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More culture, less bureaucracy – the keys to a more mobile Nordic labour market

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The need to facilitate mobility in the Nordics

“My ambition is to make commuting within the Nordic region as unhindered by red tape as possible, both for the worker and the employer. And cross-border commuters should be able to work from home without it having consequences for the amount of tax they pay.”

EDITORIAL

22.08.2023

BY BJÖRN LINDAHL, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

That is what the Nordic Council of Ministers' Secretary General Karen Ellemann said when we asked her which one issue she would like to achieve within the Nordic cooperation.

Mobility is about being able to benefit from a bigger labour market and being able to study abroad – but it is increasingly also about being able to choose between working at home or in the office.

Although the common Nordic labour market has existed for over 70 years, there is not a lot of mobility between the Nordic countries, according to a new Nordregio study. No more than 1.7 per cent of workers choose to move and work in a different Nordic country and just 0.5 per cent live in one country and work in another.

You could also put it like this: Out of a total Nordic population of 27.2 million people, only 40,000 move to a different Nordic country each year, and 49,000 commute across the border to work in a different Nordic country.

This is not because Nordic citizens rarely move. 13 to 16 per cent of us relocate every year, a higher than EU average figure. But we move to other countries beyond our neighbouring ones. I myself am Swedish and have lived in Norway for 40 years.

Thinking back to how I saw the world as a young man, I can understand this. For me, Norway was not the country I was likely to move to – there were so many other exciting and more exotic countries to choose from! But love strikes in the most unlikely places, in my case in the Canary Islands.

Karen Elleman's interest in all things Nordic was woken when she was in year 5 and her school class visited friendship schools in other Nordic countries. Perhaps the odds of meeting another Nordic person today are bigger in Spain or Thailand for most of us?

When I asked my Icelandic colleague to write about why unemployment in Iceland is lower than in 20 years and about

the challenges this poses for the tourism industry, he got the following interesting answer from Jóhannes Þór Skúlason, Managing Director at the Icelandic Travel Industry Association:

“Mediterranean countries now get more tourists than staff from Poland.”

Another surprising figure is the 800 Swedes who study medicine in Latvia, which now has surpassed Poland as the top choice for Swedish medical students going abroad. The Nordic Labour Journal met one of them, Linnéa Zargarian, who had never been to Riga herself but who chose to study there rather than resit her upper secondary exams – something that can only be done every two years. She is positively surprised.

“The good thing is the number of lecturers. One lecturer has 13 students, and the lecturers are skilled and ambitious. Many of them are young and do just that little extra to ensure students succeed.”

Studying abroad also brings many other unique experiences.

One thing all the Nordic governments agree on is that further education is needed for the changing future of work. Yet worrying figures were presented during the Arendalsuka political gathering in Norway. The Work Research Institute's annual workforce barometer shows a big fall over time in the number of Norwegian workers who are interested in further education and training.

Just 48 per cent said they were interested in this in 2022 compared to 62 per cent in 2010, the first year the survey was published. Meanwhile, more than before believe working tasks will disappear because of artificial intelligence.

One figure that is far too high is the number of fatal workplace accidents in Denmark. In 2022, 43 people died – the highest number since 2008. We look at what the Danish agriculture sector is doing to turn the trend.

For women in the Baltics, the workplace is often not the most dangerous place to be, but their homes. While the Baltic countries are catching up and even bypassing the Nordics in many areas like digitalisation, things are moving slower when it comes to gender equality, influence in the workplace and democracy.

Latvia is one of six countries that still has not ratified the European Council's convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.

The Marta Centre in Riga is a voluntary organisation that helps mistreated women and works to strengthen their rights – with Finnish and Norwegian support. The LAMPA democracy festival is also important. It too has been inspired by the Nordics and has involved the Nordic Council of Ministers this year.

In order for us to understand society and to keep the democratic conversation alive, one group of people is particularly important – journalists. For more than 65 years, the Nordic Journalist Centre in Aarhus, Denmark, has provided further education, courses and networking in order to strengthen journalism and the media.

“Creating the world's most integrated region by 2030 means both changes and sacrifice. It means that Nordic citizens must be aware of which decisions are being made and why. Journalists who know something about the Nordics and the region's relationship to the rest of the world have an important job that helps provide transparency and contributes to the development of our democratic societies,” says the Centre's leader John Frølich.



Karen Ellemann – Nordic through and through

The Nordic Council of Ministers' new Secretary General takes on responsibility for the Nordic cooperation as challenges are piling up – on security policy, the environment and the Nordic model itself. But she is an incurable optimist and believes the Nordic vision can be achieved.

PORTRAIT

22.08.2023

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL, PHOTO LINE SCHEISTRØEN

Karen Ellemann's office at Nordens Hus in Copenhagen has turned into a small gallery.

"The paintings on the walls are by Icelandic artist Þorlákur 'Tolli' Kristinnsson. I contacted Iceland's embassy here in Copenhagen because I want to showcase art from whatever country holds the Council Presidency that year," she says.

The pictures are vibrating with colour combinations that you might not associate with the volcanic island, but that emerge from a combination of glaciers, lichen, moss and water reflections. Two large landscape motifs are veritable fireworks, and they match the Secretary General who has held the position for only six months and who is brimming with a strong work ethic.

"I will be 54 in 14 days. The children have moved out and I am at my peak in terms of energy and motivation. I have the time and determination to take on what is truly a major task since the Nordic cooperation is so large and complex," she says.



Karen Ellemann likes using her hands while she speaks.

But she brings a backpack full of experiences, and it is a roomy one. Few people have seen the Nordic cooperation from so many angles as her. Not only was she a Danish MP for 15 years and a delegate to the Nordic Council. As a government minister in various posts, she has met Nordic colleagues in the different councils of ministers. She has been Denmark's Minister of the Interior and Social Affairs twice, she has led both the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Fisheries and has also served twice in the position of Minister for Nordic Cooperation.

As if that was not enough – she has also been head of the Norden Association in Denmark.

But it all really started way back at school in Søllerød, a Copenhagen suburb, when her year 5 class visited friendship classes in Haugesund in Norway, Ystad in Sweden and Ekenäs in Finland.

“I notice that we now have municipalities in Denmark who want to establish friendship municipalities in China. I struggle to see the benefit of this. First, you need to learn where you come from yourself,” she says.

The school trips planted the first Nordic seed in Karen Ellemann and her parents made sure there were other trips around the Nordics too. She admits that she had studied the news from Nordens Hus for a while before she applied for the job – which in reality became available at an inopportune moment for her since she was also running for a new term in the Danish parliament.

“But the dream to get this position has been there,” she admits.

As she took office on 1 January this year, she was cautious about making any programme statements because she wanted to get to know the organisation first – both the secretariat at Nordens Hus with its around 120 staff and key people on the Nordic Council. She also wanted to visit the many different Nordic organisations from major institutions like Nordforsk to smaller ones like the Nordic Institute on Åland.



Karen Ellemann visiting Nordregio in Stockholm, one of the larger Nordic institutions. Photo: Martina Huber/norden.org

There has been intense travel both in the Nordic region and in the Baltics. She has taken part in democracy festivals and political meetings in addition to the many gatherings of the 12 different councils of ministers. When we meet her, she is getting ready for *Arendalsuka* in Norway, an annual political gathering akin to Sweden's *Almedalsveckan* on Gotland and the Danish *Folkemødet* on Bornholm.

“I am so proud and enthusiastic about our Nordic cooperation model in all its breadth! It has enormous power when everyone is pulling in the same direction. I have of course seen a lot of this before, but I was pleasantly surprised when I saw the full extent of the Nordic cooperation,” she says.

Iceland holds the Nordic Council of Ministers Presidency this year. The Icelandic Minister of the Labour Market Gudmundur Ingi Gudbrandsson is also the Minister for Nordic Cooperation and hence holds a key position. Karen Ellemann met him already back in January.

She has also taken over as Secretary General in a time when the challenges are bigger than in many decades.

Despite her being impressed by the Nordic institutions and the cooperation, she is also very clear that some things could have been done differently – especially during the pandemic.

“Other regions in Europe did not close their borders as we did in the Nordic region. A lot of Nordic citizens and border commuters were hit hard by this. Yet I am not sure what I would have done myself as a government minister in that situation – we were all scared.

“Understanding the consequences these decisions had for our populations is a costly lesson. We must have more consideration for our Nordic neighbours when introducing comprehensive changes. I think a lot needs doing in terms of the labour market, border region commuting and more. We have a significant amount of work ahead of us here.”

At the same time, there is a lot of willingness to find pragmatic solutions, for instance among parliamentarians.

“But then the parliamentarians’ proposals meet legislation and civil servants. That is when we need to appeal to them to think Nordic to allow us to succeed in implementing the concrete solutions that benefit Nordic integration.”

Karen Ellemann highlights the Nordic Border Barriers Council which has one representative from each country – often a former politician with some seniority. It assesses existing potential border barriers and proposes solutions.

