

By Ieva Sliziute

TALLINN Estonia has a long history of both emigration and immigration that has coincided with periods of colonization, independence and occupation. The other period added to this list can be – euro crisis. High prices, austerity measures, bitterness of helping technically richer southern countries, and other disappointments that the euro brought to Estonia encourage Estonians to pack their bags and leave to pursue their happiness in other countries.

Estonia, the 4th smallest euro zone member, has proved that you don't have to be big to make it to the top. Only 21 years ago this little country in the Northern Europe was just one out of 15 Soviet Republics, for decades people overseas never even heard the name "Estonia", for half a century it was just a part of Soviet Union. But it only took two decades for Estonia to make a rapid transformation and become the wealthiest nation in the region, with the best economic performance. Nevertheless, the number of inhabitants in Estonia is decreasing.

Recent preliminary data from Statistics Estonia showed that there were 1,316,500 million people were living in Estonia, which is less than the population of Munich, Germany. According to the statistics, the population dropped by 4400 in 2011.

The birthrate has decreased significantly; natural increase of population became negative again, while it was positive in 2010. 513 more people died than were born.

The biggest reason of decreasing population however is emigration. Last year 3922 more people emigrated from Estonia than immigrated to the country, the largest difference in 10 years.

Raising support fund

Estonia is supporting people who wish to return to their homeland for 20 years now. This year 61 577 euros has been allocated for this purpose.

The Integration and Migration foundation supports integration, and are looking for ethnic Estonians who wish to return to Estonia. The maximum rate of the return support is 2,000 euro and the support is intended for ethnic Estonians holding Estonian citizenship or an Estonian residence permit. They must have emigrated from Estonia at least 10 years ago or were born in a foreign country and need support to return to Estonia due to their financial and social situation.

"The idea behind this return benefit is just to give some extra money for returnees to cover first expenses back in Estonia, have food on the table, roof above their heads. Even though we would like to help everyone, our budget is limited, so we have to choose people who can get our support very strictly," says Martin Eber, the coordinator of Civic Education and Migration Unit in the Foundation.

"We are just trying to give them a good sign, that they are all welcome here," adds Meelika Hirmo, the communication manager of Integration and Migration Foundation.

In 2010, 66 people received the support and the average sum was 12 152 kroons (776,6 euros), a total of 800 000 kroons (51 129 euros). Last year 61 people received it, as nearly 55 070 euros, or an average of 903 euros per person was paid.

Not very popular between ethnic Estonians

The Integration and Migration Foundation also support people who wish to return their country of origin.

"During these 20 years the foundation and through Estonian government and other governments who provided funds, we have helped more than 25 000 people to return to their

motherlands. The number of ethnic Estonians, who we have supported are dramatically smaller: less than 2000," says Martin Eber.

According to him, there were a few hundred people every year who wished to return to Estonia, but during financial crisis there were a lot less, the lowest amount was 12 people in 2005.

Martin Eber says,"It is obviously connected with euro crisis, because people were not so sure about their future anymore. The decision to leave the country you are currently living in is hard decision to make in the first place and to come back to Estonia which was strongly hit by crisis was very risky."

Most of the returning citizens last year were working age adults and almost a third were minors coming to Estonia with their parents.

The largest number of people returned to Estonia from the Russian Federation (58%), the Unites States of America (31%) and Ireland (11%). People also returned from Finland, Georgia, Switzerland, Moldova, Great Britain, Belarus, Ukraine, Sweden, France and Yemen.

Youth emigration

High unemployment rate, especially among youth and open borders have raised a lot of discussions of brain drain and "leaving Estonia" issue.

Regina Feldman, a young Estonian working as a personal assistant for a disabled child in Sweden, believes that the biggest problem is that young people do not get a job in their field after graduation. "For example, one young girl studied telecommunication in the university but after graduation she only had found a job at the supermarket. Then young people start thinking about other possibilities and the only solution often is going abroad," she says.

Meelika Hirno says that going abroad is a negative thing only if you do not come back. Also if you are going just to earn money and work in any service sectors, not doing what you were trained for, with the money from the government and tax payers. "If they go for 2 or 3 years – that is great. It means that they manage to live the way our parents and grandparents were not able to and where only dreaming about," she tells.

