

CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND

A GROWING PROBLEM IN THE EU

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It is difficult to know the exact numbers involved, but estimates suggest that approximately 500,000 children are left behind in EU countries, that is, 500,000 have at least one parent abroad. Most of them are in Poland and Romania – a result of the size of these countries. But as a percentage of the population, the problem is greater in Lithuania and Latvia. There might also be a considerable number of cases in Estonia and Bulgaria, but the numbers are not known.

This text will focus on Lithuania, one of the hardest struck countries. Estimates of the number of children with one – or both – parents living in the UK, Ireland, Norway, or some other Western European country have varied between 10,000 and 20,000. Nobody knows the exact number. Some years ago, the Children's Rights Ombudsman of Lithuania claimed that five percent of all children are in this situation. No one knows whether this figure is different today.

It all started in 2004 when the poorest countries around the Baltic Sea – Poland and the Baltic states – joined the EU. The borders opened up and we saw a huge flow of workers moving westward. In the first stage, it was primarily young single people without families who emigrated, but there were also some breadwinners searching for better pay abroad. Many found jobs in the construction business, the care sector, and the cleaning industry, working for a couple of years before – at least in many cases – moving back home again.

Some were forced to move away from their homeland because of a lack of work, others freely chose to leave. In addition, among the emigrants were of course students choosing to study abroad and highly educated people wanting to explore new career possibilities and earn more money.

At the end of 2008, the nature of emigration changed to some extent. The financial crisis had hit the Baltic countries – though less so Poland – more severely than most other European countries. Unemployment skyrocketed and a growing number of emigrants were now compelled to leave the country.

This also meant that the number of emigrant parents being separated from their children started to grow. These countries had already been confronted

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with this problem, in some cases even before EU accession. In 2007, Lithuania thus changed the law declaring that parents had to report to the authorities when children were left in the care of grandparents or other caretakers.

“We had to introduce this law. The situation had gotten out of control with parents just leaving without reporting it to the schools or any other public institution”, says Rūta Pabedinskienė, Chief Specialist at the Family and Children Division of the Ministry of Social Security and Labor. “Already back in 2004 the first teachers reported cases where children who used to be fine suddenly showed a lack of concentration and started to misbehave. It turned out that they no longer had their parents around.”

Today children with one or both parents abroad can be found all over Lithuania, in big cities as well as in the country – with slightly higher numbers along the Baltic Sea coast. Pabedinskienė admits that the situation for many children is still severe. But she sees a couple of indications of improvement:

“One sign is that parents nowadays more often take their children with them when emigrating. Another positive sign is that, as the years pass by, both families themselves as well as society have found better

structures to deal with the situation. We all have more knowledge of the problem today, and we try to act accordingly. A third positive sign is that children with parents abroad are less stigmatized as ‘problem’ children nowadays, since so many are, or have been, in that same situation.”

When it comes to international research on migration, the focus has been on the receiving countries, on how their labor market has been affected as well as on the social consequences. Concerning migration source countries, some research has focused on remittances to family members left behind, but less on the social consequences for them, especially for the children.

So how are the children doing? All people working on this question underline two things. First, many are doing fine; it is wrong to categorize them all as problem children just because one or both parents live abroad. Second, it is difficult to find out when these children aren't doing well, since parents and caretakers are reluctant to admit it.

But one conclusion can definitely be drawn: a disproportionate number of these children develop problems. The children can be bad-tempered, sad, worried, and absent-minded, and many have difficulties with their schoolwork. For some, the situation has become even worse. The head of a juvenile prison confirms to me that the number of teenagers with one or two parents abroad is overrepresented in the prison. Youth with absent parents are also common in institutions for children whose parents have lost custody of them, says the head of a national center for such institutions, Rytis Siautkulis:

“The parents do not always realize the difficulties for a grandmother or an aunt in raising the kids and establishing limits for their behavior.”

When trying to help these children, one has to focus on the whole family in question, not only the children. For the sociology professor Irena Juozeliūnienė at Vilnius University, who has been doing research on children in this situation since 2005, this is the first conclusion that she wants to emphasize.

“Three generations of the family can be included in this complicated situation, since grandparents often are the ones taking care of the children. I have interviewed many families where parents are in conflict with their own parents on how the children should be raised.”

Grandparents tend to use authoritarian parental methods from Soviet times, which are vastly different from the methods used in the 21st century. Additionally, children tend to listen less to their grandparents, whatever methods of parenting they use. “You are not my mother!” is a common answer that Irena Juozeliūnienė has heard from children being brought up by their grandparents.

“There are of course examples where grandmothers turn out to be excellent guardians, but I have seen several cases in my research when children feel that they don’t want to bring up intimate issues with their grandparents, only with their parents. And when the parents aren’t around, it creates a problem.”

