



Weekly Briefing

**Estonia social briefing:
A year of resilience-building societal changes
E-MAP Foundation MTÜ**

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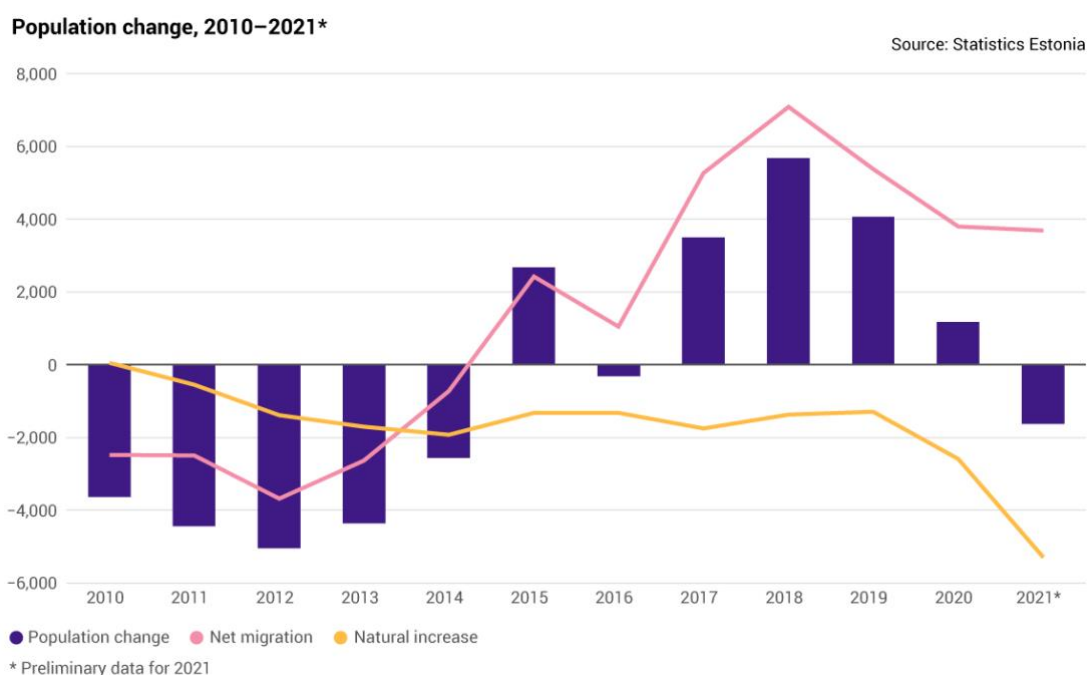
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A year of resilience-building societal changes

Undeniably, ‘society’ means ‘people’, but in order to be called ‘a society’, the people should be living together, communicating, and building up a sense of cohesion. The pandemic did its best to destroy the communicational part of this *quasi*-definition – arguably, from about March-April 2020 and throughout 2021, the concept of life had been ‘transported’ to the cyber domain, nearly in its socio-philosophical entirety. In addition, in 2021, the world continued losing people because of the COVID-19. According to *Statistics Estonia*, which published some of its preliminary data on the outgoing year, on 1 January 2022, the population of the Republic of Estonia was **1,328,439** (1,629 persons less than a year back)¹. In addition, in 2021, the births vs. deaths ratio looked correspondingly as 13,138 vs. 18,445 deaths, while the country absorbed 12,280 people who immigrated to Estonia and said ‘good bye’ to 8,602 people who left the country² (see *Table 1* for details).

