

## Analysis of subjective wellbeing is important for wellbeing development in the Northern Dimension area

Actors in the social and health care often aim to improve wellbeing of the population in various interventions and development projects. The evaluation of their outcome is usually based on objective wellbeing criteria only, although people's subjective wellbeing (SWB) is the foundation of the wellbeing of the population. Therefore, the viewpoint of families and experiences of individual people should always be essential and deeply considered whenever wellbeing is evaluated. This is feasible, as SWB can be directly measured by qualitative interviews and questionnaires, and many large international research programs have studied subjective wellbeing. This policy brief is based on a current study on SWB of Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Poles and Russians, which was investigated on European Social Survey data from 2006 to 2016 with 48 000 interviewed respondents. The results show that SWB was improving slowly during the period of investigation, and that there were several factors connected to SWB. The most important ones include health, income, trust, religiosity and not being unemployed. The results allow making the following recommendations for actors in the health and social care, and for the work under the Northern Dimension Partnership in Public Health and Social Wellbeing.

- **Recommendation 1.** Subjective wellbeing should be acknowledged in all development projects, decisions, interventions and studies addressing health and wellbeing. Health is an important part of SWB, but not the only one.
- **Recommendation 2.** Data from large-scale international studies can be helpful in the evaluation and interpretation of final outcomes of wellbeing development projects. If the outcome is not easy to assess, SWB measured in existing studies would help to detect the change in wellbeing.
- **Recommendation 3.** Cross-sectoral co-operation and information exchange is beneficial for the assessment of wellbeing outcome of development projects and for research.

## How and why to study subjective wellbeing in the post-socialist countries of the ND area?

The European Social Survey (ESS) has been conducted every second year since 2002. The survey data is collected by trained interviewers and simple questions approved by strong scientific consensus give us valid information on subjective wellbeing. SWB components of the survey include questions **on personal happiness and satisfaction with life as a whole**. These two questions measure feelings and cognitive factors on an eleven-step (0 not at all - 10 very much) scale. According to prior scientific literature and the current study that motivated this policy brief, many measurable individual factors are linked to SWB.

The current study utilized ESS data collected between 2006 and 2016 in five post-socialist countries of the Northern Dimension (ND) area: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Russian Federation. The dataset consisted of opinions of 48 000 respondents from these countries. The data was collected in at least five rounds in all countries except Latvia, which participated in the ESS only in 2006 and in 2008.

Research has shown that it is possible to collect meaningful and reliable **data on subjective as well as objective well-being**. Subjective well-being encompasses different aspects (cognitive evaluations of one's life, happiness, satisfaction, positive emotions such as joy and pride, and negative emotions such as pain and worry). Each of them should be measured separately to derive a more comprehensive appreciation of people's lives (Stiglitz, Sen, Fitoussi 2009).

People in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Russian Federation have **experienced a tremendous societal change** during and after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. It is well-known that such a profound societal change can impact SWB for many decades. Constitutional and economic reforms take a relatively short time when compared to the transformation in social foundations, people's behaviour and attitudes.

These five countries are **members of the Northern Dimension Partnership** in Public Health and Social Wellbeing (NDPHS), one of the aims of which is to promote wellbeing in the ND area. The NDPHS has by now performed **three evaluations** of the achievement of its objectives, but these evaluations have not covered SWB.

## Subjective wellbeing is slowly improving in post-socialist area of NDPHS

One of the main results of the current study was that the subjective wellbeing measured by happiness and life satisfaction of the populations of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Russian Federation was very slowly improving during the study period. At the same time, the improvement was flattening towards the end of the period. (Figure 1)

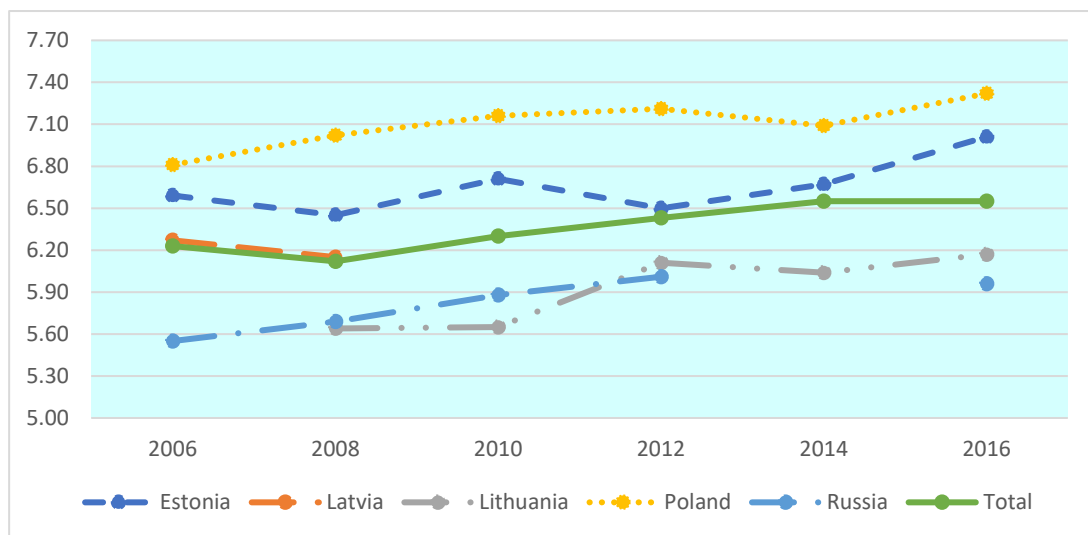


Figure 1: Subjective wellbeing of Estonians, Latvian, Lithuanians, Poles and Russians in 2006-2016 (scale 0-10), presented in yearly means of wellbeing scores of 48000 interviewed respondents according to ESS data.