Which one issue would you like to be resolved during your time as Secretary General?

Karen Ellemann gives this some thought and a little hesitantly starts talking about how Nordic payment solutions for mobile telephones – like Swish in Sweden, Vipps in Norway and Mobile Pay in Denmark – should work together. But then she asks if she can give the question some more thought. On our way to the airport, she texts her answer.

“When we talk about solving border barriers, there is one particular issue I feel is incredibly important, especially since it is a barrier that really affects many people and companies.

“That is why I have a clear ambition to make commuting within the Nordic region as unhindered by red tape as possible, both for the worker and the employer. And cross-border commuters should be able to work from home without it having consequences for the amount of tax they pay – just like it is for everybody else.”

Border commuting between Nordic countries lags behind that between other EU countries, as we write about elsewhere in this edition.

But back to Ellemann’s office, where we switch themes to the new security policy situation in the wake of Finland’s Nato membership and Sweden’s probable membership.

“This is a time of several crises where our security is being challenged, not least because of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. We do not cooperate on guns and bullets at the Nordic Council of Ministers, but the sense of community that we help create in the Nordic region is very important,” she says.

Nordens Hus houses both the secretariat for the Nordic Council of Ministers, which represents the governments, and the secretariat for the Nordic Council, which represents the parliamentarians. In early summer, the Nordic Council launched an initiative to revise the 1962 Helsinki Treaty, something which many had wanted to see for a long time. The Treaty is often called “the constitution” of the Nordic cooperation. It is 27 years since the Treaty was last revised, back in 1996, when Finland and Sweden had joined the EU.



Karen Ellemann meeting the Nordic Council Presidium, with President Jorodd Asphjell to the right and Vice-President Helge Orten to the left. To the far right is Kristina Há-

foss, Secretary General for the Nordic Council Secretariat. Photo: Martina Huber/norden.org

A working group has been established to “investigate the need to update the Helsinki Treaty and to specify which areas may need to be updated. The objective is to ensure that the Helsinki Treaty serves as the best possible framework for stronger Nordic cooperation now and in the future. The working group must assess the need to include any new policy areas in the treaty such as security, emergency preparedness, and defence and foreign policy.”

“I do not believe there is any merit in establishing a separate council of ministers for defence issues. That is already being taken care of by Nordefco [the Nordic Defence Cooperation], and this does not change because of the security policy situation,” says Karen Ellemann.

It is clear that she believes guns and bullets are not an issue for the Nordic Council of Ministers. But the invasion of Ukraine has many other consequences besides the military ones.

“The wave of refugees created by the war reached the Nordic region quickly. So far, it has been handled in an exemplary manner by the Nordic countries,” she says.

“The war has also led to a clear sense of togetherness since there is a very obvious external enemy.”

In the Nordic region today, only people who have turned 80 have any personal recollections of WWII.

“The war is also creating stronger bonds with the Baltic countries, where there are much fresher memories of living without freedom. We also have to start thinking about what should happen after the war is over and how we rebuild Ukraine,” she says.

This summer, climate change has also made its presence felt in frightening ways. The evening before the Nordic Labour Journal was to fly from Oslo to Copenhagen, authorities published emergency warnings for the extreme weather Hans, linked to a loud alarm signal. Norway was split in two since all rail and road links between Oslo and Trondheim were cut. Rivers breached their banks, landslides carried with them houses and thousands of people were evacuated.

“This should at least lead to fewer climate sceptics,” says Karen Ellemann.

The last two aims in the ambitious Nordic vision to be the world’s greenest, competitive and socially sustainable region by 2030 look reachable. But becoming the greenest region might be harder to achieve, according to a new report from the Nordic Council of Ministers. It says:

“It is obvious that greenhouse gas emissions, including consumption-based emissions, are still too high. The Nordic

Region also faces significant challenges in terms of greenhouse gas intensity and material footprint. With regard to the latter, the trend is actually moving in the wrong direction – even more so than in comparable countries.

How does Karen Ellemann herself consider the likelihood of reaching the green goals?

“I am an optimist at the end of the day. I believe our countries will manage this. The aims are ambitious, but at the same time it is completely necessary to reach these goals.”

Karen Ellemann underlines that the Nordic Council of Ministers’ role is first and foremost to make sure there is solid research that can be presented in a way that is both concrete and understandable for citizens.

“One example that really created a lot of debate in the early summer, was the report published by the Council of Ministers containing the Nordic nutrition recommendations.



Karen Ellemann at a lunch break during the presentation of the Nordic nutrition recommendations. Photo: Kjartan Torbjörnsson

The photographer next to me laughs a little at this.

“I have a meat-eating husband and children,” she explains.

Karen Ellemann underlines that she is neither vegan nor vegetarian.

“But I also know, thanks to solid research and my own common sense, that what I put in my mouth matters. You only have to look at the connection between eating meat with a high fat content and bowel cancer. But this is also about eating things that have been produced in a certain area. For the first time, as a matter of fact, we have produced research that says something about the size of the carbon footprint and the climate impact of what we eat.”

But is there not a risk that the Council of Ministers ends up pointing fingers and telling others what to do?

“There is a risk that the Nordic Council of Ministers is seen as a nanny. This is a role that I really do not want to inhabit, but I insist that we live in enlightened societies and that we shall help member countries access the best possible research and that researchers can work on what recommendations to present to the public. After all, we don’t tell the countries that they have to tell their citizens to become vegans – that would never cross my mind!

“But when you go food shopping for your own and your family’s consumption, it should be easy to see whether an item is “locally produced” or not. The Nordic Swan Ecolabel is an excellent example of how you can find practical solutions. It has spread so much that you can now check in at a Swan-labelled hotel. It should not be easy to obtain a Swan label, but it is easy to choose.”

What is damaging to the environment also changes constantly. Karen Ellemann mentions Iceland as an example, where exotic vegetables are grown in greenhouses heated with geothermal energy.

“We cannot point to agriculture and say that they are the bad guys. On the contrary, they are the ones who will contribute to finding solutions. There is a lot that can be done in terms of the quantity, quality and what type of produce is being grown.”

But do people really care about the Nordic vision, or do they mainly care about what is happening in their home country? This summer saw the publication of a report that showed how Norwegians use 130 plastic carrier bags per person per year. In Sweden and Denmark, that number is around 30.

“I really love that kind of competition between the Nordic countries!” exclaims Karen Ellemann.

“But in order to compete, you also need comparable statistics. That is when you can start talking about why Denmark and Sweden, like in this instance, succeed and why Norway lags behind.”

A report from Nordic Energy Research published in March highlights that long processing times are the biggest challenge to reaching renewable energy goals.

What is your view on the dilemma that quick development processes can undermine the democratic process?

“I absolutely do not think we should compromise on the democratic process. We have to achieve the goals while bringing the citizens with us through the green transition.”



Østerild Test Centre was inaugurated in October 2012. The centre was expanded in 2019 and now fits nine wind turbines at a time Photo: Fredrik Clement.

“But sometimes, of course, politicians have to make difficult decisions. I still have political bruises after I gave the green light as Minister for the Environment for the construction of a test centre for offshore wind, which impacted the Østerild nature reserve. But today, that site is a state-of-the-art test centre which the locals are proud of.”



The future of the Nordics depends on journalism

Journalism plays a crucial role in how the Nordic countries face current and future challenges. What, where, when, how and not least why must be reported by independent media employing well-informed journalists. The keywords for the Nordic Journalist Centre are knowledge sharing and networks.

THEME

22.08.2023

TEXT: FAYME ALM

Finally, the message many had been waiting for. The Helsinki Treatment – the cooperation agreement between Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden – might be updated. One reason is the changed security situation, the Nordic Council of Ministers said on 27 June.



A group of journalists from NJC visiting Helsinki, where the agreement on Nordic cooperation was signed on 23 March 23 1962. Photo: NJC

The day before, the Nordic Labour Journal meets John Frølich. He is the leader of the Nordic Journalist Centre, NJC, and one of those who look forward to a revised treaty.

“We find ourselves in a completely new geopolitical situation, this is not least true for Sweden and Finland. But the Nordic Council of Ministers does not seriously discuss security policy. That is why the Helsinki Treaty must be revised as soon as possible. If not, the Council risks becoming irrelevant.”

John Frølich believes the Helsinki Treaty can be used to improve coordination between the Nordic countries in as many areas as possible.

“If the Treaty is revised, which I hope and believe it will, journalists will contribute with reporting to create debate around the changes,” he says.

Focus on changeability and bridge-building

NJC is based in Danish Aarhus, Jylland, and for the past 65 years, the organisation has worked to strengthen journalism and the media through further education, courses and networking. It is a not-for-profit organisation based at DMJX – the Danish School of Media and Journalism.

“You find us at the department for research and development, which is appropriate since the NJC is interested in changes to the surrounding world. This informs our activities, says John Frølich.

The NJC operates in the Nordics and also in the neighbouring areas of North-West Russia and the three Baltic states. Because of the war in Ukraine, the NJC no longer operates inside Russia proper, however. Instead, there are now several projects supporting Russian journalists in exile, like in the Baltics where the NJC has helped develop Russian language media.