Table 1



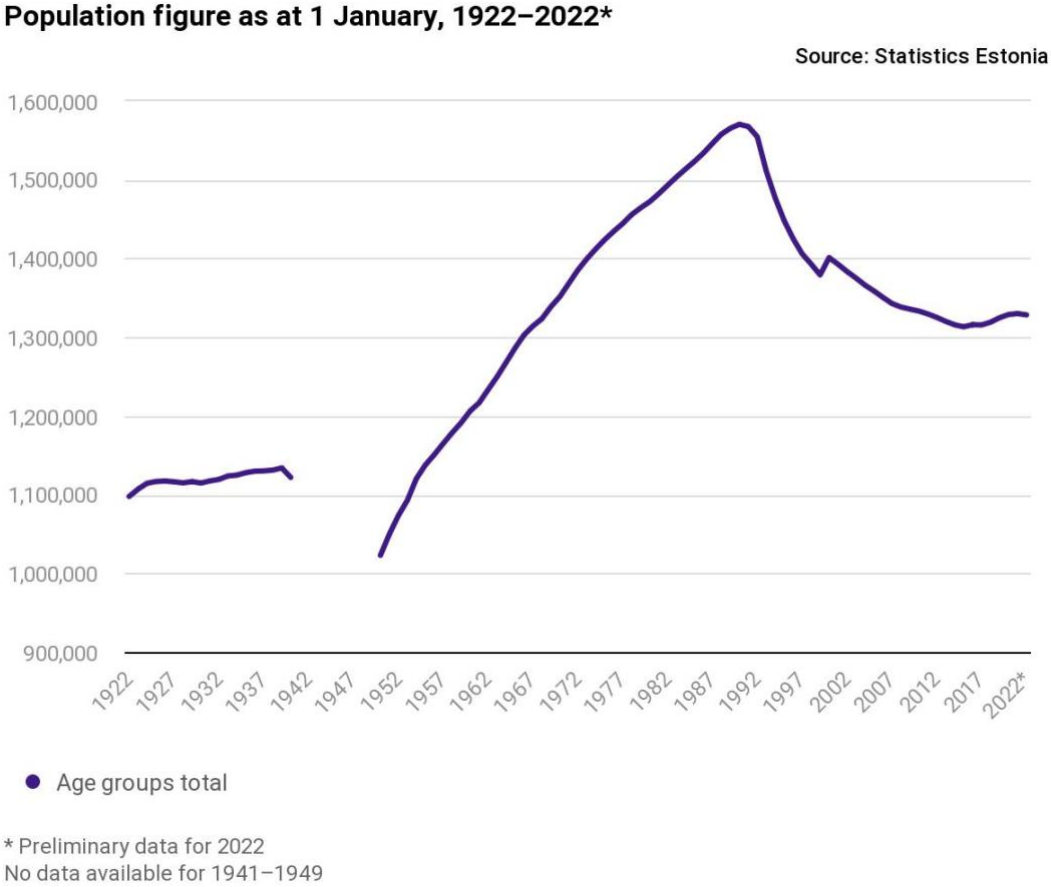
Statistics Estonia noted about “an exceptionally high number of deaths” recorded in 2021; at the same time, the preliminary data allows to underline that “3,678 more persons moved to

¹ ‘The population of Estonia decreased, mainly due to the high number of deaths’ in *Statistics Estonia*, 18 January 2022. Available from [<https://www.stat.ee/en/node/258591>].

² ‘The population of Estonia decreased, mainly due to the high number of deaths’.

Estonia than left for abroad”³. Interestingly enough, a century ago, the then newly independent Republic of Estonia had **1,097,733** people, reaching its peak in 1990 with 1,570,599 (see *Table 2* for details).

Table 2



From the Government’s perspective, the end of 2021 was the right time to have a census of the country’s population to be conducted. Certainly, since we are talking about Estonia and its genuine ‘friendship’ with e-governance, the first part of the process had to be executed using e-applications. As reported, by 22 January 2022, the e-part of the Estonian Population and Housing Census was completed, recording the responses of 568,891 persons (43 per cent of the entire population) to the proposed questionnaire, which, of course, would need to be filled out on the voluntary basis⁴. Urmet Lee, Director General of *Statistics Estonia*, noted that “it is especially nice that people responded to this call during such a difficult time”, and that “[t]hey made an important contribution to the success of this census”⁵. Predictably, most of the

³ Terje Trasberg as cited in ‘The population of Estonia decreased, mainly due to the high number of deaths’.
⁴ ‘Nearly 600,000 people responded to the Estonian e-census’ in *Statistics Estonia*, 24 January 2022. Available from [<https://www.stat.ee/en/uudised/rahvaloenduse-e-kusitulusel-koguti-ligi-600-000-estimaalase-vastused>].
⁵ Urmet Lee as cited in ‘Nearly 600,000 people responded to the Estonian e-census’.

respondents to the online questionnaire were from Tallinn and Tartu, the two biggest cities in Estonia, and the preliminary data showed that “that 40–65-year-old women were the most active respondents, whereas young men were the most passive”⁶. In a way, this latest Estonian census can become a new trend-shaping exercise for the other counties to follow, because, as it was described by the same Director General Lee, “[t]he people who did n[o] or could n[o]t answer the questionnaire do n[o]t have to worry, as we will enumerate all Estonian residents based on register data”; he also added that the “work on improving registers has been going on for ten years, and therefore, our registers are of sufficient quality by now”, thus “[s]oon, it will be the right time to start discussing how to conduct censuses in the future, at any particular moment and, figuratively speaking, by push of a button”⁷.

To fully complete the census, the second stage of the process will be framed up via conducting phone interviews throughout February 2022, when the census-takers will be contacting those people “who live at the addresses that are included in the mandatory random sample if they did n[o]t respond to the online questionnaire or did n[o]t finish it”⁸. Considering the latest ‘avalanche’ of scam-making calls that are taking place targeting Estonian residents these days, *Statistics Estonia* treats this second part of the census with full seriousness, security wise. Liina Osila, Project Manager of the *Population and Housing Census*, underlined that

Our goal is to conduct the second stage of the census by phone; personal interviews are our last option, considering the current pandemic. If necessary, these will take place with prior agreement and by observing strict health and safety rules. [...] As a reminder: the interviewers of Statistics Estonia do not ask for any bank account information, pin codes or money to be transferred. If there is any suspicion, it is possible to check the interviewer’s name and ID number with the customer support of *Statistics Estonia*. [...] If the census taker refuses to identify himself or herself or a scam is suspected, both the police and *Statistics Estonia* should be notified immediately.⁹

Arguably, the 2021 census will, with necessity, highlight a range of new features, which the Estonian society have adopted in the last decade, since the 2011-generated data was published. It is easy to predict that many of these new features can and will be attributed to the

⁶ ‘Nearly 600,000 people responded to the Estonian e-census’.

