

Demographic Trends in Estonia

PRIMARY RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

In 2012, the Eleventh Population and Housing Census (PHC 2011) was conducted in Estonia.¹ In January, residents were able to participate via completing an online census questionnaire; in fact, it is remarkable that more than 800.000 persons participated in the E-census which is more than 60 percent of the population of Estonia. Those who did not participate in the E-census were visited by an enumerator. PHC 2011 consisted of three parts, namely questions regarding the composition of a household, the size and condition of a dwelling, and the origin, language skills, education as well as employment.

According to PHC 2011 data there are 1.294.236 permanent residents in Estonia; in comparison to the previous census in 2000 with 1.370.052 the number of permanent residents in Estonia has declined by 5.5 percent. This permanent residents figure is comprised of 693.884 women and 600.352 men.²

Age and regional aspects

The age structure of the Estonian population has changed since the previous census. In general, it confirms the consistence of the specific population trends that emerged after the Restoration of Independence. In 2000, the percentage share of children (aged 0–14) of the total population was still 18 percent, this share decreased to 15 percent in 2011. Along with this trend, the share of people aged 65 and over had increased from 15 percent in 2000 to 18 percent of the total population in 2011. However, the percentage share of the working-age population (aged 15–65) remained the same level as in 2000 with 67 percent (see graph).

Besides these age structure trends, there are specific regional population trends as well. According to Ene-Margit Tiit, the regional trends of population allocations continues and is evident by the PHC 2011 collected data. Compared to the previous census, the population in the capital Tallinn and in the second biggest city Tartu has increased, while the population in all other counties has decreased and is expected to further do so in the future.

¹ Previous censuses were carried out in 1881, 1897, 1922, 1934, 1941, 1959, 1970, 1979, 1989, and 2000.

² In line with the international definition, a permanent resident is a person that has lived in the country in question for at least a year before the census moment or intends to live in the country for at least a year.

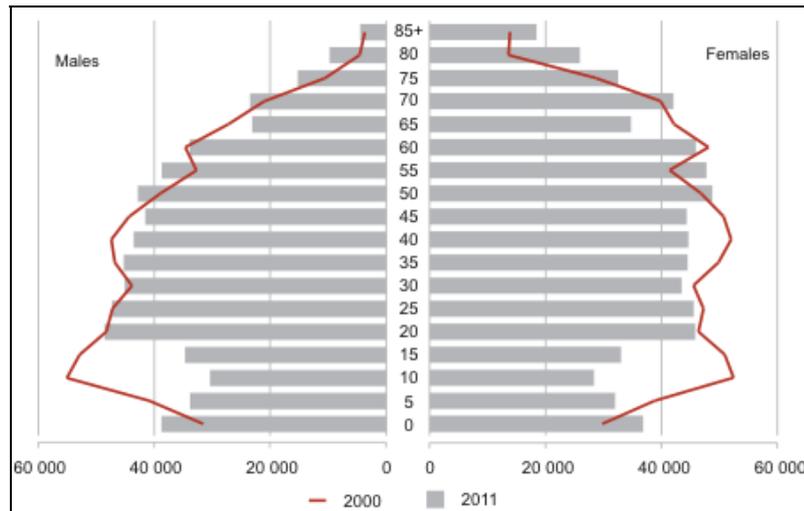
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THOMAS SCHNEIDER

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Graph: The age structure of Estonian society in 2000 and 2011, Estonian Census Bureau <http://www.stat.ee/public/rahvastikupyramiid>

Ethnicity and language

According to PHC 2011, there are 192 ethnic nationalities living in Estonia. In fact, the biggest ethnic groups are Estonians, Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians and Finns. 68.7 percent or 889.770 persons of the permanent population are ethnic Estonians, 24.7 percent or 321.198 persons are of Russian ethnicity. 22.302 Ukrainians account for 1.7 percent, whereas 12.419 Belarusians and 7.423 Finns for less than 1 percent of the permanent population. In total, there are 37 ethnic nationalities that have more than a hundred representatives in Estonia. Compared to the previous census, the share of ethnic Estonians increased by 1 percent, but the population of Estonians decreased by 40.449 persons over the last 12 years; meanwhile, the share of ethnic Russians in the total population has declined by about one percent or 29.980 persons. There has been a decrease in the populations of most of the larger ethnic groups, whereas the number of Georgians, Azerbaijanis, Swedes, Englishmen, US Americans, Italians, Frenchmen, Dutch and Chinese has increased, compared to the previous population census with only 142 ethnic nationalities represented in Estonia.

Of the 1.294.236 enumerated permanent residents in Estonia, 1.101.761 are Estonian citizens; compared to the previous census, the percentage share of Estonian citizens of the total population increased from 80 percent in 2000 to 85 percent in 2011. In fact, 85.1 percent of enumerated permanent residents defined themselves as Estonian citizens and 8.1 percent as citizens of a foreign country; remarkably 6.5 percent defined themselves as persons with undetermined citizenship. Furthermore, 3.116 persons did not specify their citizenship. Compared to the previous census, the share of persons with undetermined citizenship has decreased from 12.4 percent to 6.5 percent, whereas the share of persons with the citizenship of a foreign country has increased from 6.9 percent to 8.1 percent. Of those permanent residents, the largest number with 89.913 refers to citizens of the Russian Federation. Furthermore there are currently 4.707 Ukrainian and 1.739 Latvian citizens living in Estonia.

Furthermore, a total of 157 native languages are spoken in Estonia, compared to only 109 languages in 2000. Estonian is the most common native language and has 886.859 native speakers that account for 68.5 percent of the permanent population, followed by Russian with 383.062 native speakers or a share of 29.6 percent. Besides 8.012 Ukrainian native speakers, there are a total of 25 languages in Estonia that are spoken by more than one hundred people.

