

## **Response from the NSPA network on the EU Commission Consultation on Call for Evidence regarding the initiative on establishing an Eastern Border Pact.**

*Closing on 18 September 2025.*

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The Northern Sparsely Populated Areas (NSPA) network represents the four northernmost regions of Sweden, the three northernmost regions of Norway, and seven northern and eastern regions of Finland.

The Finnish NSPA regions of North Karelia, Kainuu, North Ostrobothnia, and Lapland make up the vast majority of Finland's 1,340 km-long border with Russia. These regions are directly affected by Russia's ongoing aggression and broader hostile actions, which are creating serious security and socio-economic challenges. Russian aggression has not only disrupted cross-border cooperation and trade but has also amplified pre-existing structural challenges such as limited accessibility, demographic decline, and the vulnerability of local economies. Similar impacts are felt in the Norwegian county of Finnmark, also part of the NSPA, which shares a 198 km-long border with Russia.

Border regions are not isolated entities and if the border to one side closes, the need of connections and collaboration in other directions increase and entitles a focus on more coherent policies and actions in the broader surrounding geography for connectivity, collaboration and common capacity building. In parallel to developments along the eastern border, Russia has systematically strengthened its military presence in the European Arctic, escalating tensions with Western Arctic states through offensive exercises and hybrid operations.

Together, the NSPA regions serve as an eastern and northern frontline for the EU and form part of a globally significant border region. The NSPA regions also have great potential for the green transition and extensive natural resources that are critical to the EU's competitiveness and strategic autonomy. However, the regions face specific challenges that make them vulnerable. This reality underscores that, for the eastern border pact to be successful, the different needs of border regions need to be taken into account. The challenges for regions in the north can differ vastly from regions in the south. Moreover, when other strategies are being developed or reconsidered, such as the EU's Arctic Strategy, it is important to ensure coherence in order to achieve sustainable and long-standing results.

The challenges in NSPA border regions underline the need for strengthened support, including investments in east-west transport infrastructure, common capacity building and the development of resilient and attractive local communities. In this regard, cohesion policy plays a key role in contributing to European security while making sure that no region is left behind.

Over the past two decades, we have seen increasing securitisation of issues such as climate, cyber threats, critical infrastructure and resources. Local and regional actors are on the frontline of these challenges and must be empowered and actively involved in developing the policy responses. While defense and security measures are vital, it is equally important to support the long-term sustainability of communities and demographic presence in border regions. These communities must be resilient and innovative, able to adapt quickly to changing circumstances. With the right measures, eastern border regions can drive economic diversification, enhance resilience, and safeguard the well-being of their citizens.

*/On behalf of the NSPA Steering Committee, 18/2-2025*