

Speech by the ambassador for Sweden, Mr. Anders Ljunggren, at the conference Smart migration policy organized by the Nordic Council of Ministers and Tartu University in Eesti Teaduste Akadeemia October 31st 2013

It is a pleasure for me to be able to welcome you all on behalf of the government of Sweden which for the moment also holds the presidency within the Nordic Council of Ministers.

This conference is about migration. Migration policy has been on the top of the agenda within Nordic cooperation as long as such political cooperation has existed. The very first important decisions within the Nordic Council, an organization created in the beginnings of the 1950-ies, was about a passport union. It gave a citizen in one Nordic country freedom to travel in all Nordic countries without a passport and here the Nordic countries were decades before the European Schengen agreement.

A second agreement was about a common labour market that gave all Nordic citizens freedom to work without asking authorities for permission in all the five Nordic countries. In the Nordic countries borders between our states have not been a problem for a person who wishes to work and live in another country than they have been born in and have citizenship in. We think that this freedom to migrate, this freedom without barriers, is a positive conquest. And we are happy that this freedom now has been established at the European level and that nearly all members in the EU now give union citizens this freedom.

The freedom to travel and work in the Nordic countries has been followed up with an agreement about social security. A Swedish citizen who has moved to Denmark has the same social security as a Danish citizen and a Swede who has moved to Norway has the same social security as a Norwegian and so on and vice versa. Today European cooperation has to a large degree been able to catch up with what the Nordic countries achieved already earlier – to a large degree but not totally.

Sweden has profited greatly because of migration as long as our nation has existed. We, living at these latitudes, know for sure that we all have migrants among our foremothers. The beautiful landscapes we have in the Nordic and Baltic countries were, as we all know, buried under ice some thousand years ago. We are all immigrants or at least we all have immigrants among our forefathers.

It is politics that creates possibilities or obstacles for migration. For example Herman Wrangel, born in southern Estonia and with a very successful career in Sweden built the biggest private palace in Sweden, Skokloster, not far from Stockholm, but he had not migrated from one country to another. He moved within the Swedish empire that also included Finland and all Livonia at that time.

As president Ilves has told us Estonia since its independence 1991 more often has been recognized as a former part of the Soviet Union than as a part of the former Swedish empire. Before the Soviet occupation around 35 000 persons escaped from Estonia to Sweden. Many of them have been very successful in Sweden. The background for their emigration is of course very tragic. As a Swede I have at the same time a need to recognize that the result of their immigration in Sweden is very, very positive.

Migration is not always voluntary. But also non-ability to migrate can be forced on people as a result of political oppression. That was a situation you had during the Soviet time – you experienced in the same period forced and grim migration to Siberia and forced and grim obstacles for migration to the western world. Our situation now is so much better.

This conference concentrates on smart migration. This is an important theme in politics today not only in the Nordic-Baltic states but in Europe and other parts of the world. The government in Sweden has introduced instruments that have made it a lot easier for employers to hire employees from all around the world. Companies like Ericsson and many high tech companies can more easily recruit laborers with advanced skills from countries beyond Europa. The very successful gaming industry in Sweden is one example that gains from immigration from many, many different countries.

And people not only move to Sweden to work. Swedes also move to other countries to work – there are tens of thousands Swedes in Norway and tens of thousands in London just to give a few examples. There are also some Swedes who have migrated to Estonia but quite few compared with Finns who have done so and quite few compared with Estonians who have migrated to Finland and Sweden.

Many countries in Europe need immigration to be successful in the future. I believe that this is true for Estonia but it is also true for some of the biggest economies in the world like Germany and Japan. And the success that the US has had and has today is to a very large degree a result of immigration policy.

Smart migration policy is not only a clever policy. It is also a necessary policy in many countries. And let me before I finish this speech tell you that the headline for this conference has given me reasons for reflection. If there is something like Smart Migration Policy we must perhaps also ask ourselves what Stupid Migration Policy means. In my eyes a good migration is a policy that gives each and every individual the right to take his or her belongings and move to whatever place they freely choose.

It's not the situation we have today. There are a lot more restrictions today compared with the situation one hundred years ago. For people in a country as Sweden the fifty years before the first world war was a very liberal period when we speak about migration.

In my view a stupid migration policy means a policy creating unnecessary barriers for migration. And a smart migration policy must include generous possibilities for asylum seekers.

In Sweden of today nearly all news broadcasts include messages about asylum seekers coming to Sweden from wars and oppression, for example from Syria and northeast Africa. We try to find houses for them and we try to give them as good shelter as possible during their asylum.

Not all people who try to escape war and political oppression are happy enough to get the asylum that is their right according to international law and political declarations. Many of them die instead in the Saharan desert or the Mediterranean Sea. This is of course very, very tragic and we have to admit that it is a result of something else than smart migration policy.

I am proud that Sweden, with very few tragic exceptions, did not send the refugees from Estonia, back to war and political oppression in 1944. And I am proud that Sweden does not send asylum seekers from Syria back to war and political oppression today. We are not the only country in Europe that tries to be generous in our migration policy for asylum seekers. But there could for sure be more states that go for a generous asylum policy in Europe now and I'm sorry to say that the EU as a union cannot be proud of a generous asylum policy yet.

During most of the time since the second world war the possibilities for migration in the Nordic countries and in the Baltic ones have been very, very different. But now we are happy to be able to cooperate freely and to give citizens in our countries the possibility to move freely. Let us go for smart migration policy, a policy that both is a tool for economic growth and prosperity and, this is also very important, gives asylum seekers good possibilities to find the shelter they long for and have the right to find.

I wish you interesting discussions during this conference and let us not only celebrate but also really use the ability to exchange views without barriers at the borders.