



Weekly Briefing

Estonia social briefing:
Impact of migration on economic and social development
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Impact of migration on economic and social development

Migration as a socio-political phenomenon has a special connotation for and in Estonia. Having suffered from multiple occupations in the XX century, the country had to face a range of multidimensional challenges, which were directly associated with migratory flows. The most obvious challenge that still represents a matter of serious concern for local policy-makers is linked to the issue of **history-bound ethnic disbalance**. At any given moment, there is no *intra*-Estonia political debate, which would not be ‘incorporating’ (either consciously or unconsciously) the so-called ‘ethnic card’, be it when it comes to schooling, citizenship issues, industrial capacity of a region, climate change, or even anti-covid vaccination.

Indeed, as argued by Puur *et. al.*, “[p]ersistent immigration entailed a major transformation in the composition of the population [,] [when] [t]he proportion of the ethnic (Estonian) majority decreased from an estimated 97% in 1945 to 62% at the last Soviet enumeration (1989), while the share of ethnic minority groups more than decoupled over the same period to reach 38%”¹. The post-WWII processes, when the Soviet occupation of Estonia became a *de facto* ‘parameter’ for analysing the Baltic/Nordic country’s developments, were featured by a particular type of immigration, which was directed as well as “stimulated by political and ideological motives [...], [...] br[inging] to Soviet-occupied Estonia a wave of Communist Party members, Soviet military personnel and a large industrial workforce [from other titular states of the USSR]”².

From the societal angle, the impact of the take-over could not be precisely measured in all cases, but even some estimates were good enough to understand the degree of changes made. For example, according to a credible report, “between the 1959 and 1979 censuses, the proportion of ethnically mixed couples increased from 10% to 16% in Estonia”, and “among ethnic Estonians, majority–minority couples constituted 13% of all married and cohabiting couples as of the late 1970s”³. Another good account comes from Tõnu Parming’s material published in 1972, where it was stated that “[b]etween 1950 and 1959 immigration [in Estonia]

¹ Allan Puur, Leen Rahnu, Luule Sakkeus, Martin Klesment, and Liili Abuladze, ‘The formation of ethnically mixed partnerships in Estonia: A stalling trend from a two-sided perspective’ in *Demographic Research*, vol. 38, article 38, 2018, p. 1117.

² Katus and Sakkeus 1993 as cited in Kadi Mägi, Maarten van Ham, Kadri Leetmaa, and Tiit Tammaru, ‘The neighbourhood context and changes in self-reported ethnic identity’ in *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2018, p. 5.

³ Volkov 1989 as cited in Puur *et. al.*, p. 1119.

was almost as large as natural increase, and since 1959 it has been larger”, while “[m]ost of the immigrants are regionally concentrated and urban”⁴. In plain numbers, the ethnic Russian segment of Estonia’s population increased by 169,000 people or 70.3 per cent, in the period from 1959 and 1979⁵.

A more recent article, based on the 2000 census-generated data, discussed the so-called “assimilation perspective”, having found that “mixed ethnic partnerships were more common among second- and third-generation immigrants as compared with the first generation”, with “[m]embers of the largest groups (Russians, Ukrainians, and B[elaru]sians) were found to be the least likely to form partnerships with the majority population”⁶. Another interesting point, which was detected by the same material, underlined that “[c]ontrary to expectations derived from the social exchange theory, highly educated members of the ethnic minority population seemed to prefer co-ethnic rather than majority partners”⁷. It is worth noting that, the beginning of the 1990s saw a “substantial proportion of the Russian-speakers” leaving the country, but the 2011 census detected that “the majority of the Russian-speaking population stayed”, constituting 30 per cent of Estonia’s population⁸.

The aforementioned linkage between Estonia’s Soviet-time historic immigration and urbanisation portrays the second major issue for the context – it is interlinked with **political economy and structural changes**, which the Estonian economy had to come to know mostly from 1945 until 1991. As a result, at the time when the Soviet Union was about to collapse, 90 per cent of the country’s non-Estonian societal segment lived in urban areas⁹. Under the Soviet rule, the country’s capital city Tallinn, for example, was to experience “[s]teady population growth, formation of the Tallinn agglomeration and the end of Western-style sub-urbanisation”, being influenced by “the start of rapid and labour extensive industrialisation and the role of external migration in Estonia”¹⁰. In digits, the city’s population was going from 134,000 inhabitants (1944) to 166,000 (1947), and then to 479,000 (1989)¹¹.

