (Eglīte, 2011).

The second demographic transition was first mentioned by Dutch scientist D. van de Kaa and Belgian scientist R. Lesthaeghe. In 1986, they observed interrelated changes in fertility, family formation and in relations between partners, which had begun at the end of the 1960s in many western and northern European countries. These changes were closely related to a significant turning point in the value system regarding family life and children. With the increase in the availability of contraceptives and the significant decrease in the birth rate, no longer reaching the replacement-level fertility rate, it was pointed out that the importance of the traditional family as an institute in society was weakening. These observations were considered to make up the main features of the Second Demographic Transition (Kaa, 2002; Sobotka, 2008).

This was based on the belief that industrialised countries had reached a new stage in their demographic development and that this was characterised by the full possibility of birth control. As couples lost the motivation to have more than two children, the birth rate also fell below the threshold for replacement fertility. Although it is possible that the postponement of childbearing also played a role, the observations showed that the birth rate would continue to remain at a low level, thus creating unbalanced demographics and leading to the next stage of demographic transition. The Third Demographic Transition is characterised by migration trends and was outlined by the Oxford professor D. Coleman. He emphasised that the features of Third Demographic Transition itself are impending ethnic and social transformations in host countries, affected by immigration from distant regions with different ethnic, cultural and racial backgrounds (Coleman, 2006).

Elements of the Third Demographic Transition can also be observed in Europe. As Professor Krūmiņš has acknowledged, demographic development in Latvia is characterised by elements of the Second Demographic Transition, tending to develop into the Third Demographic Transition (Krūmiņš, 2019). It should be noted that migration aspects in demographic policy in Latvia have not been significant, but the war in Ukraine and consequently a large number of Ukrainian asylum-seekers have slightly impacted the demographic situation in recent years in a positive way.

Changes in population have an impact on the understanding of various concepts, such as the concept of “family”, and influence the development of family support policy and the scope of the necessary measures to be taken to enhance support for families. For example, the EU project “Families and Societies”, conducted by Stockholm University, came up with the contribution that it is impossible to define families. “Family” can have a broad meaning, and we want to make sure we are not discriminating against those that are not in traditional nuclear families. They should still have the same life chances, as recognised by project coordinator, Professor L. Oláh.

As has already been mentioned, demographic policy in the narrowest sense relates only to processes that influences birth and death rates – especially reproductive behaviour, family support policy, health policy etc. A broader understanding of demographic policy, in addition to the subject of natural change in the population, includes the question of population movement (emigration and immigration, both internal and international), influencing changes in the location and composition of the population (Krūmiņš, 2024). Over many years, the central issue in demographic policy in Latvia has been fertility and family support policy, so demographic policy has been viewed according to this narrow understanding.

Looking back at the historical development of demographic policy, it should be noted that more than a decade before the restoration of Latvia’s independence, in 1976, the occupying government of the time established an interdepartmental council for the study of demographic problems and developed a set of complex measures to promote the birth rate over the following ten years (Eglīte, 2013). In 1980, the first family support policy planning document during the Soviet occupation of Latvia was developed, which pursued a policy of support of work and family balance for large families, employed mothers with children, those experiencing housing issues, etc.

In 1983, support for the state programme “Inhabitants of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Latvia” commenced, which resulted in an increase in the birth rate, reaching the level necessary for simple replacement fertility (Zvidriņš & Eglīte, 1990). In 1987, just before Latvia regained

its independence, a new government-level document was adopted on additional guarantees and benefits for large families and mothers with children under three years of age.

Therefore, efforts to emphasise issues of demographic policy, according to their topicality – to promote the natural replacement fertility, by creating favourable conditions for an increase in the birth rate – also existed before the restoration of Latvia's independence.

Demographic policy as a part of social policy has always been emphasised in state policy processes, which has manifested itself in various ways, and can be found in all 22 governmental declarations made since the restoration of independence.

It should be emphasised that at the time of the restoration of independence, it was important to ensure the stopping of undesired growth of the population due to migration, including the presence of Soviet troops, who were counted among the population of Latvia. Along with the topicality of demographic issues, other fundamental national issues prevailed in documents defining the political discourse of the government after the restoration of independence, e.g. economic transformation, devaluation of currency (the ruble), high unemployment, industrial collapse and economic crisis.

