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# Between the State and the Kin in Latvia: One-Person Household Social Security from Social Anthropological Perspective

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## Abstract

One-person household is the dominant type of household in today's Latvia. Research on kinship in contemporary Europe suggests that weak kinship ties are characteristic of institutionally strong countries where individuals once incapacitated due to illness, disability, or old age can reckon on some social security. Kinship ties are not particularly strong in Latvia, nor does its social security system compensate for their weakness: the statistical data show that of all household types, one-person households are the most exposed to the risk of poverty, especially those of people over 64 years of age. The aim of the article is to provide a socio-anthropological insight into the ways in which the policies implemented by various political regimes in Latvia over the last one hundred years have promoted the formation of an economically independent individual, thus directly and indirectly weakening family and kinship ties. Drawing on our ethnographic data, we explore instances when the state welfare system failed to provide an individual with social security and inquire into the degree the family and kinship ties in such circumstances are likely to be re-established. The fieldwork findings suggest that the person whose next of kin needs additional assistance or care, faces a dilemma: either to provide support to the vulnerable relative while compromising his/her own economic stability, or to delegate care obligations to the state. However, our data also show: while the country's social assistance system at times falls short of meeting the necessities of one or another vulnerable group, its social insurance system nevertheless has significantly shaped the sense of moral obligation in intergenerational relationships.

Tasks of the article are (1) to survey recent theoretical approaches and research findings on interaction between kinship and the state, (2) to outline the consequences for Latvians' family and kinship ties of the policies implemented by consecutive political regimes over the previous century, and (3) to analyse the role of family and kinship in contemporary Latvia drawing on own ethnographic data as well as statistics and studies on kinship and paying a particular attention to the issue of social security of one-person households.

**KEYWORDS:** kinship, family, state, one-person household, social security.

## Introduction



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In recent decades, in conditions of increasing precariousness of jobs and unprecedented mobility of populations, family structures and the role of kinship have undergone a sea of change in many societies. One of the outcomes has been the continuous growth of one-person households in Europe. That has also been the case in Latvia: whereas mere 14 per cent of all households qualified as such in 1993 (Zvidriņš, Ezera, Goša, & Krūmiņa, 1996, p. 29), their proportion had risen to 25.1 per cent in 2005 and 35.3 per cent in 2019 (CSB, 2020a). Households with three or more persons were undergoing an opposite trend (ibid.). Currently, the one-person household is the most common household type in Latvia.

Small families and weak family ties are typical of societies in the North and West of Europe with developed welfare systems, and conversely, large families and strong family ties are more common in countries with weak institutional support (Heady, 2012; Viazzo, 2010). The growth of the number of one-person households in Latvia could indicate a strong state support that is likely to reduce an individual's reliance on family and kinship. However, the statistics show that nearly a half of such households (17.1 per cent) comprise people over 64 years of age, almost three quarters of whom are at risk of poverty (CSB, 2019). This development raises at least two questions: first, what are the factors that have contributed to such a pattern of relationships among the kin and, second, are the vulnerable relatives' family and kinship ties intensified, to support them in situations when the state is unable to provide one-person households with sufficient social security? To answer these questions, we have structured our paper along the following lines:

- we briefly survey recent theoretical approaches and research findings on the interaction between kinship and the state;
- we outline the policies implemented by different political regimes that have affected Latvians' family types and kinship ties;
- discussing ethnographic data as well as other studies on kinship in Latvia, we analyse the contemporary practices of kinship, paying special attention to the issue of social security of one-person households.

The data of Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (henceforth: CSB), the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) database, and EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) mostly have served us for advancing our research questions. In order to answer these questions, we draw on our fieldwork findings and discuss them in the context of anthropological, ethnological, and sociological studies on kinship in other European countries. We depart from the premise that ethnography, "by virtue of its intersubjective nature, is necessarily comparative. Given that the anthropologist in the field necessarily retains certain cultural biases, his observations and descriptions must, to a certain degree, be comparative." (EB Editors, 2020).

