

Conference “Immigration to the Nordic-Baltic region: New challenges for nation states in the age of migration”

Kumu art museum, Tallinn. March 31, 2017

Summary

This year's Nordic-Baltic migration conference in Tallinn, the fifth to be held, focussed chiefly on new challenges for nation states in the age of migration. The conference was divided into four sessions, with the first half dealing more with immigration policy and the challenges of integrating the new wave of asylum seekers to Europe, while the second half looked at the interrelations between the media and migration and the new challenges migration is creating for nation states.

The topic of the keynote speech given by MEP Professor Marju Lauristin was the changing definition and future of nation states and the emphasis on the importance of shifting the balancing point of integration policy between the EU-wide level and the nation state level. Currently too much is left up to nation states or even local municipalities, with too little regulation on the EU side.

A recurring theme of many of the presentations was integration on the labour market and in employment as well as culturally. States must help to ensure that migrants have easier and faster access to the labour market through changes in policy. Likewise, immigrants integrating with their host country's culture is even more important than merely learning its language. It could even be concluded that without cultural integration there can be no nation states.

Another major theme was the sharing of a series of guidelines for dealing with crisis scenarios. The keywords were establishing constant and honest communication; leaving aside emotions and maintaining rationality whilst also retaining empathy; involving as many relevant parties in resolving the crisis as possible; and sustaining healthy relationships with everyone involved, no matter how difficult it may seem. Overall it is important to find a balance between idealism (what should be done) and pragmatism (what can be done).

The presentations from the conference can be found here: <http://www.norden.ee/en/regional-co-operation/presentations>

Full conference can be seen online at daily newspaper's Postimees opinion portal: <http://arvamus.postimees.ee/4060279/jarelvaadatav-millised-on-randeajastu-valjakutsed-rahvusriikidele>

Photo gallery of the conference: <http://www.norden.ee/et/meist/pildid/raendekonverents-2017/prio-vanemteadur-marta-bivand-erdal-ja-piret-marvet-norra-saatkonnast-3086>



Overview of conference presentations

The conference began with opening remarks by **Christer Haglund**, Director of the Nordic Council of Ministers' Office in Estonia; **H.E. Dagfinn Sørli**, the Ambassador of Norway to Estonia; and **Andres Anvelt**, Minister of the Interior of the Republic of Estonia.

Marju Lauristin, a professor at the University of Tartu and a Member of the European Parliament, talked about the concepts of nation states and integration and how they may have to be redefined in the age of migration.

There are several, often contentious theoretical constructs for the concept of nation states and as such it is difficult, yet all the more important, to try to settle on a widely agreed base in order to help facilitate more effective cooperation at multiple levels of governance and society. In some circles the importance of nation states is thought to be diminishing, or is confused with national society. Indeed, society is based on shared identities and experiences, connections that the influx of new migrants is lacking with the local population. Wide open virtual spaces also transcend borders and thus create new identities and sets of rule not confined by national characteristics. National peculiarities may even come to be seen as needless obstacles. The last argument against the importance of nation states is that in a globalized world, individual nation states are no longer fully in control of their economies: instead, they depend on their neighbours and the global economic and financial system.

These arguments seemingly lead to the conclusion that nation states are gradually coming to an end, but Professor Lauristin argues that this is not the case and in fact that the European Union is actually fortifying nation states through two main principles. First, the EU can only make decisions on matters its Member States have granted it authority in. Secondly, decision-making is granted through the subsidiary principle to the levels at which it is the most practical, the most effective or the fastest.

Unfortunately, these concrete principles quickly get muddled up when it comes to solving actual problems and deciding who should tackle them and at what level. Lauristin emphasizes the importance of shifting the balancing point between the pan-European level and nation states to the right position. Currently, matters of integration are left largely up to nation states or even local municipalities to resolve, while there is very little regulation at the EU level and most of it is focused on issues of language, not cultural conflict, which is a much more important source of problems in integration. Ultimately, the best course for overcoming these difficulties is more dialogue and cooperation between nation states that respectfully takes into account the different natures of the nation states. It is through such a process that the EU moves beyond mostly just being an economic



institution to fostering more common ground and solidarity between Member States by acknowledging their importance as a source and protectors of cultural diversity.

Anders Danielsson, the General Secretary of the Red Cross in Sweden, shared his experiences of Sweden helping 136,000 refugees in just six months.