Demographic policy milestones in government priorities

Between 1990 and 1994, the social security and support system was gradually created and Latvia gradually joined the international legislative system. However, during the early '90s, as described by researchers (I. Pavlina & M. Brants, 2002), economic growth and strengthening of state independence prevailed as the most important political trends. Defining demographic policy as a priority was not perceived to be an important measure that should be included in the government's action plan. This period is characterised as a time of populist decisions. Anticipated demographic policy measures were postponed and transferred from one declaration to another. As stated by P. Eglīte, at the end of 1992, the Demographic Commission was established, which consisted of members of parliament, representatives of the state administration, scientific institutions and the non-governmental sector, and their goal was to develop proposals for the government's priorities for improving the demographic situation.

In 1994, instead of this commission, a similar consultative demographic commission was established under the leadership of the Minister of Welfare, and as a result of its activities, in 1995 the Cabinet of Ministers issued an order "On improving the demographic situation", which is still valid from the legal point of view. With this order, the ministries and local municipalities were tasked to take measures to improve the demographic situation, but without having funding provided for it. In 1997, the Latvian Academy of Sciences issued a decree "On

the demographic crisis in Latvia and the need for state action to prevent it”, which was a reaction to the government’s inaction. However, in 1998, indicating the lack of a unified coordinated approach, the Cabinet of Ministers, implementing the government’s declaration, developed a programme of measures to improve the demographic situation, although there were no financial resources allocated for its implementation.

The development of demographic policy has also been studied by researchers S. Kristapsone and I. Indāns (Kristapsone & Indāns, 2019), who noted, similarly to P. Eglīte, that since the regaining of independence by Latvia, various measures for the promotion of national regeneration have been developed, but that these have only partially been implemented. One of the first, the complex target programme “Inhabitants of Latvia” in 1991, was developed by order of the Council of Ministers, but it was not approved due to lack of funds (Eglīte, 2013). Giving priority to the promotion of the birth rate and family wellbeing, the Cabinet of Ministers accepted the concept of “National Family Policy” for the implementation of the national family policy on 28 May 2002, later replacing it with the “Guidelines of the National Family Policy 2011–2017”.

At the end of 2022, the guidelines for children, youth and family for 2022–2027 were approved, which also included the strategy for population reproduction in Latvia. This strategy was developed by the expert platform Demographic Affairs Center, established in 2016, and emphasised strengthening the family as having value in society, quality of life for families with children and issues of remigration.

However, a comprehensive understanding of the demographic policy framework has not been characteristic of the measures developed by the government and ministries to improve the demographic situation. It can also be concluded that for real action to implement approved plans, the political will to allocate financial resources to them was required. Rather, the dominant approach has been to allocate a certain amount of finance and then figure out what and how much can be done with the allocated funding.

The creation and implementation of the institutional mechanism should be considered separately. The concept of “National Family Policy” included the task for the government of developing the necessary legislative drafts for the creation and implementation of the institutional mechanism by 30 December 2002. For the purpose of implementing a unified policy, the related functions of the Secretariat and later of the Ministry were consolidated from other state administrative institutions, but due to the consequences of the economic crisis they were fragmented again in 2009 between the Ministry of Welfare, the Ministry of Justice, and the Ministry of Education and Science.

According to Professor J. Krūmiņš (Krūmiņš, 2024), an important role in the planning and implementation of demographic policy measures is played by the expert commissions of interested parties and the coordination of the activities of various institutions. The demographic commission had already been established at the end of 1992. It later became the Demographic Commission of the Cabinet of Ministers under the auspices of the Ministry of Welfare and then the Demographic and Family Affairs Council. Between 2004 and 2009 some demographic initiatives, including management of the council, were provided by the Ministry of Children's, Family and Community Integration Affairs.

In 2011, the council was transformed into the Demographic Affairs Council – a consultative and coordinating state institution to promote a unified state demographic policy and its implementation at all levels of state administration. At this time, the term “population reproduction” (*tautas ataudze* in Latvian) appeared for the first time in the government's declaration. Demographic policy issues in Latvia are mainly coordinated by the Ministry of Welfare, and the council is also coordinated by this ministry, but is headed by the prime minister.

