

Global Migration Group Symposium

“Overcoming barriers: Building partnerships for migration and human development”

27-28 May 2010, Geneva

Contribution for working group C: Mainstreaming migration in national development strategies

The status of developing a strategy for migration in Latvia

Maris Pukis, Dr.oec., Latvian Association of Local and Regional Governments

In Latvia, the issue of migration has been on the public policy agenda, but public discourse has been mainly focused on emigration from the country. Latvia’s immigration policy is currently not welcoming to immigrants.

At the same time, Latvia has to address foreseeable problems related to its demographic prognosis. EUROSTAT predicts a serious decrease in population and a decrease of the number of active labour market participants relative to the total population resident in the country.

Negative attitudes towards immigration stem from the historical experience of Russian (Soviet Union) occupation during and after the Second World War, which ended after 54 years in 1994. The experience and memories of that period of colonization among the local population are extremely negative.

Against this backdrop, the possibility of a new inflow of immigrants from Russia is regarded as a threat. Also, what is perceived as an aggressive foreign policy of Russia towards neighbouring countries (such as Georgia and Moldova), and as attempts to “protect” the Russian speaking population in Latvia, presents a serious obstacle to a liberalization of immigration policy and progress in integration policy. However, the absence of a pro-active immigration policy that regards migration as a positive factor puts Latvia at a disadvantage compared to other EU countries, who have benefits substantially from more liberal immigration policies.

Thus, the academic discourse in Latvia has started to raise awareness of the necessity to liberalize immigration policy, and the prospective positive effects and opportunities that such a policy change could yield. However, a majority of economists and politicians in the country is not ready to backtrack from their preconceived ideas about migration as a “problem”.

The main issue that Latvia would need to tackle is emigration. After reestablishing national sovereignty, freedom of personal movement was introduced. And, after joining the EU, Latvia's labour market was opened. Given the difference in remuneration levels for the same work between Latvia and the old EU countries, there are strong incentives for emigration and an increase in emigration rates has occurred.

Latvia has been hit very hard by the economic crisis, due to mistakes made by the national government in its fight against inflation during the period from 2004-2007. Inflation was a natural consequence of EU cohesion policies being applied to Latvia, an expression of price equalization across the common European marketplace. In that context, the introduction of monetary policy measures led to a rapid freeze in economic activity half a year before the global crisis. Further, the application of IMF concepts during the crisis has led to a worsening of the situation, including a growing shadow economy and an increase in outflows of the workforce.

The economic crisis was a facilitating factor for some steps that are now being taken to liberalize the granting of residence permits to persons who come to Latvia to buy real estate or to start a business. After tough discussion between "economists" and "nationalists", the Latvian parliament accepted corresponding amendments in the legislation.

Another reason for an increasing interest in emigration is the political and economic influence of the Latvian Diaspora. After the Second World War, that Diaspora maintained the idea of national independence and has influenced political parties and civil society development after 1990. Now Latvians working abroad contribute to the economic wellbeing of the country by supporting their families or relatives left behind.

The establishment of better relations with emigrants working abroad is among the priorities of public institutions at the national, as well as local level. National institutions and private associations are seeking ways to support emigrants and families working abroad on educational and cultural issues. The aim of that outreach is to facilitate the preservation of links with Latvia, and to keep the use of the Latvian language in families living abroad alive. One important activity is to provide information to generate interest regarding Latvia's social, economic and political agenda and the achievements of the country.

Local governments have been moving in the same policy direction. Practically each local authority is trying to establish positive relations with emigrants originating from their territory. Measures target persons of any ethnic identity who have left Latvia and preserved some interest in their native country.

Among the positive experiences in this area is the establishment of NGOs among Latvians abroad, who originate from the same local administrative territory and wish to remain connected to that locality.

A good example is the local government of Cēsis city. The NGO "Cesnieku association" with above mentioned purpose works in close cooperation with the local government. Each year different activities are organized. Those are:

- City festivals,
- summer schools,
- conferences,
- invitations to be lecturers in schools and other lecture-rooms with presentations about experience abroad etc.

Latvia's immigration policy is conservative and based on the concept of limited immigration from third countries (except EU). The citizens of third countries face problems such as:

- uncertainty of legal status,
- lack of social protection guarantees,
- lack of information, if they do not speak Latvian or one of the other popular languages (Russian, English or German).

Presently, policy pertaining to residence permits is liberal as regards family reunifications, but conservative and restrictive for labour migration and foreign students.

Over the next decade, the pressure to liberalize immigration will feature prominently on the political agenda for several reasons:

1. negative demographic prospects (the number of residents is expected to decrease from 2,5 million in 1990 to 1,6 million in 2050 (EUROSTAT));
2. an increasing of proportion of old people among the population;
3. a lack of necessary skills in the local workforce to fill sector-specific demands;
4. changes in the ethnic composition of the population due to the free movement of persons in the EU;
5. a inflow of irregular migrant workers from countries of the former USSR.

At present, local governments pursue in many cases a more liberal approach to migration, than national authorities. For further improving the situation, a broad based public discourse on migration is necessary. The issue at stake is no less than to forge a new social contract on that issue between government and society.

Latvia already has policy documents pertaining to strategies for strengthening relations with emigrants, but it does not have a clear view on how to develop a new approach to immigration. As mentioned above, a new social contract on that issue is necessary. To facilitate this process, the dissemination of good practices and analysis of the mistakes made in other countries is necessary. That applies also to local level experiences of introducing migration-related policies into local society.