

Agata Włodarska-Frykowska\*

## **MIGRATION PROCESSES IN CONTEMPORARY ESTONIA**

**ABSTRACT:** This article examines migration trends in contemporary Estonia, focusing on migrant movements, legal regulations applying to migrants and national policies dealing with migration. Estonia is a multi-ethnic country in which both immigration and emigration occur on a considerable scale; consequently, understanding migration patterns and trends is particularly important. Historical factors have influenced Estonian society in a way which has necessitated the implementation of integration programmes and strategies aimed at social consolidation. The article features an analysis of the main changes in migration movements in Estonia since it gained independence and presents contemporary tendencies.

**KEYWORDS:** Emigration from Estonia, migration movements, social changes, post-Soviet Estonia, modern Estonian society.

### **Introduction**

The contemporary world seems to have become smaller: the development of modern technologies and new means of international communication shorten the distances between people and nations. These changes create new situations where powerful expressions of inter-culturalization and acculturation create bicultural identity. Migration is one of the key forces shaping these global changes.

Migrations are one of the most important factors that shape and change the social landscape. Contemporary migration trends are caused by a wide variety of social, political and economic challenges:

---

\* Ph.D., University of Łódź, Faculty of International and Political Studies, ul. Składowa 43, 90–127 Łódź, e-mail: [afwłodarska@gmail.com](mailto:afwłodarska@gmail.com).

one such issue is security, a matter seen as particularly important by diverse global communities. Antrop identified three main forces generating changes in society – accessibility, urbanisation and globalisation (Antrop 2005). Other scholars recognise demography, economy, new technologies, social attitudes, beliefs and behaviours as further social drivers of migration processes. Apart from these considerations, the effects of war, climate change and rapid demographic growth – as well as economic issues – must also be listed as factors influencing the moving of people (Castles 2010). Subject literature does not provide a single common definition of migration; instead, one can distinguish a number of migration patterns or trends emerging from political, economic, social and cultural changes rooted in diverse conflicts taking place in the modern world.

One of these tendencies is the globalisation of migration: immigrants come from a variety of locations all across the globe and these migratory movements critically affect many states; this situation is generated by a very wide spectrum of social and economic issues. Another visible tendency is the acceleration of migratory trends – people migrate more often than they had in the past; this appears to be an inexorable process. The third tendency, called migration differentiation, means that specific countries face specific, differing types of migration, labour market immigration, incoming refugees and permanent settlement. The feminization of migration is another trend, visible in the typology of migratory movements since the 1960s: in the past, only male migrants were thought to play an active role<sup>1</sup>. Yet another tendency is the politicization of migration, which continues to increase and gain importance in the contemporary world as long-term local political relations between states and security issues are affected by various forms of migration. The last modern trend is the proliferation of migration transition: some countries are treated as territories of transit migration, rather than a permanent place to settle down (Castles, Haas, Miller 2013). Varying individual motivations add up to create the present circumstances – a world in which people migrate more than they had in the past. This situation greatly influences the societies and politics of many states.

---

<sup>1</sup> Previously, the role of women has frequently been limited to arranging family reunions. This situation has changed and the contemporary realities of migration are not seen as dominated by male family members.

## **Migrations in the Baltic States**

The beginning of the 1990s in Central and Eastern Europe was marked by an extraordinary shift: from a communist regime towards democracy, free market economy and free movement of people and goods. This transition allowed for a complete change of migratory behaviour and had a large impact on social change in the countries of the region. Up until then, all forms of migration had been strictly controlled by the state. The infrequent migrations of people belonging to ethnic minorities or of families allowed to reunite were also under state control. A complex landscape of migrations emerged after 1990. According to Okólski, one can distinguish seven types of migration occurring in the region at the time. The first one is migration for settlement, in which ethnicity plays a significant role. The second one is labour migration; non-settlement migration is defined as the flow of people aiming to develop businesses or to attend professional training or courses. The next type is incomplete, quasi-migration – immigrants belonging to this category do not always fulfil all the conditions set for migrating groups. The next type of migration classified by Okólski is the flow of asylum seekers and refugees, as well as transit migration including instances of human trafficking. The last but not least type is non-migratory mobility, such as tourist visits or the transit of passengers (Okólski 2004).

