# Social factors as the catalyst of emigration

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**Abstract.** The objective of the study is to address the factors contributing to emigration from Latvia, in particular by highlighting the importance of social factors in the emigration decision, using the theory of push and pull factors of migration as a theoretical basis. The role of the family and the desire to improve not only the economical, but also the social and psychological conditions of families are important factors in the decision-making process, while maintaining links with Latvia. The authors argue that social factors are essential to the migration decision alongside economic factors, and in particular the family situation. The family is a resource that helps to settle in the new country of residence. The family relationship is addressed in terms of both "ontological security" and a feeling of "social anchoring". The family remains important in maintaining links with relatives in Latvia.

**Key words** – emigration, push and pull factors of migration, sense of belonging.

## 1 Introduction

The process of migration has grown after World War II, and particularly in the early 21st century, and includes regions that were previously not affected. The main reasons for migration are identifiable as economic, demographic, ecological and social factors. They also include political persecution, wars, and natural disasters, insufficient levels of employment, family reunification, and rural poverty. Migration has evolved into such a global phenomenon that this time is being referred to as "the age of migration" [1].

Migration most often cannot be explained monocausally. The mobility due to migration is caused by a variety of interdependent reasons that are so intertwined that at times it is barely possible to precisely separate voluntary migration from forced migration. In addition, migration is an ongoing process that takes place over a long time, and the final change of place is just the visible sign, but not the end of migration. It is considered that "internal psychosocial migration" occurs well before "external physical migration" [2].

The traditional model, which evaluates migration push and pull factors, highlights the fact that individuals leave their homes because of unemployment, economic hardships, political constraints and head to countries, regions, where migrants are offered jobs and higher wages. This model often places emphasis on the wage and income gap between the sending and receiving countries. The main reason for emigration is often the desire to resolve or improve economic problems, but social factors are often mentioned as key factors as well [3]. Migration trends around the world are driven by two major considerations: the desire of people

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from less developed countries to improve their quality of life by finding better living conditions, and the need for labour in developed countries, as well as the ageing and shrinking of the population in developed countries.

In Latvia, the migration phenomenon has never been absent, but it has been particularly prevalent in recent decades. Latvia's population is one of the most mobile nations in Europe [4], a typical "sending country". Latvia has experienced intensive emigration in recent years, making it one of the countries that is most affected by emigration in the EU/and the European Free Trade Association.

Although the decision to move to another country is taken at the level of the individual, it is possible to talk about a set of factors that prompt the making of such a decision. In terms of post-1991 emigration, economic factors have been the main causes, but, according to the data, for the majority of people leaving Latvia, several simultaneous causes have been identified. Most commonly, economic factors are closely intertwined with social, family, or other factors. Since the renewal of independence and particularly in the first 20 years of this century, migration trends of the Latvian population have changed many times, affecting the direction of emigration, migrant profile, and the reasons for emigration.

Mihails Hazans outlines four waves of emigration (beginning in 2000), characterised by different emigration trends, and varied emigration profiles [5, 6]. The author points out that in the 1st wave of emigration (2000–2003), the potential for emigration is limited not only by expectations for a better life here in Latvia, but also by an institutional environment that is detrimental to economic migration and by very high costs. In the second wave (2004–2008), emigration becomes more accessible and potentially more "beneficial" after accession to the EU and after the introduction of the free movement of labour, the reduction of migration costs and the effects of social networks. In the third phase (2009–2010, possibly until 2011), the role of non-economic reasons for emigration increases during the economic crisis and the focus on long-term or permanent emigration and the emigration of families. The fourth wave (2012–2014) relates to the period of economic recovery, and the main reasons for leaving were the lack of a sense of stability and clearly definable life prospects, as well as the decisions to emigrate already taken previously, but not implemented yet. Emigration became a normal rather than an extreme step taken in one's life. The non-economic factors remained important, but the role of economic pull factors increased again [7, 8].

The decision to emigrate has often been triggered by a desire to improve the financial and social situation of families, particularly children, by improving their future lives. Although there have been more pull factors in the host country and more push factors on the Latvian side contributing to the decision to leave, emigrants maintain close links with family in Latvia, keep using the language, and maintain the culture of their country of origin while living abroad.

