

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MINORITIES IN THE BALTIC STATES

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The purpose of this paper is to present changes in the ethnic structure in three Baltic States after the regained political independence and to analyze the largest ethnic minorities. Although each of the Baltic States has had a different history, they have experienced a broadly similar fate from the 18th century when they were absorbed into the Russian empire. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were able to remain politically independent only for two decades in the 1920s and 1930s and in the period since beginning of the 1990s.

Being on the crossroads of long established trade routes, the Baltic areas always were strongly influenced by immigration waves and their population was ethnically mixed. During the 50 years of Soviet occupation the proportion of population of titular ethnicities (Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians) fell drastically whilst Russian, Ukrainian, Belarussian and other ethnic groups (minorities) from the other Soviet republics increased substantially, particularly in Latvia and Estonia which became the ones of the most ethnically diversified countries in Europe. A process of Russification was ensued under Soviet rules.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the regaining of political independence in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania cardinally changed social and economic conditions, the directions and intensity of migration and also ethnic structure of every Baltic country. The Baltic States from countries of immigration became countries of emigration. The level of emigration and repatriation reached peak in 1992, when the former Soviet military forces and their family members left the Baltic region.

As a result of such migration development and cardinal changes in the demographic process in the last 14 years, the proportion of minorities population in all three states has decreased while proportion of indigenous population and titular ethnicities has increased.

The Baltic States have historically formed traditions in the fields of counting of population and in analysis of ethno-demographic development (especially in Estonia and Latvia). As a result, we have the information about the ethnic structure in these countries for a longer period. The recent publication of the 2000 round censuses (in Estonia and Latvia in 2000 and Lithuania in 2001) makes it possible to analyze the dynamics of ethnic structure and patterns of minority population growth since independence and for the 20th century as a whole. Some special studies of ethnic minorities have been made within Council of Europe or national governmental integration programmes.

A characteristic feature of the ethno-demographic development after regained independence is the decrease of the population both the titular ethnicities and minorities. The

total number of population in the Baltics decreased from 7933 thousand in 1990 to 7116 in 2004, or by 10%. According to the last censuses, the population of three majority ethnoses has decreased from 5324 thousand to 5253, or by 3% but the population of different minorities has decreased more substantially (by almost 30%). The share of population for minorities which formed 33% of total population in the Baltics in 1989 has decreased to 27% in 2000 with a clear tendency to further drop in the last years. However, it is still high in comparison with many other countries, particularly in Latvia (about 40%). Minorities are weakly integrated in the societies therefore much attention in each republic is devoted to build up a common political identity for people living in these countries.

The largest ethnic minority by size in every Baltic State is Russians. Their total number within intercensuses period (1989-2000) decreased by one third (almost by 600, 000). However, their numerical strength is still impressive. The number of Russians (1274 thousand in 2000) is only slightly less than the number of Latvians and exceeds almost 1.4 times the number of Estonians living in the Baltics. More than a half of the Russians residing in the region live in Latvia (about 700,000), 350,000 in Estonia and slightly more than 200,000 in Lithuania.

Being the largest minority, the Russians never thought of themselves as a minority during the Soviet period. Even now in many cities, including the largest city of the Baltic sea region Riga and rural settlements there is a dominance of the Russian environment and language. This language is often used also by non-Russians. At present, the former so-called „Russian-towns” and „Russian zones” are the most problematic from the point of view of integration.

The second largest minority by size is Poles. They number about 300,000 and have a weak tendency to decrease. The great majority (more than 80%) of them reside in Lithuania, about 60,000 in Latvia and only about 2,000 in Estonia.

The Belarussians are the third largest ethnic minority. In Latvia the Belarussian is even the second largest minority, and in Eastern Latvia (Latgale) they have their local national roots. The majority of them are Russian speakers. They have a negative net migration and natural decrease. Besides the Belarussian community has decreased due to assimilative processes.

The Ukrainians are the fourth largest minority and the seventh ethnic group by size in the Baltics. Half of them are residents of Latvia. In demographic terms, Ukrainians are a younger ethnic group and have slightly integrated in the Baltics. Approximately half of them speak only Russian and, similar to the Belarussians, about 90% families are ethnically mixed. The age structure of Ukrainians is relatively young, therefore their depopulation began a little

later and it is not as profound when compared to other minorities. They are relatively well educated. Ukrainians living in the Baltic States were denied Ukrainian citizenship by their officials, and therefore their repatriation to the Ukraine was more marked than of other Slavic ethnicities to their home countries. For that reason the number of Ukrainians who have obtained citizenship in the Baltics, is very low.

Jewish settlers were among those who entered the Baltic provinces during 18th and 19th centuries. The number of Jews in comparison with the above-mentioned minorities is small and it has decreased substantially during the last decade. Since independence their number in the Baltics has more than halved. More than half of them reside in Latvia, mainly in Riga. Their fertility rate is very low and an old age structure can be observed; emigration was also extremely high. Among them the percentage of citizens is rather high.

Two other ethnic groups live in the Baltics whose numerical amount slightly exceeds 10,000 persons. These are Finns and Gypsies (Romanies). The number of Gypsies is slowly increasing while the number of Finns, who mainly live in Estonia (11,800 in 2000), is systematically declining.

Germans are among those ethnicities which are losing people as a result of natural movement and emigration. Less than 9,000 Germans currently live in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. About 9,000 Tatars live in the Baltic States. Their number also has a tendency to decrease.

Each Baltic State has a relatively small number of titular ethnicities of the neighbouring Baltic states. Lithuanians in Latvia make up the greatest number (32,000) but Estonians in Lithuania account for the least number (only 400). Totally according to the last censuses there were 43,900 representatives of such minorities from the neighbouring countries which account for only 0.6% from the total population in the Baltics.

More demographic and socio-economic characteristics of main minorities as well as results of projections of minorities development will be presented in the paper. The baseline demographic scenario indicates population decline for almost all minorities in each of the three Baltic States.