Out of many factors that determine the character of migration movements, ethnicity is considered to be of particular importance. The Baltic States, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were all influenced by migrations which deeply affected the changes in their population. These three countries had previously been part of the Soviet Union<sup>2</sup> and have never been densely populated. As such, they have become potential locations to settle down, especially for Russian citizens. The decrease in the indigenous population was clearly visible while at the same time these countries, especially Latvia and Estonia, experienced an influx of Russians. The case of Lithuania was different: due to much simpler administrative

---

<sup>2</sup> The Baltic States were recognised as independent states in 1918; during the Second World War (in 1940) they were incorporated into the Soviet Empire. Industrialization processes were very strong in this part of Europe after the Second World War, and closely related to the movements of people from many different parts of the Soviet Union to the Baltic States territories. Russian settlers have been very enthusiastic towards staying in these territories.

regulations, all inhabitants were given Lithuanian citizenship without going through extended procedures. Meanwhile, contemporary Estonia and Latvia must deal with a high number of stateless Russian-speaking residents – a result of complex naturalisation regulations in both countries. Latvia has scored lowest on immigrant policy – both in relation to the free labour market and the political participation of citizens (Kowalenko, Kovalenko, Mensah, Leončikas 2010).

Estonia is thought to be a strongly multi-ethnic country with a considerable flow of migrants. This is strongly connected to the country's historical background – the number of new immigrants is relatively low, yet the nationality of a significant number of people is other than Estonian. Despite there being relatively few new immigrants, migration to Estonia does not seem to be particularly welcome. Estonian History, from the 1940s till the 1990s, still strongly influences social perceptions and attitudes to migrations. The majority of immigrants coming to Estonia today come from the territories of the former Soviet Union. There is also a group of so-called “old immigrants” living in Estonia, who are mostly Russian speakers. Additionally, it has to be underlined that Estonia is a relatively small country with a limited population. The territory of today's Estonia covers a little over 45 000 km<sup>2</sup> and is inhabited by fewer than 1 300 000 people<sup>3</sup>. Some residents still do not have Estonian citizenship and instead have a stateless status. Most of these people were born on the territory of today's Estonia, and had to build a new relationship with the new state. The number of immigrants in Estonia is not large and immigration seems to be a relatively new phenomenon. Not many people decide to come to Estonia to settle down; those who do are mainly Russians or Fins. There are also immigrants from Ukraine, Germany, Latvia and Lithuania – mostly from countries belonging to the European Union. Refugees and asylum seekers do not form a large group: the Citizenship and Migration Office does not receive any applications for asylum. Estonia is not believed to be a country tolerant towards newcomers, which once again is related to ethnic issues. The one exception is Tallinn where an open attitude towards immigration has been observed even when Estonia still belonged to the Soviet Union (Kowalenko, Kovalenko, Mensah, Leončikas 2010).

---

<sup>3</sup> Estonia covers the territory of 45 226 km<sup>2</sup> and is inhabited by 1.294.500 permanent residents.

## Legal regulations concerning migrants

The issue of equal treatment of people ties into the analysis of migrations. In 2008, the Estonian government adopted the Equal Treatment Act, aligning its regulations with those observed in the European Union. Unfortunately, the protective measures aimed at preventing unequal treatment have not been put into practice. Moreover, the Estonian legislation documents do not define the terms “migrant”, “migrant worker” or “seasonal worker”; the option that had been provided was to define the people without citizenship as “strangers”. Before joining the EU structures, Estonia had to take some steps towards regulating the status of immigrants living within its borders<sup>4</sup>. It was a decision of high importance to all “old” immigrants, whose command of Estonian in many cases was not good enough to actively participate in social life. These immigrants are mostly Russian speakers, which also influences issues related to their employment. According to national regulations, legal residents can be lawfully employed regardless of their background or religion. However, when applying for public service posts, citizenship and the command of Estonian seem to be essential issues. The Employment Contracts Act came into force on May 1, 2004 and is the main source of regulations on equal treatment of all citizens, whatever their race, ethnicity, age, religion, disability or sexual orientation. In 2008, Riigikog – the Estonian Parliament – adopted a new comprehensive Equal Treatment Act. This document provides a set of measures to prevent discrimination based on ethnicity, race, gender, religion and beliefs, physical and mental disability or sexual orientation. Article 2 of this document regulates the application of these principles in the context of signing an employment contract. Complaints of unequal treatment based on ethnicity are not made very often – in a few recent years the Labour Dispute Committee has not received any unequal treatment complaints. Several issues have, however, been submitted to the Chancellor of Justice, and these mostly concerned unequal treatment due to citizenship and ethnicity.

