



Nordic-Baltic initiative for  
refugee and immigrant integration

 Nordic Council of Ministers  
Office in Lithuania

 **UNHCR**  
The UN Refugee Agency



Ministry of Social Security  
and Labour of the Republic  
of Lithuania

**KAU**  
**NAS**

Kick-off Conference

## Shaping Inclusive Cities Together

09 - 10 April, 2025 | Science Island, Karaliaus Mindaugo Pr. 50 Kaunas, Lithuania

# PROGRAMME

**Day 1 - Wednesday, April 09<sup>th</sup>**

11:00 - 11:30

### Registration

11:30 - 11:45

### Opening

Helén Nilsson, Director of the Nordic Council of Ministers in Lithuania  
Rauf Aslanov, PhD student at Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania

11:45 - 12:00

### Welcoming Remarks

Deimante Bukeikaite, Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania, Lithuania  
Signe Grūbe, Ministry of Culture of Latvia, Latvia  
Annika Sandlund, UNHCR Representation for the Nordic and Baltic Countries

12:00 - 13:00

## Kick-off Debate: Shaping Inclusive Cities Together? Who and how?

This dynamic panel discussion brings together people from diverse backgrounds to share perspectives on shaping cities that are welcoming, equitable and participatory. The conversation will address pressing questions: who is involved in designing inclusive cities? How can different voices contribute to decision-making? What innovative solutions are making a difference today?

**Moderator: Anna-Maria Mosekilde**, Project Officer, Knowledge & Welfare, Nordic Council of Ministers

**Alyssa Bittner-Gibbs**, Nordic Migrant Expert Forum

**Rushy Rashid Højbjerg**, Nordic Migrant Expert Forum

**Dmytro Mamaiev**, Lithuanian Centre for Social Sciences, Lithuania

**Ghieth Alkhateeb**, Estonian University of Life Sciences, Estonia

13:00 - 13:30

## Keynote

**Migrant Integration: Insights from the International Migration Outlook 2024**

**Ana Damas de Matos**, OECD

13:30 - 14:00

## Coffee Break

14:00 - 15:00

## Holistic local level integration ecosystem

The panel explores comprehensive approaches to integrating refugees and migrants at the local level. It highlights the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration, including local governments, civil society, businesses, and refugees themselves, to create inclusive, sustainable ecosystems that support social, economic, and cultural integration. The discussion will address best practices, challenges, and innovative solutions that enhance access to services, employment, education, and social cohesion while ensuring that integration efforts are tailored to the unique needs of each local context.

**Moderator: Rita Marascalchi**, Council of Europe

**Olga Gren**, Welcome House in Stockholm, Sweden

**Janika Hango**, Adaptation and Integration at the City of Tartu, Estonia

**Christin Hagen**, Refugee Service in Tromsø Municipality, Norway

15:00 - 15:15

## Q&A

15:15 - 15:45

## Coffee Break

15:45 - 16:45

## Labour market inclusion and inclusive workplaces

The panel examines the critical role of employers in facilitating the economic and social integration of refugees and migrants. It explores how businesses can create inclusive workplaces, support skill development, and address barriers to employment through targeted policies, mentorship programs, and diversity-driven hiring practices. The discussion will highlight best practices, challenges, and the broader economic benefits of leveraging refugee and migrant talent, emphasizing the need for collaboration between the private sector, policymakers, and civil society to foster long-term labor market inclusion.

**Moderator: Karolis Zibas**, UNHCR Representation for the Nordic and Baltic Countries

**Rugile Trumpyte**, Lithuanian Diversity Charter Association, Lithuania

**Aicha Manai**, Start-up-Refugees, Finland

**Emma Klöcker-Gatzwiller**, Foreningen Lige Adgang, Denmark

**Ragnar Granstrand**, Skellefteå Municipality, Sweden

16:45 - 17:00

## Q&A

17:00

## Closing of the first day

08:30 - 09:00 **Registration**

09:00 - 10:15 **Building resilient communities: proactive outreach for preparedness planning, integration and inclusion**

The panel discussion explores strategies to strengthen communities by fostering inclusivity, preparedness, and sustainable integration for diverse populations. Experts from NGOs and grassroots organizations will discuss the importance of proactive outreach to communities in addressing socio economic preparedness challenges. Key topics include community engagement, access to essential services, policy innovations, and collaborative approaches that enhance resilience, ensure equitable opportunities, and promote long-term social cohesion for migrants, refugees, and vulnerable groups.

