

Dear experts, ladies and gentlemen!

You are about to discuss one of the key issues in today's globalised world – namely, migration. It is also one of the most difficult questions, which doesn't have a simple answer.

Immigration has always been a socially divisive topic and on that regard it doesn't matter whether it is work-related immigration or due to humanitarian crisis. On the one hand, immigration may become a social or even security issue. On the other hand, immigration boosts economic growth, helps to meet skill shortages, and creates a more dynamic society.

In the context where many member states are facing demographic challenges and skills shortages, governments are putting in place more and more policies to attract talents.

Here in Estonia we are in the middle of that kind of a process, as we are debating the changes in our labour immigration policy. We are discussing how to attract talents without endangering the wellbeing of our people.

For 25 years we have had the same policy. We have had annual quota for labour immigration which is 0.1 per cent of Estonia's population. But that is outdated and does not meet our needs as a growing economy.

Therefore, we have made changes in our policies and made exceptions for startup companies, IT sector and investors, also for academics, to name a few. They are no longer under the quota, but that is still not enough.

At the same time, we have had tens of thousands of people who have left Estonia to work abroad. Therefore, we must not only think about how to attract skilled foreign workers, but also our own talents.

In some areas we are in a desperate need for skilled workers, but on the other hand, we need to be sure that we cope with them as a society. That all who live in Estonia would feel safe and secure and welcome, both the ones who come here and the ones who already live here.

For that all interested parties have to work together. We must create an attractive social and economic environment, which supports talent immigration to Estonia.

Let's think big. For example, how we can use the e-residency programme for creating more businesses – so far we have almost 25,000 e-residents, who have started more than 3,000 companies.

We also have to bear in mind that right now Estonian labour market needs one kind of skills, but in a few years' time things can be completely different. Therefore, we need to create a flexible labour market, so that people can retrain themselves and have a new job. And perhaps do so several times during their working life.

While changing a policy which has been in place for 25 years, we also have to think 25 years ahead. Estonia is a small country, but nothing stops us, or anyone else for that matter, to think big, to think us bigger than we are on a global market.

People who come here should be able to integrate into our society and employers must also do their share in helping their talents to blend in. Employers too have to take responsibility for their workers.

And last but not least – our foreign talents cannot pose any threat to our security.

Labour migration has also emerged as an important issue on the EU's agenda. This is reflected in several directives regulating labour migration being adopted in the last years and proposals to make the rules for highly skilled migrants more attractive.

However, in this 'War for talents' we are not alone. Countries around the world are attracting highly skilled migrants. In 2016 a joint research project by the OECD and the European Commission found that only a fragment of labour migrants were coming to the EU under programmes for skilled workers.

This is why the Member States and EU as a whole need to step up its game. Therefore, I am very proud that during Estonia's Council Presidency, we have agreed on the reform of the blue card directive, which aims at making it more attractive for highly qualified workers from third countries to come to work in the EU.

On the one hand, we compete with each other also in the EU. On the other hand, we share the same labour market and therefore cooperation makes us stronger globally.

Here in Estonia we have already made changes to our law in order to encourage highly skilled people to come to work and live here.

However, the debate continues.

All of you who have gathered here have an important part in it. I wish you fruitful and constructive discussions! What you discuss here may one day be part of our labour immigration policy. Thank you!