

*Speech by **Christer Haglund**, Director of the Nordic Council of Ministers' Office in Estonia at the Nordic-Baltic Labour Migration Conference in Tallinn, Estonia on March 27, 2015*

**Ambassadors, cooperation partners, friends,**

Welcome to the **third** labour migration conference of the Nordic countries and Baltic States.

I'm pleased to see that so many of you have been able to come along once again.

Two years ago, in spring, when we decided to liven up the migration debate in Estonia, we unleashed something big.

Estonia and the other Baltic States are small. Every person, every worker here, is worth their weight in gold. Preserving the nation and national identity are of vital importance, just like economic growth and innovation. But when numbers start dwindling and the young and talented disperse into the wider world, people naturally start to worry: what will become of us? This was one of the main issues discussed at our first conference on labour migration.

The studies and analyses presented at last year's conference eased people's minds somewhat. People come and people go. They want to maintain links with their homeland. A phenomenon has emerged known as 'transnationalism' – living and working in several countries at the same time. As people move about, so do money and valuable skills. We heard from the most recent analysis presented by the Estonian Ministry of the Interior that fewer and fewer people are making plans to leave the country.

**Today**, as we organise a third labour migration conference of the Nordic countries and Baltic States with the help of our partners, migration issues are topics of fiery debate in Estonia and throughout the Nordics, as well as in Europe more broadly. Migration was also one of the key issues in the recent parliamentary elections in Estonia.

**Friends**, if you'll allow me, I'd like to conduct a quick survey. Please raise your hand if you know someone – a friend or family member, or just an acquaintance – who is living, working or studying abroad, away from their homeland.

Migration is a personal issue for everyone in a world with open borders. Many people know someone who has moved to another country to work or study or simply for the life experience. Perhaps they are escaping from poverty, or war, or violence. Maybe they met the love of their life in another country. There are a lot of opinions and strong feelings in relation to migration in a world where there are open borders and open information space.

**Firstly**, let me stress that 'migration' is a very broad term. It covers emigration, immigration, people returning to their own countries, refugees and asylum seekers. It also covers labour migration. We have to take all of those meanings into account when we talk about migration – both its success stories and the social and economic problems that come with it.

Our conference will be focussing on the labour migration of first and foremost European Union citizens and skilled workers: our people, in a part of the world we can proudly call our own. But we will also hear about other migrant groups.

**Secondly**, I'd like to draw your attention to some claims that surround migration.

You have undoubtedly heard that:

- immigrants remain unemployed and start living off benefits;
- immigrant workers take jobs away from locals, leading to a rise in unemployment;
- immigrants drive salaries down;
- there is a greater salary divide in countries with higher levels of migration;
- immigration leads to budgetary deficits;
- immigrants burden the public sector;
- immigration causes a deterioration in the quality of education; and
- large-scale immigration reduces the sense of security in society.

Yes, these are all social problems that are frequently highlighted – but are these problems directly connected to only immigrants? Or are these wider and more complex social issues?

It is far too easy to blame immigration for everything. More than that, it is dangerous, because it fosters intolerance. And that frightens off the valuable talent that every country in the world is competing for. We lose out on skills, on money, and on people who can enrich us.

Let's hold onto our prized workers – people who migrate in the Nordic countries and Baltic States. Let's make sure that life is good for them in our corner of the world. And if there are problems, let's work together to resolve them.

That is what we are here for today: to learn something new, and to work together to help create a better future in the Nordic-Baltic region.

**Finally**, I'd like to thank our co-organisers and partners. There are so many of you that there simply isn't the time to list you all! But without your valuable contribution this conference would not have been possible. My special thanks go to University of Tartu professors **Tiit Tammaru** and **Raul Eamets**.

I wish you all fruitful and interesting debates!