## Health, income and trust are central to subjective wellbeing

The statistical analysis of the data (linear regression with standardization) revealed the most important factors connected to SWB, as well as differences in the SWB between respondents of different gender, age, level of education, or national origin.

- The most important factors connected to the SWB were feelings about **households' present income, subjective general health, and trust in institutions and in other people. Nearly as important were subjective religiosity and not being unemployed.** Religiosity was most important for Polish people and the least important for Latvians and Estonians.
- **Females expressed constantly higher SWB** compared to males, except for Lithuania, where males scored higher. This finding is supported by some other studies as well. There is also consensus in existing research that the SWB is the

lowest for people in their middle age, and it improves in the old age again. This phenomenon has been interpreted to be a western one, as the SWB of the oldest people has been found to decline in the Soviet era. According to the current study **the SWB among the oldest people was improving slowly**. At the same time, the younger generations born and grown-up after the collapse of the Soviet Union had higher SWB year after year, which has been shown in some other studies as well.

- When **marginal effects** of different factors were studied, the levels of SWB remained usually the same within and between different groups of respondents as to their labour market status. For example, **unemployed people expressed the lowest SWB scores during all study rounds** (Figure 2). An interesting finding was that people **outside the labour market** (retired, students, parents at home with children, or people staying at home for other reasons such as being handicapped) usually had **higher SWB** than people having salaried work.

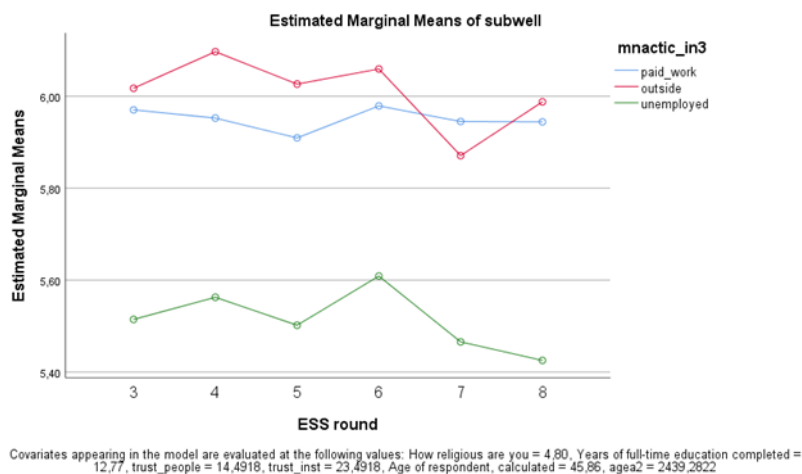


Figure 2. The impact of labour market status on subjective wellbeing during the study period. ( $F=1.386$  ns.). Explanations: subwell = subjective wellbeing; ESS round 3-8 = study round 2006-2016; blue line = paid work; green line = unemployed; red line =outside labour market.

- As to the national differences, **Lithuanians were shown to have lower SWB** compared to other countries throughout the whole study period, when all individual factors were standardised. The relative position of Poland and Estonia maintained slightly higher than others.
- The analysis of educational level of respondents reveals that those having **higher number of study years completed had higher SWB**. **Discrimination attributed to the language** was a problem for SWB only in the beginning of the study, and only in Estonia and Latvia. In the later study years this factor **had no effect on SWB**.

## The connection between hard socio-economic indicators and subjective wellbeing may surprise

Hard social and economic indicators have been the dominant measures in wellbeing programs for two last centuries. For example, higher Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita with purchasing power parity is known to reduce SWB when a certain threshold level of GDP is achieved. Yet, higher GDP is usually connected to higher SWB in developing countries, and not in developed countries, even though these views have been criticized by some researchers. Similarly, rising GINI coefficient figure (greater income inequality) is known to reduce SWB, although there is also conflicting evidence, and higher general unemployment rate is known to reduce SWB.

- Findings on economic measures in the current study were in line with most previous studies: **a rising GDP, higher GINI-coefficient and higher unemployment rate were found to reduce SWB.**

## Final conclusion

Subjective wellbeing is an important part of wellbeing, and it is not explained by health only but by multiple other factors, too. Actors dealing with wellbeing often understand wellbeing narrowly from the perspective of the sector that they represent, instead of having a comprehensive view. Yet, relevant and valid information on SWB with its cross-sectoral connections is available in scientific literature and databases of large-scale studies. This information should be utilized in all instances, where wellbeing is dealt with.

## Literature

- Vainiomäki Paula 2020. Koettu hyvinvointi Latviassa, Liettuassa, Puolassa, Venäjän Federaatiossa ja Virossa vuosina 2006-2016, MSc thesis in Social Politics, University of Turku, (<https://www.utupub.fi/handle/10024/149941>), in Finnish; Subjective wellbeing in Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russian Federation and Estonia in 2006-2016.
- Stiglitz, J. E., Sen, A., & Fitoussi, J.-P. (2009). Report by the commission on the measurement of economic performance and social progress. Paris 2009. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258260767\\_Report\\_of\\_the\\_Commission\\_on\\_the\\_Measurement\\_of\\_Economic\\_Performance\\_and\\_Social\\_Progress\\_CMEPSP](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258260767_Report_of_the_Commission_on_the_Measurement_of_Economic_Performance_and_Social_Progress_CMEPSP)



Co-funded by  
the European Union