



Weekly Briefing

**Latvia external relations briefing:
Diaspora as Latvian foreign policy priority**
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Diaspora as Latvian foreign policy priority

Summary

The diaspora is possessing a great potential for the country, especially for such a small nation as Latvians. It is a Latvian foreign policy priority for 2021. In the beginning of the year, Latvian government approved the Plan for Work with Diaspora for the next three years with the aim to preserve Latvian nation, involving diaspora in Latvian economy and in education, thus encouraging remigration. In March, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also supported and provided grants to 40 diaspora projects, which will be implemented from 1 May to 31 August 2021. Also, to contribute to the diaspora policy directions outlined in new Diaspora Plan, Diaspora and Migration Research Centre of the University of Latvia has conducted research to understand needs of diaspora youth and opportunities to attract them to educational institutions in Latvia.

Introduction

For such a small country as Latvia with a population of 1.9 million inhabitants¹, each person, each Latvian is very important. Over the past two decades more than 648 000 residents² left the country, which constitutes almost third part of current population. This is a big challenge for Latvian state. As a possible solution there is fostering remigration of Latvian residents and better cooperation with diaspora across the world. By “diaspora” it is meant those “citizens of Latvia, Latvians and other persons, as well as their family members, who permanently reside abroad but have a strong social connection to Latvia”³.

Today diaspora policy is critically important and its most important priorities are networking, maintaining the Latvian language and national identity, attracting youth and promoting more active involvement of the diaspora in the Latvian economy, which also creates reasonable preconditions for remigration.

¹ According to data of Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, in the beginning of 2020 number of inhabitants was 1 907 675: <https://www.csb.gov.lv/lv/statistika/statistikas-temas/iedzivotaji/iedzivotaju-skaits/galvenie-raditaji/iedzivotaju-skaits-ta-izmainas-un-blivums>

² Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia: https://data.csb.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/iedz/iedz_migr/IBG010.px/table/tableViewLayout2/

³ Diaspora Law: <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/302998-diasporas-likums>

The briefing will discuss new Plan for Work with Diaspora, support tools for diaspora organizations and results of the study about attraction of diaspora youth to Latvian educational institutions.

Latvian diaspora across the world

By diaspora it is meant here both Latvian citizens and “non-citizens” (special temporary status was established for former USSR citizens who didn’t apply for Latvian citizenship or any other country after collapse of Soviet Union). According to Population register data, 207 212 Latvian citizens were living abroad in 2020⁴. However, based on Diaspora and migration research centre findings⁵, the size of the Latvian diaspora in the world, including other persons with Latvian roots, at the beginning of 2020 exceeded half a million, including over 400 thousand individuals residing in EU and OECD countries. This is significant number, considering that it constitutes almost 20% of population who currently lives on Latvian territory.

In total, Latvians are living in almost 150 countries and territories at all continents across the world. The largest Latvian communities are those in the UK, the USA, Canada, Ireland, Sweden, Australia, Russia, Brazil, Germany, Belgium, Israel, Norway, and Spain.

Diaspora policy in Latvia

In 2021 diaspora politics has become one of the priorities of the Latvian foreign policy. Usually, work with Latvian diaspora was concentrated on traditional organizations and weekend schools, but this year Latvian government put cooperation also in science and business and industry networking in the centre of its policy to strengthen diaspora connection with Latvia in different sectors.

In the beginning of the year 2021, the Cabinet of Ministers approved the new **Plan for Work with the Diaspora for 2021–2023**⁶. The work plan is the first comprehensive cross-sectoral policy planning document developed pursuant to the Diaspora Law and brings together

⁴ Population register statistics 2020. Office to Citizenship and Migration Affairs of the Republic of Latvia <https://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/iedzivotaju-registra-statistika-2020-gada>

⁵ Hazans, M. (2021). Estimating the Size of Latvia’s Diaspora and the Number of Returnees: Methodological Approaches and Main Findings. Available: <https://migracija.lv/en/publication/2020-hazans-diaspora-returnees-number/>

⁶ Plan for Work with the Diaspora for 2021–2023. Available [in Latvian]: <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/320368-par-planu-darbam-ar-diasporu-20212023-gadam>

all tasks entrusted to all institutions and organizations. The document covers the current and planned initiatives by public institutions and the diaspora and non-governmental organizations, as well as maps out tasks and priorities determined by the dynamic development of the diaspora around the world.

According to the Plan for Work with Diaspora, there are four main directions for diaspora policy: 1) strengthening Latvian identity and the sense of belonging to Latvia, and preserving the Latvian language and culture outside Latvia; 2) promoting civic and political participation of the diaspora; 3) involvement of the diaspora in the development of Latvia's national economy and science; 4) support for remigration.