“It is extremely important that these media are independent and can be a counterweight for the Russian-speaking minorities in countries where Russian TV is being shown every day. It is more urgent than ever to keep countering Russian media in Russian,” says John Frølich.

He points out that the NJC does more than provide economic support for the operations in the Baltics. It is also not a question of “we” teaching “them” how to do journalism.

“They already know how. This is about an exchange where journalists in the Baltic states can help provide answers to how the Baltic Sea can remain a peaceful area despite bordering on Russia,” he says.

Networking is extremely important here, not least in terms of looking to the future, believes John Frølich.

“The younger generation is going to be crucial for a future, peaceful Russia,” he says.

A project where the NJC has matched Russian exile journalists with Nordic media houses is one concrete example of network exchange.

“We have managed to create a win-win project which satisfies not only Russian journalists. Several editors have told us the project was so beneficial to them that they would happily participate again,” says John Frølich.

One successful example is Nikita Vasilenko, a Russian journalist who got a job at the Sydsvenskan newspaper.

Bridges everywhere

But the majority of the NJC’s activities are in the Nordic region. Since its inception in 1957, the centre has offered Nordic journalists further education. An annual event is the so-called *Aarhuskursen* (the Aarhus course).

This year’s theme is the Arctic and the new Nordic reality, and this autumn the course starts with a visit to Tromsø, this year’s Arctic capital, before moving on to Oslo and Brussels. Participants will be updated on the Arctic area with a focus on security and foreign policy and the green and digital transition.



A group of course participants visiting Brussels. Photo: NJC

These are big and topical issues, says John Frølich who points out that *Aarhuskursen*, like the other courses, provides an extra dimension beyond the annual topic.

“When you meet colleagues from other Nordic countries who tell you about their experiences, your own perspective widens. Nordic media often have different angles on issues like climate and environment for instance,” he says and tells us that several Aarhus groups still meet for reunions in various places in the Nordics.

One of these is the group that was formed as far back as 1977.

“They call themselves “The Nordic Pentecostals” since they first gathered during Pentecost in 1977. Since then, they have met at least once every year.”

And it is an advantage, believes John Frølich, to have personal journalist contacts when you need to do research or find people to interview in a different Nordic country. This author agrees – having contacted colleagues in neighbouring countries herself before writing various articles for this publication.

"At the NJC we strongly believe that we can develop journalism across the Nordics. Together we are stronger," he says.

The vision

We return to where we started – how John Frølich sees the future of the Nordic region. One of his two answers included the Helsinki Treaty. The other covers the common vision that the Nordic countries agreed on in 2019.

The Nordic Region will become the most sustainable and integrated region in the world by 2030.

"Creating the world's most integrated region by 2030 means both changes and sacrifice. It means that Nordic citizens must be aware of which decisions are being made and why. Journalists who know something about the Nordics and the region's relationship to the rest of the world have an important job that helps provide transparency and contributes to the development of our democratic societies," says John Frølich.

He also believes that the Nordic coordination ministers play an important role and should therefore be given far more influence on policy in their respective countries than they have today, in order to coordinate joint measures.

"If the vision is to be realised, the countries have to coordinate their efforts in areas such as environmental policy and the removing of existing border barriers* that are hindering the free movement across national borders. And governments, together with the coordination ministers, must discuss how we renew our welfare societies," says John Frølich.

At the same time, there are areas where coordination on a Nordic level is difficult. John Frølich mentions refugee and asylum policies, where Denmark currently has an opt-out from EU rules.

Integration with obstacles

In addition to removing border obstacles in order to realise the Nordic Vision 2030, other areas have clear potential for improvement. Here's an example from John Frølich's everyday life:

"I can book and pay for a train ticket from Copenhagen to Berlin from my computer. But I cannot do the same when I want to take the train to Kalmar [in South-East Sweden]," he says.

"When I need to travel there, I have to physically visit the Copenhagen Central Station or another train station to purchase my ticket."

The Nordic Labour Journal has looked at Swedish, Norwegian and Finnish train operators. It is the same story there. With a few exceptions, it is not possible to buy train tickets online for destinations in neighbouring Nordic countries.

The Swedish state train operation's press service tells the Nordic Labour Journal in an email that there are currently no plans for a joint Nordic ticket system for train travel.

But! Interest in the Nordic region is increasing

"Media outlets are again employing Nordic correspondents," says John Frølich. Media houses are very aware of what they invest in, so he believes this is positive proof there is a growing interest in Nordic topics from their readers.

John Frølich mentions that more and more people choose to watch television series from neighbouring countries too.

The BBC has also launched "BBC Nordic" which aims to bring more British series to the Nordic region by launching them simultaneously in the Nordic countries.

"They see the Nordic region as having a shared culture and common values. We have a shared interest in certain forms of entertainment, such as English series," he says.

As a fourth example, John Frølich mentions the publication *Altinget* which was originally published in Danish, but now has a Swedish edition written in Stockholm and a Norwegian edition written in Oslo.

From challenge to challenge

In terms of the NJC's financial situation and its future activities, things remain uncertain. The Nordic Council of Ministers' grant system is undergoing radical changes.

"What things will look like in 2024, we really don't know. But it goes without saying that the entire Nordic region, including the Nordic Council of Ministers, is interested in the development of journalism in the Nordics. Nordic media and Nordic journalists have much to learn from each other," says John Frølich.

*Editor's note:

Regarding the border barriers, which affect commuting between Nordic countries: Over 100 such barriers have been identified. That is according to Sandra Forsén, senior adviser at the Nordic Council of Ministers, interviewed in "Norden," a supplement in Dagens Nyheter on June 19 produced by the Nordic Council of Ministers ahead of this year's *Almedalsvecka*.



More culture, less bureaucracy – the keys to a more mobile Nordic labour market

By 2030, the Nordics should be the world's most integrated, sustainable and competitive region. The open Nordic labour market is key to fulfilling that ambition. But mobility is low and may need to be stimulated by administrative and cultural measures, according to recent research.

NEWS

22.08.2023

TEXT: GUNHILD WALLIN, PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

Nordic citizens have enjoyed a common labour market for more than 70 years. This has included the freedom to move across Nordic borders and to find employment in any of the Nordic countries.

Yet despite this opportunity, fewer than 1.7 per cent of workers choose to move to work in a different Nordic country. Only 0.5 per cent live in one country and work in another.

Migration patterns have been fairly alike in most of the Nordic countries and territories since the early 1990s, according to Anna Lundgren and Ágúst Bogason at the international research centre Nordregio in Stockholm. They published two reports in June – “Competence Mobility – How

can labour market mobility in the Nordic Region be increased” and “Re-start competence mobility in the Nordic Region”.



Anna Lundgren and Ágúst Bogason from the Nordregion research centre.

“It is reasonable to consider that free mobility is key to fulfilling the vision 2020, especially in the border regions. That is where you find the big potential. A bigger labour market brings the possibility of better matching, which again creates more jobs and higher growth.

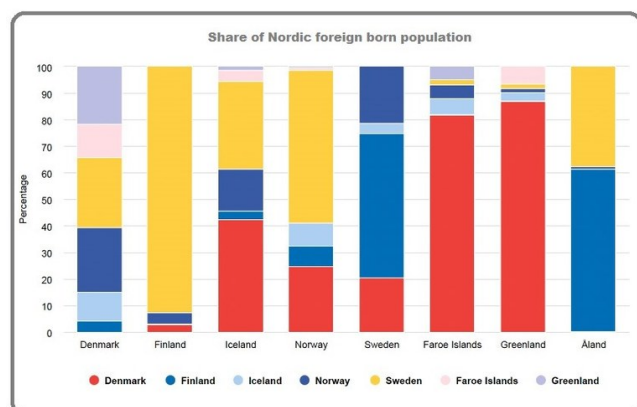
“Today, though, mobility between the countries is not that impressive, and actually lower than the EU average. Yet on an international scale, mobility within the Nordics is pretty high,” says senior researcher Anna Lundgren.

Regional voices on mobility

As part of the project, Ágúst Bogason has looked into the driving forces behind Nordic labour mobility – and obstacles to it – across three regions: Greater Copenhagen, Vestfold Telemark and Greenland.

He interviewed around 40 representatives from the business sector, municipalities, regions and trade unions. He also interviewed people who have chosen to apply for work in a different country or just across the border. What tempts people to seek work in a different Nordic country, what makes it easier and what are the obstacles to cross-border work?

“It is not necessarily straightforward to accept a job on the other side of the border. You need a personal number from the other country, a digital ID, a bank account and you need to understand the tax and pension systems,” explains Ágúst Bogason.



The researchers at Nordregio have made an illustration of the origins of the population born in another Nordic country. Denmark has the most differentiated Nordic population, on Åland the Nordic immigrants almost entirely comes from Finland and Sweden. Source: Nordregio.

