

Intervention by Paul-Eerik Rummo (Minister of Population and Ethnic Affairs) Estonia

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I would like to make you acquainted with some steps taken or planned by the Estonian government in order to improve the demographic perspectives of the country. The background situation is quite dramatic. It is forecasted (perhaps in a little exaggerated manner, but anyway) that our population of 1.4 millions may be decreased to a scarce million or even to seven hundred thousands as soon as in the middle of this century.

That's why the government which came to power in April 2003 declared the issues of population as our highest priority. A document called Fundamentals of Estonian Population Policy was adopted in December. It defines, along with the corresponding political measures, some most vital demographic objectives, such as increasing of number of births to reproduction level and increasing of not only the average life-expectancy as such but, which must be underlined specially, the average *active* life-time of both women and men. The issues of immigration and integration of immigrants, as well as those of internal migration and employment perspectives in different regions of the country, are also covered by this document. On the basis of it, activity plans for this year and the next ones will be worked out in two months.

At the same time, some quite radical steps have been taken already. Our approach to the problem is rather logical than ideological and rather practical than rhetorical. We try to make clear the reasons of the low motivation to give birth and, accordingly, we try to provide people in their fertile age new constructive impulses. That is not to say that we are so called buying babies from people or in some unfair ways luring or forcing somebody to give more births. But it is visible that after a long period of very low fertility rates and of rather negative mentality in this field, there are appearing people again with quite a positive attitude but in the same time, with hesitations on the practical everyday ground. Such changes of mentality must be supported; such people must be helped to overcome their fears.

So, from the beginning of this year, an allowance called parental compensation or parental salary will be paid from the national budget of Estonia to the mother or the father of a newborn during a year, in amount, for working people, of the parents' average salary of the previous year

and in amount of the state's minimal salary for students and unemployed. At the same time, the student loan will be partly or completely paid by the state for the graduated students in the case of getting children. In addition, there are some steps taken and some more under discussion to strengthen the correspondence between pensions for those retired and the number of their grown-up children.

One thing more: by the steering committee of the Health Insurance Department it was decided recently that the costs of the infertility care procedures will be compensated to the patients in measure of 80 percents. There are some thousands of persons interested but the prices are quite high. In the same time, we may be sure that children who will be born with help of those procedures are really waited and loved ones.

The next steps we are working on just now are aimed to design a most favorable environment for flexible connection of work and family-life, including creation of a family-oriented work environment and of more models for daycare, such as, for instance, public-private-partnership in providing daycare facilities at the working places or creating databases of trustworthy baby-sitters. According to opinion polls and sociological researches, some 70 or even more percents of women in fertile age prefer both to work and to have children. It is a great challenge and a great chance for themselves and for the society. We must work to make it possible.

Ladies and Gentlemen, all European countries have the same trouble of low birth rates. I don't think that list of possible political measures to overcome this problem can be very long. We have chance to learn from each other's experiences. Thank you for information about your ones.