



Migration of Latgale Rural Population (1920–1934): Some Aspects of Public Opinion

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Introduction

Migration of population is defined as movement in space between a site of emigration and a site of immigration (Kle m e n ĉ i ĉ 2007, 28). Migration can be classified by temporal features, causes of migration, composition of the migrating group, etc. Migration is usually linked to change of the place of permanent residence, but also the temporary migration (change of the place of residence for a limited period of time) must be noted (Zvidriņš 1989, 288). In many cases temporary migration becomes permanent. It must be noted that migration of population not only means covering some geographic distance, but also crossing some cultural borders (Tilly 1976, 4). An emigrant from Latgale (a Latgallian), when going to another region of Latvia, it meant crossing both a linguistic border – that of the Latvian literary language as opposed to the Latgallian language mainly used in Latgale; religious border – that of Protestantism as opposed to the Catholicism dominant in Latgale; borders of economic traditions – separate farmsteads as opposed to the village “rope” land distribution system prevalent in Latgale, etc. As any migration not only causes changes in the quantitative, but also qualitative composition of the population, the attitude of the local public towards the immigrants plays an important role. Therefore, the chronological range of the present article covers the period of democratic parliamentarianism of the Republic of Latvia. The aim of the present article is to establish the tendencies of the public opinion in relation to the emigrants from Latgale in the context of economy and eugenics, while studying the migration experience of the rural population of Latgale and its qualitative indicators.

The Problem of Overpopulation and the Traditions of Emigration

Since the end of the 19th century the rural Latgale started experiencing a substantial problem – overpopulation. In Latgale after the abolition of serfdom in

1861 the number of rural population grew steadily increasing approximately 2,5 times in the lifetime of two generations, while the amount of available land remained unchanged. In Latgale there were on average 8–12 members in each family, while the numbers in the rest of Latvia did not exceed 3–4 (M a l a h o v s k i s 2014, 125). In this relation the influence of the Catholic church must be noted – the use of any contraception was considered sinful. In addition to that there was a tradition in Latgale that the land available had to be divided equally among the sons of the owner when they reached the appropriate age, which led to the situation that the amount of land available to a family was constantly decreasing. Already during the life of the third generation since the available land was so scarce that many families could not provide themselves with sufficient subsistence from it. The problem of overpopulation also remained during the years of the independent Latvian state. The growth of the population of Latvia was mainly because of the growth of population of Latgale. In mid-1920s the population of Latvia approached 1.9 million. The population of Latgale reached over 500,000 (S k u j e n i e k s 1930, 9, 101).

Table 1

Natural growth of population (S k u j e n i e k s 1938, 10)

Year	Vidzeme (exc. Rīga)	Kurzeme	Zemgale	Latgale	Total:
1921	– 943	+ 52	+ 967	+ 10 348	+ 10 424
1925	+ 1 031	+ 1 867	+1 923	+ 8 016	+ 12 837
1929	+ 251	+ 814	+ 869	+ 5 426	+ 7 360

The great natural growth of population caused impressive migration of the rural population of Latgale to the larger farms of the other regions of Latvia and the city of Rīga.

Emigration of the rural population of Latgale was not a new phenomenon. Since 1880s it was the so-called becoming a *burlak* (the designation used in Latgale to denote the ones going away to take some job), when the small land holders of Latgale went for seasonal employment in both the large farms of other regions of Latvia and Russia – especially St. Petersburg, where they found employment in the rapidly growing factories. Many representatives of the Latgallian intelligentsia of the time opposed this *burlak* business. Francis Kemps wrote that the younger generation of Latgallians “going to Russia and staying there for months on seasonal employment or even years in industrial centres to a great extent yielded to the levelling influence of the great Russian nation” (K e m p s 1991, 93). This influence mainly manifested in weakening of the traditional Catholic faith and influx of Russianisms into the Latgallian speech. Nevertheless despite the negative phenomena, many of the representatives of Latgale learned new skills there, became qualified craftsmen and masters of the trade.

Emigration of the small land holders from Latgale with the purpose to settle permanently in Russia (mainly Siberia) also started in 1870s–80s. In 1890s this movement reached a truly massive scale. There was a rumour spreading among the peasants that there is much free land in Siberia, as well as different exaggerated stories of the beneficial conditions, fertile land, and so on. The historian Boļeslavs Brežgo wrote that between 1895 and 1902 more than 68,000 persons left Latgale. The data on peasants of Latgale leaving especially after 1906 are missing. B. Brežgo states that there are data on emigrants from the Vitebsk government between 1897 and 1907 travelling via Chelyabinsk. In 1907 the number of these emigrants was especially high – 22,478 persons (Brežgo 1954, 115).