It is important to emphasise the role of demography as a science in the development of demographic policy. In 1994, after creation the Department of Demographic Studies, the Demographic Center was established at the University of Latvia, while in 1998, demography was recognised as an independent branch of science by decision of the Latvian Council of Science. Along with the identification of demographic issues in state policy, scientific work in various research directions conducted by the Demographic Center also took place. Along with representatives of ministries and the non-governmental sector, demographers also worked in the Demographic Affairs Council. As early as in 2010, Professor P. Zvidriņš emphasised that it was necessary to talk more about population policy in general and future trends in this field, rather than about the current situation.

From 2017 to 2021 and from 2022 to 2024, the Council for Demographic Affairs was not convened, and its functions were *de facto* taken over by the Center for Demographic Affairs, whose competence and also interest in the field of demographic policy was less narrowed, marking the protection of the traditional family as a having value, focusing on raising the birth rate and getting compatriots who had emigrated to return to their homeland.

Quo vadis, demographic policy?

Within the framework of the national research programme EKOSOC-LV, a Latvian research team have tackled the issue of coming up with proposals for the sustainable development of society.

It is of high importance that when assigning content to the demographic policy framework, the concept of the renewal of society is analysed from the perspective of different theories, especially in cases where population growth is threatened.

According to the conclusions of research conducted by the researcher D. Bite (Bite, 2019), the concept of the renewal of society in Latvia should include modern economic solutions, with great emphasis on increasing human capital, reducing discrimination in the labour market, balancing labour market supply and demand, promoting lifelong learning and healthy lifestyles among the population, and maintaining working capacity, as well as promoting social inclusion.

The Belgian sociologist and demographer Ron J. Lesthaeghe emphasised in 1984 that the social and economic sector must occasionally adapt to demographic changes in the process of the renewal of society. If this is ignored, there is a constant risk in attributing the problems associated with the renewal of society only to the demographic aspect, which, all in all, will not provide a solution. This finding, according to D. Bite, probably also explains the long-standing weak results in the renewal of society in Latvia, and the author agrees with this assessment.

Constantly shrinking populations are also recognised as existing threats to sustainability in neighbouring countries. On 15 June 2023, the Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania adopted “The Resolution on the Future of Lithuania’s Demographic Policy”, indicating a conviction that its the demographic policy is complex and includes a policy of boosting families and the birth rate; a policy on civic and cultural identity and loyalty ties with one’s country; a policy on promoting the return of the Lithuanian diaspora and preservation of relations with Lithuania; a policy of attracting foreign students, highly qualified professionals, talents, and other workers to Lithuania, and their integration; a healthy lifestyle policy; extending lifespan and reducing mortality. Therefore, it is important to continue further discussions on the development of population policy in the region as a whole by analysing regional characteristics, and also considering the different path followed by Estonia, which has recorded population growth.

Conclusion

Demographic policy has been recognised as a topical interdisciplinary issue by all governments since 1990, but with varying focuses and intensities regarding the problems to be tackled. Since demographic policy has been understood in its narrowest meaning, demographic policy in Latvia since 1990 has been targeted and financial means allocated only to family support policy and the promotion of the birth rate. Over the time, various institutional mechanisms aimed at the elaboration and development of demographic policies have been established and transformed.

At the Council of Demographic Affairs on 7 February 2024, the deputy head of the State Chancellery, P. Vilks, gave a presentation and opened a discussion about the role of demography in all policies. For the first time in the recent decades a decision was made to move from a narrower understanding of demography to a broader one, marking its place and importance in the development policies of all sectors. Therefore, this turning point should be used as an opportunity to continue a broader discussion about the role of demographic policy in contemporary Latvian society. It is essential to be aware of the real extent of resources in order to plan their balanced use in the areas of employment, economic growth, education, health, migration and family support policies.

Those who carry out any planning documents related to demographic policy should engage with representatives of scientific institutions. First and foremost, in order to identify those demographic policy measures in each sector that are most capable of influencing important indicators (for example, in the health sector, when thinking about extending life expectancy, identifying and reducing preventable causes of death should be considered, as well as improving health status, and introducing a targeted, smart policy of deterring the use of addictive substances and processes, including alcohol and tobacco products among the youth population, etc.). Equally important is the smart management of population renewal and a common understanding that the implementation of cross-sectoral demographic policy has long-term significance.