**Moderator: Anna-Maria Axelsson**, Civil Defence Association, Sweden  
**Abdulrazzak Awf**, Syrian Community, Lithuania  
**Sulaeman Alzouabi**, I Want to Help Refugees, Latvia  
**Yanika Wilen**, Mirsal, Finland

10:15 - 10:30 **Q&A**

10:30 - 11:00 **Coffee Break**

11:00 - 11:50 **Inclusive methodologies of language training: thinking outside the box**

The panel discussion explores innovative and inclusive approaches to language training that enhance integration and social participation for refugees and migrants. Experts in language training, education policy, and community programs will share creative strategies that go beyond traditional methods, incorporating technology, peer learning, and culturally responsive teaching. The discussion will highlight best practices, real-world case studies, and the role of language as a bridge to employment, education, and community engagement, ensuring more effective and accessible learning experiences for diverse learners.

**Language training in Roskilde Kommune. Mette Lherbier**, UCplus Language Center, Denmark

**Language training and labour market inclusion. Louise Norstedt**, ELVIRA Kunskapsutveckling, Sweden

**Towards a systematic approach to language training. Laura Perevičiūtė**, Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania

11:50 - 12:00 **Energiser**

# From research to impact: leveraging data for real-world solutions

The panel discussion will explore how data generated from research can be used to develop solutions for real-world problems, improve policies, and inform decision-makers. Examples from the Nordic-Baltic region will be presented.

**Moderator: Bethina Strandberg-Jensen**, Nordforsk,

**Darta Pelse**, Think tank PROVIDUS, Latvia

**Aadne Aasland**, Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research, Norway

**Fjóla María Lárusdóttir**, Education and Training Service Center on Adult Learning, Iceland

13:00 - 13:15

## Closure

13:15 - 14:15

## Lunch and Departure

## Speakers- Panelists



### Helén Nilsson

Director of the Nordic Council of Ministers Office in Lithuania and a dedicated professional with over 25 years of experience in international cooperation and development. Throughout her career, Helén has held key positions at organizations such as the Municipality of Kalmar, The Baltic Institute in Karlskrona, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the Swedish Institute. Her expertise spans Baltic Sea cooperation, migration management, international partnerships, government liaison, and development work.



### Rauf Aslanov

Sociologist and PhD student in Sociology at Vytautas Magnus University. His research focuses on migration patterns from and to post-Soviet countries, exploring the dynamics of mobility, integration, and migrant experiences.



### Deimantė Bukeikaitė

Vice Minister of Social Security and Labor, responsible for overseeing social services, social care institutions, migration, and non-governmental organization (NGO) policy issues. Former Director at Lithuanian Caritas. Led Caritas, one of the largest national NGOs, for 14 years, focusing on social work and public administration. Actively involved in addressing crises such as the pandemic, migration and the war in Ukraine. Provided humanitarian aid and supported poverty alleviation and social inclusion in Lithuania. Education: Master's degrees in Social Work and Public Administration. Professional Involvement: Participated in various working groups initiated by the Presidential Office, ministries, and municipalities, addressing social, family, poverty, exclusion, migration, and NGO policy issues.



### Signe Grūbe

Parliamentary Secretary at the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia, with experience in public administration and local governance. She has previously served as Advisor to the Minister of Culture, Advisor to the Mayor of Riga, and Chief Executive Officer of Ropaži Municipality. Her work focuses on cultural policy, social integration, and regional development, with a particular interest in inclusive governance and community engagement. She actively supports initiatives that promote dialogue between diverse groups, believing that inclusion is a shared responsibility and a foundation for social resilience.



