



Weekly Briefing

Latvia social briefing:

Main achievements and challenges in Latvian society in 2020

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Main achievements and challenges in Latvian society in 2020

Introduction

Covid-19 has influenced every sphere of life not only in Latvia but all over the world. Social life of Latvian inhabitants this year faced plethora of changes due to emergency situation. Additionally, Latvia still has a problem of aging population and population decrease in general. This year educational system of Latvia was forced to quickly adapt significant changes and successfully implemented remote learning for the whole population. At the same time, it was very important to track people's opinion about the social and economic situation in the country.

In this social briefing the following main social and socio-economic results of the year in Latvia will be summarized:

1. Population statistics trends of year 2020;
2. Attitude of the population towards Covid-19 news;
3. Main changes in the sector of education due to Covid-19;
4. Impact of Covid-19 on elderly population.

Population statistics trends in 2020

Population trend in Latvia remains decreasing and on the Figure 1 it can be seen that there is a linear fall in the population during the last five years:

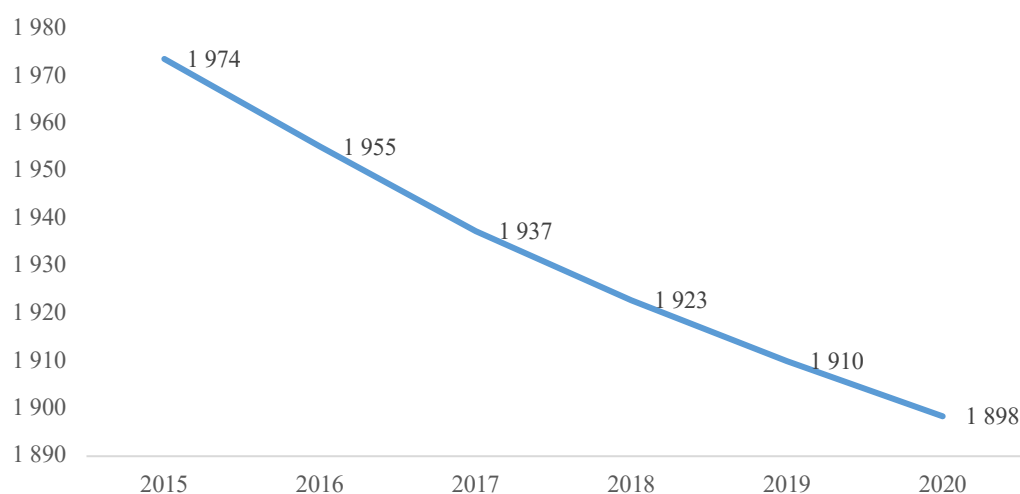


Figure 1. Population in Latvia, 2015-2020 (thsd)ⁱ

Descending population trend is one of the most problematic issues for Latvia. The decrease in the number of inhabitants is determined not only by the natural population decline, which has been preserved in Latvia since 1991, but also by migration, the negative balance of which has also been observed annually for a long time. There is no migration statistics available for the current year but data about live birth and death in Latvia is available on the Figure 2.