⁴ Tõnu Parming, ‘Population Changes in Estonia, 1935-1970’ in *Population Studies* (Taylor & Francis, Ltd.), vol. 26, no. 1, 1972, pp. 53-78.

⁵ Augustine Idzelis, ‘Industrialization and population change in the Baltic Republics’ in *Lithuanian Quarterly Journal of Arts and Sciences*, vol. 30, no.2, 1984.

⁶ van Ham and Tammaru 2011 as cited in Mägi *et. al.*, p. 1119.

⁷ van Ham and Tammaru 2011.

⁸ Mägi *et. al.*, p. 5.

⁹ Tiit Tammaru, ‘Differential urbanisation and primate city growth in Soviet and post-Soviet Estonia’ in *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, vol. 91, no. 1, 2000, p. 25.

¹⁰ Tammaru, p. 27.

¹¹ Tammaru, pp. 23-24.

On the side of the economy, despite the fact that, “[a]t the beginning of the XX century, Estonia was one of the most developed regions of the Russian Empire” and it “[b]oasted twice as many workers per 1,000 residents and three times greater output”, the country was an example of “[s]mall-scale industrialisation and weaker ties to Russia”¹². The Soviet times have dramatically changed the pre-occupation’s *status quo*. As argued, the Baltic region’s natural resources as well as highly skilled manpower made a difference in the process of gearing the industrialisation “toward labour-intensive industries which required minimal inputs of imported raw materials and fuel” and boosting “machine-building and metalworking, as well as the light and food processing industries”¹³ in Estonia. By 1980, the latter three industries accounted for nearly 67 per cent of total industrial production by value in the country¹⁴.

On the top of that, by 1950 (only five years after the end of the WWII), shale oil output was doubled if compared to 1939, reaching the level of 3.5 million metric tonnes to grow to astonishing 31.3 million metric tonnes by 1980¹⁵. In addition, the output of electricity for 1950 was recorded to be about three times higher than in 1938, peaking in the 1980s. Intriguingly, “while comprising only 2.8 per cent of the total population of the USSR, [the Baltics] account[ed] for a relatively high percentage of the total Soviet output in certain lines of manufacturing” – Estonia, for example, produced 6 per cent of the total Soviet output of electric motors and excavating machines¹⁶.

Since regaining independence, the outcome of the former USSR’s policies on migration became **the** societal base for Estonia to develop its new identity – evidently, in all respects, the country was not the same as it used to be before the 1940 occupation. There is no subjunctive mood available for history, political economy, and human development, thus, from 1990-91, Estonia’s approach was very pragmatic – to positively reflect on the *status quo*, in policy making sense, of course. Remarkably, in the context of **Human Development Index** (HDI), which has plenty of measurable indicators on education, income, and health, “[f]rom 1990 to 2015, only two other EU Member States have increased their HDI faster than Estonia”¹⁷.

¹² Heido Vitsur, ‘A hundred years of the Estonian economy’ in *Estonian World*, 2021. Available from [<https://estonianworld.com/business/a-hundred-years-of-the-estonian-economy/>].

¹³ Idzelis.

¹⁴ Idzelis.

¹⁵ Vitsur.

¹⁶ Idzelis.

¹⁷ Brendan Seney and Daniel Baldwin Hess, ‘Population Migration and Estonia: Adapting in an Age of Immigration’ in *The Baltic Times*, 8 August 2018. Available from [https://www.baltictimes.com/population_migration_and_estonia__adapting_in_an_age_of_immigration/].

These days immigration in Estonia exceeds emigration, and, as reported, the immigrational flow represents a patchy societal segment that can be categorised further: 1) people returning to Estonia (about 50 per cent of the total), 2) people arriving from the former Soviet area (for example, Russia and Ukraine), 3) people from other EU Member States, and 4) people from the rest of the world¹⁸. Additionally, the ‘Soviet’ level of urbanism still prevails in Estonia, with 69 per cent of the population prefer living in urban and small-town settlements, which is a similar figure to what it was recorded in 1989 (71 per cent)¹⁹. In a way, it is a natural development because the country’s rural residents are left with “lower opportunity for employment, while residents of Estonia’s cities fared relatively better in the new market economy”, and such a situation reflects in a monetary manner as well – as detected, “income per inhabitant in Estonia’s cities is higher than the EU average, while income per inhabitant in the country’s rural areas is below the EU average”²⁰.