“Another sensitive issue is the varying interest among grandparents in taking on this rather heavy burden. I have interviewed several who have been forced to leave their houses in the countryside to come and live with their grandchildren in town. It might work at the beginning, but after a while they get tired – especially when the parenting is difficult – and want to move back to their own homes. Guardians who feel that way are of course not the best guardians.”

“I had one case in Druskininkai, in southern Lithuania, when a girl instead ended up being the caretaker of her own grandfather who got cancer. He died, and when it was time for the funeral, her parents didn’t show up. Some stories are extremely sad.”

Teenagers who don’t get along with their caretakers, or just need somewhere else to go after school, have very few options. They don’t want to go to child-care centers – the country has 172 such centers – because the kids who go there are much younger. Since 2005, around ten youth centers have opened, partly financed by Norwegian and EU funds. These are places where teenagers can go and meet friends, engage in activities together or just talk to grown-ups who are there to listen to them. The teenagers who spend time there are ordinary kids who just want to have something interesting to do in the afternoons, or kids from socially at-risk families – or kids with parents abroad.

I visited the country’s very first youth center. It is located in Kaunas, the second biggest city, close to the town hall, but hidden in a backyard. Approaching the basement premises, I hear the drums from the rock band. Once below ground I meet kids playing table tennis or just sitting around talking. The social worker Kristina Mačiulytė tells me that they also cook and clean together as a way of giving the youngsters routines of daily life that they don’t always get at home.

“For some of the kids here, we are the only grown-ups they talk to.”

Youths aged 15–30 come here every afternoon, they don’t need to register: the door is open for them. How many of them have their parents abroad? Maybe three or four, but Kristina and her colleague – the youth worker Indrė Maršantaitė – don’t know for sure.

“It’s sensitive; the kids do not necessarily tell us.

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One girl who has been here for months told me as recently as yesterday that her father lives abroad. We never knew about it.”

20-year-old Antanas – we will call him that – comes by the table where we sit. At first he doesn’t want to talk, but then he changes his mind. He has never had any contact with his father, and when he was 16 his mother and both sisters moved to Amsterdam.

“I didn’t want to join them, so I lived alone. It was great, I could do what I wanted and I could have friends over. I talked to Mom 2 to 3 times per week, but I had very little contact with my relatives here in Kaunas. I was fine by myself.”

Well, he wasn’t totally fine, Indrė tells me when he has left the room. On one occasion, one of his “friends” staying over in his apartment stole his computer. That resulted in him gathering other friends to beat him up.

“He was fairly aggressive in those times. He took part in street fights and he smoked marijuana.”

It was important for Antanas to have the youth center to go to during these years, he admitted to me. “But it is depressing to think about all the children who do not get the support that he got”, says Indrė. “Just imagine: we are the only youth center in Kaunas, a city of 350,000 people. Of course, we need many, many more centers.”

Indrė and Kristina tell me about another youngster for whom the center has been even more important. We will call her Edita. She was 14 years old at the time, and like Antanas without a father at home. When her mother moved to Germany, she was left alone with her 8-year-old brother. Her grandmother, who lived in the neighborhood, came by 3–4 times per week to cook for the children. But Edita did not get along with the grandmother.

“She didn’t feel well during those years. She started smoking and drinking, going to bars as if she was 18. She didn’t do her schoolwork and she longed for her mother. Talking with her on Skype wasn’t enough. I have money, she said, but I don’t have my mother.”

Every day she came to the youth center, sometimes taking her brother along. She talked a lot with Kristina and Indrė.

“She knew that we were always here to listen to

her. And we could show her how to cook and how to clean. Today she is fine; the mother has moved back. I think we played a role in helping her cope during the difficult years”.

It is not easy to find a parent to interview on this delicate issue of leaving children behind. But eventually I got in contact with Dalia Bell, today happily married to a Briton but with difficult memories of the years when the family was split in three. She left alone for England 2004, leaving her 16-year-old son with her ex-husband’s parents and her 12-year-old daughter with her sister.

“My children agreed that I should move abroad since they understood how difficult our economic situation was. For the first six months, I hardly spoke with them because I didn’t have Internet and I didn’t have enough money to call them. The situation was of course difficult; they missed me a lot. My son had problems in school, he even stopped going. Neither of them valued the help they got from their grandparents and aunt, they turned only to their friends.”

“These first years I could afford to fly back home only twice a year, and they could only come live with me in the UK during summer holidays. In 2006, my daughter moved here and my son followed a year after. Before I left we had been like friends, we had talked about everything. But things were different now, they didn’t listen to me anymore and they didn’t want to talk to me. It was like a closed door between us.”

Today Dalia Bell has a good relationship with both children, who are now adults. But it was a long journey.

“We lost a lot of important time, they grew up, and I missed it. I regret that I didn’t take them to England at a much earlier stage. My advice to other parents? Make sure that your children understand what is happening: talk to them. And leave them only with those you trust, those who really are prepared to care for them. But most important in my view: bring them along as soon as possible, otherwise you might lose them for life.”