Ethnographic fieldwork has been our main research approach and, correspondingly, the main source of our data. We conducted our field research in 39 households in rural areas (including small towns) of Latvia in the period between June 2017 and December 2019. As characteristic in the contemporary ethnography (*ibid.*), we have developed close relationships with our 60 informants, to elicit specific information on such topics as lifestyle, occupation, family and kinship ties, and intergenerational transmission of memory. Of the all surveyed households, 14 were one-person households (9 of them run by women and 5 by men). Our intention is to analyse ethnographic data, to achieve a deeper insight into the household type that is, according to the statistics, among the most widespread in Latvia and at the same time subject to the greatest poverty risk, namely, one-person households with single inhabitants of over 64 years of age.

Historically, individuals in many parts of the world have depended on their kin in meeting each other's economic, social and cultural needs. This dependence has ensured both intergenerational cooperation and the inheritance of material and cultural artefacts and skills across generations. Family and kin ties have been the main channel for transmission of domestic skills and local social standing as well as world-views and social values (Bertaux & Thompson, 1993, p.1).

For most of the 20th century, there seemed to be little incentive to research patterns of kinship in complex nation-states, such as countries of Western or Eastern Europe. Recently, however, scholars researching contemporary kinship practices have pointed out the decisive role that the state plays in them (Fink & Lundqvist, 2010; Thelen, 2018). During the last two decades of the 20th century, questions focussing on kinship gradually recaptured European socio-cultural an-

thropologists and sociologists' attention. One of the reasons was the realization that the expected prosperity of the modern nuclear family, allegedly fuelled by economic transformation and the modernization of nations, did not materialize, and a great diversity of families and kinship systems persisted in Europe. Moreover, Western European welfare systems, shaped by neo-liberal policies, had accumulated an impressive number of unresolved problems. Around the turn of the millennium, national policy discourses in nearly all countries had come to frame the welfare state as overburdened (Grandits, 2010). "Demands that individual citizens and their family/kin take more responsibility for their social security have become louder" (ibid., p.23).

The term *social security* has acquired markedly different meanings in various fields of practice and inquiry. In social policy it has mostly referred to "any of the measures established by legislation to maintain individual or family income or to provide income when some or all sources of income are disrupted or terminated or when exceptionally heavy expenditures have to be incurred" (Abel-Smith, 2020). Social anthropologists, in their turn, have emphasized that social security cannot be reduced to a material or instrumental basis: meeting such basic needs as food, shelter, health and care, also has to do with people's feelings or trust and existential security (Benda-Beckmann & Benda-Beckmann, 1994; Zacher, 1988). "Individual people differ in their perception of uncertainty and insecurity and in their willingness and ability to live with them. This will depend on the personal economic situation of the individuals and on their psychological constitution, and it will be strongly influenced by the social organization in which they live" (Benda-Beckmann & Benda-Beckmann, 1994, p. 7). However, most people will positively value certainty when confronted with difficulties to provide for the next meal or their children, or to survive when they become frail due to a serious illness, disability, or old age (ibid.).

Responding to the growing concerns about feasibility of social security in contemporary societies, over previous two decades, social anthropologists as well as sociologists have increasingly addressed the questions surrounding this multidimensional concept (Schwarcz & Szőke, 2014; Thelen, Thiemann, & Roth, 2017; Thiemann, 2016), also in Latvia (Bela, 2018; Bela & Rasnača, 2015; Lāce, 2012; Reinholde, 2018; Zīverte, 2014).

In the context of public discussions throughout Europe about family policy, an international, interdisciplinary research project with an anthropological agenda, entitled "Kinship and Social Security" (KASS) was conceived in 2003 (Heady, 2012b). This as well as other extensive studies on kinship in contemporary Europe conducted over the last two decades, noted that the role of kinship was much more central in southern and east Europe, while the state tended to support vulnerable nuclear families in the northwest of the continent. Some contributors argued that as the economy develops, kinship ties weaken (Viazzo, 2010). It is noteworthy that researchers identified macro-regional family patterns not only in terms of geographical location, but also as ensuing from different systems of welfare provision. The KASS authors were seeking to answer whether a strong welfare state tends to lead to reduced family/kinship support. No clear causal direction, however, was established. On the other hand, evidence suggested that in a number of countries a strong welfare state had not led to crumbled family/kin relations but instead often strengthened family/kin support and networks (Evertsson, 2012, p. 28).

