

Dual citizenship for Latvians

Podwójne obywatelstwo dla Łotyszy, Podwójne obywatelstwo dla Łotyszy

On 9 May the Latvian parliament adopted amendments to the citizenship law following two years of work. The amendments concern above all the possibility of dual citizenship. The amended law enters into force in October 2013 and lays out that Latvians living abroad (irrespective of where they are resident) will retain the right to Latvian citizenship if they left Latvia in the period between 17 June 1940 and 4 May 1990 due to the Soviet or German occupation or if they were deported. Furthermore, those who have obtained citizenship in any of the EU, EFTA, NATO or other countries which have signed a dual citizenship recognition agreement with Latvia will be able to have dual citizenship. New born babies, regardless of their place of birth, will be guaranteed Latvian citizenship if one of their parents is a Latvian citizen. Finally, those who have received other citizenship through marriage or adoption will also retain their Latvian passport. On this list are also Australia, New Zealand and Brazil, where there is a relatively large diaspora of Latvians dating back to the Tsarist times. However, citizens of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) cannot count on an additional, Latvian, passport. The adopted amendments also make it slightly easier to grant Latvian citizenship to people who are stateless and born after 21 August 1991 if they live permanently in Latvia and do not have a passport from any other country. Children of the stateless will, following the suggestion which the EU has repeatedly made, automatically become Latvian citizens from the moment they are born.

Commentary

- Amending the citizenship law became a necessity from 2004 when Latvia entered the EU. Since then over 80,000 Latvians have emigrated to the UK alone. The organisations and circles of this “new” emigration have long lobbied for the adoption of suitable provisions. The amendments to the citizenship law are not only a kind gesture towards emigrants and their children but also an attempt to prevent a long term demographic catastrophe as it makes it easier for emigrants to return to Latvia. Between 2000 and 2011 the number of the population in Latvia declined from 2.38 million to 2.07 million. According to estimates from the Latvian Ministry of Economy, should current trends continue, the population of Latvia will shrink to 1.6 million by 2030. According to data from the ministry, 80% of the Latvians who have left Latvia in recent years are under 35 years of age.

- The passed amendments will not introduce important changes to the situation of the (mostly) Russian-speaking stateless population in Latvia (18% of Latvia's population) or any changes for CIS citizens. Considering the former (those born in Latvia after 21 August 1991) these amendments are limited to a slight easing of bureaucratic procedures. CIS countries (and Israel) are not included in the list of the countries whose citizenship can be shared with Latvia's.
- Granting Latvian citizenship to people (or their descendants) who left Latvia during the occupation and to people from the Latvian diaspora in Australia, New Zealand and Brazil is not only a symbolic gesture and confirmation of a specific interpretation of history in which the Soviet times are regarded as a period of occupation—it is also an attempt to increase the influence of ethnic Latvians living abroad on the political situation in the country as Latvian citizenship is linked to the right to vote. It is therefore an attempt to counterbalance the electoral strength of the Russian-speaking minority.