The engagement of the diaspora's intellectual resource and experience can benefit Latvia in terms of valuable information, and give rise to cooperation projects in the field of economy, education and culture, building on the mutual interests of Latvia and the Latvian diaspora, and benefits from that cooperation.

Grants to diaspora organizations as a support tool

In terms of diaspora policy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs provided support in form of grants to diaspora organizations in Latvia and abroad. By 1 March 2021, there were received 42 project applications from 16 countries - Austria, USA, Belgium, Denmark, Georgia, Ireland, New Zealand, Latvia, Great Britain, Lithuania, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Finland, Germany and Sweden. As a result, 40 projects were supported for a total amount of over EUR 62,000⁷. Diaspora projects supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will be implemented from 1 May to 31 August 2021.

Projects approved in March⁸ aim at promoting traditional culture elements such as folk music, dance, Latvian theatre and traditional cuisine workshops as one of the ways to strengthen national identity; supporting the organization of workshops for children and youth and weekend camps for diaspora youth who is main successor to save Latvian diaspora and Latvian language and culture; and celebration of Midsummer Festival (called "Līgo" in Latvian), which is essential part of Latvian culture and is significant in every Latvian's life. The Ministry of

⁷ Website of Ministry of Foreign affairs, press release from 16.03.2021:
<https://www.mfa.gov.lv/aktualitates/zinas/67658-arlietu-ministrija-atbalstijusi-diasporas-projektus-istenosanai-no-2021-gada-1-maija-lidz-31-augustam>

⁸ List of diaspora projects approved by Ministry of Foreign Affairs for period May 1 – August 31 2021:
https://www.mfa.gov.lv/images/Diaspora_majaslapai/Arlietu_ministrijas_atbalstitie_projekti_15_03_2021.pdf

Foreign Affairs also decided to support local diaspora schools, for example, by providing funding to hold a school closing and first day ceremony and a several school events of Stockholm Latvian School. It is also planned to organize a cycle for political discussions in United Kingdom, virtual networking event for European Latvian entrepreneurs in May 2021, and production of a digital broadcast show for the representatives of the Latvian diaspora living in Sweden. The approved projects of diaspora organizations are planned both in person and in a remote format.

Diaspora youth and education in Latvia

The results of the latest diaspora study "Attracting Diaspora Youth to Educational Institutions in Latvia"⁹ have shown results that are significant for the development of the education system in Latvia and diaspora policy in general. The research was carried out in order to find out the main reasons for young people from diaspora to choose or not to choose studies in Latvian higher education institutions, as well as the necessary support tools to stimulate remigration.

Study shows that around 18% of diaspora young people are considering the opportunity to study in Latvia. However, almost 72% of potential students were searching for information about study opportunities in Latvia. Among main reasons to study in Latvia young people named desire to use of Latvian language in studies, relatives in Latvia, their liking Latvia as a country, interest in cultural environment of Latvia, as well as some believe that in Latvia they can acquire a competitive education. On the other hand, top of reasons why diaspora youngsters don't want to study in Latvia include: popular belief that education in other countries is more competitive and gives wider international experience, perception of intolerance of Latvian society, assumption that Latvian education will not help to find competitive job or it doesn't provide a relevant study program which young person is interested in.

In terms of support, young people who would like to study in Latvia mentioned scholarships, help with recognition of previous education and support in case of psychological and practical difficulties or stress. At the same time, the survey of Latvian vocational and higher

⁹ Kaša, R., Cara, O., Mieriņa, I. (2020). Attracting Diaspora Youth to Educational Institutions in Latvia. Diaspora and Migration Research Center of the University of Latvia. Available: https://www.diaspora.lu.lv/fileadmin/user_upload/lu_portal/projekti/diaspora/petijumi/Diasporas-jauniesi-Petijums.pdf

education institutions conducted in the same research shows that only a few of them view the diaspora as a pool for potential students.

The above-mentioned results of the study are important to further development of diaspora policy. Government and educational institutions should take some actions to make education more attractive for diaspora youth as it is also a strong tool to foster remigration.

Conclusion

Nowadays, diaspora is one of the priorities in Latvian foreign policy. In view of the massive emigration flow over the past two decades, it became crucial for survival of Latvian nation to maintain dialogue and regular communication with diaspora.

In 2021 special focus was put on work with diaspora in new directions such as cooperation in business and science through networking events and education. Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced several project calls and gave grants for diaspora organizations abroad to support their initiatives. Another opportunity for strengthening link with diaspora and remigration is implementation of education policy with the aim to attract diaspora students to educational institutions in Latvia. Research results showed, that higher education in Latvia should be more competitive and internationally recognized so that diaspora youth would be interested in studying in Latvia.

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