Discussions on social security patterns related to the two broad types of kinship and social organization have ensued from research in historical demography conducted since the 1980s (Hajnal, 1982; Laslett, 1983). These studies had suggested that notable macro-regional tendencies in composition of households and marriage patterns existed in the continent and introduced the notion of the Hajnal line, or a broad division between "strong family countries" and "weak family countries". This macro-regional approach has been criticized for ignoring the cultural, economic,

demographic, and ecological differences (in relation to the Baltic population cf. Plakans & Wetherell, 2005; Puur et al, 2012).

One of our intentions in this study is to add to this spectrum of practices, spread along the north-west to south-east axis of Europe, an outline of interaction between welfare regimes and kinship patterns in Latvia, one of the two Baltic States whose territory the Hajnal line crosses (Plakans & Wetherell, 2005, p.108). More particularly, we endeavour to answer the following questions: How far have the social security regimes implemented in Latvia by different state formations in the course of the previous century, superseded mutual assistance patterns within family and kinship networks? Have the state-advanced welfare policies made kinship ties redundant as far as an individual's social security is concerned? Last, but not least: in what ways can an analytics of biopolitics contribute to identifying the forces shaping kinship systems?

Since Michel Foucault introduced the term *biopolitics* in the 1970s, it has served as an analytic lens in a number of disciplines, including social anthropology. On the level of social theory, Thomas Lemke has advanced a methodological approach, the *analytics of biopolitics*, to examine life processes, e.g., life-expectancy, illness, or abandonment, as results of social practice and political decision-making, rooted in specific rationalities and normative choices (Lemke, 2010, p. 434). The questions that Lemke has posed are relevant also for analyzing welfare and family policies in Latvia: "What forms of life are regarded as socially valuable, which are considered 'not worth living'? What existential hardships (...) attract political, medical, scientific and social attention, which are seen as intolerable, a priority for research and in need of therapy, and which are neglected or ignored?" (ibid.). The state welfare system in Latvia in recent years no longer succeeds to protect some vulnerable social categories against poverty (cf. Bela & Nikišins, 2018; Constitutional Court of the Republic of Latvia, 2020) (elsewhere in Europe too, the welfare systems have been posited as overburdened, as the KASS project confirmed). Analysed biopolitically, such a development reflects not only neo-liberalism or economic constraints of the globalized world but also changing regimes of truth, hierarchies of value that the states unequally assign to their subjects' lives, and the ways in which the subjects comport themselves vis-à-vis the goals set by one or another authority (Lemke, 2010, pp. 432–433). In relation to contemporary Latvia, we endeavour to clarify what are the practices through which the value of single elderly people's lives is being determined.

*"There are no more houses left here. How many are left now? - One, two, three, four [counting to herself] - only 4 out of 12 families have remained. Women the same age as me. The children of two are in Daugavpils - they work in the customs. There [points with her hand] another neighbour, he's 60. That's all that's left.*

Regina is 74 and lives on her own in a farmstead inherited from her father in the countryside located 40 km from the nearest city Daugavpils and more than 200 km from the capital Riga. Regina's two sons have been living in the UK for more than 15 years, with their spouses and Regina's six grandchildren. Regina's story could be rehearsed in many places - the departure of the population and the retention of the elderly is a common picture in the countryside (Bela & Elksne, 2020; Dzenovska, 2018; Hazans, 2019; Trapenciene, 2020).