The fact that the cross-border labour market is less than seamless became clear during the pandemic. When Swedish workers suddenly no longer could travel to their jobs in Norway, it soon became clear that the safety nets were not strong enough. Who would pay compensation for those who could no longer turn up at work, for instance? And how would the employment insurance schemes work in this unusual situation?

“It is true that we are not talking a huge number here, but for the individuals concerned the uncertainty meant a lot,” agree Anna Lundgren and Ágúst Bogason.

Driving forces, attractions and obstacles to mobility

Higher pay is one common reason for looking for work in a different country, as are beneficial exchange rates. Swedish doctors and nurses have for a long time been tempted to take long or short-term jobs in Norway. Today, the Norwegian krone is weaker and interest has waned.

“The Covid-19 pandemic and consequent limits to free movement put a damper on cross-border mobility. Over time, it might also have an impact on the trust needed to get a job in a different Nordic country,” according to both researchers.

The Copenhagen region has also tempted job-seeking Swedes in the Öresund region with its lower unemployment rates and higher wages. The latest statistics from 2021 show that 16,914 people commuted across Öresund daily. 95 per cent of them lived in Sweden and commuted to Denmark.

Recent figures show an increase of 17 per cent during the first six months of 2022 of Swedes commuting to Denmark to work. Higher wages and more available jobs are issues that impact the Nordic labour market, but there are other factors at play too.

“Social and cultural aspects are also attracting factors. People might be on the search for an adventure, to try something new, or it could be the beautiful Norwegian scenery for instance,” says Anna Lundgren.



Norwegian nature tempts Swedes to the country, including those who want to work in a different country. Photo: Björn Lindahl

But social and cultural differences can represent an obstacle too, especially when it comes to language skills. Older generations often have better knowledge of and understand different Nordic languages than the younger ones. There is also a range of bureaucratic difficulties that throw spanners in the work both for people moving to a different Nordic country and for those who remain in their home country while working across the border.

“It ought to be easy to do the correct thing. Today there is a lot of frustration in the regions that it takes so long to remove red tape and that national legislation does not take into account the regions’ needs to a sufficient degree,” says Anna Lundgren.

Proposed improvements

Anna Lundgren and Ágúst Bogason point to three issues that they believe are important when it comes to improving labour mobility. The first is to improve the coordination of laws and regulations between the Nordic countries to make it easier to work across borders.

A digital ID system that would work in all of the Nordic countries, allowing for access to banks and public services, is crucial, they argue. They also highlight the need to simplify tax systems and the right to social security for border commuters.

The second is to support initiatives aimed at boosting interest in Nordic cultures and languages, in order to improve integration. In recent years, partly because of globalisation, interest in Nordic issues has fallen. That is why targeted measures aimed at boosting knowledge about language and culture – not least among younger people – will be particularly important. To improve mobility rates, more information about the opportunities to study and work in a different Nordic country is also needed.

The third is to improve Nordic cooperation on all levels in order to stimulate free movement between the Nordic countries.

“It is important to synchronise the systems better so that those who want to work across borders or in a different Nordic country don’t lose their social rights,” says Ágúst Bogason.



Iceland's unemployment rate lowest for 20 years

Unemployment goes up and down and is almost always connected to the strength of the economy. This is also the case now, as Iceland's economy has begun to grow again after the pandemic – largely because of tourism. The unemployment rate in June was 2.5 per cent, the lowest for 20 years. Although this is in itself a positive thing, it has some negative side effects.

NEWS

22.08.2023

TEXT: HALLGRÍMUR INDRIÐASON, PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL



Katrin Ólafsdóttir, assistant professor in economics at The University of Reykjavik, says that these numbers show a slight delay in getting foreign staff.

“It has been the case in Iceland that when we need workforce, we import it. This doesn’t seem to happen as fast now as before. We are seeing probably the best year in history in tourism and that might be the biggest reason for this low unemployment rate.

“There is also a housing shortage for people working in this sector, which increases the problem. And Iceland is also competing for labour with other countries. We have usually been able to get workers from countries such as Poland but that seems to be more difficult now,” says Ólafsdóttir.

Despite this, the number of working immigrants to Iceland has increased from 42,278 in the middle of last year to 49,889 this year. That is an increase of over 7,600, which may explain the growth in tourism this year.

The unemployment rate is especially low among women, only 1 per cent. Ólafsdóttir says the main reason is that the staff shortage is mainly in the service industry.

“The last few years there has been a shortage in kindergartens, health care and other sectors with a high proportion of female workers. You can always get a job there so I think that any woman who is looking for a job can get it.”

Ólafsdóttir says this could make companies do certain things to make better use of the staff they have, for example, take larger groups on tours.

“This can lead to less efficiency and even shorter opening hours.”

Tourism workers have not returned

Jóhannes Þór Skúlason, Managing Director at the Icelandic Travel Industry Association, partly confirms Ólafsdóttir’s analysis.



“It has been more difficult for us to get Icelandic staff. Before the pandemic foreigners represented roughly 33 per cent of tourism staff. Now they’re 40 per cent, which is about 12,000 people.”

Skúlason adds that before the pandemic, one in every three foreign workers in tourism had permanent residence in Iceland. He thinks that percentage is lower now. Skúlason says this is a consequence of Icelanders leaving the tourism sector during the pandemic.

“Official statistics show that after the pandemic, the number of staff changed in two sectors. The number of tourism workers fell by 9,000, of whom 5,500 were Icelandic, while the public sector gained 5,000 staff. So Icelandic workers went to the public sector where the jobs are safer and the salaries better. It takes time to get these people back because it’s hard to leave the safety offered by the public sector after such a big shock.”

He expects, however, that in three to five years the percentage of foreign workers returns to what it was before the pandemic.

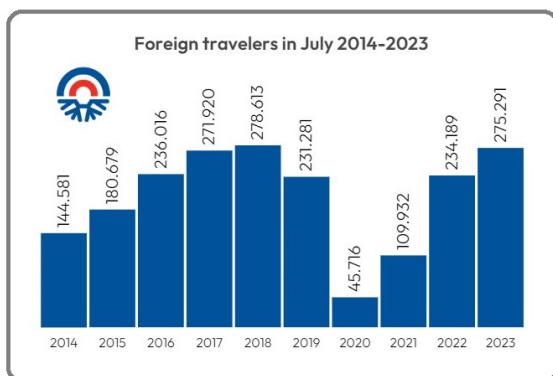
Skúlason says that it has been easier this year to attract workers from abroad. Last year this was extremely hard to do. But it is still difficult to get people with the right skills.

“The staff we can get is mostly inexperienced and the percentage of them is bigger than before. We are having problems getting people with the right skill set, such as waiters, cooks, tour guides, bus drivers and so on. Hotels and accommodations can hire inexperienced people but that also means that they have to use a lot of time and energy to train them.”

He points out that last year, 8.3 per cent of jobs in tourism were vacant. Now that figure is 4.3 per cent. Skúlason also notices that more workers come from Southern rather than Eastern Europe.

“I know that Mediterranean countries now get more tourists than staff from Poland. So maybe the economy is shifting a bit.”

The main problem, according to Skúlason, is not getting staff, but getting the right staff.



In July this year, there were only 3,322 fewer tourists than the record year 2018. Source: Icelandic Tourist Board.

“We expect to receive between 2.1 and 2.2 million tourists in Iceland this year and we have the manpower to cope with that. But the question is what service we want to give them. The shortage of qualified staff diminishes the companies’ capacity to grow and make tourism a more valuable industry. It’s important that we get qualified staff and the longer that takes, the more difficult it will be to get the balance right between quality service and pricing.”

Salary pressure increases

But back to the economic effect of low unemployment. When there is a low unemployment rate, the pressure for higher salaries increases.

“We haven’t seen anything of that kind right now. But the current collective agreements will expire at the end of Jan-

uary so I would think that this would increase the pressure in negotiations for new agreements. There is already a sombre mood within the trade unions, and this only adds to that. But I don’t see any salary increase before negotiations begin,” Ólafsdóttir says.

And she also adds that this situation could lead to increased inflation.

“The inflation has been on its way down, but I don’t think it’s likely that it will go down as rapidly as it has in the last two months any time soon.”

Ólafsdóttir says that all these numbers indicate pressure on the economy.

“If this goes on it will lead to even higher interest rates. I think that the summer tourism peak will end by the autumn. The question then is whether the foreign staff who have finished their jobs will leave Iceland or register as unemployed. But what we don’t know just yet is how this will affect certain lines of work. Will we for example see some expert shortage in the autumn? This is something to keep an eye on.”

Ólafsdóttir is worried that this situation might lead to more conflict between employers and workers – which will get even worse if the central bank increases interest rates.

“This situation makes it necessary for the government to step in and do their bit to calm things down. That has not happened in the last few months. If the government doesn’t do that, thing will be difficult.”



New occupational health measures to cut fatal accidents in Danish agriculture

Far too many workers are seriously injured at work and the number of fatal accidents in Danish workplaces is at its highest since 2008. Now a parliamentary majority demands action across the three most dangerous sectors, including agriculture.

