

VIEWS ON THE FUTURE OF THE POPULATION IN THE ESTONIAN MEDIA (SUMMARY)

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The population of Estonia is small. It is also decreasing and aging, unlike the world population. This is a well-known fact. A small, decreasing and aging population is a problem exacerbated by the lower level of wages compared to neighbouring countries, which causes young people to leave Estonia in search of new challenges and the labour force to leave and seek better wages elsewhere. On the other hand, Estonia is suffering from structural unemployment, meaning that there are not enough specialists in Estonia in several areas with great development potential. There is a shortage of qualified employees, and this restricts economic growth.

The population is decreasing in most regions of Estonia. At the moment, the trend is upward only in the region of the country's capital. Many regions are clearly being abandoned and marginalised. Several economics specialists believe that investments (excl. infrastructure objects) made in rural parts of Estonia should be considered investment mistakes from the economic perspective.

Three main problems are associated with a small, ageing, decreasing population:

- *The national culture of Estonia will not be able to develop or survive;*
- *The Estonian economy will not be able to grow;*
- *The Estonian social system will not be sustainable.*

Two types of solutions are proposed to these problems. Firstly, some would try to change population trends, that is, to ensure that Estonia's labour force will not decrease. A rise in the rate of natural increase is not considered very likely, which leaves immigration as the only option. It is thought that, in order to support immigration, the immigration policy should be laxer and Estonia should establish an English-language-based living environment. Not much thought is given to whether the Estonian culture would survive in those conditions. Will this strategy be sustainable 50 years from now? This is not important for people who favour immigration.

The second solution is to look for ways to change the current economic system, which would be based on changing the society's values. No one has come up with any specific ideas for modifying the economic system. Which new values should be encouraged? There are some ideas, such as sustainable living. Currently, however, sustainability efforts are mostly focused on areas that do not have any significant impact on population trends. Of course, it is quite bold to say that energy efficiency is useless. At the same time, if people do not stop the pointless and wasteful consumption, energy efficiency will not be a solution either. So, there is some talk of possible new values. But how to achieve these? Is that even possible? Is it not just an utopian dream? There are no answers.

Other solutions have also been suggested – for example, a more effective regional policy, or the simple solution of waiting until the neighbours' economic situation gets worse, forcing the Estonians to come back home. These are some interesting topics for discussion, but they do not appear to be the main issues.

All kinds of supports and subsidies are a popular topic, and it is an important issue that concerns the people. But there are not many who believe that the trend of natural increase can be reversed with financial support.

It is clear that there is public debate in Estonia about the population, the economy and the development of the country. The problems are also evident. But things are more complicated when it comes to specific, socially accepted objectives and the ways to achieve these objectives.

The article focuses on the abovementioned issues, using an approach that is uncommon in a statistical publication. The author has collected statements published (mostly) in the Estonian

media, presented as quotations together with brief commentary. It would be possible to supplement most of the quoted ideas with the relevant statistics, but the author has chosen not to do that. The quotations published in the press are much more expressive than the language normally used in statistical analysis. This ensures a rather emotional experience for readers that hopefully has an impact.