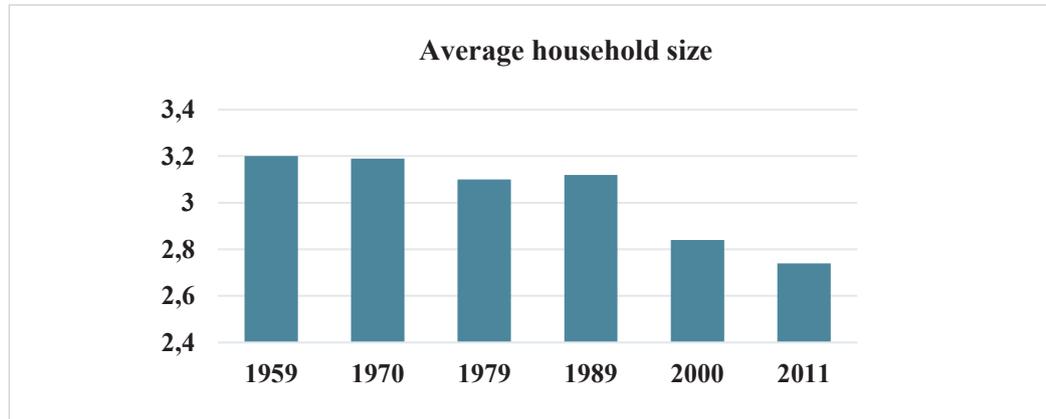
Our ethnographic observations show that the largest households (consisting of 4 to 7 people) are those of families with minor children. A more common type of household consists of 1 to 2 people who are childless or whose grown-up children live elsewhere. Adult children mostly stay with their parents in two cases: either they have remained single (unmarried or divorced) or some family members need to be looked after due of their illness.

In the period from 1990 to 2018, the population of Latvia decreased by 27.5 per cent (734 thou-

sand); part of it was due to a particularly rapid emigration that took place during the global financial crisis of 2008–2009 (Krūmiņš, 2019, p.14). Demographic shifts brought about a decrease in both the total number of households and the size of an average household (Āboliņa, 2019, p.88). The census, conducted every decade, shows a sustained trend towards a decline in the average household size (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

Average household size  
(number of persons in  
the household)



(created by authors).

Sources: Central Statistical Bureau of the Council of Ministers of the Latvian SSR, State Statistics Committee of the Republic of Latvia, and Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia.

A closer look at the statistical data on demographic trends over the last two decades confirms that the number of households without offspring is steadily increasing. While 66 per cent of all households were childless in 2005, their proportion had reached 73 per cent in 2019 (CSB, 2020b). As Regina's story (related above) and other ethnographic observations testify, the geographic distance among members of family and kin is increasing. Adult children are less and less likely to stay with (or near) their parents, especially in rural areas, a trend that is determined by many factors, among the most prominent being limited employment opportunities in rural areas. Studies conducted in other European countries likewise show that practical domestic assistance among family members is shrinking as the geographical distance between them increases (Heady, 2012a).

Besides, our ethnographic interview data demonstrate: although people are able to identify various kinship ties over at least 4–5 generations, mostly those are parents and children who maintain close and regular relationships throughout their lives (their intensity, though, varies at different stages of life). When the geographical distance between them increases, the patterns of domestic help and mutual care, essential aspect of these relationships, change or even disappear. In some cases, the left-behind parents may compensate for that by forming a mutually supporting relationship with a more distant relative or even with a person outside the kin group who lives nearby or with whom a close emotional connection has been established (we illustrate that below, relating Kārlis' life-history).

A multitude of factors may account for the decline of the role of family and kin ties as a basis of an individual's social security. Among the most prominent have been industrialization and urbanization in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, collectivization of agriculture in post-World War II years, transition from the planned economy to the free market during the previous three decades, particular social policies implemented by one or another government as well as changing cultural values. In the following section, we take a closer look at the interests pursued by the various political regimes and the changes they brought about in the patterns and practices of family and kinship.