NEWS

22.08.2023

TEXT MARIE PREISLER

Kent Andersen runs a farm with 150 dairy cows in North Jutland and is among a minority of Danish farmers who demands that anyone working on the mini loader wear a safety harness. The risk of a fatal accident or serious injury is too high not to wear one, he thinks.

“If you try to jump off you can easily trap a foot underneath it, and I actually think more people fall off than is estimated. The worst thing that can happen is getting crushed if it topples over,” he says.

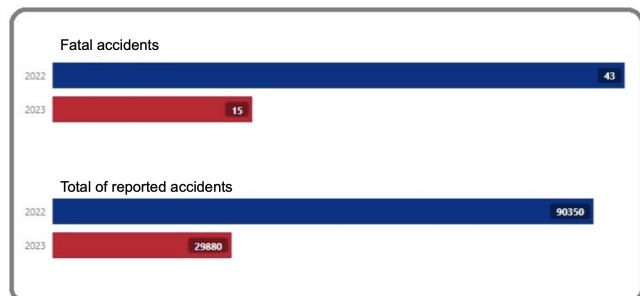
The mini loader is an important tool used to move heavy loads around farms, and it is a legal requirement for farmers and employees to use a safety harness when they operate it.

Yet a large majority do not use a harness. Only 13 per cent of Danish cattle farmers put on a safety harness before turning the ignition, according to a survey from SEGES Innovation, a private, independent, non-profit research and development organisation that also provides advice for farmers.

Kent Andersen admits he did not always insist on the use of the safety harness. He first became aware of the risk of serious accidents when an employee expressed concern about operating the mini loader. Today, the harness is a requirement at Kent Andersen’s farm, and he has chosen to talk about his experiences in a campaign on the use of safety harnesses in mini loaders which SEGES Innovation is making for farmers.

Spotlight on three sectors

Falling out of mini loaders and getting trapped under machinery represent some of the most common agriculture accidents and are one of the reasons agriculture tops the list of the sectors that have the highest number of fatal workplace accidents.



The Danish Work Environment Authority's accident barometer shows the number of fatal accidents and the total number of workplace accidents this and last year. Data was collected on 17 August 2023.

43 people died in 2022 in Danish workplaces, the highest figure in 15 years. Between 2021 and 2022, there was also a five per cent increase in the number of workplace accidents reported to the Danish Working Environment Authority. A total of 46,500 workplace accidents were reported in 2022. The number does not include Covid-19-related accidents.

This sad development has made politicians react. In the summer of 2022, a majority in the Danish parliament agreed on an action plan to reduce the number of workplace accidents. As a result of this political agreement, an expert group will secure new knowledge about the causes behind serious accidents in order to prevent more from happening.

Campaigns will be launched and there will be a comprehensive drive to improve the three sectors that see half of all workplace accidents: agriculture, transport and construction.

When presenting the national action plan, the Minister for Employment Ane Halsboe-Jørgensen said it is unacceptable that people could die from going to work.

"No person should risk their life by going to work in Denmark. Every work fatality is one too many and totally unacceptable. That is why I am happy that all of the parliamentary parties now agree that we need action to prevent such accidents. We have now agreed on a concrete plan of action, and we are naturally focussing on putting measures in place in the sectors where most of the fatal accidents occur," the minister said.

From farm owner to business leader

Danish agriculture has in a relatively short time changed from small, family-run farms to businesses with many em-

ployees. This change goes some way to explain why agriculture has not come as far as other sectors that have put in place occupational health systems, believes occupational health consultant Per Jørgensen at SEGES Innovation.



Occupational health consultant Per Jørgensen. Photo: SEGES Innovation.

"Only two generations ago, most farms were run by the farmer himself, together with his wife or a farm hand. Today, far more farms have become businesses and they are much bigger. So a modern farmer runs a business that often has between 10 and 20 employees. This means occupational health and safety must be handled and communicated in a completely different and systematic fashion than farmers have been used to," says Per Jørgensen.

He visits and advises many Danish farmers on safety and accident prevention, and his experience is that many really want to secure a good work environment for their employees and that some farmers have created a culture where occupational health and safety is a subject that permeates the way work is organised every day.

Foreign labour

Labour shortages are one of the things that is both a challenge for agriculture and that can promote the industry's efforts to achieve even better safety for employees, believes Per Jørgensen.

"It is difficult for farmers to recruit people, so a good working environment is an important competitive factor. The labour shortage also means many farm workers are foreign, they speak a different language and are used to working environments where there is less focus on safety."

There are many Eastern European workers in Danish agriculture, but also people from Asia who do not have the same culture when it comes to the use of protective gear for instance. They are not used to being able to approach their superiors to ask about safety either, explains Per Jørgensen.

"That's why it is extremely important that farmers are very clear about which safety measures must be followed in the

workplace, and luckily many farmers have begun this process.”

Yet there is still some way to go before occupational health and safety measures have been implemented in all companies. All Danish companies with employees are required to hold an annual occupational health discussion, but only a very few do, thinks Per Jørgensen.

“This legally required occupational health discussion is still not very common in farming, to put it mildly. It is a very good way of getting occupational health and safety on the agenda in the workplace, and making this a collective endeavour for everyone,” he says.

Talk about occupational health in everyday work

The insurance company Alm. Brand also encourages farmers to improve planning to cut the number of accidents. The insurer receives many reports about agriculture workplace accidents and believes many of these could have been avoided.

“Every year we receive far too many reports about agriculture workplace accidents. Although workplace accidents cannot be avoided altogether, sadly, more can be prevented,” Alm. Brand stated when the Working Environment Authority presented the latest figures for fatal accidents in agriculture in 2022. The insurer believes some of the accidents are due to people rushing things, changes to work processes and new employees who are less experienced, as agriculture companies continue to grow.

To break the cycle, Alm. Brand recommends that farmers make safety a daily talking point during meetings with employees and that they make safety an issue workers can talk about during the working day just like other ordinary tasks.

Danish companies have more than double the number of workplace accidents per 100,000 workers than Swedish companies. The 2017 Danish-Swedish research project “Workplace accidents in Denmark and Sweden” looked at possible causes for why Swedish workers are better at avoiding workplace accidents. One of the conclusions was that Swedish employers were good at allowing employees to take an active part in the planning of their working day by expressing their views and coming up with their own suggestions.



Fighting domestic violence in Latvia with Finnish and Norwegian support

Just a lovers' spat. A common explanation in Latvia for domestic violence, although legislation has been considerably tightened in recent years. The country's Marta Centre, with support from Norway, is working to reduce stereotypical perceptions among Latvian government officials.

NEWS

22.08.2023

TEXT: FAYME ALM, PHOTO: CENTRS MARTA

The Istanbul Convention. That is the name of the European Council's convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.

Signed but not ratified

In a press release from 10 May this year, the European Parliament urges the six countries that so far have not ratified the Istanbul Convention to do so "without delay, so that it can protect women to the full extent of the Convention's intended scope".

Latvia signed the convention when it was published in 2011, but is one of the six countries that still have not ratified it.

A few weeks before the emphatic press release, Iluta Lace was on her way to the Latvia's Radio building in Riga for an interview about yet another woman who had been killed by her ex-partner. Lace is the founder and leader of the Latvian women's support organisation and resource network Centrs Marta.

"Poor, poor man who was forced to kill his awful wife. I feel so sorry for him," says the male taxi driver.

The murder happened in Jēkabpils, a city some 140 kilometres east of Riga. The man had earlier been married to the woman and killed her in front of their child – a very young child. He had physically and mentally abused her many

times. She was hounded and threatened. He had told her he would kill her. He also threatened people who supported her, Iluta Lace tells the Nordic Labour Journal when we meet her at the Marta Centre office in central Riga.

“He had been reported to the police several times and the woman had also written to a prosecutor and to the Latvian Ombudsman to tell them what was going on. Still, he was not in prison.”

What were the prosecutor and judge doing? wonders Iluta Lace.

Temporary protection against violence

It is a relevant question, as this tragic event took place despite the fact that Latvia has had “temporary protection against violence” legislation since 2014. The murdered woman had sought help through this legislation.



Iluta Lace heads the Latvian organisation Centrs Marta. Photo: Screenshot Frontline Women's Fund/YouTube.

“It means that a woman who is the victim of violence can report this to a judge and describe her situation. That is enough. No evidence is necessary,” says Iluta Lace and explains the legislation briefly:

- Within 24 hours after the judge receives the woman's report, they can decide that the perpetrator of violence should leave the residence – for a month if it is his residence, permanently if it is her residence. This applies if the man does not contest the woman's report.
- If the man harasses or visits the woman during this period, a legal process is initiated.

Women in Latvia seek help using this law. Around 1,000 reports are filed every year, and last year the number was even higher. Right now, Latvian police are overseeing 3,808 protection cases of this kind, explains Iluta Lace.