## 2 Methodology

The research uses quantitative data covering a broad and diverse sample of the target group and qualitative data enabling an in-depth analysis of the research issues raised.

To analyse the reasons for emigration, data from quantitative longitudinal surveys of Latvian emigrants have been used. The first wave survey was conducted under the ESF project "The Emigrant Communities of Latvia: National Identity, Transnational Relations, and Diaspora Politics" in 2014 (sample $n$ = 14 048 respondents from 118 countries). In the second wave of the study, carried out in 2019 under the Latvian Council of Science project "Exploring Well-Being and Social Integration in the Context of Liquid Migration: A Longitudinal Approach", 6242 Latvian nationals living outside Latvia were surveyed.

To reduce the full set of reasons for migration to a smaller number of generalized emigration factors, factor-analysis (FA) with the principal component method was employed (eigenvalues > 1). To simplify factor interpretation, a dispersion maximizing Varimax rotation method was used. Interpretation was performed according to characteristics with factor loadings > 0.4 within respective factor. At the next step, based on a factor loadings grouping in quartiles, ordinal variables were computed with values from 1 – the least expressed factor value, until 4 – the most expressed factor value. To find out which reasons for migration dominate in various groups of emigrants, the correlation between ordinal indicators and various socio-demographic variables, i.e., gender, age, level of education, ethnic belonging, and wave of migration was tested.

In order to deepen understanding of the subjective interpretation of migration factors, twenty life-story interviews with respondents who emigrated from Latvia after the restoration of independence in 1991 from the Latvian National Oral History archive were selected. The interviews were recorded between 2010 and 2019 in Sweden and the United Kingdom. The value of stories or narratives is not only in the extraction of information, but also in the analysis of the complex relationship between the narrative, time, and memory itself [9].

The study used a thematic analysis of narratives, exploring the factors that determined the choice to emigrate. In the study process, the study of theoretical sources was integrated with the empirical study, both during the fieldwork and in the final phase of data analysis. The names of respondents in the text have been changed to ensure the confidentiality of data. The text of the interview is indicated by an abbreviation where "NMV" refers to the collection of the Latvian National Oral History archive, followed by a reference to the serial number of the interview in the collection.

## 3 Theoretical basis

The conceptual framework of the push and pull model is provided by Ernst Ravenstein's work "Laws of Migration" (1885) which is widely used in migration research. The framework provided by Ravenstein provides for the classification of migration-related factors in three main groups: the first is the reasons for forcing (push) to leave the country, region or place of origin, the second group includes the reasons for attracting (pull) migrants to a specific destination. The third factor provides that, in order for migration to become possible, it should not be hindered by any insurmountable obstacles or restrictions on leaving [10, 11].

According to the concept of push and pull model in migration, both must be present for migration to occur. Push factors are those life situations that give one reason to be dissatisfied with one's present locale (such as poverty, unemployment, rapid population growth, political repression, low social status); but the pull factors make migration growth appealing (for example, well-being, job opportunities, political freedom, education and the welfare system of the destination country) [12, 13].

The following main factors are often highlighted as the key factors affecting migration: economic factors (the majority of researchers see this as key, especially when developing countries face challenges of unemployment, low wages, limited job opportunities, poverty; those often serve as push factors); demographic factors (e.g., personal characteristics – age, gender, social origins, education level, race, family and ethnicity); socio-cultural factors (e.g., when the younger generations desire to obtain diverse cultural experiences through studying abroad and living for a shorter or longer period in countries overseas); and political factors such as political crises, military coups, discernment, lack of political freedom, social origins or political persecution 13]. Investment in children's human capital, a desire to provide children with a "better future", can be a key driver of migration [14, 15]. If parents aspire to move

for better investment in their children's education, then the parents' migration may benefit in the future [15].

The end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century are marked by a shift of focus towards individual factors, based on the theoretical basis of the scholarly literature of Ulrich Beck, Zygmunt Bauman and Anthony Giddens on the individualisation of society [16]. The rapid changes in the world since the 1970s are often linked to an identity crisis, where individuals find it difficult to build stable identities; economic life has become unpredictable and communities – fragmented. Personal factors, not just socio-economic or coercive, are becoming increasingly prevalent in migration.

