

Northern Sparsely Populated Areas network calls for a strong cohesion policy post-2020 (10.6.2016)

The Northern Sparsely Populated Areas network, NSPA, represents the interests of the four northernmost counties and regions of Sweden (Norrbotten, Västerbotten, Jämtland Härjedalen and Västernorrland), seven northernmost and eastern regions of Finland (Central Ostrobothnia, Kainuu, Lapland, North Karelia, Northern Ostrobothnia, Pohjois-Savo and Etelä-Savo) and North Norway (Finnmark, Troms and Nordland).

The NSPA – a significant partner for tackling challenges within the European Union

In order to strengthen European competitiveness, it is important that regional viability is based on regional strength and smart specialisation. All the European Union initiatives depend heavily on the regional level for successful implementation. Regions also offer political identification and legitimize the European Union to the citizens. The EU regional policy, the cohesion policy with its structural and investment funds, is therefore also a tool for creating legitimacy for the European project down to the regional and local level; additionally, it assures the engagement of all regions and their will to contribute to the EU, building capacity and interest in active partnership, and finding cooperation not otherwise fostered, within the regions, between the regions and throughout Europe as a whole.

The Northern Sparsely Populated Areas network, NSPA, is a strong, specific and promising region. The NSPA region is also an important part of the EU, most notably due to the abundance of natural resources and nature values, advanced research institutions and high-performance industries in the area. It is, furthermore, an integral part of the Arctic, which is gaining importance at both European and global levels. However, the NSPA is at the same time peripheral and sparsely populated, with long distances to the European markets. It is an area with great potential, but is also in need of support and cooperation efforts to unleash this regional potential.

For these reasons, the NSPA is acknowledged in the EU as a region of special, very sparsely populated areas with special needs, dating back to the Accession Treaty for Sweden and Finland, which gave specific status to the very sparsely populated areas in the northernmost EU. This is, for example, also stated today in the specific paragraphs for what is defined as the Northern Sparsely Populated Regions in the European structural and investment fund regulations and the State Aid regulations. It is also put forward in the newly-released EU integrated Arctic policy and the aim of integrated support for the European Arctic within the EU. NSPA region also has a long border with Russia, which has a strategic and economical importance for the regions and the EU.

The NSPA network also paves the way for its commitment to common progress, manifested in the OECD study in which the 14 regions in the NSPA are involved, aiming at better understanding of the even more focused investment priorities and support needed for sustainable growth in the region.

Cohesion policy post-2020 to support development and investment in all regions in the EU

Over the past years, the Cohesion Policy has undoubtedly promoted regional development in the NSPA region, which has contributed to the achievement of EU objectives. Together with cross-border cooperation projects, significant regional overall capacity-building initiatives – often in cooperation with sectorial and research and innovation funds – have substantially contributed to European integration, development, growth and jobs within the NSPA-region. This has enabled processes and development which would not have been possible without such external support, as the region also lacks such investment capital outside the raw material industry due to lack of critical mass. The EU funds materially help in making capacity building, cooperation over all borders and smart specialisation investment priorities come into reality.

Smart specialisation in the NSPA enables the sustainable use and processing of northern raw materials and natural resources, while also using such traditional “obstacles” as climate, remote and vast geography and distances in innovative ways, fostering not only traditional clusters but also innovative clusters in sectors such as bioeconomy, ICT and tourism. Therefore, the NSPA is bringing added value to the EU as a whole, and helps to improve European economic development, growth, jobs and competitiveness. However, this requires long-term systematic regional development and versatile and flexible financing instruments. The EU interest and focus on the Arctic issues, and the potential for sustainable growth in the Arctic, as demonstrated in the joint communication on the Arctic, take as a starting point the European Arctic. The credible success of the EU in promoting and taking responsibility for the Arctic depends on the policies, actions and support for the region.

A cohesion policy with common EU objectives but flexible tools for specific regional needs

The NSPA region supports a comprehensive future policy of territorial cooperation, and a strong cohesion policy post-2020, with the availability of structural funds for all regions. Delivering a strong post-2020 cohesion policy focusing on EU common challenges and goals, to support jobs and growth and sustainable development in all of the EU, is a key investment for the success of the EU, using the best possible mix of grants and other financial support, however recognising that as always this is a result of support for activities and businesses at local and regional level. This also requires flexibility in what and how to deliver the support out of each regional context. Within a strong cohesion policy, it remains important to continue to recognise the needs of geographically and demographically exposed regions such as the NSPA, with sparsely populated areas and long distances.

Efforts to increase competitiveness and attractiveness for investments and sustainable long-term growth in the NSPA have to target, for example, the distances and the fact that yield produced in the region is not automatically reinvested in the region. Development of the region is dependent on good infrastructure where roads, air traffic, railway, maritime transport and ICT are equally important. EU regional policy should reflect the fact that regional growth and employment require good transport connections both internally in the region and to and from the region.

The need for education, a skilled work force and a labour market attracting young people, women and academics together with integration of immigrants is tremendous, as is thereby also the potential for innovation, new businesses and growth in less-populated areas of Europe. The NSPA, being on a scale of its own in sparsity, distance within and to agglomerations and the bigger markets together with harsh climate, is nonetheless in the forefront in many sectors, and constitutes a potentially enormous gain for all of Europe, with support tailored to regional conditions and needs.

We, in the NSPA region, call for a strong Cohesion Policy post-2020 for all regions, with adequate financial funding and regional flexibility to deliver European jobs and sustainable growth, while taking into account the specific needs of this northernmost region of Europe.

Decided in Mikkeli, Finland, by the NSPA political steering group on June 9, 2016, and approved by the NSPA forum on June 10, 2016.

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