---

<sup>4</sup> The Estonian legal system was strongly influenced by German. The Constitution, from 1992, is the main source of rules in the state. Regarding of the case law as the legal sources of norms is not accepted. Decisions taken by the Supreme Court are introduced as legal and can be treated as considerable extend. Article 123 of the Estonian Constitution clarifies *The Republic of Estonia may not enter into international treaties which are in conflict with the Constitution.*

Linguistic discrimination is still quite noticeable in Estonia. Employers expect a relatively high level of proficiency in Estonian from job seekers. Unemployment statistics have shown that the number of unemployed non-Estonians has been twice as high as the number of unemployed Estonians for many years following Estonian independence. This situation has recently changed. Since 2007, the level of unemployment among non-Estonian males has decreased (Statistics Estonia 2015). On July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009, new employment laws were introduced. Unfortunately the labour market in Estonia is still divided and ethnic background is very important for employers. Non-Estonians do not always have the job opportunities available to native Estonians. This seems to be influenced mainly by the level of jobseekers' education. Employees with basic or secondary education are paid rather similarly regardless of their native language and ethnicity. The situation is different at the level of higher education: ethnicity seems to influence the opportunities and non-Estonians are usually offered lower salaries while holding the same positions and responsibilities as native Estonians. The Language Inspectorate investigates all cases of language discrimination and conducts checks across the country (Kowalenko, Kovalenko, Mensah, Leončikas 2010).

### **Migration policy in Estonia**

The scale of migration movements in Estonia is relatively small, and a small number of people choose it as their future place of permanent residence. It should be underlined that the government has not prepared any special programme directed at immigrants staying in Estonia. Since 1995, several strategies have been implemented to aid "old" immigrants who decided to stay in the country after 1991. The first programme, introduced by Rein Taagepera, was designed to help to integrate the Russian-speaking inhabitants with people of Estonian origin. Unfortunately its scope was not very wide; therefore a new, nationwide programme was developed in 2007, to be introduced over a period of seven years. The programme's strategic statement noted that Estonia is a country in which the division of society into distinct groups with differing cultural and linguistic backgrounds is highly visible. The main aim of the programme was to create tools enabling people of different origins to integrate. The programme consisted of three components: a linguistic strategy,

a political and legal strategy and an economic strategy. The first component was aimed at the development of linguistic skills and also covered the issues of cultural diversity and mutual tolerance. The second component was directed at the issue of the requirements of obtaining citizenship and aimed to reduce the number of people waiting to become Estonian citizens. The goal of the last component was to empower the jobseekers regardless of their background and language. Unfortunately the first element of the programme was not carried out on a regional level, which greatly limited its impact. It should be clearly underlined that a regional approach often brings the best results in the area of social integration.

The next five-year integration programme was launched in January 2008. It was the only strategy aimed at migrants living on the territory of Estonia. The main goals of this programme included: adhering to Fundamental European Values in Estonia as a part of the European Union; improving the command of the Estonian language as a tool of communication in public sector; strengthening national identity; inclusive policies for all inhabitants of the country; promoting equal rights and reducing ethnic segregation. The ability to contribute to the development of the country seems to be key in building an equal society where cultural diversity, human rights and peace are fully respected. Ethnic background should never be considered as a barrier for building one state. According to the strategy programme, those points were understood to be the most important (State Programme 'Integration in Estonian Society' 2008)<sup>5</sup>.

Today, other programmes are aimed at migrants staying in Estonia; their scope is widely connected with the issues tackled by the earlier programme. Considerable attention is still paid to linguistic issues. The six-year 2009–2015 strategy aimed to strongly aid learning foreign languages and support multilingualism. The document introduces a set of goals for effectively teaching foreign languages. Success in this sphere could enable Estonia to be better connected with the rest of the world. The strategy is inclusive and treats all Estonian inhabitants equally without segregation according to their nationality (The Estonian Foreign Language Strategy 2007)<sup>6</sup>.

---

<sup>5</sup> State Programme Integration in Estonian Society 2008–2013 was adopted by the Estonian Government in January 2008.

<sup>6</sup> The strategy aims at increasing the motivation for learning foreign languages, underlines different opportunities, intensifies language education in

Integration programmes and strategies in Estonia are based on multicultural approaches. Social harmonization seems to be one of the most desirable features of social consolidation; in such a multicultural society, the preservation of cultural and linguistic heritage and ethnic differences is considered to be a valuable process in which both native Estonians and migrants can equally participate.

