

Position on the European Commission and European External Action Service consultation on EU Arctic Policy

The European Arctic in the core of geopolitical change of relevance for the EU

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 NPSA network make the following call for the evidence on the current EU Arctic Policy:

North Sweden, East and North Finland, and North Norway in the Northern Sparsely Populated Areas (NSPA) values the EU Arctic Policy's aim to support a peaceful, sustainable and prosperous Arctic, with focus on local development.

The policy will gain from a more integrated and cohesive approach between the three pillars. Security and competitiveness are built by strong, resilient and innovative communities and business ecosystem. This is especially true for sparsely populated remote areas. Resilient communities provide strong foundations for adaption, preparedness and civil defence.

The Arctic is a geopolitical frontline and global tensions have risen. Russian aggression in the East, policy divides in the West and China's Arctic interest make the European Arctic a challenged strategic northern outpost for the EU to strengthen its role in.

With all Nordic's within the NATO, cross-border integration and improvement of military and civilian infrastructure is vital. The space infrastructure in the NSPA is a European asset to develop.

Climate change impact the Arctic and is threatening traditional indigenous lifestyles. It provides also opportunities for renewable energy, essential minerals, shipping and marine resources. The Arctic is key to the green transition, including the regions forestry to be added as a resource in EU's Arctic policy.

The OECD report on the NSPA (2025), highlights the area as a global model for rural innovation and productivity. It notes the European Arctic's increasing importance for EU's security, industrial transition, and strategic autonomy. However, the NSPA remain vulnerable due to low population density and harsh conditions. The unique characteristics make place-based strategies essential.

EU's support for smart specialisation has fostered business, research, innovation, and investments that strengthen European value chains. EU cohesion policy has been crucial in building local capacity and strategic cooperation between small communities. State-aid exemptions for NSPA help to lower market barriers.

The OECD recommends EU to support Arctic innovation hubs and platforms and green transition policies to bolster resilient communities and build capacity to attract capital and competences. It is needed to balance competing Arctic interests: climate change, resource management, and the welfare of local communities, including the Sami Peoples and other minorities.

EU's soft power, through its value-based policies and support schemes, underpins sustainable regional development and helps to build collaboration platforms. In current cohesion policy, the NSPA allocation is the EU's only targeted Arctic investment tool and becomes even more important for EU's legitimacy and engagement in the Arctic.

The NSPA regions within the EU and EEA represent EU's gateway to the larger Arctic. Support for the NSPA, including more targeted policies and instruments to address socioeconomic development, therefore contributes to EU's security and strategic autonomy.

A comprehensive approach to infrastructure, business, innovation, and social cohesion from a broad regional and dual use perspective, for defence and business build-up, is needed. Research is vital for knowledge-based decisions and must address the complex interplay of ecosystems and human activity, to support the innovation potentials and a sustainable Arctic development.

The EU Arctic Policy must reflect these realities, built on close stakeholder dialogue and addressing the issue of current underinvestment and outflow of revenues. The region is not just for protection or resource extraction, but a place to live, work, and grow. A place where all voices need to be heard.

The EU Arctic Policy must prioritise local needs, resilience, connectivity, and collaborative efforts across the European Arctic regions, as integrated partners on the internal market, to ensure sustainable development, security and competitiveness, to the benefit of EU's broader global Arctic interests.

The NPSA network make the following remarks on the questions asked in the consultation:

1. The relevance of the current priorities in the EU Arctic Policy

International cooperation on safety and security (4 on a scale 1-5)

The security and safety of the Arctic and its inhabitants have become a core issue, demanding support for cooperation on all levels. The European Arctic serves as EU's gateway to the larger Arctic for international collaboration, mutual understanding and development, including reach of Arctic resources, new trading routes and other EU interests, to also hold back global power grabbing. The NSPA are at the heart of this and will, given the right tools, be a partner for these common interests.

Environmental protection and mitigation and adaptation to climate change (4 on a scale 1-5)

Climate change in the Arctic is alarming. Yet the main reason for it lies outside the Arctic. The EU needs to keep its high climate goals and accelerate green transition in which the European Arctic is a resource and a leader. The large forestry in the Arctic is an asset to address in this context. As climate change, mitigation and resource management have become increasingly securitized, vulnerable Arctic communities need to get targeted tools to boost their resilience and ability to innovate.