It is very difficult to foresee migration flows due to the large number of elements that have an impact, especially political decisions. In autumn 2015, the number of refugees to Sweden peaked at an historic high – nearly 40,000 people in one month, which was 10 times the amount that the country had the readiness to receive and process. When border controls in many countries, including Germany and Sweden, ceased to exist, the solidarity of the European asylum system broke down. As a result, there was an urgent need for accommodation in Sweden and the asylum process became much longer, despite the migration service working 24/7, largely due to a lack of preparation and reserves. The Swedish Red Cross alone could not overcome the crisis, so they enlisted the help of volunteers, communities and other agencies, including the police and military.

Danielsson highlights some of the lessons he has learned that can be used in future crisis situations. In particular, he stresses the importance of constant communication and being proactive. Use true facts without exaggeration and consider all perspectives and consequences, but remember to also show empathy to the people affected and to treat them with dignity. A leader must also have the courage to make decisions, even difficult ones, guided by a clear set of values. It is important to involve others and establish good relations, showing solidarity.

Klára Fóti, a research manager at the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, gave an overview of different approaches to the labour market integration of refugees in Europe and her organization's input through a research project. Their key objectives were to update existing information on legislation and practical arrangements, to examine the labour market integration of social services and to explore the role of social partners in the labour market integration and self-employment opportunities of asylum seekers and refugees. She also explained the methodology and challenges of the research, such as accounting for the constantly changing situation.

One of the conclusions of the report highlighted the importance of the role of social partners and their involvement in shaping policies through consultation as well as direct provision of services and measures. (Self-)employment measures and opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers were also examined and found to be very limited. Finally, the report offered various policy pointers at both the state and EU levels.



Eero Janson, the Chairman of the Management Board of the Estonian Refugee Council, summed up Estonia's year of experience of the migrant quota system.

The Estonian quota, as set by the European Commission, is 550 people. In the preceding two decades, just 350 people had been recognized as refugees in Estonia, while now, under the quota system, 120 people have arrived in one year, with an additional 65 refugees outside of the quota. All of the arrivals have access to direct individual support and counselling, a one-day welcoming programme and 100 hours of language classes. Janson outlines six challenges and ways of overcoming them:

- Refugee distribution in Estonia and the need for a coordinated and weighted placement procedure
- Language training and the need for functional language training, capacity building for schools and a clear funding scheme
- Labour market access and the need for support schemes for employers, language training in the workplace and additional counselling
- Mental health support and the need for a systematic approach and capacity building for psychologists
- Social integration and the need for group activities to complement individual support and state investment in local initiatives
- Lack of coordination and cooperation and the need for a single channel approach

All of these issues are tied to one another, so failing in any of them could jeopardize the entire integration process. Nevertheless, marked improvements have been made in this first year through constructive cooperation between the state and civil society organizations.

Catrine Bangum, a senior adviser with the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM) in Denmark, talked about NCM initiatives in answering the challenges of immigration and the integration of newly arrived migrants.

Proactive and evidence-based approaches are needed to best deal with the new situation in migration. In 2016, the NCM initiated a cooperation programme to help migrants and refugees by sharing effective measures and policies between countries. The four main elements of the programme are establishing a clearing centre; providing new knowledge; financing projects; and ensuring cooperation between Nordic ministers. A number of conferences are also being held in 2017 for meeting and exchanging ideas and knowledge on the topic of integration.

Bangum outlines a second initiative, Nordic Safe Cities, which is also highly relevant to integration efforts. Launched in 2015, it focuses on democracy, inclusion and safety by creating a network of Nordic cities working together, with the goal of preventing radicalization and violent extremism within the countries' populations. To that end, the network provides new tools and solutions to local municipalities and internationally.



Tuomas Martikainen, the Director of the Migration Institute of Finland, shared what happened to the 2015 intake of asylum seekers in Finland.

From the perspective of geographical access, Finland is similar to an island. The refugees' main point of entry into Finland was via Northern Sweden, as access via the sea was strictly controlled. The highest rate of refugees entering Finland was 4,000 people in one week in autumn 2015. In the years prior to 2015, Finland had been closing down its refugee centres, citing increasing efficiency and the need to save money. Due to the rapid influx of new migrants, however, by the end of the year the number of refugee centres had increased tenfold. Approximately one-third of the arrivals were granted asylum in Finland, while one-fifth were denied asylum but remained anyway. The remaining refugees left for elsewhere in Europe or returned to their homeland.

Since then, Finland's migration policies have undergone a number of amendments. The main changes have been in regard to tightening everything and making things more difficult from the asylum seekers' point of view. Deportation systems have become more effective, obtaining asylum has been made harder and applying for family reunification is so difficult as to be nearly impossible. A new balance is emerging between idealism and pragmatism.