To be entirely successful, integration processes should involve two groups representing the social minority and the majority. International law does not clearly define the conditions to be met in order to achieve full social equality. Social discourse and equality play an important role in contemporary democratic states; unfortunately, there are still no normative theories in politics that can adequately answer the question of migrants' protection (Patten, Kymlicka 2003).

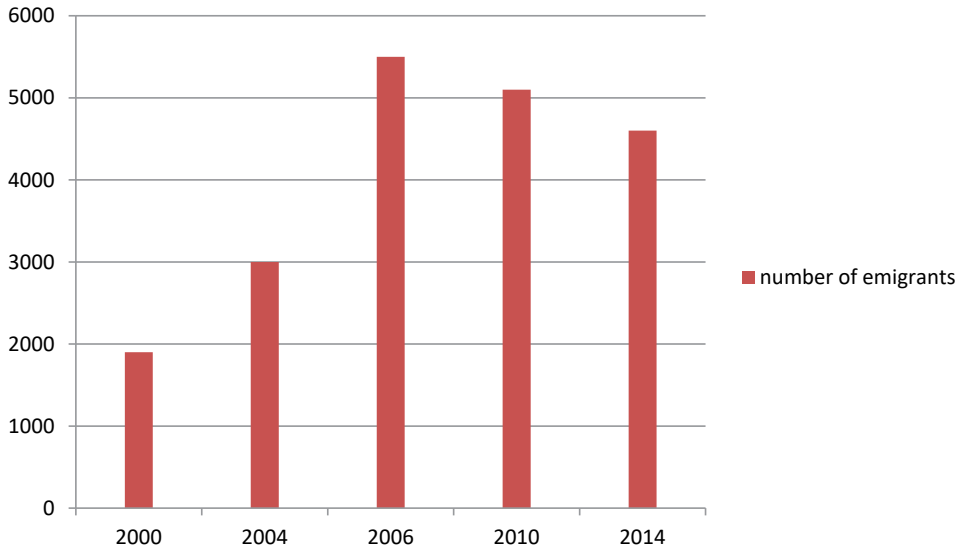
### **Migration movements in Estonia**

After Estonia joined the European Union on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2004, migration movements have intensified. The people who decided to leave Estonia have chosen to emigrate to countries offering better economic prospects, such as Great Britain, Ireland, Sweden, Norway, Finland and Germany. Emigration to Great Britain and Ireland increased almost eightfold, to Finland almost fivefold, and the rate of emigration to Sweden and Norway doubled. (Diagram 2). On the other hand, emigration to other countries fell – to the USA 1.8 and to Canada more than 2.5 times. In 2000–2006 there was a visible increase of the number of emigrants; in the following years, the rate of migration stabilised and remained at a steady level. In 2014, approximately 4600 people emigrated from the country and at the same time almost 4000 decided to immigrate – the rates of migration were 30% lower comparing to the previous four years (Diagram 1). The majority of people emigrating from Estonia were between 20 and 34 years old; immigrants were aged 24–39. 2015 was the first year in the history of independent Estonia in which the number of immigrants exceeded the number of emigrants. 15 413 people immigrated and 13 003 emigrated from the country. The group which migrates the most is Estonians aged 20 to 39.

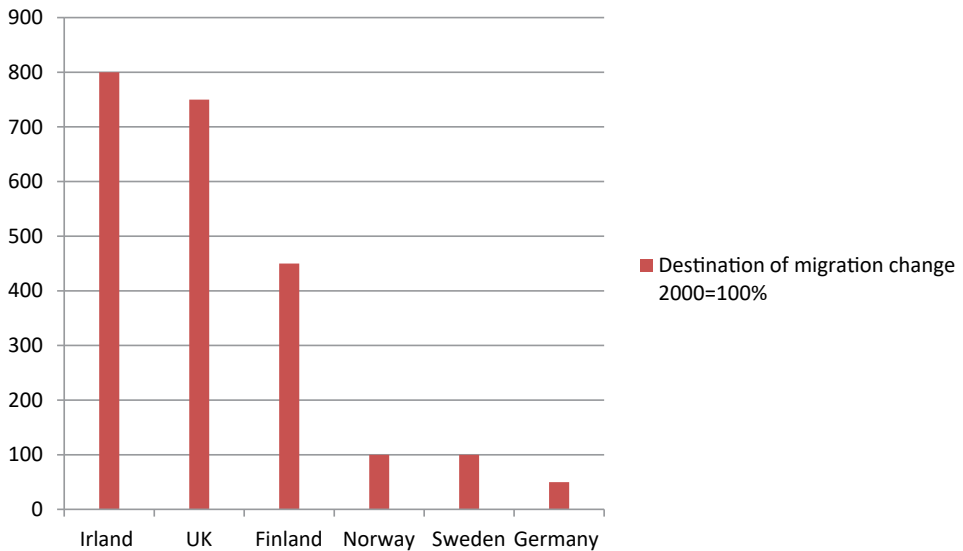
---

fields of formal and non-formal education, supports a new system of learning foreign languages with highly- trained teachers and educational materials. Those who do not speak Estonian as their first language can study the language as a foreign one and are guaranteed all the proposed aspects.



