

Mr Commissioner Andor, Mr Sundström, Ladies and Gentlemen,
Good morning and welcome to Kumu Art Museum

Many European countries face common challenges – our populations are aging and decreasing, technology is developing ahead of our skills and more highly qualified workers are needed. Therefore free movement of labour in the European Union is absolutely necessary.

Labour market needs and possibilities how to manage labour force vary between member states. Still, we have a common labour market in the EU and the needs of all the countries must be acknowledged. All the member states should contribute to establishing a well- coordinated system to support labour mobility.

Free movement of labour is a two-way street. People can go, but people can also come. Until now, Estonia has been a sending country in the sense of labour migration. As years pass and labour market needs change, it is becoming clear, that we also need to find ways how to attract highly qualified labour force to Estonia.

Estonia is special in its history. Our cultural background makes us careful towards change and also other nationalities entering our land. Luckily, studies have shown that we are more and more open towards immigrants. This is an important precondition for truly supporting free movement of labour.

We should keep a vision in mind to move towards a society, where the main reasons for working abroad are not connected with unemployment or low wages, but with the desire to gain new experiences and knowledge abroad. During recession, many people found work abroad, but the driving forces for that were economic restrictions. We hope, that in the future, work migration is driven by possibilities abroad, not restrictions in the native land.

Ministry of Social Affairs has just finished assessing the migration potential of the working-age population in 2013. The results show that Estonia is already moving towards society, where people do not have to go to work abroad to manage, but they go, because they can and want to.

According to our recent policy analysis, that is also going to be presented today, migration potential of working-age population in Estonia has decreased. While according to the survey conducted in 2010, the estimated migration potential of the working-age population in Estonia was 8,5% of the working-age population, by 2013 the number has decreased to 5,9%.

The survey shows, that one of the main reasons why people choose working abroad is no longer unemployment in Estonia, like it was in 2010. Estonians also do not have that many complaints about the availability of suitable jobs as they had in 2010. Therefore, people are more satisfied with their employment security in 2013 than they were in 2010.

We are also happy to see from the results of the study, that young people mainly want to go abroad to gain new experiences, not because they are disappointed with the life in Estonia. This is the kind of free movement we especially support and want to see in all Europe.

People with experiences and knowledge gained abroad also support our economic growth in the future and help Estonia to become competitive with Nordic countries for example as regards wage levels, productivity and economic stability.

It is essential to exchange information and knowledge to develop successful migration policies in Europe. We should cooperate, take into account each-others needs and possibilities and create a well-functioning common labour market. The driving forces for labour migration should not be economical difficulties in the native land, but the possibilities for self-development abroad.

Today, I am glad to say, that Estonia is definitely moving towards these goals.

Thank you and I wish you a pleasant day.

Taavi Rõivas,

Minister of Social Affairs of Estonia

Opening speech at the conference 'Labour Migration and Transnationalism in the Nordic-Baltic Region', March 7, 2014, Tallinn