One unfortunate outcome of this has been the emergence of a so-called "paperless society". Due to a lack of monitoring systems, there is also very little information on the fates of the people who have left Finland. There are still many questions regarding the impact of these policies that remain to be answered in the future.

Maarja Saar, a postgraduate researcher in Sociology at Södertörn University and a member of the TRANSWEL research project, talked about mobility and welfare management between Estonia and Sweden.

The TRANSWEL project analyses the policies, practices and limitation of portability of social security in the EU. Its members examined four pairs of countries, one of which was Estonia and Sweden, and found that there are three main types of conditions affecting EU migrants' access to social security: contribution requirements; residency conditions; and institutional practices. They also found that the formal procedural requirements for accessing benefits in Sweden were complicated and opaque, especially for migrants, who might not be well-versed in the intricacies of Swedish welfare policies or even speak Swedish.

The Estonian and Swedish welfare systems are both residency-based and end up disadvantaging highly mobile transnational migrants. However, the main challenge for migrants in gaining access to the Swedish welfare system is related to acquiring a Personal Identification Number (or PIN), as receiving almost any benefit hinges on the person having a PIN. Applying for one usually requires a person to have a one-year working contract, which is a barrier for many low-skilled Estonian migrant employees who are only given shorter contracts. This has led to the creation of a semi-legal market,



especially in construction, which can result in challenges in acquiring benefits, especially by migrants who are not aware of their rights.

Triin Vihalemm, a professor at the University of Tartu, discussed the relationship between media and mobility in Estonian society.

Since the restoration of its independence and up until the last couple of years, Estonia had mainly been a country of emigration, and the topic of Estonian people moving abroad in search of higher-paying jobs and a better quality of life has been ubiquitous in the Estonian media. Vihalemm takes a look at the role of mass media in migration and the dual role of the media in adaptation and integration into the host country. Though the media is not the sole or perhaps even the main influence in making migration decisions, it is still an important intermediary and co-influence of countries' political, economic and social factors.

The rise of the Internet and social media has given people unprecedented opportunities to learn about new places and people. Advances in multimedia have made these contacts more personalized and "real", enhancing their appeal. Once migration has taken place, accessible communication channels between the migrant and those remaining at home have the effect of lessening homesickness and loneliness and thus also making the decision to migrate seem less costly and easier to undertake. Social media also allows easier networking with fellow migrants in the host country, helping new arrivals acclimatize better.

Studies have shown that one in every two inhabitants of Estonia has social media friends or family members living abroad. Therefore, media and networking are likely to be important in defining migration in Estonia. However, it has also been found that a mere interest in others' travel experiences and life abroad is not a contributing factor to migration decisions on its own, as age and social networks also play a major role.

Karina Horsti from the Academy of Finland Research Council and the University of Jyväskylä gave an overview of the immigration debate on the transforming media landscape in Finland.

Similar to many other European countries, the public debate over immigration is becoming more polarized in Finland. There are organized protests and counter-protests on the streets, yet it would be incorrect to label the participants on either side as "extremists" and the majority who does not publically side with one or the other as "sensible people", as that would ignore the valid criticisms being levelled at government policies from both sides of the protests.



The asylum seekers themselves have always been central to the pro-immigration protests, especially now that Finland's migration policies have become tighter and more people are being rejected. They have garnered widespread attention and support from many corners of Finnish society, such as churches, the cultural elite and the general population.

Horsti argues that although humanitarian action often creates a hierarchical relationship between those helping and those being helped, this gap can be narrowed through encounters and engagement between the two sides. Following the influx of 32,000 refugees to Finland in 2015, many Finns offered help by donating clothes and even volunteering to house immigrant families, thus creating closer relationships with them. Participants in the hospitality movement feel connected to the asylum seekers as a whole, and are dismayed when people they have grown close to have their asylum requests rejected. Humanitarianism and acceptance of the helpless have become values associated with Finnish identity, and the strict state policies are seen as an injustice and betrayal of those values.

There are two other recent developments in the Finnish public immigration debate: one is the greater focus on deportations and personal stories than before, when the main discourse was over arrival numbers and administrative topics; the other is in the framing of asylum seekers in the media. Whereas previously the focus was mainly on select individuals who were de-ethnicized in order to make them seem more "suitable" for acceptance into Finnish society, now the discussion is about larger groups of people and from a more humanitarian angle.

Marti Aavik, an editor with the Estonian daily newspaper *Postimees*, discussed the public perception of migration in the Estonian media.

