



**Leverhulme Centre**  
for Research on Globalisation and Economic Policy

**Research paper  
media briefing**

## **Ageing, births and attitudes towards immigration**

### **Evidence from two transition economies**

By Tom Ivlevs

**Labour immigration is often proposed as a tool to ensure pension system sustainability in ageing societies but immigration often provokes controversy and tension in the host country. This paper shows how attitudes towards immigrants are mellowing in parts of two European countries with among the lowest birth rates in the world, as older indigenous residents become more aware of pension financing problems - and see the new immigrants as key to their economic security in retirement.**

#### **Background on Latvia and Ukraine**

In the 1990s Latvia and Ukraine both experienced a dramatic fall in fertility rates, as the economies struggled to cope with the transition from planned to market economies. Since then birth rates there have remained among the lowest in the world. At the same time both countries have experienced high emigration rates as workers head West in search of better economic conditions. This is putting serious pressure on the pensions system. Average pensions in Latvia and Ukraine, which are financed for the major part by pay-as-you-go systems, have been systematically below national subsistence income levels. Dr. Ivlevs says: "The employment vacuum created by the emigration of Latvians and Ukrainians to the West is encouraging immigration to Latvia and Ukraine from further East - from former Soviet states including those in Central Asia. Ironically perhaps this is creating similar tensions to those reported in the West by the wave of immigration from new European states like Latvia and the Ukraine."

#### **Key Findings:**

- Concerns about pensions affect attitudes towards immigration
- In Latvia people were more positive about immigration the lower the birth rate in their locality
- In Ukraine, in areas with low birth rates, the older people were, the more likely they were to welcome immigrants.
- Women particularly are concerned about pensions - they live longer.

#### **Immigration attitudes and research significance**

The attitudes of citizens towards immigration and what determines these attitudes is central to how a government decides immigration policy. A wide range of considerations affects individual attitudes. Economically, people may think that immigrants reduce wages or increase unemployment or rely excessively on welfare benefits. Other reasons for opposition to immigration include racism, xenophobia, threats to national identity, social norms and cultural and security considerations. So what are the factors that might change public opinion?

This research looked at the role of regional birth rates in determining attitudes towards immigration - something we believe has not been studied before. Birth rates vary considerably in different parts of Latvia and Ukraine, which presented a good opportunity to test reliably the hypothesis that individuals in areas with relatively low birth rates - where they are more likely to be aware of the

population ageing around them - would be more favourable to immigrants.

### The research

In Latvia Dr. Ivlevs studied a survey conducted in 2005 by the Marketing and Public Opinion Research Centre, which contains information on attitudes towards immigration of a broad geographical and socioeconomic spread of people aged 15-74 drawn from 1060 face-to-face interviews. The Ukrainian data came from the 2nd Round of the European Social Survey (2004) which contains 2031 face-to-face interviews and provides information on immigration preferences of a similarly broad range of people aged 14-92.

### The results

Dr. Ivlevs said: "In Latvia people were more positive about immigration the lower the birth rate in the area they were living. In Ukraine, the older people were the more likely they were to be staunchly opposed to immigration in areas where birth rates were high, but also the more likely they were to welcome immigration in those regions where the birth rate was low. In both countries, women were more aware of ageing and pension financing problems and how immigration could be a solution - this is probably because they live on average ten years longer than men there."

### Conclusion

Dr. Ivlevs says: "In most developed countries, the dependency ratios are constantly growing and the natural question arises how the pensions of an increasing number of retired people will be financed.

"This research largely supports the theory that the nearer people get to retirement and the more they see their state

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pensions under that the more willing they are to accept working immigrants.

"This research is particularly relevant in areas with rapidly ageing populations and low pension levels."

"The alternative to immigration is to work long beyond the current retirement age, improve productivity significantly or for more of those of working age who currently don't work to be brought into the labour market".

## GEP Academics:

### Dr. Tom Ivlevs

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Tom Ivlev specialises in the field of migration. He is studying the relationships between labour migration and foreign investment; the role of ethnicity in determining migration flows; age-related determinants of attitudes towards immigration and dual migration flows in Central and Eastern Europe .

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