The Economic Context of Migration

As the result of World War I Latvia's agriculture lost more than 250,000 people. After the war and the War of Independence the demand for labour was high both in the countryside and in towns, dictated by the need to restore the roads, rebuild the buildings and perform other work to repair the damage caused by war. Rebuilding and development was extremely rapid in Rīga. In 1920 there were 185,100 inhabitants in Rīga, while in 1923 the number approached 280,000 (Zuševičs 1994, 45, 50). The increase of population of Rīga was mainly based on influx of people from other regions, a substantial part of which was constituted by immigrants from Latgale.

There was an acute shortage of farmhands. For the farmers of Latvia this issue of farmhands was among the most pressing. This shortage was the most pronounced in Vidzeme. For example, in 1920s the shortage of farmhands was indicated by on average more than half of farms (Malahovskis 2014, 130).

In Latvia of 1920s farmhands were roughly 12 % of all country population. According to the data of statistics, every year more than 20,000 workers left Latgale, the number constituting approximately 12 % of the total number of farmhands in the country. In addition to that around 8,000 of them never returned to Latgale, settling permanently in other regions of Latvia (Malahovskis 2007, 149). It must be noted that these are just the official statistical data, while in practice the number of emigrants must have been greater. In addition to that, the migration of population within the borders of a state, especially if it has seasonal character or even shorter duration, is difficult to control and monitor. Most of the workers from Latgale were farmhands – more than 60 %, followed by ditchdiggers, road and forestry workers. As the farmhands from Latgale could be hired for a pay approximately 30 % less than workers from other regions, they were actively recruited by agents from Vidzeme, Kurzeme and Zemgale (LRSS, 1. Saeima: 571. sl.). The peculiarity of the temporary migration of the Latgale rural population was the fact, that the ones leaving for work elsewhere left their own farms during the season of agricultural work. This meant that the main workers in numerous farms were women, children and the elderly ones.

The significant number of farmhands in Latvia marked a substantial problem – the time and conditions of work. The 1st Saeima (Latvian Parliament) spent several sittings in March 1924 in discussions regarding the working hours of farmhands. The initiative was that of the Latvian Social-Democratic Workers Party, proposing to set an 8 hour working day. Judging from the specifics of the agricultural work, limiting of working hours taking into account the low level of use of machines for the work was an overly complex task, and after lengthy discussions this proposal was not accepted. Still the discussion in parliament, through expressions of some members of parliament, provides an insight into the public opinion prevailing in the rest of Latvia regarding the farmhands from Latgale. The ardent defender of the interests of Latgale F. Kemps stated: “This law on working hours, although not suited to [the situation of] Latvia <...> is necessary in the circumstances of the results of our unjust agrarian reform. So that you, the Baltic ones, had to learn somewhat to respect [other] people, so that you had somewhat greater respect towards that worker from Latgale <...>, carrying your machines and providing you with your big harvests” (LRSS, 1. Saeima: 585. sl.).

A member of parliament from the Latgale Workers Party Jāzeps Trasuns explained the social differences between the farmhand in Latgale and other regions of Latvia: “A servant in Kurzeme and Vidzeme is a person of a completely different class than the landowner. When in Latgale the owner and the servant work the same hours, leave for work at the same hour, and when they sit down at a glass of beer, then a few days they may sit there together doing no work <...>, but in Vidzeme and Kurzeme it is different. In many cases while the owner is resting the servant has to work. There the servant not only would not eat from the same bowl with the owner, but he would not enter the same room either. When he does enter that room, then it is not as when visiting an equal, but rather when approaching some master” (LRSS, 1. Saeima: 571. sl.).