For the European Union, the issue of children left behind has become high priority, since it has to do with the negative aspects of what EU is fighting for: transnational labor mobility. The possibility of working across national borders is one of the drivers of growth for the European Union, underlined in the Europe 2020 strategy. In a report from 2012, the EU commission states that “the issue of the impact of migration on children needs more attention”. The authors of the report stress that more money from the European Social Fund should be used for childcare centers and youth centers in areas of Europe where most such children live.

What more can be done to help these children? The EU report – called Children Left Behind (2012) – emphasizes the importance of schools being able to identify the children left behind and providing after-school activities for them. When necessary, they should also offer counseling. And in areas with limited Internet connectivity, the schools must ensure that pupils can stay in contact with parents abroad.

Kristina Mačiulytė and Indrė Maršantaitė at the Youth Center are often in contact with schools – and



realize how few resources they have to help the children who don't have their parents around.

"Many months can pass without schools even knowing that children are alone at home. And sometimes they never get that information. Every school we have talked to has said the same thing: it is very frustrating, we don't know when parents emigrate and leave their kids with relatives."

When it comes to the number of children left behind, they think it is much higher than the 2000 or so cases that are reported to the authorities every year. I tell them about the assurances from Rūta Pabedinskienė at the Ministry of Social Security and Labor, assurances that the situation for children left behind has improved over the last couple of years. They are not convinced.

"Let's hope that she is right. But nobody knows for sure. In our work, we see no tendency of kids back home with problems receiving more support than in years past."

The Youth Center has also contacted social institutions in cases when the youngsters have more serious problems. And they have been in contact with the police when youth suspected of crimes have come to the center.

"The sad fact is that we lack institutions where the children can get professional help when they are not feeling well. The shortage of psychologists is severe".

In Vilnius I meet three young psychologists in the premises that they have just started renting – the walls are still white and the rooms are mostly unfurnished. We sit around one single table in a big room, discussing their new project: a center concentrating on families where one or both parents live abroad.

"We are advertising and we are contacting schools all over greater Vilnius. But it is difficult to make families come to us – it is a sensitive issue. By experience we know that many need psychological help, but few

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seek it", says Inga Truskauskaitė-Kunevičienė. "Our idea is to work with all members of the family, not only the children".

"Our message is: moving abroad and leaving children with relatives or friends doesn't have to be dramatic, it is part of our society today, it will continue to happen. But when doing so, people have to prepare themselves and their kids for this change."

In their work, the young psychologists have run into cases where such preparations were nowhere to be found.

"I had one 9-year-old who was left alone for 2–3 months. Eventually the mother realized that she had to move back home. I just hope that such cases are rare," says Truskauskaitė-Kunevičienė.

What are the most common psychological problems that they have seen in these troubled children?

Many of them lack a trusting and close relationship with a parent or any other adult, which means that no one is around to give them guidance and emotional support.

"This risks leading to an inability to foster close ties with other people later in life, they might develop a fear of starting a family of their own," argues psychologist Lina Gervinskaitė-Paulaitienė.

The psychologists also see a problem when children are overwhelmed by gifts and money sent home by their parents. The children are led to believe that the best way to show love is to give presents. But the most serious cases might be the small children who don't really understand what is happening.

"A 5-year-old child doesn't understand the difference between a parent moving out for a period of time and a parent disappearing for good. The child might think that the parent is lost forever, which can lead to serious emotional problems," says Truskauskaitė-Kunevičienė.

When Juozeliūnienė at Vilnius University met slightly older children, she was struck by how much they are simply waiting. They wait for nothing other than their parents to return, or at least give them a call:

"When these children recount something that has happened, they don't speak of 'last Thursday', they say it happened 'two days before the latest call from Mom'. They live for these telephone calls or talks via Skype."

Another psychological problem for children left behind is sometimes a feeling of rootlessness. They still live where they were brought up, but since their parents live elsewhere they feel that they themselves also are on their way.

"This can cause problems for some children who are just waiting for the green light to leave the country," says Juozeliūnienė. "They tend to isolate themselves, avoiding friends, unwilling to engage in any deep personal relationships."

Almost ten years have passed since the first children who were left behind came into the limelight. A lot more needs to be done to help them and their families, argues Juozeliūnienė, who stresses that there is no scientific evidence indicating that the affected children are better off today than in 2004.

"You can't say: stop migration! It is just happening, whether we like it or not, and it has both positive and negative consequences. It is up to all of us to try to lessen the negative consequences. We can't hope that state institutions will fix it, we also have to help each other more, share experiences, do volunteer work."

And before society has fully figured out how to best help the affected children, a new phenomenon has occurred: Elderly left behind.

"We are definitely seeing this trend", says Gervinskaitė-Paulaitienė. "With the growing number of whole families leaving the country, old grandpa and grandpa are left alone, often with inadequate elderly care and lack of money". ❌



Indrė Maršantaitė and Kristina Mačivlytė work at the first youth center in Lithuania.