“This is good as long as the man follows the law, but every year, we see between 500 and 600 cases where he does not. That's when problems arise.”

She points out that Latvian legislation dealing with violence against women and domestic violence has improved. Often

the Marta Centre has been a driver for this change, either through lobbying different stakeholders or in meetings with decision-makers.

“I have met President Egils Levits and Minister for the Interior Māris Kučinskis, and next week I will be meeting the chief prosecutor to talk about teaching gender equality in elementary school and what the gender perspective means, something that needs improvement.”

The fight for a more equal society never ends, points out Iluta Lace.

“Right now, Marta representatives are part of three working groups looking at both the criminal and civil legal processes in Latvia.”

Exchanging experiences in order to progress

The country has legislation aimed at protecting women from violence. But legislation is often not enough. In order to make the best use of the laws, changing attitudes are needed – not only among the general public but also among professionals who meet victims of violence.

“Over the years we have seen problems linked to how the Latvian police deal with violence in close relationships,” Inge Engeland Johansen tells the Nordic Labour Journal. He is a social worker from Arendal in Norway who for many years has served voluntarily on Centrs Marta's board. Today he is the chair.

Torstein Pihlman is a retired Norwegian police officer whose work as head of department included working with domestic violence. In May, he and Inge Engeland Johansen met representatives from Latvian police, municipal social services and the city's Marta office in Rēzekne, a city in the eastern part of the country that houses many Ukrainian refugees.

“We want to improve the knowledge, priorities and attitudes of the Latvian police and social services,” says Inge Engeland Johansen.

During the meeting, police and social services from both countries described their working methods and experiences in combating and preventing human trafficking, sexual offences, and violence.

The Norwegian police officers presented their agenda for discussions related to family conflicts, with a specific focus on protecting children's rights.

The group also discussed the importance of getting the general public, governmental and non-governmental organisations to collaborate to investigate acts of violence and prevent new ones from occurring.

The meeting took place within the framework of the project “Hand in hand to protect,” which receives financial support

from the Nordic Council of Ministers and aims to foster collaboration among multiple parties.

This was not the first Latvian-Nordic exchange, explains Inge Engeland Johansen.

“A few years ago, a Norwegian judge hosted a seminar for Latvian judges and police. Since then, quite a few things have happened, much thanks to the Marta Centre’s influence and campaigns.”

More exchanges are planned. This August a delegation from Rēzekne will meet in Norway, comprising people from the same organisations that met in May. This meeting’s aims are:

- getting to know each other better
- enhancing local collaboration when working with victims of violence
- sharing knowledge of methods linked to the work with violence in close relationships

There are also plans for a study visit to a regional crisis centre for women and men who have been victims of violence, and another visit to *Alternativ til vold* (Alternative to violence), a Norwegian foundation offering treatment for adults who use violence.



Inge Engeland Johansen is a workers' representative at the Norwegian Union of Social Educators and Social Workers. He is also the chair at the Marta Centre. Photo: Centrs Marta.

“We will also visit a joint operations centre for firefighting, emergency medical services and police to see how emergency services can work together in different situations, including violence in close relationships,” says Engeland Johansen.

Finally, there will be a visit to the local police station in Arendal, where guests and hosts will discuss how Norwegian police work with these challenges.

Reading from dead woman’s letter at protest

The murder in Jēkabpils last spring got a lot of attention. Other media beyond Latvia’s Radio wanted to talk to Iluta Lace.

But it did not end there. On 25 April, several hundred people gathered in a protest outside the Riga government offices. Iluta Lace read aloud from a letter written by the murdered woman to the Ombudsman where she asked: “How many letters do I have to write?”



Iluta Lace reads aloud from the letter that the murdered woman wrote to the Ombudsman. Photo:

“There are still a lot of stereotypical perceptions about domestic violence, as this case demonstrates. But people protest against them too,” says Iluta Lace, who holds up the Nordic region as a role model in terms of gender equality.

Thanks to the Nordics

“I don’t know what my life would be like without my contacts in the Nordic countries. Here in Latvia, nobody understood the notion of gender equality when I wanted to set up a gender equality centre,” says Iluta Lace.

In order to reach her goal, she spent the 1990s applying for support for a range of projects and got the backing of friends and others who believed in her initiatives. Her connection with Inge Engeland Johansen was fruitful right from the start.

“He helped me with contacts and knowledge, and he created the friends of Marta in Arendal, who helped raise money for us.”

In Finland too

Latvia’s Marta Centre became a reality in 2000 thanks to a joint project with Finland’s Swedish Martha Association, and last year the Centre was able to open protected accommodation for female victims of threats and violence.

“We were able to buy the flat where women can seek shelter thanks to fundraising from our Norwegian friends,” says Iluta Lace.

Finland has consistently supported the Latvian Marta Centre. When the economic crisis hit Latvia in 2008, Centrs Marta struggled. So Iluta Lace and her sister started writing and performing their own music, along with other Latvian songs, at various events.

This led to an invitation to perform on Finnish television, and that again led to a tour in Finland. Thanks to that tour, the sisters raised 10,000 euro. Along with support from the Finnish Martha Association, it secured the organisation's survival.

An ongoing fight

The abuse of women is widespread in our part of the world. This is what the European Parliament writes:

"One in three women in the EU has experienced physical and/or sexual violence."

But Iluta Lace does not see any difference between the situation for women in Latvia and that of women in other European countries.

She does, however, believe the Nordic countries have done more to put in place mechanisms to create a more gender-equal society.

"Historically, the discrimination is the same whatever the country. There are people in the Nordics and in Latvia with discriminatory attitudes," she says and points to what could be the crux of the matter.

"Violence against women is not always taken seriously. It is considered to be a private problem, like a lovers' spat for which the state should have no responsibility. This is what we are here to change."



Norwegian workers lukewarm to further education

The annual workforce barometer shows fewer and fewer workers in Norway want to take further education and training.

NEWS

22.08.2023

TEXT: LINE SCHEISTRØEN

Workers' interest in pursuing further education and training has fallen steadily over the past 15 years. When researchers from Norway's Work Research Institute (AFI) at OsloMet started collating data on this, the number was 64 per cent. This year it is only 48 per cent.

Norway's stated goal for skills development is that no one should be past their sell-by-date. These figures should alert the social partners, politicians and authorities that something has to be done, argues Mari Holm Ingelsrud at AFI.

Measuring trends

With her colleague Elin Moen Dahl, Holm Ingelsrud presented the results from this year's *Arbeidslivbarometer* (workforce barometer) during a seminar organised by the Confed-

eration of Vocational Unions (YS) during *Arendalsuka*, Norway's largest annual political gathering.

This year's YS workforce barometer is the fifteenth of its kind. It measures the state of and developments in central areas of the Norwegian workforce:

- Trade union support
- Support for collective wage formation
- Working conditions, stress and coping
- Gender equality
- Security and connection to working life
- Skills

"The Norwegian workforce is in good shape. Generally, we see small changes year-on-year. The Norwegian labour mar-

ket is very stable,” sums up AFI researcher Mari Holm Ingelsrud.

A worrying result

Each year, the researchers do an in-depth study of a new theme. This year they looked at further education and training. Other themes have included digitalisation and the green transition.

The survey shows that:

- 62 per cent do not take further education or training because they do not need it in their jobs.
- 55 per cent say they personally do not need more skills.
- More than previously believe digitalisation and the use of artificial intelligence will lead to the loss of working tasks.
- Half of the workers surveyed do not believe the green transition will have consequences for their own jobs. Fewer than previously believe they can contribute to cutting emissions at work.

YS President Hans-Erik Skjæggerud thinks the results are worrying.

“The workforce is facing major changes linked to digitalisation and climate change. When few people want further education and training, it might spell trouble for both the private and public sectors,” says Skjæggerud.

More learning at work

The workforce barometer shows that workers are more positive about further education and training when this takes the form of courses and seminars, while they are less interested in classroom teaching and/or gaining educational points at higher education institutions.



Trine Lise Sundnes (Labour) and Erik Johan Tellefsen Lindøe (Conservatives) participated in the political debate about further education and training. Photo: Liv Hilde Hansen

Hans-Erik Skjæggerud thinks there should be more of what he calls training close to the workplace. He gets support from Trine Lise Sundnes, former head of Norwegian LO's interna-

tional department and now a Labour MP and a member of the Norwegian parliament's Standing Committee on Labour and Social Affairs. She too thinks more must be done to implement learning in the workplace.

Asked what the state should do to contribute, Sundnes said:

“There is no indication that a state-funded further education and training fund will be established tomorrow. Up until now, all governments regardless of political hue, have pointed to the State Educational Loan Fund. That is our approach. Something has to be done to turn this trend, and I believe the authorities must contribute – but that this must be in cooperation with the social partners.”

Sundnes believes Norway could learn from Sweden and Denmark's models for further education and training.

Young people fear ill health

The researchers highlight other worrying results in the barometer, including a surprising increase in the number of young people who fear becoming disabled in the future.