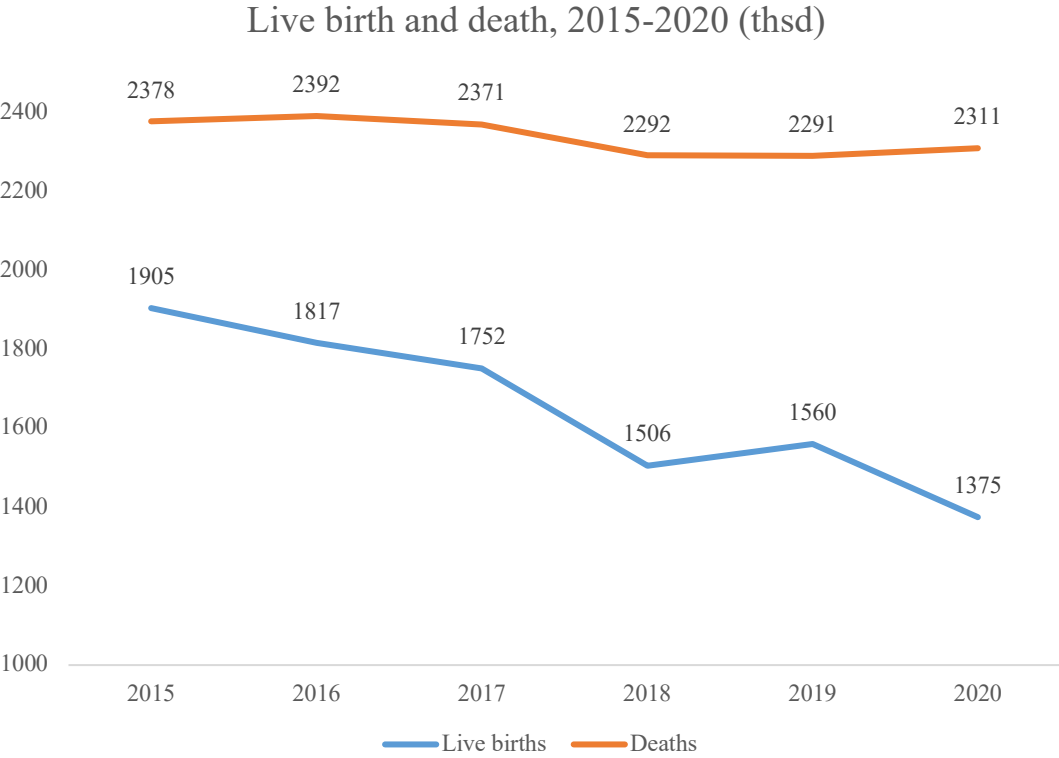


Figure 2. Live birth and death, 2015-2020 (thsd)ⁱ

Based on data from the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, there is a slight increase in the number of deaths this year and it is needed to be considered that there is no data for December yet but deaths due to Covid-19 reason are at the pic now in Latvia. Therefore, it can be forecasted that statistics for 2020 will be worse than previously and Covid-19 pandemic is a tragedy for Latvian society. At the same time, declining trend of live birth observed with a significant drop by 12% in 2020. Population aging continues in Latvia and serious reforms will be needed in the near future to be able to provide a good quality of life for future seniors.

Main changes in the sector of education due to Covid-19

The first emergency situation was declared on March 14th this year because of that all educational institutions were closed for more than a month thus making one of the historically biggest challenges for all members of the education process. Remote education tools had been developed earlier were not meant to ensure the learning process for all students of Latvia simultaneously. The shift to remote learning has been drastic and demanded a fast reaction from all the sides involved. The government and educational institutions have developed new tools and approaches for remote learning and ensured the quality of technologies for all members of educational process.ⁱⁱ

It is important to mention that on November 12 2020, the Parliament supported the amendments to the Education Law, according to which in the future the procedure for organizing and conducting distance learning will be determined by the Cabinet of Ministers.ⁱⁱⁱ There is a significant necessity in the law amendments because the risk of Covid-19 infection is still high. Besides, the opportunity for remote education allows not only to use it during the pandemic but also in every situation, when a student or a teacher cannot attend classes. In general, these amendments can help improve the process of learning. Therefore, it is a great achievement for Latvia that educational institutions ensured distance learning on a daily basis in order to provide access to education for learners and implement the educational programs.

According to the law amendments, the school board will have the right to decide which individualized teaching materials should be provided to the student's parents. The law sets out the conditions under which teaching aids are provided from the state budget and the condition according to which local government may finance the purchase or subscription of e-resources, remote learning platforms, teaching and communication software or subscription fees for educational institutions subordinate to them.

Attitude of the Latvian population towards Covid-19 news

In the 2020 humanity have faced significant changes in the social life. Plethora of restrictive measures were implemented around the world to protect people from Covid-19. However, there are and will be a lot of consequences of this pandemic, influencing life of general public. News about Covid-19 have become a part of people's everyday life this year and social sciences expert of Riga Stradins University (RSU) has conducted a study on Latvian society's attitude towards Covid-19 related news. 1005 respondents participated in the research.^{iv}

According to the study, more than half of the respondents (55%) follow the news on Covid-19, despite tiredness and worry. The higher the level of concern, the readier a person is to regularly update the knowledge on Covid-19 current situation. 21% of the least frequent news followers respondents are those who are not worried about getting sick.

