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Europaforum Northern Sweden's views on the EU's Tenth Framework Programme for Research and Innovation

Europaforum Northern Sweden (EFNS) is a network for politicians at the local and regional levels from Norrbotten, Västerbotten, Jämtland Härjedalen and Västernorrland. EFNS is a meeting place and a knowledge arena for discussion and analysis of the impacts of EU policy on northern Sweden. EFNS monitors European issues to influence EU legislation, the EU's strategies and action programmes and the EU's budget. The objective of EFNS is to safeguard the interests of northern Sweden both in the European arena and in relation to the national level in matters with a clear European perspective.

EFNS views on the Tenth Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (FP10) in brief:

- **Excellence, widening participation, and simplification:** FP10 should maintain excellence while improving accessibility for smaller actors, particularly in sparsely populated northern areas. Significant simplifications are needed to widening participation, which should be based on innovation potential at the NUTS2 level.
- **Local and regional actors:** FP10 should expand the role of regional and local authorities to enhance project impact and support programme goals.
- **Synergies:** Improved synergies between EU funds are necessary to maximise investments in research and innovation. This requires better coordination and simplified rules.
- **Regional dimension of FP10:** FP10 should focus on utilising the potential of regional small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and innovation actors, while minimising administrative burdens.

Thematic priorities: Thematic areas that should be prioritised in FP10:

- The Arctic dimension
- Sparsely populated areas
- Societal transformation linked to industrial transitions
- Indigenous populations
- Bioeconomy, wood-based products, and forestry research
- Energy systems
- Changing geopolitical context in Europe



- Space
- eHealth and remote healthcare services

Excellence, widening participation, and simplifications

EFNS believes that excellence should remain the guiding principle for the allocation of funds in competitive calls and should be applied throughout the programme. However, FP10 should reach a broader range of participants. One way to achieve this is to facilitate participation for smaller actors.

Northern Sweden is home to many small research and innovation actors, SMEs, and manufacturing companies in sparsely populated areas, possessing valuable expertise that can contribute significantly to FP10 projects and increase competitiveness. However, these actors risk exclusion due to their limited capacity to manage the administration of Horizon Europe projects under current procedures. FP10 should therefore implement significant simplifications to make participation more accessible.

Additionally, initiatives for broadening participation should be based on innovation potential at the NUTS2 level rather than being constrained by predetermined country classifications. FP10's efforts to broaden participation must consider the specific challenges faced by all regions with permanent disadvantages, such as sparsely populated northern areas and long distances, ensuring they are not left behind in Europe's research and innovation landscape.

The three-pillar structure used in Horizon Europe is effective as it balances curiosity-driven research, collaborative projects addressing global challenges, and industrial competitiveness, while also supporting innovative start-ups with scaling potential. The introduction of the EU's new "Competitiveness Fund" should not come at the expense of FP10 projects currently supported under Pillar Two, particularly those involving European collaborative projects, as Pillar Two is essential for Europe's competitiveness.

Local and Regional Actors in Horizon Europe Projects

Regional and local actors are already recognised as valuable participants in many Horizon Europe projects. They contribute essential knowledge, facilitate the implementation of technical and organisational innovations, and play a central role as end-users. By applying FP10 project results, they ensure that innovations are implemented effectively, benefiting society at large. However, their involvement could be further expanded by ensuring that future calls more explicitly and frequently include regional and local authorities as designated project participants.

Synergies

Synergies between various EU funds have long been acknowledged as critical for maximising the impact of EU investments in research and innovation. Achieving these synergies requires improved dialogue and coordination among the European Commission's directorates-general to ensure that funds are planned in consonance. This would enable regions and research funders to actively pursue synergies. The funding system should also



provide incentives and create conditions that make collaboration across different funds attractive for consortias and organisations, such as regions.

Simplified rules and harmonised procedures across different funding instruments can reduce administrative burdens, encourage broader participation, and ensure more efficient use of resources. This, in turn, will strengthen the overall impact of EU-funded research and innovation projects.