Soon after Latvia came into being as an independent state, it started to build its social welfare system. Among the first steps were introduction of a pension system, based on the principle of social insurance (Rajevska 2019). By the end of the interwar period (in 1938) the Latvian state used 13.1 per cent of the state budget for social insurance (while the average in Europe was 9.3 per cent) (Runcis, 2012, p.125). This system, however, only included citizens connected with a workplace, leaving out most of the women, generally housewives (ibid.). After the USSR annexed Latvia in 1940, the paternalistic Soviet model of welfare was introduced. The state took on itself to meet its subjects' needs (defined within the state regime of truth, not by the subjects themselves), regulate their actions in matters that affected them as individuals, and shape the citizens' relationship to the state as well as to each other (cf. Moors, 2019).

The enormous human losses caused by the World War II and deportations (Zvidriņš, 2011) made it necessary to address demographic issues. The Soviet biopolitics saw women as a resource for reproduction of population that would compensate for the loss of labour. Consequently, the state aimed at promoting the autonomy of women and supporting their economic independence, while never leaving out of focus their reproductive function (Selezneva, 2016, p.1). The Soviet propaganda promoted a socialist family model as a progressive type of union whose members were mutually independent economically (in contrast to the former family model in Latvia, the *bourgeois family*, whose members were said to be economically dependent on each other) (Runcis, 2012, p.126). The state provided free education and health care, secured employment, housing, pensions, and family benefits (Rajevska, 2020). Moreover, the public infrastructure – kindergartens, hospitals, and nursing homes as well as orphanages, pioneer camps, reformatories, and sobering rooms – was extensively developed. That enabled the economically active population, especially women, to delegate care for their young, elderly, sick, mentally distressed, alcoholic, and delinquent relatives, previously considered obligation of family or kin, to institutions (cf. Rockhill, 2010; Moors, 2019).

To sum up, the social policy implemented by the Soviet state aimed at ensuring demographic reproduction and maximal employment of the population, with an additional target of emancipating the individual from both dependence on the family and the duties toward the kin (cf. Runcis, 2012). However, the social policy had not led to the envisioned effects: most citizens lived in crowded apartments, were coping with shortage of food and waiting in long queues for other necessities. Consequently, family and kin ties continued to play an important role in ensuring economic viability as well as social security (viewed from an anthropological, rather than politico-ideological vantage point, these needs had not been met).

After the restoration of the country's independence in the 1990s, a social security system was introduced that centred on municipal services of social assistance (Reinholde, 2018, p. 73). Reforms in social policy aimed at reducing the role of the state and increasing the individual's own responsibility for his or her well-being in the field of housing, pensions, social insurance and social assistance (Rajevska, 2019). At the same time, the social policy of the 1990s, as Stukuls observed, reflected a certain tendency toward re-establishing the patriarchal family model in Latvia and 'domestication' of women. For some time, that model also received legislative support: the special child allowance for single mothers, established in the post-war USSR, was eliminated in 1991. The process of divorce was made longer and more costly in 1993 (Stukuls, 1999, pp.547-548). Benefits were only offered to those mothers who stayed at home (ibid., p.543). Thus in spite of the popular rhetoric praising motherhood, the free market realities and the state policies of the 1990s made the position of women, particularly mothers, precarious (ibid., p.546). As time passed, it became ever more evident, however, that the citizens' economic activity was not only in the interest of the state, but also of the citizens themselves: a number of social security benefits

and services (pensions, sickness, unemployment, childcare benefits) were only available to those who were or had been employed and contributed to the tax revenue.