According to Elisabeth Scheibelhofer, emigration from Western Europe can be better understood today within the second modernity framework. Although this emigration initially appears to be similar to labour migration, greater emphasis has been placed on individual self-actualisation; the social-economic factor is no longer the determining goal of migration, because emigration is only one option of many, as a model for one's life [17].

In an emigration, individuals are looking for ways to preserve their sense of self that goes beyond the place, time, and social context, and which allows the individual to establish a relationship with others without feeling threatened or marginalised. The immigrant's biographical situation poses many critical situations (a term used by Anthony Giddens that describes transitions from one type of society to another) that reflect the impact of that experience on their identity [18]. By using Anthony Giddens' concept of "ontological security", one can feel safe when one feels a sense of order, continuity, and stability that creates a sense of control [19]. The ontological safety on emigration described by Giddens, is sought by parents both for themselves and they want to provide it for their children [15].

Aleksandra Grzymala-Kazlowska puts forward the concept of "social anchoring" when analysing the Polish community in Great Britain and theorising the various adaptation and "settlement" mechanisms. Anchoring is defined as searching for footholds, enabling migrants to gain social stability and security and to function effectively in a new or substantially altered life environment. As essential "anchors" for the sense of security and stability of migrants, Grzymala-Kazlowska mentions attachment to their language and culture (including religious and food practices), but a crucial role is given to family, and the desire to find or create "real homes" to ensure stability. Similarly, the concept of anchoring is used by analysing migrants' integration into the new home country [20].

## 4 Results and discussion

### 4.1 Push and pull factors of migration

In Latvia's emigrant surveys in 2014 and 2019, respondents were asked a number of questions about the reasons and main objectives of emigration, allowing a number of determinants to be selected. In a detailed breakdown of responses (see Fig. 1), we see that social factors, such as the desire to improve quality of life, are not less important alongside economic ones, etc. For a large part of the diaspora, non-economic reasons are the determining push or pull factors when deciding to leave Latvia. These are followed by a number of economic factors. The family factor: migration together with a spouse, parents or marriage/cohabitation with a partner abroad is at least one of the reasons for emigration for more than a quarter of diaspora members.