“The trend is particularly concerning because that these workers have the longest time left until retirement age,” says AFI researcher Elin Moen Dahl. Her colleague Mari Holm Ingelsrud thinks it is interesting to see whether this trend is linked to the Covid-19 pandemic, or whether other factors might explain it.

Satisfaction lower than in years

Another worrying tendency, according to the researchers, is that fewer people experience job satisfaction or that they cope well with their jobs. Workers earning less than the median are more likely to have jobs that are physically hard and risky. They are also more likely to report that they lack an interesting, independent and meaningful job.

“We have measured job satisfaction since 2014, and this year's level is the lowest we have seen for a long time,” says Halm Ingelsrud. This is also one of the trends that the researchers will follow particularly closely in their work going forward.

Thinking of ourselves more

The barometer also indicates that workers have felt that many things have become more expensive, the researchers say. They believe they are seeing a slight shift towards more individualism. There is also a slight increase in the number of people who say they want performance-related pay.

The 2023 wage settlement was a mid-term settlement and the first in decades that led to a strike that lasted for four days. The economic framework for the main settlements ended up between 5.2 and 5.4 per cent, based on an estimated inflation rate of 4.8 per cent.

Now, everything points to a higher rate of inflation and that this will erode the wage settlement.

“Could this weaken the support for allowing trade unions to negotiate wages on behalf of workers?” ask the researchers.

“Increased prices on items like food and electricity may have made workers more individualistic and made them want to do more of the wage negotiation themselves, but we do not know whether this can be directly linked to this year’s wage settlement,” says AFI researcher Elin Moen Dahl.



Why Swedish medical students flock to Latvia

Nearly 800. That is how many of Riga's medical students come from the Nordic region's largest country. The Nordic Labour Journal went to meet one of them.

THEME

14.08.2023

TEXT AND PHOTO: FAYME ALM

This far but no further. Linnéa Zargarian, a medical student at the public Riga Stradiņš University, and the writer from the Nordic Labour Journal cannot move beyond this point.

Along the walls under tall windows, chairs are bolted to the floor. Behind us is the tall and narrow wooden gate we have just stepped through. In front of us, a turnstile with an electronic pass system – an anachronistic detail in an otherwise archaic environment.

"This is where we remove our outerwear and don the white laboratory coats we brought along. They must be clean and ironed. We are not allowed to pass without them," explains Linnéa Zargarian.

I get ready to take a photo with my mobile but a voice briskly tells me off. It comes from a high landing on the other side

of the barrier. A woman emerges. She is unhappy with my presence. I put away my mobile and we go outside, around the corner to the large garden behind the building and conveniently find a bench and table in the shade. It is hot in the Latvian capital on this day in June. Except for a few cleaners on their break sitting at another table, we are the only ones here.

"Most of this term's exams are over and many students have already gone home," says Linnéa Zargarian. She has one exam left before taking a break from her theory studies.

From animals to humans

How did she end up in Riga? It turns out that for her – like for many upper secondary school students in Sweden – the *Prao* work experience programme would determine her choice of education.

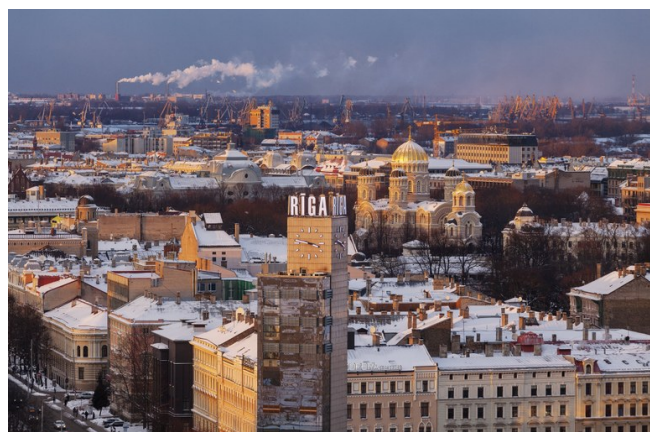
“I had decided to become a vet. But when I failed to get a *Prao* space at a veterinary clinic, my godmother intervened. She is the head nurse at one of Stockholm’s hospitals and I got a placement there at the surgical urology department. After that, I made up my mind. This is what I want to do. Work in the health sector and becoming a doctor.”

Three alternatives

A few years later, Linnéa Zargarian was ready to apply for medical school. Her B grade in science was not good enough to study medicine in Sweden. The grades run from A to F, with A being the highest grade, and an A was required.

“I realised I had three alternatives. The university aptitude test is held only twice a year, and studying for an improved grade would take time. So I started looking into the possibility of studying medicine abroad since I was keen to get going.”

A family friend was studying medicine in Riga and was encouraging and assuring. Linnéa Zargarian herself has no links to Latvia and had never visited the country. But her mother had and she would love to return to the Latvian capital.



Riga in winter. Photo: Reinis Hofmanis

“She brought me here on a cold winter weekend. I fell in love with the city and could picture living here. I spent my final year of upper secondary education at the Swedish School in Brussels, so I knew that living abroad was not a problem. I did, however, wonder what kind of education I was letting myself in for. But my parents were very supportive and said go for it! You could always leave if it doesn’t live up to your expectations.”

Linnéa Zargarian was accepted to study medicine in Riga on her first attempt and started in the autumn of 2019.

In order to be accepted, you need high grades from upper secondary education, references and a covering letter explaining your motivation, she says and refers to the EduPlanet organisation that helps Swedish students with the process of applying and settling in.

Loan and summer job

The Swedish Board of Student Finance (CSN) offers student grants and loans for studies it considers having an “acceptable standard”. The amount is the same regardless of where in the world you study, and students abroad can also apply for extra student finance.

“According to the contract I wrote with the university when I started, I pay around €12,000 per academic year, but I know that the student fee has increased somewhat. You can borrow from CSN to make up for some of this, but it only covers around half. So I always have to work in the summer holidays to earn money,” says Linnéa Zargarian.

This year she works for a couple of months at Stockholm’s Södersjukhuset, which has the largest emergency department in the Nordic region. Linnéa Zargarian will work as an “assistant carer” with responsibilities similar to those of an assistant nurse.

“We receive a lot of serious cases so I will learn a whole lot.”

When she returns later this autumn, she starts her ninth term out of a total of twelve. After that, she will start her *BT*, short for *bastjänstgöring* which is a basic service period as a junior doctor.

“When I graduate from here in 2025, I and my three fellow Swedish medical students will do our BT in Sweden just like those who have studied medicine there. It can be difficult to find a space in the Stockholm area where my childhood home is, but I am happy to do it anywhere in Sweden,” says Linnéa Zargarian.

Body after body

We are sat at the bottom of the garden which is full of shrubs and edged with flowers. From here, the distance to the anatomy building is the length of a tennis court. It nevertheless dominates my field of view when I look around. The building has history. It was constructed in the late 1870s as a Greek Orthodox seminary. Today it is the university’s institute of anatomy and anthropology, described as “the place where the dead help the living”.

“The building is filled with mystery and locked doors, and we students sometimes wonder a little sardonically how many bodies are really in there. We studied anatomy during the first four semesters and got to dissect many dead people of various ages.”



Linnéa Zargarian in front of the anatomy building.

And then Linnéa Zargarian tells the story of how at the beginning of her first semester she and some fellow students were reading at Anatomikum in a room with glass walls when a gurney with a body was wheeled into the next room.

“Suddenly they opened up the body’s chest like a hatch in order to study the internal organs. I don’t think new students in Sweden would ever get to experience something like that. I have heard from students at Karolinska Institutet that they prepare and can get support before seeing a dead human being. Here we are asked to be respectful, but that’s it.”

Even better than expected

By now, Linnéa Zargarian is well used to dead people, and apart from this minor incident, she has many good things to say about her course.

“All teaching is in English, it is very theory-heavy and complicated but I was prepared for that. The good thing is the number of lecturers. One lecturer has 13 students, and the lecturers are skilled and ambitious. Many of them are young and do just that little extra to ensure students succeed. We can talk to them if we have any questions.”

Linnéa Zargarian says one of the advantages of studying in Riga is that accommodation is relatively cheap, as is travel between Riga and Stockholm. Also, you get more for your euro than for the Swedish krona.

“Although inflation is making everything more expensive now, it is still cheaper than in Stockholm to take a taxi, hire a car, cut your hair or get a facial.”



The cost of living is lower in Riga than in Sweden. This image is from Riga’s old town. Photo: Ģirts Raģelis

In terms of negative things, she mentions language barriers when meeting non-English-speaking Latvians and Russians.

“Some can be unfriendly when they hear me and my fellow students speaking Swedish on the bus, and they hush us. But many do speak English and they like talking to us Swedes. They are welcoming and happy that we are studying here,” says Linnéa Zargarian.

The attitude you as a student bring to the country you study in also matters, she adds.

“Those who are happiest here have a positive attitude and understand that this is not Sweden. If you accept that this is a different country, you will have such a great time.”