### Annika Sandlund

Representative of UNHCR's Representation for the Nordic and Baltic Countries, Sweden. Prior to working for UNHCR, she was an International Observer for WFP in Iraq, worked for the IRC, ECHO, the Finnish National Broadcasting Service in Swedish, and the Ministry of Social Affairs in Finland. UNHCR career: Representative at UNHCR Representation for the Nordic and Baltic Countries, Sweden; Head of Partnership and Coordination Section at Division of External Relations, Switzerland; Senior Inter-Agency Coordination at Division of External Relations, Switzerland; Senior Resettlement Officer at Division of International Protection, Switzerland; Senior Protection Officer at UNHCR Representation in Turkey; Protection Officer at UNHCR Representation in Ethiopia; Protection Officer at UNHCR Representation in Sri Lanka.



### **Anna-Maria Mosekilde**

Project manager at the Nordic Council of Ministers and responsible for the development and implementation of the Programme on integration of refugees and immigrant in the Nordics. The programme brings together policymakers to ensure a common Nordic platform for knowledge and experience exchange, which can enrich our Nordic-Baltic cooperation with even more perspectives on what constitutes successful integration of new citizens in the region.



### **Alyssa Bittner-Gibbs**

Project lead and community engagement practitioner working at the intersection of social sustainability, inclusion, and civic participation. Based in Åland, she works with Alla kan blomstra (Everyone Can Flourish), an initiative focused on well-being, trust, and participation. She is also contributing to the development of a practical toolbox for scaling the model in collaboration with UN-Habitat and the Government of Åland, drawing from her interests in livable cities and fostering inner capacities to strengthen both individual and community well-being. Alyssa serves as Chair of Ålands Natur & Miljö, Vice-Chair of the Åland Integration Council, and Vice-Chair of the Nordic Migrant Expert Forum, actively working on environmental and integration-related issues in the Nordic region. She is also a substitute member of the Mariehamn City Council, where she engages in discussions on local governance and inclusivity. With experience in migration, integration, and grassroots initiatives, she focuses on how people and communities can thrive by balancing structural solutions with everyday human experiences.



### **Rushy Rashid Højbjerg**

Diversity and inclusion advocate with over 30 years of experience as journalist and as board member of diverse egos. For the last 5 years she has been involved in recruitment and coaching. As the first female news presenter with a minority background on national TV in Denmark, Rushy has with her own example shattered the glass ceiling and championed in leading the agenda of equal opportunities. With her podcast Hudson All Inclusive and a weekly radio show "Rushys Roulette" on a national radio station, Rushy has introduced diverse voices to take part in the democratic dialogue in public opinion in Denmark. Rushy is passionate about building inclusive communities and empowering individuals to thrive. Let's make a difference together!



### **Dmytro Mamaiev**

PhD Candidate of the Lithuanian Centre for Social Sciences in Vilnius (Lithuania). His research interest intersects broadly with the areas of migration and integration of migrants, with a particular focus on youth, labor and internal displacement. Dmytro has also applied experience of work as an external consultant for international humanitarian and research-focused organizations. He has been invited several times as a guest lecturer to the Vilnius and Vytautas Magnus Universities to conduct lectures within the various courses, in particular related to integration, inclusion and immigrants' adaptation. As a member of several research networks, Dmytro contributes to the development of PhD students' soft skills across the demographic disciplines and engages in the research initiatives related to the Ukrainian war-displaced migrants.



### **Ghieth Alkhateeb**

Junior Research Fellow in Landscape Architecture at the Estonian University of Life Sciences, focusing on sense of place and spatial adaptation among displaced and host communities. His research explores how forcibly displaced individuals (refugees, IDPs, and asylum seekers) re-establish attachment to new environments and how host communities experience urban change. Ghieth integrates urban design, participatory methodologies, and AI-driven visualisation to examine how displacement reshapes urban spaces and societal interactions.





### **Ana Damas de Matos**

Senior Policy Analyst in the International Migration Division of the OECD. She works on the economic impact of international migration, on migration statistics, as well as on the labour market integration of immigrants and their children in OECD countries. Ana completed a PhD in economics from the London School of Economics and worked as assistant professor at HEC Montréal prior to joining the OECD.