Considering these and many other, highly nuanced, local and global developments, *Estonian Human Development Report 2019/2020* worked out a few scenarios (four in total) of exploratory nature to illustrate a range of possible futures for Estonia as it is visualised to become in three decades from now (see *Figure 1*). As explained by the authors of the material, “[t]he main axes of the future scenarios are settlement structure and public space”²¹, while the two axes (from individual to public space and from rural to urban life) help in separating the clusters to make them distinctly visible. For example, the public space axis exhibits a particular role that this category plays in societal development, “with a more specific focus on data, mobility and accessibility issues” when “the average citizen has access to public space and services according to their individual consumption capacity”²².

¹⁸ Seney and Hess.

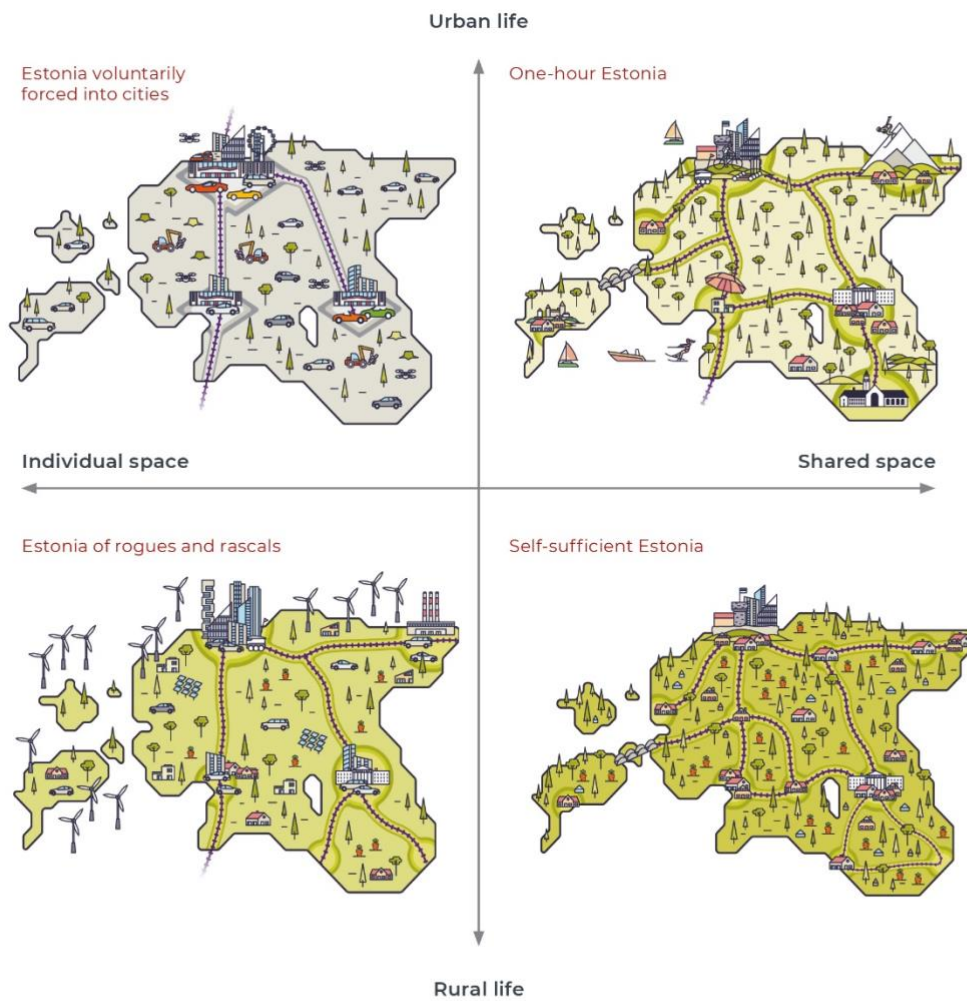
¹⁹ Statistics Estonia as cited in Kristi Grišakov and Mihkel Kaevats, ‘Estonia 2050 scenarios’ in *Estonian Human Development Report 2019/2020*. Available from [<https://inimareng.ee/en/estonia-2050-scenarios.html>].

²⁰ Seney and Hess.

²¹ Grišakov and Kaevats.

²² Grišakov and Kaevats.

Figure 1: Estonia 2050 living environment scenarios on the axes of settlement structure and public space



Source: Grišakov and Kaevats, Estonia 2050 scenarios

A particular story has to be and is associated with each and every scenario outlined in the report, be it ‘Estonia voluntarily forced into cities’, or ‘One-hour’ Estonia’, or ‘Estonia of rogues and rascals’, or, finally, ‘Self-sufficient Estonia’. However, whatever the country will become in thirty years, the long-standing impact of those migratory flows it had experienced during the turbulent XX century will still be ‘visible’ in every segment of Estonia’s societal development.