There was no unified opinion regarding the situation of farmhands from Latgale in the farms of the other regions of Latvia. The statements of some MPs from Latgale at the sittings of parliament are as follows: “The farmhands from Latgale is mercilessly sucked dry and swindled (LRSS, 1. Saeima: 1005. sl.), the Latgallian either returns to Latgale as poor as he was while leaving, or – the Latgallians are enslaved” (LRSS, 2. Saeima: 875. sl.), and the like. At the same time the representatives of Vidzeme emphasised a completely different view: “The Latgallians are here held in really high esteem. Having served until autumn they are returning to their homeland to tell about the culture here and the prosperity of the people living here. And they are returning wearing not that miserable short coats and bast shoes, but well dressed. And their pockets are filled with the money they have earned, enough to pay their debts and buy a horse” (LRSS, 2. Saeima: 875. sl.). It must be said that these opposite views were both true and not, as in many cases the situation of a farmhand was determined by some subjective factors – the attitude and views of his employer – the landowner.

Altogether in 1920s the public opinion was quite tolerant towards the temporary migration of the Latgale rural population, as from the economic view it at least

balanced the disparity between the great number of rural population and the small amount of available land in Latgale, while the farms of the rest of Latvia could find the hired labour they needed. The situation changed around the end of 1920s and early 1930s, when Latvia was hit by the results of the global economy crisis. For example, the newspaper “Jūrmalas Vārds” wrote: “Jūrmala is flooded with the Latgallians. This is a fact, as everywhere where any work is being done you will find at least a Latgallian. A local worker may clearly consider themselves jobless. <...> But had they stayed in their Latgale and worked more diligently in their own fields, there would have been daily bread for both them and us”. Further the author of the article states that there is some benefit from the Latgallians, as “the money that these people earn with their hard work, is partially transferred into the pockets of inn-keepers, thus providing some benefit for them and also some for the town as such” (K r i š i ņ š 1933).

It must be noted that at the beginning of 1920s also the migration of the rural population of Latgale to Kurzeme and Zemgale took place, with the aim of permanent resettling there. This activity was initiated by the Latgallian politicians. In order to reduce the shortage of tillable land in Latgale, it was planned to move some 2,000–3,000 families. As the attitude of the local population at the destination was openly hostile (protests against settling of *foreigners*), while the local municipalities in the best case were displaying indifference, the Latgallian MPs admitted at the parliament that the resettling has failed, as only some 200–300 families instead of the promised 2,000 have actually resettled. According to the data of the Ministry of Agriculture from 1 July, 1930, 425 farms had been allocated in Kurzeme and Zemgale to emigrants from Latgale (M a l a h o v s k i s 2014, 147). Still, notwithstanding the initially negative attitude, the emigrants from Latgale gradually adapted to the local circumstances, keeping the Catholic faith as a special manifestation of their sense of identity.

The Context of Eugenics

In 1920s and 1930s the ideas of eugenics reached global popularity – those of increasing the number of “more valuable, more desirable” people simultaneously diminishing the number of those “less valuable and desirable”. Also, in Latvia representatives of different research fields actively participated in discussion and promotion of these ideas (Z e l č e 2006, 100). After establishing the independent state of Latvia, the Latvians still lacked the common national sense. The researcher of national processes Jāzeps Brolišs indicates that the Latvians divided themselves into “the Latgallians and the Baltic ones, the true and the non-true, the *čangali* and the *čiuļi*”, and so on (B r o l i š s 2000, 39). Wider strata of the public were still ruled by certain stereotypes and prejudices, actively supported by the nationally conservative press.¹

¹ For more detailed information, see: Malahovskis 2017 – Vladislavs Malahovskis, „Diskursīvais nošķīrums „latgalieši – baltieši” nacionālkonservatīvajā latviešu presē (1920–1934)”, *Vēsture: avoti un cilvēki*, Daugavpils: Daugavpils Universitāte, 20, 217–224.

In accordance with the theory of eugenics, the population of the ethnically diverse Latgale are “an ethnographic type with extremely negative racial biological features” (A k e r m a n i s 1928, 821). The economist Alfrēds Ceihners states that in Latvia only 60 % of the natural population growth is constituted by the Latvians, and in addition to that 38 % of them are “the physically, culturally and economically comparatively inferior Latvians of Latgale” (C e i c h n e r s 1930, 322). In the article of the newspaper “Latviešu Balss” devoted to the issues of the natural growth of population in Latgale A. Ceihners states that of each 100 individuals increase in population of Latvia 70 are Latgallians. Furthermore, only in the second half of the 1920s ca. 40,000 Latgallians migrated to resettle permanently in other regions of Latvia. As this tendency remains, there are substantial worries regarding the ethnic “purity” of the Latvian nation. The inhabitants of Latgale were said to be relatively uneducated, as in mid-1920s only 54 % of them could read, while in other regions the percentage was around 75–90%. In Latgale there is a very low number of students in secondary schools – at the end of 1920s only 13 % of the total number in Latvia. Also, among the 7,000 students of University of Latvia only around 300 (or 4 %) are Latgallians. Lack of education and culture, as well as great consumption of alcohol, influence the high proportion of different crimes in Latgale: “Of all persons convicted for bodily harm and violence against individuals during the recent years (more than 600) 43 % are those convicted in Latgale”. Therefore, every effort must be made: “In order to keep Latvia from gradually getting more and more Latgallians, to keep the quality of nation in Latvia from deterioration, and the power of our nation and state from diminishing, and in order to improve the economic and cultural well-being of Latgale, it is necessary to decrease the birth rate in Latgale greatly” (C e i c h n e r s 1931).