Regional Dimension of FP10

During the current programme period, the European Commission has explored various methods to integrate a regional dimension into research and innovation policy, including the Regional Innovation Valleys (RIV) initiative. While these efforts are appreciated, the models introduced—particularly through European Innovation Ecosystems (EIE) and RIV calls under Horizon Europe—have raised some concerns. These regional partnerships across NUTS2 regions should primarily be based on criteria of excellence and thematic alignment among the collaborating NUTS2 regions, rather than being driven by their classification as more or less developed regions in the Regional Innovation Scoreboard.

The classification of regions as "more developed" or "less developed" is overly restrictive, ignoring that regions labelled as "more developed" may contain substantial areas resembling "less developed" regions. To better reflect the complexity and varying challenges of each region, the classification system should be refined. The current NUTS2-based system risks becoming an ineffective incentive for strong partnerships.

There is also a risk that these approaches create significant administrative burdens for public authorities, cluster leaders, and research actors in the regions, through requirements such as interregional collaborations, value chain identification, and investment portfolio development. This could divert focus from innovation work and technological development. To enhance European competitiveness, these efforts should instead aim to leverage the innovative potential of regional SMEs and other local actors, regardless of their administrative capacity.

Thematic Priorities

Europaforum Norra Sverige (EFNS) aims to contribute to the development FP10 by highlighting thematic areas critical to ensuring a competitive Europe driven by knowledge-based innovation.

Societal Transformation, Industrial Transition, and Sparsely Populated Areas in the Arctic

The Arctic is a complex region with unique conditions, a sensitive environment, and a diversity of economic activities, all playing a critical role in the EU's strategic autonomy, green industrial transition, and security. While it is essential to continue focusing on climate change and environmental issues in Arctic research, it is equally important to recognise that the Arctic research is not solely about climate, polar, or marine studies—it is also about the people living there. Far too often, "Arctic research" is limited to global climate impact studies rather than addressing the needs of the region's inhabitants.



To address this, the role of Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) needs to be strengthened within FP10, and the importance of interdisciplinary projects in the Arctic should be emphasised. More research is needed to understand the societal impacts of climate change and how these specifically affect and influence the Arctic's sensitive environments, supporting resilience in areas such as forestry and food security. The EU's framework programme should place the Arctic's people at the centre of its research and ensure the benefits of these efforts are tangible for them.

The Arctic perspective should be considered in relevant calls, especially in areas of global importance, such as the bio-based and circular economy, Arctic food production, energy transition, sustainable extraction of mineral resources, and digital transformation. Furthermore, thematic research areas of particular relevance to the EU's Arctic regions—due to cold climates, long distances, and geographic conditions—should be included. These challenges include an ageing and declining population, healthcare systems, and infrastructure.

Sparsely Populated Areas

Europe's sparsely populated regions play a key role in the EU's green and digital transition and its pursuit of strategic autonomy, particularly in energy production, forestry, and mining. However, these strengths also come with unique challenges. These regions are likely to experience the impacts of these transitions differently, making it essential to understand how the green and digital transition will affect people living there. This understanding is crucial to ensure these regions are fully integrated into the transformation.

Special attention should be given in FP10 to developing solutions tailored to these regions, particularly in terms of communication technologies and their ability to provide reliable coverage in sparsely populated areas. Additionally, the development of electric and autonomous vehicles suited for remote and cold regions, as well as improved health and welfare services, should be prioritised. The specific needs and potential of sparsely populated areas must be considered in all relevant calls to ensure their inclusion in Europe's broader transition efforts.

Societal Transformation in Industrial Transition

For northern Sweden, the green industrial transition also entails societal transformation as the region's energy-intensive industries take steps to drastically reduce carbon emissions. This positions Europe as a global leader in hydrogen steel and battery production. Industrial investments exceeding €100 billion in northern Sweden create both opportunities and challenges for the local population, SMEs, suppliers, and local and regional authorities. As the EU's ambitious agenda for industrial leadership and the green transition progresses, many other regions in Europe are likely to face similar challenges in the future.

Given this dynamic, FP10 should address the societal transformations linked to industrial transitions, with a particular focus on Social Sciences and Humanities in relevant calls. Despite the prioritisation of skills development and labour mobility by both Member States and the EU, these areas remain underexplored. Addressing these gaps will be crucial to ensuring the success of Europe's industrial and societal transformation.