As a board member of the Riga office of the Swedish Medical Association Students Abroad, Linnéa Zargarian helps develop a platform that will create a sense of community for the city’s Swedish students.

“We have information meetings for new students, workshops and of course, gatherings. We also organise a doctor’s pub and parties.”

The Medical Association also offers information and advice for those who are considering studying in Latvia.

The future

The cleaners at the neighbouring table have already left when I put my last question to Linnéa Zargarian. It is about the future. What are her plans?

“I actually don’t know when it comes to choosing a speciality. When I ask those who have graduated as doctors, I get two types of answers. One is – think about what kind of life you want. Do you want a family, do you want to work weekends? The other – if are you looking for an adrenaline rush, go for emergency medical care.”

She adds that every new course is exciting and interesting. And she has a soft spot for dermatology and also gynaecology and obstetrics.

The city's charm

Our interview is over. We stand up and walk to the front of the Anatomikum where we first met. Linnéa gets her bicycle and I say I am going back the way I came. Along the canal and the avenue with tall trees, whose foliage today filters the strong sunshine.

“You chose the prettiest area to saunter through in all of Riga. It really is a wonderful city!” says Linnéa Zargarian, and cycles off.



LAMPA – Latvian democracy festival with Nordic inspiration

To strengthen democratic conversation culture through the exchange of ideas and by seeking understanding between people of diverse opinions. That is the purpose of the Latvian LAMPA festival, which has grown bigger each year since its inception in 2015.

THEME

12.08.2023

TEXT: FAYME ALM

Blue pennants are fluttering in the wind. People of all ages are flocking to the castle park with its inviting lake and the dips between small, rounded hills.

The sun is shining and many visitors are seeking shade on benches, tables and chairs under the trees. They watch the action and quench their thirst with free water out of paper cups or eat food from one of the many food stalls. It is Saturday, the second and last day of this year's LAMPA festival – the ninth of its kind.

"I am an influencer and here to participate in a debate on women's right to decide whether they want to have children,"

says my lunch companion. She is expecting her second child herself.



There is also a MiniLampa for small children, and their parents. Photo: Fayme Alm.

“In Latvia, there is a lot of pressure for women to have children. I believe it should be up to the women themselves to decide whether they want to become mothers or not,” she continues.

I do not have time to get her name before she leaves her lunch half eaten to hurry to the debate. It will be held in Latvian like most of the events here, a language I do not speak. So I settle on shouting “Good luck” after her.

A new history

This is a festival of conversation in Cēsis in Latvia, some 90 kilometres northeast of Riga. The town has beautiful buildings and hosts the ruins of a medieval castle from where half of the Baltics were governed for a while. Cēsis became a member of the Hanseatic League in the 13th century, and throughout history, the town has been the victim of violent attacks. The Swedes captured it twice – in 1626 and in 1701 according to my guidebook.

Today, a new history is being written. LAMPA offers debates, conversations, workshops, theatre plays, radio programmes and more. Altogether there are 323 activities. All are welcoming and all events are free.

“Freedom, democracy, good governance, a European way of living. That is what LAMPA wants to convey. The Baltics’ role in protecting the EU’s external borders is about more than military security. It is also about society and its resilience, it is about our democracy,” Ieva Morica tells the Nordic Labour Journal.

She is the executive director of the DOTS Foundation for an Open Society, the organisation that created the LAMPA Conversation Festival.

“At DOTS we heard about the 2014 Folkemødet in Bornholm in Denmark and had the chance to brainstorm with Zakia Elvang, a Danish democracy activist. We also looked at the Arvamusfestival in Estonia and how that worked. After that, we

began creating our own festival which became LAMPA. Since 2015, we have held a festival every year,” says Ieva Morica.

Lampa simply means lamp in English – an object that provides light. DOTS realised they would not be able to organise annual festivals on their own so they partnered up with Swedbank in Latvia, Cēsis municipality, the creative digital agency Armadillo, the communications agency Deep White and Change Agency Spark in Denmark.



Karen Ellemann, General Secretary of the Nordic Council of Ministers, participated in one of the many events at LAMPA. Here with the moderator. Photo: Nordic Office in Riga.

“And of course, we have a lot of volunteers working with the festivals. Without them the festival wouldn’t exist,” says Ieva Morica.

Meeting places in various formats

Visitors meet the volunteers all of the time – friendly people everywhere who can be asked for help. They move around the festival area which is filled with smaller spaces, stages, tents, paper cones with programmes and maps. There are manned information desks too. On the fringes of the festival area are wash basins and portaloos.

The well-organised nature of the festival means it feels accessible and safe. The Nordic Labour Journal bumps into two police officers and they can confirm this.

“So far it has been quiet. Just like last year when there were no incidents whatsoever,” they say and wander off. I am not allowed to take their photograph. Which I accept and respect.

The Nordic region is represented

One of the tents is called *Ziemeļsala*, which means Nordic island. This is where the Nordic Council of Ministers hosts its events.



“It is exciting for us to be here. LAMPA is a festival of conversations and that is what we are here to do – to participate in conversations that aim to create understanding between people of different opinions,” says Stefan Eriksson, head of the Nordic Council of Ministers’ Riga office. In 2021, they also opened a smaller branch in Daugavpils in Eastern Latvia.

The Nordic Council of Ministers has participated at LAMPA every year since Stefan Eriksson took up his current post in 2017 when he went on leave from the Swedish for Foreign Affairs.

He highlights the mutual interests between the Nordics and the Baltic states and the desire to exchange ideas and experiences.

“In the 1990s we were focusing on transferring knowledge to the countries that were about to create new societies. Nowadays it is more of an equal cooperation. There is generally a lot of interest from both sides to learn from each other. It is less about exporting Nordic solutions to the Baltics,” says Stefan Eriksson.

The Baltics look to the Nordics as a role model to learn from, not to copy. It is about using the experiences from there and adapting them where possible, he says and mentions that the Nordic Council of Ministers has certain resources set aside for cooperation although it cannot donate money to different

projects in the Baltic countries in the same way that it can within the Nordic region.

“The Nordic Council of Ministers creates preconditions and can sometimes contribute economically in order to execute Nordic-Baltic projects when there is a clear Nordic interest involved,” says Stefan Eriksson.

The Nordics have not forgotten about the Baltics, but now take it for granted that the Baltic countries are already integrated with the European community, he believes.

“There has been this idea that the EU takes care of all problems. I think this is about to change. The regional level is also important and that is why physical presence is important. The war in Ukraine has reminded us of how exposed the Baltics are, and there is renewed interest in connecting more closely with the region,” says Stefan Eriksson.

Nordic values are worth spreading

Back to Cēsis. Karen Ellemann, the Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers, has just left the stage where she discussed the future perspectives of Nordic-Baltic cooperation after 2022 with Gints Jegermanis, ambassador and expert at the Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Hilmar Hilmarsson, professor at the University of Akureyri in Iceland and Daria Krivonos, a futurist and CEO of the Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies.



Nordic Labour Journal's Fayme Alm interviews Karen Ellemann. Photo: Nordic Office in Riga.

There is no doubt Karen Ellemann believes in the Nordic countries’ democratic values and that she would like to further anchor them in cooperation with the Baltic states.

“I am impressed with this event and with the fact that there are so many people who are interested in social issues. It is important to create a framework where you can also discuss difficult issues, like we did here during the seminar Women in War for instance,” she tells the Nordic Labour Journal.

Karen Elleman also highlights the importance of meetings within NB8, Nordic-Baltic Eight, a regional cooperation be-

tween Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway and Sweden. Like LAMPA, NB8 focuses on protecting democratic values.

Many visitors and many proposed events

The first year the festival was held, the organisers had hoped for 2,000 visitors. 3,500 came. Today there are more than 20,000. That is how many had been attracted by the programme which was put together with the help of the audience themselves. There are many events on the programme.

“Anyone can propose their idea or concept. The core group then considers the proposals. This year we only had space for one-third of all the proposed events. The festival must not become too big, but we are of course happy about this great interest. It shows that people want to contribute,” says Ieva Morica.

She says the festival has undergone several changes, some of which take time, while others happen without any planning.

“Themes that were not popular the first time they were proposed became popular in a later year. So the programme mirrors the current hot topics in Latvian society. We in the core group always try to remain one step ahead in order to create an even better festival next year,” says Ieva Morica.

Active network creates ripples

LAMPA is part of the Democracy Festivals Associations, a network of democracy festival organisers in Europe which was set up in 2018.

“The first year it was important for us to be able to create our platform and shape our programme. Now we can continue to develop by being equal partners with the other members. The network allows us to learn from each other and share our experiences,” says Ieva Morica.

Mia Stuhre, executive manager for the Swedish Almedalen democracy festival, writes in an email to the Nordic Labour Journal:

“LAMPA, being a relatively new festival, remains a fantastic role model to us. We have adapted their rulebook*, for instance. They are brave and focus on developing creative meeting spaces.”

About Almedalsveckan in English: <https://www.almedalsveckan.info/english>