### **Rita Marascalchi**

Head of the Council of Europe Inclusion and Integration Unit, managing the Intercultural Cities Programme (ICC), and providing secretariat services to the intergovernmental group of experts on anti-discrimination and inclusion (ADI-INT). Supporting local authorities to realise the diversity advantage and encouraging effective multi-level governance of migrants' integration are at the core of her work. Prior to this, she worked with NGOs and international organisations, both locally and in head offices, on human rights, international relations and migration issues, including as human rights monitor, policy advisor, project and programme manager and evaluator.



### **Olga Gren**

Coordinator at Welcome House in Stockholm, where she focuses on operational development and quality improvement. With experience in social work and integration, she has worked with initiatives supporting refugees with several municipalities and NGOs across Stockholm County.



### **Janika Hango**

Head of Adaptation and Integration at the City of Tartu, Estonia. Since 2019, she has led the Tartu Welcome Centre – a joint initiative of the City of Tartu, the University of Tartu, and the Estonian University of Life Sciences – supporting international newcomers in settling and integrating into the local community. With a background in community development and social wellbeing (MA, University of Tartu), she is dedicated to fostering inclusive communities and advancing local-level integration through cooperation and practical support.



### **Christin Hagen**

Supervisor at the Refugee Service in Tromsø Municipality. She is responsible for the settlement of refugees in Tromsø and ensuring the proper implementation of the national integration Act, which governs refugees' participation in the Introduction Program. The Introduction Program is a structured training program designed to prepare refugees for participation in education or the workforce in Norway. Christin has been with the Refugee Service for three years, having held both supervisory and coordinator roles.





### **Karolis Zibas**

Integration Officer at UNHCR Representation for the Nordic and Baltic Countries. He is leading UNHCR's integration activities in the region by strengthening partnerships in various integration areas, including socioeconomic inclusion and welcoming societies, labor market and local level integration. Karolis holds PhD in Sociology.



### **Rugile Trumpyte**

Public policy expert with 13 years of professional experience in the fields of transparency, diversity and inclusion. She is the CEO of Lithuanian Diversity Charter and a founder of SCOBO, an inclusive recruitment platform. Rugile is also responsible for evaluating Lithuania's efforts and providing periodical expert analysis on good governance and institutional openness for Open Government Partnership.



### **Aicha Manai**

CEO of Startup Refugees and leads an international organization where 17 different languages are spoken. Diversity is a central part of her daily work. She is an expert in diversity, immigration and refugee entrepreneurship, with extensive experience working in integration, both as a volunteer and as an employee.



### **Emma Klöcker-Gatzwiller**

Project Manager, Foreningen Lige Adgang (DK). Emma is an anthropologist specializing in DEIB initiatives and norm-critical methods. She has extensive experience designing and implementing mentorship programs that connect refugees and migrants with corporate and civil society volunteers to address employment barriers, leverage skills, and create pathways to sustainable career opportunities. In collaboration with corporate partners, she has developed bias-aware recruitment strategies and inclusive onboarding processes, particularly for entry-level positions, supporting companies in building more diverse and equitable workplaces.



### **Ragnar Granstrand**

Inclusion Coordinator at the Culture and Leisure Department, Skellefteå Municipality, Sweden. Over the past ten years, the department has focused on developing practical methods to actively and meaningfully bring refugees into vibrant communities within the culture and leisure sector. These initiatives aim to nurture valuable skills, create connections, and build social networks that can play a key role in refugees' settling into other areas such as housing and employment. A central aspect of the work has been empowering refugee communities through leadership development and mentorship programs designed to support the growth of future leaders.



### **Anna-Maria Axelsson**

Consultant in her own company, Cultural Geographer file. Bachelor, instructor for self-protection and volunteer resource groups. President of the Swedish Civil Defense Association since 2021. Before district chairman for 5 years. Active management of the organization during forest fires, flooding, clean-up and the pandemic.



### **Abdulrazzak Awf**

I am from Damascus, Syria, and I have been working in the field of teaching music and singing all my life in Syria. In 2015 I left Syria due to the war that started in 2011 and moved to Turkey, where I lived and worked for two years as a translator between Arabic and Turkish. Then, at the end of 2017, I came to Lithuania through the UNHCR Resettlement Programme. Here I started to learn the language and work at the same time because I wanted to be independent. After a short period, I started working as a translator with refugees at Caritas and other organizations. Later, I moved to a social services center in Jonava - this experience was a turning point in my life. I was not only a translator, but I also helped refugees and other people to integrate into Lithuanian society. Thanks to this experience, I broadened my knowledge of working with refugees and took part in several trainings related to refugees. Today, I continue to work in my favorite field, working in a social services center and as the chairman of the Lithuanian Syriac community.