It is also essential to continue further discussion in the context of the population policy of neighbouring countries.

The author presented her opinion, based on the research that has been carried out, at the Demographic Affairs Council on 7 February 2024, as well as at the 83rd international scientific conference of the University of Latvia in the section "Sustainable demographic development" on 21 March 2024.

Kopsavilkums

Latvijā demogrāfiskā situācija un atbilstošas demogrāfiskās politikas veidošana kopš neatkarības atgūšanas (un arī pirms tās) ar atšķirīgu intensitāti un fokusu vienmēr bijušas politiskās dienas kārtības jautājums. Līdz šim galvenais uzsvars demogrāfiskajā politikā Latvijā bija vērsts uz dzimstības veicināšanu un ģimenes atbalsta politikas attīstību, tomēr neseno Demogrāfisko lietu padomes sēdē tika akceptēta paplašināta demogrāfiskās politikas izpratne, tajā ietverot demogrāfijas kā caurviju jomas nozīmi visās politikās. Lai raksturotu demogrāfiskās politikas ietvaru un tā attīstību kopš neatkarības atjaunošanas, autore izvirzījusi mērķi izpētīt demogrāfiskās politikas aktualitāti un ar izpratni saistītās izmaiņas laika posmā no 1990-2024. Lai sasniegtu mērķi, autore izpētījusi 22 valdības deklarācijas un to izpildei izdotus politikas plānošanas dokumentus, tiesību aktus, kā arī Demogrāfisko lietu padomes pieejamos materiālus. Lai raksturotu demogrāfiskās politikas attīstību, autore to analizē no politisko prioritāšu, institucionālās attīstības, teorētiskā un zinātniskā ieguldījuma aspektiem. Autore izvirzījusi hipotēzi, ka Latvijas demogrāfiskās politikas tvēruma attīstība ir likumsakarīga, jo, fokusējot to tikai uz valsts ģimenes atbalsta politiku, demogrāfiskā politika ir attīstījies vienpusēji, nespējot nodrošināt līdzsvarotu sabiedrībai būtisku procesu attīstību. Izpētes rezultātā autore secinājusi, ka pēdējā Demogrāfisko lietu padomē panāktais konsensus attiecībā uz to, ka demogrāfiskā politika būtu skatāma un attiecīgi pasākumu plāns izstrādājams, ņemot vērā paplašināto demogrāfiskās politikas izpratni būtu jāizmanto kā iespēja uzturēt un attīstīt plašāku diskusiju par demogrāfiskās politikas caurviju lomu mūsdienu Latvijas sabiedrībā. Vienlaikus nepieciešams apzināties reālos resursus un plānot līdzsvarotu to izmantošanu gan nodarbinātības, gan ekonomiskās izaugsmes, izglītības, veselības, migrācijas, ģimenes atbalsta politikas jomās.

Tādejādi politikas veidotājiem vispirms būtu nepieciešams identificēt tos demogrāfiskās politikas pasākumus katrā nozarē, kas spēj ietekmēt būtiskākos rādītājus (piemēram, veselības nozarē domājot par veselīgi nodzīvotu mūža gadu pagarināšanu, būtu apsverama novēršamu nāves cēloņu identificēšana un mazināšana; veselības stāvokļa uzlabošana utml.).

Tikpat būtiska ir sabiedrības atjaunošanas procesu vieda vadība, kas būtu koordinēta, visaptveroša un periodiski mērīta. Vienlaikus nepieciešams turpināt tālāku izpēti kaimiņvalstu demogrāfiskās politikas kontekstā.

Autore savu viedokli, pamatojot izpētē gūtajās atziņās, ir paudusi 2024.gada 7. februāra Demogrāfisko lietu padomē, tajā piedaloties kā veselības ministra pārstāve, kā arī Latvijas Universitātes 83.starptautiskās zinātniskās konferences sekcijā "Ilgspējīga demogrāfiskā attīstība" 2024.gada 21.martā.

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