Inclusive and sustainable Arctic development to the benefit of Arctic inhabitants (5 on a scale 1-5)

The EU must, to safeguard its interest, build on its soft power towards communities and stakeholders for long-term influence. This requires strengthening local capacity, improving connectivity, and supporting business frameworks on small Arctic labor markets. This will deliver the resources needed to EU's industrial value chains. With a dual-use investment perspective, this will also benefit crisis resilience. This should be the cornerstone for EU's engagement and legitimacy in the Arctic.

2. Additional perspectives to address the development since 2021

Safety and Security for the Arctic region and ocean have become a core issue. The NSPA is EU's Arctic gateway, and with the entire Nordics in the NATO, the region clearly entails EU's northern security zone. Climate change, cyber threats, critical infrastructure, space activity and resource management have become securitized. The scope of the EU Arctic Policy must address this, resting on three equally significant pillars: security, sustainability, and prosperity. The need is to integrate these perspectives into a coherent strategic framework reflecting EU's Arctic activities, so that the NSPA regions ultimately can promote EU's priorities of strategic autonomy, competitiveness and security.

3. Measures to monitor and protect the Arctic environment

The best managers of the environment are the local communities, with support for environment and land-use management and capacity to host green establishments. Research, skills, innovation and green technology must reach scattered communities and traditional livelihoods in a strategic, collaborative, and coherent way. Local strategies connected to the EU's are key. It includes support to the space technology and launch capability in the NSPA, to monitor sustainability actions, on land and sea.

4. How to enhance efforts to combat climate change in the European Arctic

The rapid climate change in the Arctic is due to global activities. EU needs to keep up the climate ambitions. It is the competitiveness advantage for the EU and the Arctic. It entails the need for climate smart actions, new technology, methods and business models, before regulations, prohibitions and state-aid schemes to big less innovative industries. Sustainable forestry for a circular biobased economy is a part of this green transition, especially important for the European Arctic areas.

5. The main economic areas with most sustainable development potentials

For a diversified and sustainable economy, as well as sustainable societies, the three main development areas, together with many others, can be put as follows:

1. sustainable resource exploitation
2. telecommunications and digital services
3. cultural businesses

The Arctic economies are built on natural resources and traditional cultures. The NSPA will play a relevant role for Europe's strategic industrial transition, with its assets and unique environment for testing and scaling sustainable industries. However, there is a need to strengthen the many very small companies, including sustainable tourism and cultural and creative business, and their innovation, investing in ICT over the vast areas for smart green digital services and establishments.

6. Most prominent Arctic socio-economic challenges and how to address these

Regarding proposed socio-economic challenges;

*The NSPA network **Strongly agree on**:*

- Education, training, and capacity-building
- Transportation and connectivity
- Community resilience, prevention and preparedness
- Talent attractiveness and retention
- Migration and demographic changes

*The NSPA network **Agree on**:*

- Climate change and environmental deterioration
- Sustainable tourism

*The NSPA network stays **Neutral on**:*

- Raising awareness and citizen engagement in public and European affairs
- Inclusivity and community integration

*The NSPA network **Disagree** on:*

- Health

The 2025 OECD report “Navigating Global Transitions in European Arctic Regions”, offers analysis and guidance, such as fortifying weak local systems, enhance connectivity, support business frameworks, and expand local strategic capability. There is a need for EU adapted local and regional support to build capacity for innovation and attract capital and competence via cross-border collaboration and global outreach in the NSPA. It puts a demand on strengthening the small, scattered labor markets to ensure skills supply by distance-spanning clusters among the small enterprises and an EIB-supported Arctic Investment Platform, combined with Arctic targeted EU funds and state-aid regulations.

7. Ensuring sustainable and inclusive reach of natural resources in the Arctic

The EU’s strive for dialogue to include local demands while ensuring resource access must be coherent. Different policies and actions must be assessed in a common framework, to avoid multi-layered conflicts without the capacity on local level to solve these externally driven diverging interests. It includes more foreseeable, rather than fast, permitting processes. The EU must support effective consultation methods and common standards on compensation for the peoples and communities affected.

