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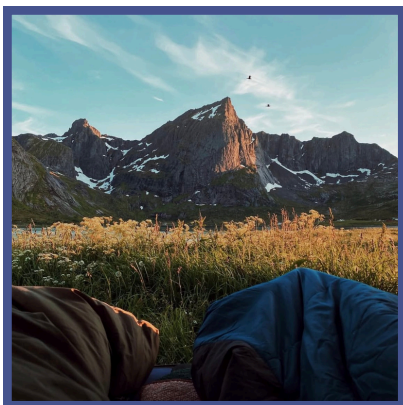


Photo: Sunniva Tønberg Gaski

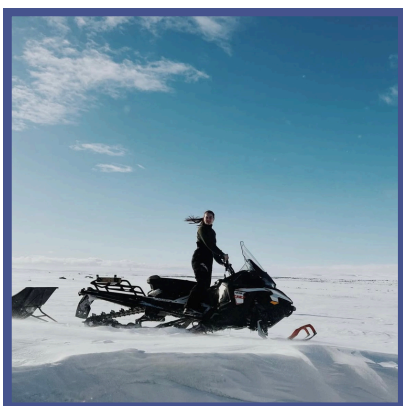


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The Northern Sparsely Populated Areas network, NSPA, represents the interests of the four northernmost regions of Sweden (Norrbotten, Västerbotten, Jämtland Härjedalen and Västernorrland), the seven eastern and northernmost regions of Finland (Central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

The Arctic could well play a pivotal role in shaping the future of the world order. The EU needs an Arctic policy that places the union at the heart of this discussion. The updated Arctic approach should therefore prioritise local needs, fostering resilient societies and connectivity. It should also strengthen competitiveness and sustainable development within the Arctic. The aim should be to create opportunities for the region to link with European value chains of strategic interest. This will benefit Europe as a whole and support the EU's global interests in the Arctic.

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The NSPA Calls for an Updated EU Arctic Policy

In October 2021 the European Commission published a communication calling for a stronger EU engagement for a sustainable, peaceful, and prosperous Arctic. This communication forms the basis of the current EU Arctic policy and contains several valuable insights, such as a strong focus on sustainable regional development.

Just months after the communication was published Russia began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This, together with other global developments, have changed the geopolitical realities in the Arctic and challenged the notion of it being a low-tension area. In the light of these evolving dynamics, it is imperative for the EU to reassess and adapt its Arctic strategies.

The NSPA is therefore calling on the EU to update its Arctic policy to better reflect the current geopolitical landscape and security issues in the region.

In doing so, the NSPA is demonstrating its full commitment to playing a role alongside the EU institutions in updating the Arctic policy. The NSPA is inviting the EU to discuss how people and partners in the Arctic can contribute to ensuring the region is secure, sustainable and resilient.

The Arctic creates added value for Europe, but it needs coherent EU policies to balance different interests

The Arctic offers significant assets in relation to the EU's competitiveness, strategic autonomy, green industrial transition and security objectives. There is growing global interest in the Arctic and its natural resources. This is evident also in various EU initiatives, such as the Critical Raw Materials Act, and the Net-Zero Industry Act. In addition, the vast forestry areas are crucial in their capacity to capture CO₂ and, together with marine resources, form a strong basis for the development of bio-based products, food and the bioeconomy as a whole.

The Northern Sparsely Populated Areas are a frontrunner region in many fields that support the green and clean transition. However, the use of raw materials located in the European Arctic raises questions that the EU needs to take into consideration in its updated Arctic policy.

The EU's objectives regarding the exploitation of raw materials and the increased production of renewable energy frequently clash with the indigenous peoples' rights and nature preservation targets. Local communities are left to handle the consequences alone, while trying to balance local economic growth with the welfare of the people.

The NSPA is calling on the EU to formulate coherent policy actions that will complement the local dialogue and to support the European Arctic in overcoming these challenges.

Sustainable development in the Arctic requires the EU's strong commitment and support

The Arctic is a region of vibrant cities, smaller communities and a diverse population of around 4 million people. There is not just one Arctic, but many Arctic realities. The NSPA calls for a balanced, holistic EU Arctic policy that supports the region's long-term sustainable development.

The NSPA region faces permanent challenges, including sparse population, harsh climate conditions, long distances, and remoteness from larger markets. With the right support, these challenges can be transformed into opportunities, enabling the region to reach its potential for Europe. The EU's cohesion policy is therefore a crucial tool for building and strengthening societal capacities, innovation ecosystems, and to support small communities and entities.

Stronger cross-border collaboration between the NSPA countries, and place-based strategies, such as smart specialisation, are essential for sustainable growth and regional development.

The NSPA is calling on the EU to continue supporting the development of its Arctic regions through a cohesion policy that recognises the value of regional aspects and tools promoting a place-based approach.

A resilient and innovative Arctic is a safe Arctic

Today, the concept of resilience has many dimensions in the Arctic. Scientific research has shown that the climate is warming up to twice as fast in the Arctic than in Central Europe, and almost four times faster than the rest of the world. Alongside polar research we need to know more about how local communities are affected by climate change and how they can become more resilient.

Resilience also involves preparing for other threats. The current geopolitical situation in the European Arctic shows the importance of cross-border collaboration, covering both civilian and military matters. Logistical solutions from east to west in the NSPA are crucial for security of supply, as well as increased use of the Northern Sea Route.

Security-wise, small communities must be resilient and innovative, adapting quickly to new circumstances and needs. Vibrant, sustainable communities are essential for a secure and inhabited European Arctic. The EU's updated Arctic policy must include comprehensive security and preparedness aspects.

The NSPA is calling on the EU to update its Arctic policy to strengthen resilience in the European Arctic.