Factor analysis yielded the six-factor solution (see Fig. 2). The factor matrix shows that these six factors account for 60% of the total variance between 17 variables. Using the characteristics of quartile rankings calculated basing on the factor scores, allowed us to look at one or another set of emigration factors and in which groups of emigrants they are more prevalent.
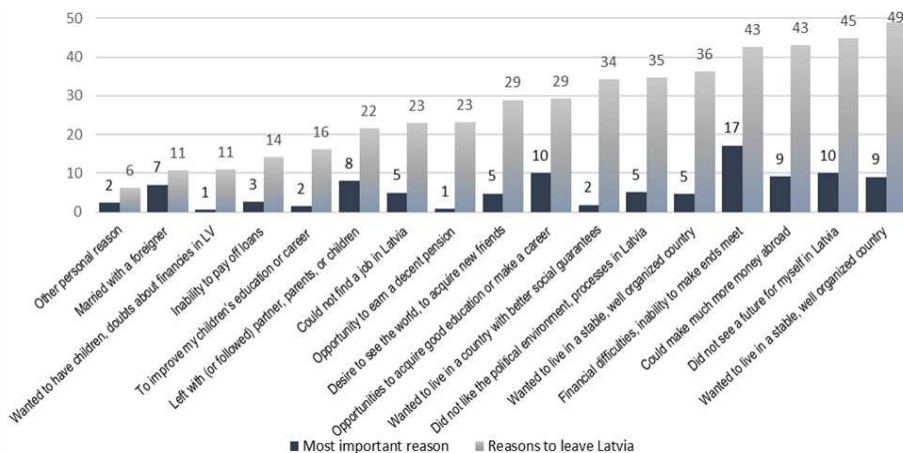
**Figure 1.** Reasons for moving abroad (multiple choices and most important reason) %.
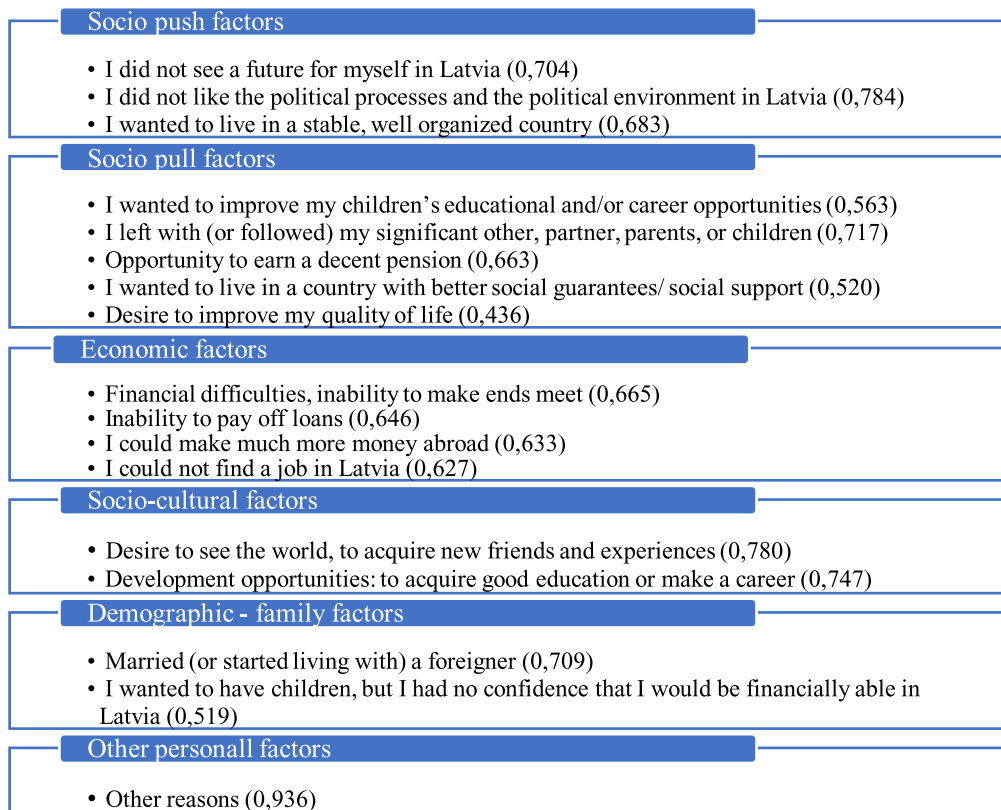


**Figure 2.** Emigration factors (Factor loadings).

The first group of factors, which we can theoretically call social push factors, includes reasons such as the dislike of processes in Latvia, the political environment, the lack of future prospects in Latvia and, in accordance with this, one of the pull factors – the desire to live in a stable, well-ordered country. This set of reasons is statistically significant and more commonly found among young people aged 25–34, more typical for men, Russian speaking emigrants, people with higher education levels and with the lowest level of confidence in the Latvian government. These factors are relatively common for emigrants from the early 2000s through to the economic crisis (2000–2008). These emigrants have significantly more frequently had at least one friend or acquaintance living in the host country.

Emigrant survey data show that it was often the children's future, educational opportunities and broader healthcare services that were behind the final decision to emigrate [4, 21]. Qualitative research data complement statistical measurements with the subjective interpretation of one's experience and decision-making process. In the case of Vita (1974), who emigrated in 2010 together with her children, the reason for emigration was her daughter's health problems and the lack of opportunities to resolve them in Latvia:

"*My daughter injured her knee. Medical examination was long, very expensive and the diagnosis was frightening. With my daughter, we went to Stockholm and got an answer about the incorrect diagnosis. The treatment had to be done in Sweden. I sold my flat and everything I could sell and went with my 3 children to Stockholm for my daughter's treatment. It was the only solution.*" [NMV-4571]

The second set of factors include both non-economic push and pull factors: the desire to improve the education/career opportunities of one's children, the desire to improve one's quality of life, to live in a country with better social guarantees, and to earn a decent pension. At the same time, this group of motives is complemented by a reason for going abroad with a spouse, children, or parents. This group of motives is more typical in the 35–54 year old age group, among respondents with a relatively lower level of education, and is slightly more common among women. Like the previous group of motives, this one is more typical of Russian speaking emigrants and people with a very low level of trust in the Latvian government. A large proportion of emigrants are those who still have their parents' families residing in Latvia, and someone from the respondent's own family already living in the host country. In accordance with emigration waves, more often such a set of reasons is characteristic of expatriates pushed by the economic crisis (2009–2011).