### **Sulaeman Alzouabi**

Social mentor helping international protection beneficiaries integrate into the system in the Republic of Latvia. By education he comes from a medical background but, in 2018 he started work as an interpreter which led to involvement with international protection beneficiaries and the supporting organizations. Since 2019, he has been working as a social mentor with the organization "I Want to Help Refugees". Both as an interpreter and a social mentor he has accompanied international protection beneficiaries from the asylum seekers interview stage through the job interview stage and full integration into society. Sulaeman Alzouabi himself is an international protection beneficiary and he comes from Syria.



### **Yanika Wilen**

Licensed social service professional specializing in Arab family issues. She works on the 'Father is Important' project at Mirsal ry and as a family work planner at Familia ry, focusing on counseling and peer support. Since 2024, she has chaired Kaapatut Lapset ry after seven years on its board. With personal experience in multicultural, blended, and large families, divorce, custody disputes, and parenting neurodivergent children, Yanika is also a licensed trainer for new experts by experience. She specializes in helping divorcing parents resolve custody agreements outside of court and is a trained Divorce Seminar facilitator. She recently rewrote 'Love and Parenthood in an Intercultural Family' - guide and continues advocating for better support for Arab and Finnish Arab families. A mother of six multilingual and multicultural children, she is dedicated to strengthening family support systems.



### **Mette Lherbier**

Head of UCplus Language Center in Copenhagen, Denmark. UCplus Language Center is the largest provider of the Official Danish Language Education. We collaborate with 13 municipalities to provide free Danish classes to refugees and immigrants. Mette Lherbier has been head of UCplus Language Center in Copenhagen for 5 years and is also a board member of the association for Danish language schools. She has worked on language and labour projects for 20 years.



### **Louise Norstedt**

Holds a Bachelor's degree in International Relations from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and a Master's degree in Applied Linguistics from the University of Edinburgh. Her expertise lies in informal education, language acquisition, and integration. As Deputy Manager at ELVIRA Kunskapsutveckling, part of ABF Stockholm, Louise has designed and led multiple projects focused on Swedish language education for newly arrived immigrants. She specializes in developing practical, skills-based language programs that facilitate both social and professional integration.



### **Laura Perevičiūtė**

Head of the Foreigners' Integration Group at the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania, with over 12 years of experience in social inclusion and EU fund investments. Since 2019, she has been coordinating the functions of the Responsible Authority for the Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund in Lithuania. Since 2022, Laura has led the Foreigners' Integration Group.



### **Bethina Strandberg-Jensen**

Senior Adviser at NordForsk (a research funding organisation under the Nordic Council of Ministers). Responsible for Nordic-Baltic research funding initiatives on migration and integration, children and young people, and future working life.



### **Dārta Pelse**

Policy Analyst in migration and integration, representing Latvia-based policy think-tank Providus. Previous research includes an evaluation of Latvia's integration system, opportunities for migrant participation in local decision-making, the development of a Pan-Baltic experience exchange platform, and the development of a data model for identifying the outcomes of integration policies. Current research focuses on assessing the capacity of Latvian municipalities in response to the increasing arrivals from Ukraine.



### **Aadne Aasland**

Research Professor at The Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research, Oslo Metropolitan University; leader of the working group on refugees and migrants and member of the steering group at HROMADA (Nordic-Baltic knowledge-based input network to the rebuilding of Ukraine); and researcher in the NordForsk-funded project NOR-RETIN.



### **Fjóla María Lárusdóttir**

Specialist at the Education and Training Service Center in Iceland on adult learning. Her main focus is on the development of a national strategy for validation of prior learning and career guidance for adults with little formal education. Fjóla was in the coordinating team for the project Voices of immigrants – inclusion in education, work and society, funded the Nordic Council of Ministers.