Estonia is one of the few countries in the world rated as having good freedom of the press by Reporters Without Borders and Freedom House. Aavik emphasizes the importance of the freedom of the press and explains how he has never felt any strong pressure from the state in his career as a journalist. However, he feels that there is a certain self-censorship within the media and public discourse that he has dubbed "the spiral of silence".

Aavik takes pride in the Estonian media and his newspaper *Postimees* having a lot of opinion pieces written by experts and specialists instead of regular columnists. Such articles are able to present new information to readers and help fill in gaps in knowledge instead of merely being political mouthpieces or appealing to readers' base emotions. Unfortunately, there is always a shortage of people willing to step up and help explain the situation to the layman onlooker and who will not cower from the resulting debate and arguments.

Regarding the reporting on migration in the Estonian media, Aavik notes the lack of coverage of the personal experiences of the asylum seekers themselves as well as a shortage of direct reporting without intermediaries from the countries most affected by large influxes of migrants. He laments the occasional lack of open acknowledgment in the media of cultural differences between people of different backgrounds, attributing it to the spiral of silence, as some writers are too timid to speak



publicly about them from fear of negative public feedback. On the bright side, there has recently been coverage of migrant families where public support has helped bring about changes in Estonia's asylum policy.

Marta Bivand Erdal, a senior researcher at the Peace Research Institute in Oslo (PRIO), talked about recent migration to Norway, especially integration, diversity and the implications for nation and state.

Over half of new residents to Norway come from Europe, with migrants from Poland making up by far the largest share, yet there is very little mention of them or other European migrants in the Norwegian immigration debate. Part of the reason for this has to do with their lower visibility on the streets, as well as them mainly being economic migrants – so unless they work, they do not have access to the Norwegian welfare system and therefore do not represent a cost to the state.

The large inflow of Polish migrants to Norway has only been ongoing for around a decade, and contrary to many older immigrant groups they do not congregate in just a few larger cities; instead, they are scattered throughout the country. Another finding is that many Polish migrants initially only intended to stay and work for a short period and then return to their homeland, but that timeframe shifted rapidly and eventually their families followed them to Norway, with their return to Poland being postponed. Erdal points out how European authorities seem to be learning the lesson again and again that guest workers can end up staying for long periods of time.

Curiously, despite family reunifications, the proportion of Polish men to women living in Norway has not shifted from two-thirds and one-third, respectively, which seems to indicate that a large number of men are still transnational commuters between the two countries.

Allan Puur, a professor at Tallinn University, previewed projections of the Estonian population according to different migration scenarios.

The projections were created as part of the new Estonian Human Development Report. Immigration has become a key factor maintaining population growth or preventing decline in countries with persistent below-replacement levels of fertility and positive net migration. Immigration has also been seen as a remedy against population aging since the majority of immigrants belong to younger age groups.

Following the change in net migration in Estonia from negative to positive, new population change projections up to the end of the century were created with variable net migration and fertility rate levels. Puur compares five scenarios in his presentation, ranging from very conservative estimates of no change (sustained negative net migration and a low birth rate) to ones with large positive net migration and replacement-level fertility. He concludes that the extrapolation of current demo-



graphic trends leads to the least sustainable outcomes, while the depopulation trend can be reversed by raising fertility close(r) to replacement level, reaching sustained positive net migration, or a mix of both.

Tiit Tammaru and **Raul Eamets**, professors at the University of Tartu, discussed Estonia in the era of migration.

From the restoration of its independence up until a couple of years ago, Estonia witnessed net migration flows into the country that were negative. Thus the migration debate has almost exclusively centred on the topic of how to discourage younger and more educated people from leaving for good and how to encourage them to eventually return to Estonia. Lately, however, the net migration flow into Estonia has become positive, sparking new discussions on migration and demographics. Following Estonia's accession to the EU, outbound migration to other, more prosperous European countries grew, but so did inbound migration from less-developed nations. In general, Estonian emigrants tend to be less skilled, whereas immigrants to Estonia are highly skilled.

Estonia is in need of a new immigration policy. The old system of annual immigrant quotas and the elevated salary requirements placed on employers no longer serve their purpose, as over time more and more migrant groups have been granted exceptions and are no longer subject to the quota. The goal of the new immigration policy would be to balance the labour needs of employers with the integration capacity of society. This new policy would be more active instead of passive and based on a foundation of two pillars: a point system in labour migration and study migration.

Summary of the Nordic-Baltic migration conference 2017 was compiled by Marian Viik, Tartu University.