

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen.

As a representative for the Swedish Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers, it is a pleasure to see that so many have taken interest in attending this conference and I bid you all welcome. The number of participants here today is evidence of the increasing importance attached to issues of migration and demographic challenges in the Nordic-Baltic region.

Demographic challenges are one of the focus areas of the Swedish Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers. I will take this opportunity to say a few words about our Presidency program, The Nordic Model in a New Era. I will then move on to talk briefly about demographic changes in the Nordics and possible solutions to these challenges.

The starting point for our Presidency program is the Nordic social model, a model that has successfully contributed to the development of our nations' growth and social wealth. The model is associated with our core values – democracy, openness, equality, individualism and social cohesion.

The Nordic model remains strong in the era of globalization, but to secure future growth, sustainability and welfare, we must take on the challenges that threaten its long-term viability and success.

The Swedish Presidency program is therefore focusing on combatting social exclusion, improving economic competitiveness and building an environmentally sustainable society.

A key priority of the program is the topic of this conference – facing the changing demographic realities in the Nordic countries.

Firstly, due to ageing populations and dropping fertility rates, the future will hold fewer citizens in the workforce, who will have to support and provide for increasing numbers of elderly.

Secondly, urbanization and cross border migration are reshaping population structures at local, regional and national levels. These forceful and continuing processes can be viewed as challenges, but they are also opportunities.

Nevertheless, this scenario puts pressure and strain on our traditional welfare systems. Responding to these challenges is crucial for our countries' future development.

From a Swedish point of view, actions for involving more people in the workforce and prolonging the average working life are necessary responses. This entails an inclusive labour market for active elderly citizens and early job-accessibility for young people.

Another solution to tackle a diminishing workforce, is through labour migration. The Nordic mindset is open and acceptant to people from other nations, viewing them as valuable assets rather than liabilities. In Sweden, immigrant workers have successfully helped to strengthen our export-based economy and maintain competitiveness ever since the Second World War.

The Nordic-Baltic countries all have different experiences from migration and demographic challenges. This conference presents an opportunity to draw upon these experiences and to learn from each other, by sharing knowledge and ideas in open dialogue. We are convinced of the value of Nordic-Baltic cooperation and the exchange of experiences as ways to strengthen our region and tackle the challenges of tomorrow.

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To end this speech, I would also like to take the opportunity to welcome you to the reception at the Swedish Embassy, this evening at 6 o'clock, where you will get the chance to mingle and discuss these issues further. There will be buses available for transport from here at 5.30, taking you to the office of the Nordic Council of Ministers in the old town, in walking distance to the Embassy.

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Lastly, I would like to specially welcome Mr. Ulf Holm, deputy speaker of the Swedish parliament and representative of the Swedish Greens. Whose Party is currently in opposition, but has a framework agreement with the government on migration policy.

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Thank you for listening.

Jan Palmstierna, Ambassador of Sweden, the Presiding Country of the Nordic Council of Ministers in 2013

The 'Migration and Demographic Challenges in the Nordic-Baltic Region' on 7 & 8 March 2013, KUMU Art Museum, Tallinn