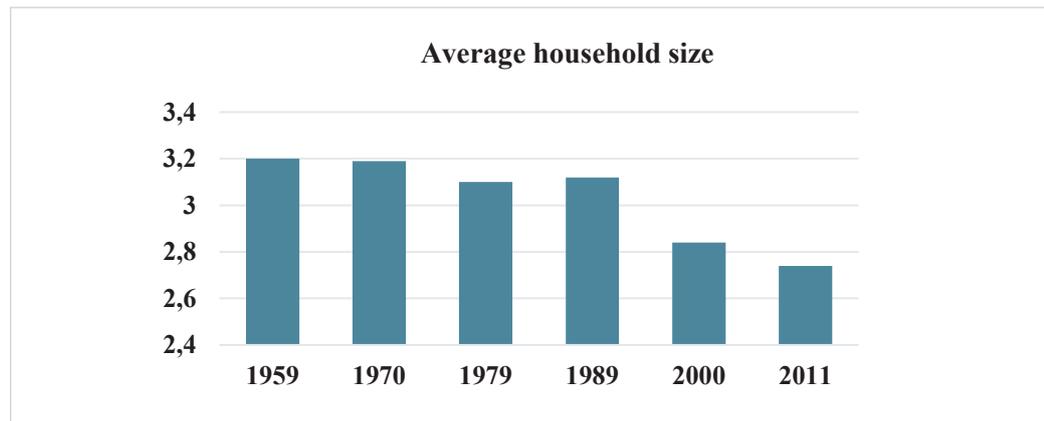
In recent decades, as the working-age population has been shrinking (due to low birth rates, economic migration and other reasons) and life expectancy increasing, the state has attempted to facilitate the employees' participation in labour market as long as possible. It is for this reason that the retirement age keeps rising and additional measures were introduced. For instance, in order to prevent the mothers' long absence from the labour market and thus losing their competitiveness, an amendment of the Labour Act, passed in 2004, enabled also the fathers to opt for paternity leave and receive childcare allowance (Sedlenieks & Rolle, 2016, p.31). Nevertheless, those who care for small children or the sick and the elderly, often struggle to reconcile work and family life (Lāce, 2012; Lūse et al., 2016; Millere, 2012).

### One-person households in post-socialist Latvia

To sum up, during the last one hundred years, two priorities have been consistently present in the biopolitics implemented in Latvia: to maximize the population's reproduction as well as its economic activity. To achieve this, each regime has utilized a different policy, but their cumulative result had been to directly or indirectly reduce the individual's dependence on and need for family and kinship as a resource of social security. The impact of economic liberalism on fragmenting the family and kinship relations is something taken for granted since Latvia has been implementing a market-based economic regime for the last 30 years. However, the statistical data show an additional trend: not only is the number of one-person households increasing (see the Introduction of this paper), but also the proportion of people in such households at risk of poverty (see Figure 2). In particular, one-person households in the age group over 64 are most at risk of poverty in Latvia, according to the criteria adopted for measuring poverty in the European Union (cf. Dobelniece, 2020a).

**Figure 2**

(created by authors).  
At-risk-of poverty index  
by one-person household  
type. Source: CSB



Almost 75 per cent of these households were reported to experience poverty in 2018 (CSB, 2019). The statistical data indicated an allegedly positive trend during the global financial crisis, when the total income level also decreased in other household types, thus reducing the income gap. That did not mean, however, that the living standards of single persons at retirement age had improved, rather the social security of society in general had deteriorated. The data show that, for example, the availability of health care services for people over the age of 65 in Latvia is one of the lowest in the EU. More than half of the elderly in one-person households find it difficult to afford care services (the average proportion in the EU being 16.7 per cent, in Estonia 23.2 per cent, and Lithuania 9.2 per cent) (Eurostat 2020a). More than one third (36.8 per cent) of the elderly living in one-person house-

holds mention financial issues as a reason for not using professional homecare services (Eurostat 2020b). Figure 2 also underlines the significant income differences between the economically active and inactive people living in one-person households. The main and often the only source of income for retired people (in 94.6 per cent of cases) is the pension (SHARE Latvia, 2020).