⁷ Lee.

⁸ Liina Osila as cited in ‘The census continues: enumerators start their work today’, *Rahvaloendus*, 1 February 2022. Available from [<https://rahvaloendus.ee/en/uudised/rahvaloendus-jatkub-tanasest-alustavad-tood-rahvaloendajad>].

⁹ Osila.

ubiquitous pandemic, which has been raging in and across Estonia in 2020-2021. Even the end of January 2022 saw more than 7,000 new cases of the COVID-19 infected people, having a positive share of nearly 50 per cent and the 14-day infection rate being recorded at the 4,660 per 100,000 people level¹⁰. The society, being tied of and totally distracted by the situation, is still inertially ‘playing’ the prescribed ‘game’ of vaccination, finishing the year and starting the new one with 377,586 booster doses having been given and 62 per cent of the population having been vaccinated¹¹. On an *intra*-societal level, the situation was skilfully summarised by Henri Kõiv, Executive Editor of *Müürileht*, who, having looked back into 2021, noted the following:

I [a]m sure more than a few people have felt a certain tightness in the chest scrolling through news feeds in recent weeks. [...] Yes, we have spent around two years living with a completely new virus and in extraordinary circumstances, while recent news make[s] even the past coronavirus year seem like business as usual. We have finally learned to live with the virus. Next, we need to learn to cope with a world where electricity has become something of a luxury. The green turn would simply come too late and take too long without pressure on prices. [...] Perhaps the reader noticed that the Prime Minister warned the *Riigikogu* of three simultaneous crises. Kaja Kallas said that Estonia is facing the three-headed hydra of healthcare, energy and security crises. Not a word on the climate or biodiversity crises. The latter are not deserving of a political statement by the prime minister.¹²

The above statement is ‘suggesting’ that 2021 was one of the most multi-dimensional years, when it comes to the society-building and society-developing initiatives, policies, and narratives. The local elections, the disastrous geo-strategic situation in the Central-Eastern Europe generated by the unprecedented level of Russia’s aggression towards its neighbours, the ‘green turn’ global discussion as well as the different digits in the country’s energy bills, the EU’s unfinished politico-economic ‘conversation’ with China that has not even started yet – all of these and similar factors added plenty of ‘value’ to the pandemic-related ‘headaches’, which already became somewhat ‘normal’. As one of the examples, a power bill of a private household in a southern suburb of Tallinn, Nõmme, having relied on electricity for its heating “was EUR 566 in December [...], consum[ing] around 1,180 kW of day tariff and 990 kW of night tariff

¹⁰ ‘New record: More than 7,000 coronavirus cases reported’ in *ERR*, 29 January 2022. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1608482549/new-record-more-than-7-000-coronavirus-cases-reported>].

¹¹ ‘New record: More than 7,000 coronavirus cases reported’.

¹² Henri Kõiv, ‘On a crisis overshadowed by crises’ in *ERR*, 23 January 2022. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1608475382/henri-koiv-on-a-crisis-overshadowed-by-crises>].

electricity, with the price at 27.5 cents per kWh and 15 cents per kWh respectively”¹³. Such figures in the bills had never been seen before. These socio-political and socio-economic burdens are very heavy loads to carry for any society, and the Estonian one is not an exception in the list. In principle, there is no quick-n-efficient way out from such a complexity. Most probably, Estonia is to face a challenge of entering a noticeable period of adopting a number of populism-driven measures, which can, in a long-term, be very costly for the future taxpayers. In fact, the Prime Minister has already warned her coalitional partners about their push for the issuance of a prospectively dangerous compensation scheme to help the embattled society to survive the crisis¹⁴. At the same time, having experienced the complexity of 2021 and looking into the uncertainty of 2022, the population of Estonia is to step out from the pandemic as a very resilient social unit, a society in all positive senses of this word.

¹³ Adele Johanson and Anna Ploompuu, ‘Government agrees on new energy price compensation measures’ in *Postimees*, 21 January 2022. Available from [<https://news.postimees.ee/7435298/government-agrees-on-new-energy-price-compensation-measures>].

¹⁴ Anna Ploompuu and Henry-Laur Allik, ‘Prime minister: What we have is a populist race’ in *Postimees*, 13 January 2022. Available from [<https://news.postimees.ee/7429548/prime-minister-what-we-have-is-a-populist-race>].