Indigenous Populations



FP10 should address the specific needs of indigenous populations, such as the Sámi in northern Europe, emphasising inclusion and sustainable development. These communities are deeply connected to their lands, which play a crucial role in their culture, livelihoods, and traditions. While industrial projects are vital for the EU's green and digital transition, they often lead to tensions around land rights, environmental impacts, and cultural preservation. Future research efforts should prioritise conflict resolution, cultural preservation, and sustainable land use. Strengthening SSH perspectives in calls can further contribute to addressing these issues and ensuring that indigenous populations benefit from industrial development while preserving their cultural heritage.

Bioeconomy, Wood-Based Products, and Forestry Research

The bioeconomy and wood-based products play a central role in Europe's green transition by offering renewable materials with significant substitution potential, such as replacing concrete and plastics in various applications. Wood constructions are sustainable alternatives that reduce emissions, promote circularity, and act as stable carbon sinks. Moreover, Europe demonstrates industrial leadership in forestry and in developing a competitive bio-based circular economy. To fully exploit these opportunities, the entire value chain for wood-based products—from raw materials to high-value products—should be a central focus. Bioeconomy, forestry research, and wood-based products should therefore be prominent topics in FP10.

Energy Systems

The green transition requires not only the development and refinement of renewable energy production—such as wind power, solar energy, and hydrogen—but also a comprehensive overhaul of the energy system as a whole. The rapid expansion of electrified heavy industry, coupled with growing demand for clean energy, will place significant pressure on Europe's energy infrastructure. The transition will require substantial investments to modernise and adapt energy grids to support this transformation. This includes upgrading transmission and distribution networks to meet new demands, integrating smart grid technologies, European battery production, and enhancing storage capacity to ensure reliability and efficiency. In this context, FP10 must focus on both technological innovations in energy production and the systemic changes required to facilitate the transition. Research and innovation should aim to improve grid flexibility, integrate renewable energy sources into existing infrastructure, and develop robust energy systems capable of handling increased electrification.

Changed Geopolitical Context in Europe

The geopolitical landscape in Europe has undergone significant changes in recent years, particularly due to Russian aggression against Ukraine and the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO. This has heightened the focus on the need for a stronger emphasis on security and resilience within the EU's research and innovation agenda.

As Europe navigates an increasingly volatile geopolitical environment, FP10 must prioritise research that enhances both the EU's strategic autonomy and its ability to address emerging security threats.



Research calls should focus on the development of robust and secure energy infrastructure that reduces dependency on external actors, especially in regions particularly vulnerable to geopolitical disruptions. Additionally, cybersecurity solutions must be continuously advanced to protect critical infrastructure from digital attacks.

Furthermore, Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO strengthens the security framework in the Arctic and Baltic regions. Calls within FP10 should reflect this by addressing comprehensive security issues in the north, focusing on areas such as border security, preparedness, and defence technologies adapted to the region's unique environmental and logistical challenges. Tackling these issues will enable FP10 to support the development of innovative solutions that not only bolster Europe's defence capabilities but also enhance the resilience of its economic and social systems against geopolitical instability.

Space Technology and Atmospheric Research

Space technologies are increasingly utilised by researchers, public authorities, businesses, and individuals for applications in transport, logistics, environmental monitoring, climate research, and communication. Investments in space research not only drive economic growth but also deliver societal benefits far beyond their original purposes. For this reason, atmospheric research, space technology, and space observation should be prioritised in FP10.

eHealth and Remote Healthcare Services

eHealth and remote healthcare services have already demonstrated their potential to improve efficiency, particularly in sparsely populated northern areas where many citizens face long distances to healthcare providers. However, the potential of eHealth extends even further with the application of technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), big data analytics, and robotics. These innovations can revolutionise personalised care, predictive diagnostics, and remote patient monitoring.

With this in mind, eHealth should be a prominent theme in FP10, fostering the development of innovative digital solutions to address current and future challenges in European healthcare. These initiatives can ensure broader accessibility, improved outcomes, and more efficient healthcare systems.

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