In many emigrant stories, social emigration factors are difficult to separate from economic ones. Financial security is considered a prerequisite for the safety of the whole family, which assumes that emotional security will follow [15]. So Daina (1970) went to Sweden in 2008 where she found work with the help of Latvians already living there. Later, she started her own successful business. At first she lived in Sweden by herself, later her children joined her:

"*I realized that I felt stable and had been here for a long time when the children moved here. I realized that I would not go anywhere anymore, they had to study. Because what a free education, a free university gives them here, I can't provide this in Latvia. My oldest daughter was not in any free budget groups in Latvia, and we paid for her studies. And if I had to pay for all three, I wouldn't be able to. And security as well is very important to me. I'm not talking about emotional but purely economic.*" [NMV-4572]

In addition to the desire to provide children with educational opportunities and thus a more stable future, a factor such as the lack of economic and social support from the spouse is also highlighted. According to Daina, she did not receive sufficient economic and emotional support from her spouse in Latvia who continued to be out of work and left it to his wife to solve all their economic problems. After few years in emigration, she chose to divorce him:

"*I didn't get that support from my family. [..] At first, there was still hope of keeping the family together. But when I was in Latvia, [my husband] came over drunk, and you felt you*

*were not welcome. The other spouse was comfortable, the wife earned, and on top of that, one had to hear: you earn more than me. [..] The person didn't change anything in his life and didn't want anything better.*" [NMV-4572]

Problems in the family, divorce, lack of support, the desire to break away from the parents' family can also work as a push factor. Just as the findings in the quantitative data, in qualitative interviews informants speak about the lack of social support that facilitates social exclusion and isolation. The task of social support is to absorb and reduce the negative effects of shocking and traumatic events by helping individuals to adapt socially. The availability of social support and the option to use various types of such support and resources are essential and meaningful factors for an individual's well-being. In cases when it was stressed that no social support was received from the closest people, such a situation could become the determining factor for making the decision to emigrate.

The main reason for Vita's (1974) emigration (child's health problems) has been accompanied by a second important reason – the attitude of loved ones to her problems:

"*My mother is alive, my father is alive, they are divorced. We call each other, we ask "how are you?" [..] But at the same time they never ask me about my children. They did not help. Ever.*" [NMV-4571]

The third factor identified in the analysis of quantitative data – the economic reason – includes financial difficulties: inability to "make ends meet", inability to find a job in Latvia and/or fulfil financial loans obligations, and as a pull factor – the opportunity of a much better income abroad. At a statistically significant level, differences between groups of emigrants can be observed only by a few characteristics. The most common group of such reasons is among men, emigrants who still have family members residing in Latvia (spouse, children). More often, those are emigrants with a high-school level of education, who have neither anyone of their family, nor friends living in the host country. It is more common among those who left in the post-crisis period (2009–2011).

The fourth set of factors consists of two emigration reasons that we can call factors of personal growth and global exploration. They stem from the individual desire for personal development: e.g. leaving Latvia with the aim of getting a better education abroad, building a career, travelling the world, and making new friends. This set of factors is more typical for young people under 24 years old, but especially among the 25–34 years old. A higher proportion of young people with a relatively low level of education who have family members living in Latvia, but who also already have friends in the host country waiting for them. More often these pull factors are typical of expatriates who emigrated after 2009. Although the level of trust in the Latvian government is low, as it is in the whole of the diaspora, it is still higher than that of the groups described above. Interestingly, according to the 2019 survey, this group has a significantly higher share of respondents who have already returned to Latvia, i.e. return migrants.

The fifth factor is a typical family factor, which includes only two reasons: marriage or cohabitation with a foreigner, as well as the desire to have a child in a country with higher welfare (there is no certainty that conditions will be financially suitable for it in Latvia). The group of these reasons is the most typical for women in the age group 25–34, as well as among those 34–54 years old. This set of reasons is the most common among expatriates who moved abroad in the 1990s and during the pre-crisis period (2004–2008).