**Diagram 1.** Emigration from Estonia between 2000–2014

Source: Statistics Estonia 2015, <http://www.stat.ee/en>

**Diagram 2.** Emigration destinations between 2000–2014

Source: Statistics Estonia 2015, <http://www.stat.ee/en>

Looking at the proportions of men and women deciding to migrate shows that men tend to be more determined to move while women are more likely to stay in new locations for longer periods of time. On January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016, the number of Estonian inhabitants was estimated at 1 315 944, which means the overall count had decreased by 2 675 people compared to January 2015.

The data presented above shows that people with primary education are around 1.8 times more likely to emigrate than people educated to a secondary level. Furthermore, university graduates are fifty per cent more likely to migrate than people who graduated from secondary schools. The issue of education influences migration very strongly and consistently, considering the ethnicity of Estonian inhabitants. In short, after Estonia had joined the European Union, the likelihood of migration increased inversely to the level of education.

Another important factor is *the glass ceiling effect*. Young, well-educated people whose origin is other than Estonian do not have the same opportunities to get a well-paid job corresponding to their qualifications as native Estonians do. This situation encourages them to find better career opportunities and higher salaries abroad, often in the countries of Western Europe (Anniste, Tammaru, Pungas, Paas, 2012).

Intense migration movements are hugely influencing Estonia and its labour market. Many skilled workers decide to leave the country because of poor economic prospects. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent rapid economic changes in the region, Estonia has become one of the *Baltic Tigers*, introducing many reforms and Western standards of production. Improved standards of living and foreign investments strengthening the economy were made possible by a *shock therapy* applied by the state. Today, Estonia is struggling with many *push and pull* factors that influence people's decisions about leaving the country (Sippola 2014). For more than 10 years, Estonians have been provided with legal instruments enabling them to seek employment abroad, while the Western European countries have abolished all restrictions limiting free movement. Estonians are thought to be much more optimistic than their neighbours from Latvia and Lithuania, perhaps for reasons related to the country's geographic location. They have always seen their homeland as a post-Soviet Scandinavian country with a strong Finnish influence helping them to cope with post-transition and transformation problems. The population of Estonia has visibly decreased, but emigration is one of many reasons for the underlying social changes.

---

### Works cited

- Antrop, M., *Why landscapes of the past are important for the future*. "Landscape and Urban Planning", 1–2, 2005, pp. 21–34.
- Castles, S. and de Haas, H. and Miller, M. J., *Age of Migration*. Palgrave, New York 2013.
- Castles, S., *International Migration at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century: Global Trends and Issues*, "International Social Science Journal", 165, 2010, pp. 269–281.
- Kowalenko, J., and Mensah, P. and Leončikas, T., *New Immigrations In Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania*. Legal Information Centre for Human Rights, Tallinn 2010, pp. 4–10.
- Okólski, M., *The effects of political and economic transition on international migration in Central and Eastern Europe*, [in] *International Migration. Prospects and Policies*, eds. J.E. Taylor and D.S. Massey, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004, pp. 35–58.
- Patten, A. and Kymlicka, W., *Introduction: Language Rights and Political Theory: Contexts, Issues, and Approaches*, [in] *Language Rights and Political Theory*, eds. A. Patten and W. Kymlicka, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2003, pp. 2–36.
- State Programme Integration in Estonian Society 2000–2007 adopted by the Estonian Government (14 March 2000). Web. 15 June 2015 <[http://www.rahvastikuminister.ee/public/state\\_programme111.pdf](http://www.rahvastikuminister.ee/public/state_programme111.pdf)>.
- State Programme Integration in Estonian Society 2008–2013, Tallinn 2008. Web. 12 June 2015 <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/>.
- Statistics Estonia, public database. Web 12 June 2015 <<http://pub.stat.ee>>.
- The Estonian Foreign Language Strategy 2008–2013, November 2007, Tallinn 2007.