Noticeable fact that 37% of the respondents state that following news about Covid-19 makes them feel safer and plan their lives more easily. At the same time, people are tired of following the latest updates on the pandemic and more than half of the respondents (53%) agree that they have lost interest in COVID-19 news. 34% and 44% of respondents are moderately concerned and rather concerned respectively agree that news impact their behavior. This mean that people are tend to follow the restrictive measures provided by government and frequently these measures are announced through the news channels.

Now the rate of infected people in Latvia is growing and people's interest in news is still increasing. However, consumption of news is not equal to perception. Covid-19 news content causes concern and tires people after a longer period of time. Even if the content is contradictory, more explanations are better than uncertainty, as uncertainty increases hopelessness among society.

Impact of Covid-19 on elderly population

Riga Stradins University and University of Latvia has conducted a study with approximately 1,000 respondents from different regions of Latvia by means of a survey and detailed interviews. The study covered issues regarding health, economic and social aspects of people's life and the sample consisted of the Latvian population over the age of 50.^v

Based on the results of the study, more than a half of respondents have access to digital technologies. However, only 20% of respondents use these technologies to access health care services and rarely used for online shopping. The elderly population mostly tend to use technology to obtain information as any other use of technology require more skills and means than population over the age of 50 have.

People's habits have changed significantly due to emergency situation. According to the study, more than 75% of respondents avoid visiting public places, using public transport and other forms of direct contact with people. Even though respondents admitted that their daily activities were restricted during the state of emergency in the country, they do not think that these restrictions are excessive.

In addition, the elderly population in Latvia is concerned about repatriation flights and the associated risks of infection. This concern arose as they do not believe that everyone who returns from abroad complies with restrictions properly. When assessing the information on Covid-19, the respondents admitted to have more trust in infectious disease specialists and epidemiologists than in politicians. But the trust in politicians during the pandemic has been quite high, according to the research.

Overall, people's trust in medical staff and government ensures proper behavior and perception of the emergency situation by Latvians.

Summary

One major issue for Latvia is the population decrease. Population is aging, a lot of people migrating and the consequences for society and country's economy in the future can be very challenging. This year is no exception and the data show that there is a decrease in the population again.

Every educational institution in Latvia was able to ensure distance learning for the members of educational process. Such a rapid development of technologies in the educational environment can be widely used after the state of emergency and Covid-19 pandemic. For example, it is possible to organize remote study programs for foreign students or conduct classes even if it is not possible to attend them physically.

Overall, in the tough conditions of 2020 Latvia was able to overcome plethora of issues in social life of inhabitants. People trust to the government and medical staff, which is the fundamental requirement for calmness and readiness to follow the rules in society. It is necessary to focus on the future and start to minimize consequences of this pandemic already now.

ⁱCentral Statistical Bureau of Latvia (December 2020) Population change and demographic balance by month. Available at: <https://www.csb.gov.lv/en/statistics/statistics-by-theme/population/number-and-change/key-indicator/population-change-and-demographic-balance>

ⁱⁱLA.lv (07.04.2020) Vēl 2000 skolēniem trūkst attālinātajam mācībām nepieciešamās viedierīces. Available at: <https://www.la.lv/vel-2000-skoleniem-trukst-attalinatajam-macibam-nepieciešamas-viedierices>

ⁱⁱⁱ Latvijas Republikas Saeima. Attālināto mācību organizēšanas un īstenošanas kārtību noteiks Ministru kabinets, lemj Saeima (12.11.2020). Available on: <https://www.saeima.lv/lv/aktualitates/saeimas-zinas/29308-attalinato-macibu-organizšanas-un-istenosanas-kartibu-noteiks-ministru-kabinets-lemj-saeima>

^{iv} LSM.lv (04.11.2020) Study: Latvian society and COVID-19 news^s. Available at: <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/features/features/study-latvian-society-and-covid-19-news.a380175/>

^v Rsu.lv (14.10.2020) Researchers Identify the Impact of COVID-19 on Elderly Population