Many of the parents of this group of emigrants live in Latvia, but the emigrants themselves continue to live permanently in their host country, or less often, they belong to a group of liquid migrants or re-emigrants. From the perspective of ethnicity, this is more characteristic of other ethnicities (not Latvians or Russians). As can be predicted by the reasons, most of these emigrants already live in the host countries, either together with their own family member(s) or have close friends there.

The last group of factors includes a very diverse set of reasons that, on the empirical level, correspond to the category "other reasons". The most frequently mentioned of those are xenophobia, intolerance of society in Latvia towards sexual (homophobia) and ethnic minorities, Russophobia, as well as discrimination experienced in Latvia because of these characteristics.

## 4.2 Sense of belonging

Data from the second wave of emigrants survey (2019) show that the majority (93%) of recent emigrants have at least one family member or relative living in Latvia, of which 75% have parent(s) or relative(s) (brother, sister, etc.), while 14% of respondents have a spouse/partner and /or children living in Latvia. Emigrants maintain close ties with Latvia, maintain the language, culture, traditions [22], but about one fifth (19%) of representatives of the Latvian diaspora live simultaneously in Latvia and abroad, thus enjoying a transnational lifestyle [23]. While maintaining their home and connection with their relatives in Latvia, they do not feel they have left country of origin. Dzintra (1979) lives in Sweden since 2000 when she came to study in a language cooperation programme, worked as a nanny, then met her husband who was a sailor, and stayed in Sweden:

*"I told my mom that I would love to live in the middle, between Sweden and Latvia. I think I have two homes. When you're here, then talking about home is about Latvia, when you go to Latvia, then talk about home is about Sweden."* [NMV-3702]

As the analysis of emigration reasons shows, family can play both roles: as push and pull factors. However, measurements of feelings of belonging within the framework of the quantitative survey show that people feel the strongest belonging to social groups closest to them – family (~93%) and friends (~85%). Regardless of their emigration experience, there is almost no change in these feelings of belonging over five years (between the two waves of the quantitative survey, 2014–2019). It is different when it comes to belonging to larger social communities, such as people of the same nationality, residents of Latvia, residents of the host country, Europe or the world. Over the past five years, the sense of belonging of emigrants to anything Latvian (Latvia, the place from which he or she left, Latvians, people leaving Latvia, etc.) has decreased significantly. At the same time, the sense of belonging of respondents to their place of residence in host countries has increased significantly, and even more – to the inhabitants of the country of residence and residents of the local neighbourhood, which may indicate successful integration into the country of residence and its society.

The time factor, i.e., the time spent in the host country and the time of moving from country of origin – the wave of emigration, which is also related to the reasons for emigration and the emotional backdrop for the person leaving Latvia, as well as family and social ties, namely, whether a person lives alone or with family, or friends, play a crucial role in maintaining or transforming the sense of belonging in emigration. The preservation and intensification of a strong sense of national belonging over time is influenced by the part of the family remaining in Latvia and the breadth of social contacts in Latvia. The material component that strengthens the feelings of belonging is property ownership in Latvia [24, 25].

While emphasising the emotional aspect of belonging and identity, the role of family and friends is stressed. In the broadest sense of the term, it includes relationships and connections with children, parents and family members, etc. in both the country of origin and in the host country.

