

Northern Sparsely Populated Areas' (NSPA) views on the European Commission's initiative on brain drain – mitigating challenges associated with population decline

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

The NSPA Position

[The NSPA](#) welcomes the Commission's ambition to contribute to reducing regional disparities in the initiative on "Brain drain", raising the problem with population decline and the lack of skilled workforce in European regions.

The NSPA would like to highlight some points.

- Preventing human drain and population decline: losing skilled workforce is a challenge, but the NSPA would like to highlight that there is a need for **all** workforce, including unskilled jobs. We would therefore like to see that the scope of the brain-drain initiative is widened to include all kinds of brains.
- The brain drain initiative needs to look at challenges; 1) both in regions struggling to stop the demographic change becoming a challenge for providing basic services such as health care, education and welfare; 2) and in regions facing big investments and growth but struggling to get attract enough workforce.
- Making a transferable framework: The initiative should look for solutions that can be shared within the European context, as well as solutions that recognise the specific characteristics and challenges of regions such as the NSPA with long distances.
- The EU initiative on Legal Migration should be closely linked to the initiative on brain drain as it could offer concrete solutions.
- A populated Arctic is a safe Arctic. We need people to live in and move to the Arctic to ensure that the region is safe. The regions in the NSPA are either close to or share borders with Russia. Taking the new geopolitical situation in account, the issue of security in the Arctic needs to be more prioritised.
- The NSPA welcomes the ambition that the EU action will build notably on the EU's cohesion policy funds. In addition, The NSPA suggests to also use other EU programmes and to look for synergies. This could include for example:

- To use Horizon Europe to build a knowledge framework to tackle brain drain and to secure secure transferability.
- Using Erasmus+ as a bridge between education and work life and attract newly graduated candidates, could help regions attracting new brains, but also while at the same time to convince others to stay.

Preventing human drain and population decline

The NSPA would like to draw attention to how brain drain is understood in the consultation. In the NSPA we need not only to convince people to stay in the region, but we also need to attract more people and workforce – either they are possessing a tertiary education or not. It is important to focus on both people that are staying and people who want to move to places that have been suffering by urbanisation. The NSPA strongly recommends the Commission to reconsider making a distinction between skilled and non-skilled workforce in the initiative. People /inhabitants living in any European society should have the impression that their contribution is valuable, regardless of their level of skills. In the NSPA as in other European regions there is and will also be a need for non/low-skilled workforce, even in the green transition sector. The NSPA strongly believes that by expanding the definition to include different levels of skills, the EU will help regions attracting people to come and stay, regardless of their education and skills. We think kindly ask the Commission to rethink the rhetoric of the politics on “Brain drain” to breathe/permeate this ambition.

The NSPA need all brains, more than ever

The NSPA have a significant potential of taking lead in the EU's green and digital transition. The entire region has resources and innovation eco systems needed for the EU to become self-sufficient in its production of energy supplies, biofuels etc. On the other hand, the NSPA have challenges such as a sparse population; the region has the lowest density in the entire European Union with only 4.9 inhabitants per km².

In the green transition now taking place in the NSPA, with several enormous investments and industrial establishments, there is a great demand workforce. In northern Sweden alone, industrial investments are estimated to create about 100.000 new jobs. To avoid a fly-in-fly-out situation and to be able to live up to the Green Deal, the companies should have the best possible means at their disposal to recruit the right brains, be it locally or from outside the NSPA. It would be equally important to create incentives for the recruited workforce to stay in the NSPA as this would support the sustainability of the labour policy

The EU initiative on Legal migration could be one of many solutions

We welcome the Commission's recent initiative about legal migration, where one proposition is to create a talent pool from third countries. It might be one answer to the demand of workforce, as we need to attract work force outside our own countries. For the NSPA, it is necessary that the industrial

establishments succeed to employ people who are willing to live in the concerned region which create development locally. But equally important is to look for people outside the region for the positions where they are not able to find workforce locally.

A more populated Arctic is a safer Arctic

A cornerstone for creating safe communities is to populate them. Due to the current geopolitical situation in Europe, it is more important than ever to keep the Arctic populated. This will contribute to maintain a low-tension and peaceful Arctic region, as it should be in the interest of the EU to support the attractiveness of the European Arctic and its neighbours.

Next steps

The NSPA agree on that the proposed EU actions indeed could help addressing the problem with population decline and “brain drain” and we would be more than happy to provide inputs and continue the dialogue with the Commission about these challenges. The NSPA look forward to seeing what kind of tools and tailored policies the Commission will propose to increase the attractiveness of European regions.

Taking advantage of the EU programmes, using synergies and a horizontal approach to the challenge, to further strengthen the Brain Drain initiative, could ensure more possibilities for sparsely populated regions, and provide the opportunity to learn from each other and develop framework models which can easily be transferred to new regions.

Through Horizon Europe for example, different lighthouse cases in Europe can provide a tailored framework model, develop the knowledge and competences needed, and provide a toolbox for regions with different needs.

An example to fight brain drain, are regional trainee programmes. In Northern Norway, there are several trainee programmes for newly graduated candidates within a number of fields, providing a one-year contract at a local organisation or business, including a full salary and a leadership programme for the candidates. [Kandidat Helgeland](#), one of the programmes, has since 2010 recruited 147 candidates to the region. 91 percent of the candidates got offers of full-time positions after the trainee year, and 78 percent remain in the region today. The NSPA believes that through Erasmus+, the EU can contribute to facilitating similar programmes throughout Europe.

The parallel processes of digital transition and the development of working life have created a situation where working from distance has become possible to more people than before. In Finland this has been one of the reasons that have led to the northern part of the country enjoying net migration from other parts of the country. Working from distance is a two-fold phenomenon as it allows people to work from other parts of the same country or even from other countries for the benefit of employers located in the Eastern and Northern parts of Finland, and on the other hand people living in the NSPA to work for employers located elsewhere. Thus, supporting the digital transition is vital for securing

workforce and fighting population decline. This has been recognised in the Northern part of Finland with for example the project Hybrid work in family-friendly Lapland, looking to increase the attractiveness of businesses and public sector organisations in Lapland through organisation models focusing on wellbeing and coping at work. The EU's cohesion policy funding will be important for such activities also in the future.

Approved by the NSPA Steering Committee in June 2022.

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