Such a high number of the elderly at risk of poverty raises the question of whether, in situations when the state is unable to guarantee their social security, family or kin still provide some support as they historically used to do. The official statistics is unlikely to grant an answer, since it mainly records indicators of formal economy, whereas significant interactions between family and kin members often take place within the informal economy and therefore remain off the record. Nor can such transactions be easily detected via quantitative research methods: in a recent survey, for instance, 29.5 per cent of respondents in Latvia refused to disclose the income of their household (Bela & Nikišins, 2018, p. 120). Systematic ethnographic observations and interviews, on the other hand, can highlight significant kin relations, including those that are instrumental for social security. Our data demonstrate that the role of kinship has changed over time. The character of relationships within the kin group, income level, health status as well as other factors may have a significant impact on whether an individual will see kinship ties or the state welfare system as the primary source of his/her social security. Kinship ties (provided such exist and are acknowledged) still constitute an important resource that grants some sense of security for individuals in the most vulnerable positions. At the same time, our interviewees' narratives also identify issues that reduce the likelihood to receive support from kin members. The experience of Inguna (55 years old) demonstrates that the family or kin may not always be able to offer support for a vulnerable relative.

*In 2015, I lost my job. Around the same time my mother's (75 years) health deteriorated. She lived on her own and I was taking care of her - I went to her every day to wash her, give her the medication, clean the apartment and prepare food. I received 56.90 euros every month for her care. Once I asked the social service if my travel expenses could be reimbursed, and they advised me to look for some part-time job instead. My mother is bedridden: she needs me in the morning, during the day and in the evening. Where can I find such a job? I have to say a huge thanks to my husband who enables me to stay out of employment and take care of my mother. On the other hand, he is rarely at home since he holds two jobs. Nevertheless we still return to the conversation time and again, shouldn't I start working again, because it's hard with money all the time."*

As Inguna's experience reveals, the individuals who choose to offer practical support for their family or kin members fall out of the labour market and may themselves be at risk of poverty. It has also been noted in a sociological analysis on social exclusion in Latvia: "As it is mostly women who take care for children, sick family members or the elderly, they face a higher poverty risk and find it more difficult to enter the labour market" (Lāce, 2012, p.253). Thus, in situations when a vulnerable family or kin member needs everyday care or assistance, the rest of the family or kin face a dilemma - either to provide that care, at the same time falling prey to the risk of poverty, or to leave the provision of care in the hands of the state. For Inguna's mother that would have meant moving to a nursing home, a solution that is often perceived as morally questionable and that the younger generation often postpone as long as other possibilities have not been exhausted. The nursing home clients themselves experience their existence there as *social death* that "calls in question the value of life itself" (Žabicka, 2015, p.69). Serious health problems, such as Inguna's mother experiences, make one completely dependent on the persons in one's social surrounding. The next of kin may assess the degree to which he/she feels morally responsible for the frail relative as well as how capable he/she is to provide practical assistance. Inguna's decision to take care of her mother rather than to entrust that care to public authorities largely

depended on the resources available in her marital family but also on her understanding of her role as a wife and a daughter.

In situations when seniors are still able to take care of themselves even though they only command basic subsistence, he or she may refuse the support of family and kin. One explanation can be that, in spite of relative poverty, they perceive their situation as economically stable. Marija (69) lives on her own in her countryside house after her husband passed away a few years ago. Her monthly retirement pension in 2019 (at the time of the interview) was just 360 euros – while 409 euros was at-risk-of-poverty threshold for one-person households in Latvia the previous year (CSB, 2020c). According to Marija, *“it’s not much, but enough”*, so she refuses the monetary assistance that her adult children have offered. Such a decision ensued from Marija’s desire not to endanger the economic and social security of her offspring:

*“My son wants to help me, but I say that I already have my pension. He has a family, children, they need his money more than I do. Nevertheless, sometimes I find money on the kitchen table after he has gone”.*

An important resource for Marija is her vegetable garden, tending which allows her to reduce significantly the cost of subsistence: *“As long as I can move and am fit, everything is fine”*. This is a contemporary reality: intergenerational relationships in which both the seniors and their grown-up children are trying to find a balance between maintaining reciprocity, meeting moral obligations, and ensuring own socio-economic viability.