In life story interviews, respondents discover that belonging to the family provides or strengthens the sense of belonging to both the country of origin and the host country. As
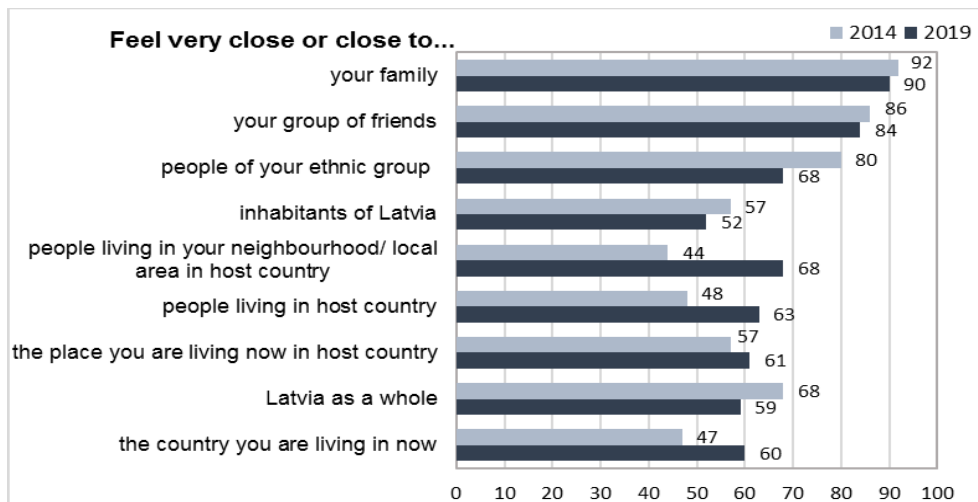
**Figure 3.** Changes in sense of belonging, 2014–2019, %.

Raimonds (1973), who left Latvia in 2010 together with his partner to begin a new life in a new place, discovers:

"*What bonds you with Latvia? – Family, just family, because our home is here. Our belongings are here, and our pets are here. From all of our travels we return there. Although Sweden may not be our home either, this place [where we are living now] is our home. Why? I do not feel at home here, but at the same time, neither do I feel at home in Latvia. My home is where my job is. I am focusing on my job.*" [NMV-4570]

In addition to the role of family ties in maintaining a sense of belonging, awareness of ethnic togetherness through participation in diaspora activities is also important. For example, Elza (1982) left for Sweden in 2000 after graduating from high school to work as a nanny and learn the language; later in Sweden, she also completed her studies and stayed there to live:

"*That true sense of belonging I can get only in my Latvian community. Together with girls playing* 'kokle' [Latvian national musical instrument similar to the kannel/ zither], *along with a choir. It's not something about the state, and it's not even about the land, it's something about my roots, where I am from. That is a part of my identity.*" [NMV-4575]

Social factors play an important role both in decision-making about emigration, as well as in the subsequent migration process. Social factors affect decisions to stay in the host country, or move to another country (liquid, circular migration), as well as the process of developing the sense of belonging to the country of residence or maintaining feelings of belonging to the country of origin.

## 5 Conclusions

In migration studies, the analysis of push and pull factors emphasizes that individuals leave their homes due to unemployment, economic difficulties, political repressions; they emigrate to countries with higher income levels, thus identifying the desire to solve economic problems as the most important reason for emigration and highlighting economic factors as determinants. This study shows that social factors are inseparable from economic ones.

The quantitative survey, as well as the qualitative study, identified push - pull factors both in the native and host country influencing the migration processes of the population. These factors are of a multidimensional nature. Alongside economic factors, the emigration of Latvian residents to countries with a higher level of economic development is influenced by a number of social factors that act as catalysts in decision-making regarding emigration.

The most frequently mentioned social factors of emigration found in the study are: (1) Dislike of the processes taking place in Latvia, the political environment, the lack of future prospects in Latvia acting as a push factor. Corresponding to this, one of the pull factors is the desire to live in a stable, orderly country. (2) Another desire is to improve the educational/career opportunities of their children, as well as their quality of life; the desire to live in a country with better social guarantees. This group of motives is complemented by a reason to leave in order to join family members abroad. (3) Factors of personal growth and world exploration stem from an individual desire for self-actualisation: the aim of getting a better education or building a global career, and travelling the world. (4) Another social factor is the family factor, which includes marriage or cohabitation with a foreigner, as well as the desire to raise a child in a welfare country. (5) A set of factors, the most frequently mentioned of which are xenophobia, intolerance of Latvian society towards sexual, ethnic minorities, as well as discrimination based on these characteristics in Latvia.

The research data suggest that in general, Latvians who emigrated abroad after the restoration of Latvia's independence are aware of their belonging to Latvia. Emigrants maintain close ties with Latvia; they maintain the language, culture, traditions. The most important factors in maintaining a sense of belonging to the country of origin are the relatives living there. Both the wave of emigration (the time when a person has gone abroad) and the emotional backdrop for the person leaving Latvia, as well as family and social ties in general, also play a decisive role in preserving or transforming the sense of belonging in emigration.

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