Response of the Latgallian press to similar articles was harsh. So the clerically conservative newspaper “Latgolas Vārds” wrote: “Oh, you, poor Latgallian, they are afraid of you; thinking of you the Baltic one’s thighs are trembling in fear! You are said to conquer the Baltics! We can live to see the time, when the Baltic ones will start building on the borders of Latgale the Chinese walls, and will be more likely to import the Kirgiz to work in their fields than let it be done by the conquerors – the Latgallians” (K i b e l n i k s 1929).

Summarising the previously discussed it can be said that in 1920s the public attitude towards the temporary migration from Latgale was comparatively neutral, as Latvia, especially its rural districts experienced shortage of labour. At the same time temporary and permanent migration was used as at least partial solution for the overpopulation problem in Latgale. The public opinion changed towards more critical attitude at the end of 1920s and early 1930s. This was the result of the global economy crisis and under the influence of the ideas of eugenics.

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Vladislavs Malahovskis

Latgalos kaimo gyventojų migracija (1920–1934): kai kurie viešosios nuomonės aspektai

S a n t r a u k a

Pagrindinės sąvokos: *Latgala, kaimo gyventojai, laikinoji migracija, nuolatinė migracija, viešoji nuomonė.*

XIX a. pabaigos Latgalos problema buvo pernelyg didelis gyventojų skaičius. Ši problema išliko ir po nepriklausomybės paskelbimo Latvijoje. Taigi kasmet iš Latgalos emigruodavo daugiau nei 20 000 darbininkų – jie sudarė apie 12 proc. viso šalies ūkyje dirbančių žmonių skaičiaus. Apie 8000 darbininkų negrįžo į Latgalą – jie tapo nuolatiniais kitų šalies dalių gyventojais. Analizuojant Latgalos kaimo gyventojų migraciją ir kokybinius rodiklius buvo nustatytos viešosios nuomonės apie žmonių migraciją iš Latgalos tendencijos. Straipsnyje aptariamas demokratinis parlamentarizmo laikotarpis (1920–1934) Latvijoje. 1920 m. visuomenės požiūris į laikinąją migraciją iš Latgalos buvo palyginti neutralus, nes Latvijoje, ypač jos kaimo vietovėse, buvo jaučiamas darbo stygius. Laikinoji ir nuolatinė migracija iš dalies padėjo spręsti pernelyg didelio gyventojų skaičiaus Latgaloje problemą. 1920 m. pabaigoje ir 1930 m. pradžioje visuomenės nuomonė šiuo klausimu tapo kritiškesnė – tai buvo pasaulinės ekonomikos krizės ir eugenikos idėjų įtakos rezultatas.

Vladislavs Malahovskis

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S u m m a r y

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At the end of the 19th century a problem such as overpopulation was typical to Latgale. This problem remained even after the formation of the independent Republic of Latvia. Thus every year over 20,000 workers emigrated from Latgale, they represented about 12% of the total number of farm workers in the country. About 8,000 workers did not return to Latgale. They became permanent inhabitants in other parts of the country. Analyzing the migration of Latgale rural population and qualitative indicators, trends have been established in public opinion towards migration of people from Latgale in the context of ideas of economics and eugenics. The present article deals with the democratic parliamentarianism period (1920–1934). In 1920s the public attitude towards the temporary migration from Latgale was comparatively neutral, as Latvia, especially its rural districts experienced shortage of

labour. At the same time temporary and permanent migration was used as at least partial solution for the overpopulation problem in Latgale. The public opinion changed towards more critical attitude at the end of 1920s and early 1930s. This was the result of the global economy crisis and under the influence of the ideas of eugenics.

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