The interview data, however, testify about another outcome of the social insurance system: restricted as the insured individual’s means of subsisting at times are, knowing that a kin member is socially insured can serve his or her relatives as moral excuse for weakness or absence of intergenerational relations. In cases when intergenerational relationships for one or another reason are strained and wrought up by conflicts, the state-guaranteed pension can legitimate the distance that the offspring keep from an elderly person. Two of our interviewees, Katrīna and her daughter Evija, outlined such a situation speaking about Katrīna’s father Kārlis, formerly a collective farm labourer. Katrīna, born in the early 1980s as the fourth child in Kārlis’ family, also has three younger siblings. Their parents had received a flat in a kolkhoz village, and all seven children grew up there. After the collective farm disintegrated in the early 1990s, the children dispersed from the village leaving the parents behind and visiting them less and less frequently. Katrīna’s mother died in 2015 whereupon relations between Kārlis and his offspring – seven children and at least twice as many grandchildren – nearly dissolved. Evija, Katrīna’s daughter, (aged 17) had not seen her maternal granddad since early childhood while Katrīna herself was only able to describe the general situation of her father’s current life:

*“Dad lives in [name of the village] and receives his pension. And he lives on his own. Namely, at times on his own and at times with his girl-friend – he has met one of his age. When he wants to be on his own he returns to his flat, spends some time there again.(..) But I don’t know that woman”.*

The severed ties between Kārlis and his offspring is far from being an exception: in a number of other interviews we likewise came across stories of economically and socially vulnerable persons, including seniors, being left with little or no practical support from their offspring or other relatives. There might be a number of reasons behind such an attitude, including disagreements over a person’s moral choices, such as forming partnerships or leading a lifestyle of which that his/her relatives disapprove. In this story, however, Katrīna’s reference to her dad’s pension and the flat that he owns is noteworthy: according to her, Kārlis’ basic needs are met. Katrīna’s utterance seems to imply that in the given circumstances, the previously widespread norm of adult children taking care for their aging parents no longer holds. The boundary between the state and

kin is likely to remain deeply ambivalent in the area of care for the elderly, as also other ethnographers have lately remarked (Thiemann, 2016, p. 205, cf. Thelen et al, 2017).

The focus of state social policies on the economically independent individual, as well as conditions of market economy have changed the way people in Latvia understand their relationships, both to their kin and the state. The latter as well as the former is seen as a reciprocal one: the individual works and pays taxes, whereas the state, via social insurance, pledges a retribution in the case of the person's illness, unemployment, old age or other incapacity for work. Keeping in mind this reciprocity, the civic society exerts a constant pressure on the state demanding adequate social security for its vulnerable categories who are at risk of being unable to make ends meet.

The policies of previous political regimes have resulted in emancipating individuals from economic (and largely also social) dependence on their family or kin ties. As the historical outline of consecutive social policies, our ethnographic observations as well as statistical data testify, one can note in Latvia a steady decline of the co-residence and household patterns, previously largely based on the logic of family and kinship. Comprising a relatively greater diversity of co-residents, in terms of age as well as income and physical strength, such households were likely to guard their weaker members against poverty and abandonment. Policies over the last century have gradually shifted both the moral obligation and the protective function from the kin or co-residence group to the state.

The ethnographic data demonstrate that the state has in various ways impacted relations among the kin. However disputable or overburdened the system of social insurance and social assistance may be, it has steadily transformed the character of intergenerational reciprocity as well as the understanding of moral duty towards one's parents. The seniors endeavour to prolong their socioeconomic independence thus resisting their children's commitment to assist them. For the adult, working age people, in turn, the state has reduced one potential source of economic instability by easing their care obligations toward their elderly relatives. The state welfare system has also enabled the grown-up children to legitimize their distancing from the parents, in particular, when the relationships are strained. At the same time, as the fieldwork data demonstrate, confronted with a predicament of illness, frailty or poverty, individuals living in one-person households might still draw on the ties of kinship or relatedness as an essential resource. However, relatives who take full care of their elderly risk losing employability in the labour market and thus jeopardize their economic stability.

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## Conclusion

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<sup>1</sup> The 2<sup>nd</sup> author, in her role as an investigator in both these research projects (that partly overlap in time) has conducted fieldwork and generated data for the purposes of answering research questions advanced in both projects.

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