8. Include Indigenous Peoples and local communities in EU’s policies

The European Arctic comprises indigenous peoples and other minorities, with limited capacity to engage in decision making. This demands place-based actions to build capacity for involvement. That said, the local authorities have a limited administrative capacity. The EU must therefore acknowledge the broad spectrum of stakeholders to engage with. Networks as the NSPA can be a partner to mediate EU’s support to build capacity and collaboration to reduce polarization within the Arctic population.

9. EU support to potential development of Arctic maritime trade routes

Regarding proposed development of Arctic maritime trade routes and benefits or drawbacks;

*The NSPA network **Strongly agree** on;*

- The EU should support the potential development of Arctic maritime trade routes
- The related safety concerns (e.g. search and rescue operations) are considerable

*The NSPA network **Agree** on:*

- The geopolitical developments portray the need to develop maritime trade routes in the Arctic
- The related economic opportunities are considerable

*The NSPA network stays **Neutral** on:*

- The environmental and climate risks are considerable

*The NSPA network **Disagree** on:*

- The cultural impacts are considerable

New Arctic routes can connect businesses in Europe with new global trading patterns. The short-term aims must be realistic, investing in preparatory actions, such as search and rescue and closer ties among Arctic partners. It entails also critical port investments and connections on land over all

the European Arctic, including Baltic Sea, for dual-use NATO and trade transportation needs, due to closed Russian border. The EU can support the Platform North between the Nordic transport authorities.

10. The main security challenges in the Arctic

The Arctic is exposed to a complex threat landscape. There are multiple inter-related threats with both direct and indirect consequences. These are not uniform across the Arctic but vary with geography and among stakeholders. A rough current ranking for the European Arctic could look like the following:

1. Economic competition and resource management
2. Critical infrastructure vulnerabilities
3. Military tensions and geopolitical developments
4. Climate change and environmental security
5. Human security and human rights
6. Search and rescue challenges
7. Maritime security

11. EU support to defence and security in EU Arctic states and for Arctic states

The defense capability to be long-term and sustainable in this remote border area, it needs to be built bottom-up. Actions, investments and strategies must be coordinated and cohesive. The EU has no own military power and limited means. It is therefore a need to support the actors and stakeholders in the communities and regions, for their engagement to achieve EU's security goals. To leverage the resources, it is crucial to build local capacity and redundant connectivity measures for resilience, with focus on:

1. Promote relevant training and capacity building
2. Assist in building and maintaining infrastructure

12. Emergency and crisis response domains for the EU to prioritise

For emergency and crisis response in the Arctic, with focus on the overall European Arctic, the list of relevance for the EU to ensure its interests and focused efforts, can be the following order:

1. Continuity of operations and business continuity
2. Prevention and preparedness
3. Humanitarian assistance and relief operations
4. Search and rescue operations
5. Wildfires
6. Communication and information management
7. Public health
8. Security and law enforcement

13. Research, science and technology development for the EU to support

Polar and climate research is needed, especially as Russia and USA do not deliver data on these fields, but from a "within arctic" perspective, it needs to be complemented with many other research disciplines, and pointing to three main research areas can be:

1. Social sciences
2. Energy and Environment

3. Defense and security

Arctic research should go beyond polar climate research and take an interdisciplinary approach, including security, preparedness, resilience, responsible land use, cold climate technologies, space, social sciences. The EU should support durable, place-based cooperation and co-produced knowledge benefiting Arctic communities and sustainable regional development. Simpler funding is needed to include smaller actors with limited administrative capacity, including Indigenous communities.

14. EU initiatives for the EU to support to enhance digital connectivity

For remote and sparsely populated areas more satellite-based 5G can improve connectivity but does not replace high-quality ground infrastructure. Continued EU support is necessary, especially where private markets fall short. The NSPA should be included in the CEF 5G corridors, following important infrastructure routes for NATO and new trade needs. Reliable mobile infrastructure along these lines would help essential connectivity for surrounding areas, together with broadband rollout. The proposed international polar high-speed cable between European Arctic and Asia is also key for fast and redundant EU digital connections, that can improve attractiveness for digital regional business cases.

Adopted by the NSPA Steering Committee on 13 March 2026

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