However, the Head of the Institute of Economics at the University of Tartu, Raul Eamets states that in general migration in and out has been relatively moderate in Estonia in comparison with other countries.

"The main reason for that is Finland. Our people commute more than migrate. Finland is geographically and culturally close and it is easy to take a boat back to Estonia every weekend. According to Estonian labour force survey, around 30 000 people has worked abroad during a year. This is a return migration," he comments.

"But final truth will be published at the end of May when first data of population census, which has recently been taken, will be made public," Raul Eamets adds.

Invites talents to go home

The country which invented Skype, e-Government software, which is now used in over 40 countries worldwide, and other electronic innovations do not want to lose its talents. Thus, the campaign "Talents, come home" (Talendid Koju) was launched in October 2010 under the patronage of Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves.

The programme invites young talents to come home to Estonia by collecting and presenting all job positions that talented people would be able to get.

In collaboration with different industries they have created "this online environment in which the parties shall meet."

The aim is to help those who are afraid that they will not get a satisfying and fulfilling work position in Estonia and for that reason waste their potential working in service sectors abroad.

Nevertheless, this campaign has been greeted with lots of skepticism. According to Presseurop, it has prompted disgusted reaction from expats – not because they never dreamed of going back to their country, but because they find the word "talents" offensive.

For cleaning ladies, roofers and bus drivers, the call to return to their motherland is addressed to talented Estonians, to geniuses, but not to skilled or unskilled workers.

"There are so few of us that every person, every compatriot, every Estonian is a talent and a value as such, and should be treasured, not denigrated. That goes for talent that has already blossomed, even if it bloomed abroad. And it also goes for talent still waiting for the right moment." the president said in his speech while hosting the "Bring talents home" program.

Ahto Rebas, an advisor to the Ministry of Education and Research, said to Presseurop that the campaign was just sending a friendly message to say that Estonia values its sons and daughters wherever they are in the world.

At the same time, he acknowledged that there is almost no chance of convincing them to return home, especially when you consider they are usually paid salaries which are three times higher than those they could expect in Estonia.

"I am not planning to go back to Estonia. In the beginning it was very hard to be away from home with different culture and language, but I love my life here in Sweden so much more now. After all I can earn much more money than I can in Estonia," says young expat Regina Feldman.

More campaigns to attract emigrants

Ahto Rebas said to Presseurop, that even if Estonians are not coming back, it is still important that they retain their Estonian identity by staying in contact with the country and organising expatriate communities.

With that in mind, he has launched "Estonians Abroad," a website developed with funding from the Ministry of Education, which gives details of 600 expatriate organisations.

The most recent is a President's web campaign on Facebook titled "One Hundred Reasons Why it is Good to Live in Estonia," where President Toomas Hendrik Ilves is urging people to look for positive rather than negative aspects of Estonia.

Other issue – attitude

Regina Feldman points out another reason why she doesn't want to come back to Estonia: "I can not say that Estonia is my home anymore. I no longer even have friends there, it's the attitude of them. Maybe they are jealous."

Referring to President's Toomas Hendrik Ilves speech held in the Kadriorg Rose Garden last summer while hosting "Talents, come home" program, the first attitude which has to be changed is the idea that if you leave Estonia, you betray your homeland.

"After 1 May, 2004, when we started to enjoy all of the freedom of workforce rights throughout the European Union, finally, we were truly free. That freedom means that just as others are free to come to Estonia, so, too, are we free to leave Estonia," said President Toomas H. Ilves.

Meelika Hirno says that Estonia has a long way to go, especially in the matter of attitude, trusting each other or cooperating with each other.

"But it all takes time. Like all our 3 Baltic countries we know that we have gone a long way for 20 years, but, for example, Finland had 50 years more for that, so it's hard and unfair to compare," states Meelika Hirmo.

For a country which has a very small population anyway, every person is precious. Meelika Hirmo concludes, "In Estonia everybody needs you; in Germany- nobody needs you. Other countries might need you because it is handy and easy for them, but they would do perfectly without you, while Estonia really needs you and if you will not do it, maybe no one will."

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