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PHC 2011 only provides quantitative figures on age, regional and ethnic structure of the Estonian society as well as scope and distribution of spoken language thereof; however, the December 2012 Estonian Human Rights Report³ comprises – among others – qualitative statements on what people in Estonia know and think on the matter of human rights. In order to provide a broad image of the Estonian society and to contrast quantitative figures and qualitative statements, this section elaborates on the perception of the Estonian individual using the example of human rights.

The Human Rights Report concludes that one-third of the Estonian population is not aware of what human rights are. According to Mart Nutt, Estonians' low human rights awareness results from lacking knowledge on how to identify human rights violations and how to differentiate those from other social problems. Therefore, Estonians do not know how to stand up for their rights and how the general human rights situation in Estonia can be assessed. Based on the Report, the best known rights include the right to life with 92 percent awareness, followed by the right to education with 87 percent and equality before the law with an awareness rate of 86 percent. Along with these figures, the awareness of ethnic Estonians is significantly higher than that of non-Estonians. In general, people primarily perceive those problems that concern themselves most, for example socio-economic problems caused by insufficient income and living standards. Among non-Estonians, limited proficiency in the official language causes additional problems.

A 54 percent majority of the Estonian population believes that the Estonian human rights situation is in good order; whereas 29 percent disagree with this perception. However, the answers to additional questions reveal that a large portion of those who think that the Estonian human rights situation is not fine at all, do not know what human rights are; in fact, 23 percent of the respondents consider their difficult economic situations to be violations of human rights. Even more, parts of the non-Estonian speaking population share consider the requirement for Estonian language proficiency to be a violation of their human rights, along with the requirement of a 60 percent curricula share in upper secondary schools to be taught in Estonian. Indeed, this is generally not a violation of human rights, but might create a feeling of alienation.

According to Estonians, the major human rights issues are related to women's rights: Both the pay gap and inequality are considered to be major issues in Estonia by a population share of 8 percent. Furthermore, 5 percent of the population consider freedom of speech, adherence to laws and unjust punishment, discrimination in the workplace as well as a lack of citizenship and voting rights to be human rights issues. Furthermore, both children's rights and age-related discrimination are suggested by 3 percent, whereas 2 percent of the population consider poor treatment of disabled people to be a significant human rights issue in Estonia.

Conclusion

The PHC 2011 illustrates the overall population decline in Estonia that was generally expected to be higher. The results were received in a rather positive manner by the Estonian public. In fact, the slightly increased share of Estonian citizens as well as ethnic Estonians among the total number of permanent

³ For the 2012 Estonian Human Rights Report, the Institute of Human Rights commissioned the Turu-uuringute AS to conduct a survey of 15 to 74 year-old Estonian residents. The survey used the omnibus method, was carried out in August 2012 and had 1.001 respondents.

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residents was highlighted by local media and welcome among the public. Remarkably, the Estonian population decline of 5.5 percent was significantly lower than the 13 percent decline in Latvia or the 8.5 percent in Lithuania; amongst other explanations, this might be due to the specific nature of Estonian emigration: It is rather based on the pendulum phenomenon – mainly to Finland –, whereas Latvians and Lithuanians leave for more distant locations in a more permanent manner.

According to demography experts such as Ene-Margit Tiit, a decline of 22.000 persons is related to emigration. This figure seems rather small. A recent survey among one thousand Estonians presents a completely different picture: No less than 37 percent of people questioned said they have considered the option of leaving Estonia in the past six months. The survey's representative sampling suggests – as have previous – that as many as 365.000 working-age people have considered moving abroad while estimates suggest 8 percent of the population or 108.000 might actually go through with their plan. These figures are highly alarming. Estonian politics must address the pressing issue of brain drain by providing a sufficient economic framework that helps offering more professional opportunities especially to young people; in fact, a youth unemployment rate of 24.4 percent in the second quarter of 2012 is a huge political, economic and social challenge for Estonian society. Moreover, a population decline of another 32.000 people is due to a negative birth rate; the current total fertility rate is 1.52. Obviously, this birth rate is at less than replacement levels and slightly below the European Union average of 1.59; in fact, the Estonian total fertility rate, as well as the age structure of the population and urban allocation in Tallinn and Tartu is well within European and even global demography trends. However, Estonian politics has long realized the tremendous negative long-term impact of these demographic trends. Strengthening the role of families and reforming the administrative structures are priorities on the political agenda facing the demographic trends. Furthermore, to provide incentives as well as a future model of representative democracy in a shrinking society, various ideas such as voting rights for families, which transfer votes from under people under 18 to their parents, are debated.

The 2012 Estonian Human Rights Report highlights the need for an educational system that teaches the very basic principles of the EU, such as human rights; although the Estonian indicators of human rights awareness do not significantly differ from those in other Western countries. More importantly, the report underlines the dire need to solve the long-standing issue of inadequate integration of some Russian speaking minorities. Ethnic tensions are a major issue in Estonia. However, geographic location and a remarkable Russian speaking minority give potentials to growth. Tallinn and Estonia in general provides an atmosphere of trust, business opportunities and is as a safe haven for small private Russian investments. Russian foreign direct investments (FDI) account for €0.52 billion (4 percent).

In conclusion, the specific features of Estonian demography trends pose huge political, economic and social challenges for Estonian society. At the same time, these challenges might be the chance to “re-invent” democracy for future generations and offer various business opportunities. The next population census in Estonia will be conducted in 2020/2021.