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Europaforum Northern Sweden's position on the EU's Arctic policy

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 levels in matters with a clear European perspective.

Europaforum Northern Sweden welcomes the process toward an updated coherent EU Arctic policy, emphasising capacity building for cohesion, connectivity, climate actions, competence, and competitiveness based on multilevel governance and collaboration across borders and all levels of stakeholders. This is essential for establishing a resilient and secure Arctic region, benefiting the security and competitiveness of all of Europe.

Summary of the position:

1. The European Arctic in global geopolitical crossroads of relevance for the EU

- The European Arctic serves not only as EU's northern border area but also as the gateway to broader global Arctic interests.
- Sustainable, resilient and innovative communities and businesses capable of adapting to rapidly to changing circumstances are vital for a secure and thriving European Arctic.
- Europaforum Northern Sweden calls for a balanced and holistic EU Arctic policy that supports the region's long-term sustainable development.

2. The Arctic demands balanced and coherent EU policies and actions

- The European Arctic offers significant assets for the EU's competitiveness, strategic autonomy and green industrial transition. However, increased demand for raw materials necessitates careful considerations in the updated EU Arctic policy. Tensions between different interests highlights the need for coherent policy approaches and dialogue in all EU policy areas affecting the Arctic.
- Europaforum Northern Sweden calls for the EU's Arctic Policy to build on three equally important pillars; **security**, **sustainability**, and **prosperity**. A greater integration between these pillars is essential to reflect the needs of remote, sensitive areas with limited own capacity while promoting overall EU interests such as strategic autonomy, competitiveness, and security.



3. EU's targeted soft power is the key for Arctic competitiveness and security

- Security and competitiveness in sparsely populated regions rely on robust, resilient, and innovative communities and business ecosystems. The EU must leverage partnerships and stakeholder engagement to achieve its objectives, utilising support mechanisms and investment instruments, that together form an important part of the EU's soft-power toolbox.
- The diversity of Arctic contexts demonstrates that a one-size-fits-all approach is ineffective. Place-based strategies and instruments tailored to regional conditions and needs are essential to ensure effective policy implementation and sustainable development.
- For northern Sweden, EU cohesion policy has been instrumental in strengthening societal capacity and local innovation ecosystems. Continued support to the Swedish and Finnish NSPA regions, aligning with the accession Treaties for Finland and Sweden, remains essential for regional development and for sustaining the EU's long-term engagement in the Arctic.

4. A resilient, innovative and connected Arctic

- There are significant needs to address the skills and investment gaps in the European Arctic. This can be promoted by strengthening the small and dispersed labour markets through distance-bridging solutions, as well as by establishing skills platforms that can support businesses and public service providers. An Arctic investment platform, supported by the European Investment Bank, could provide a way to connect external capital with the region's unique opportunities.
- East-west integration is crucial for the transport corridors identified by NATO, as well as for new trade routes emerging as a result of closed borders.
- Continued broadband expansion remains essential, while satellite-based 5G could further strengthen connectivity in remote regions.
- Space infrastructure in northern Sweden, enabling satellite monitoring and unique launch capabilities, constitutes valuable European assets of growing importance that need to be supported.
- The EU should strengthen its role as an enabler of Arctic research cooperation and promote an interdisciplinary, place-based approach. Arctic universities serve as key links between research and local actors, and the EU should support inclusive collaboration and accessible funding that also enables smaller actors to participate.
- To ensure effective action, the European Arctic regions must be viewed in their broader geographical and strategic context. The EU strategy for eastern border regions and the forthcoming *Right to Stay* strategy are relevant to the Arctic region. However, such initiatives need to be integrated into a coherent approach for the European Arctic.



The position in its entirety:

1. The European Arctic at a global geopolitical crossroads of importance to the EU

The European Union plays a significant role in Arctic affairs in cooperation with its regional partners and stakeholders in the European Arctic region in northern Sweden, eastern and northern Finland, and northern Norway, which together form the Northern Sparsely Populated Areas (NSPA).

The Arctic, long characterised as a region of low tension, is now facing increasing geopolitical pressure as a result of Russian actions in the east and political divisions in the west. China, which claims the status of a near-Arctic state, has also long shown interest in the region. The NSPA therefore faces several challenges as Europe's Arctic outpost and as part of a border region facing both east and north. Since all Nordic countries became members of NATO as of 2024, it is of crucial importance that an updated EU Arctic strategy supports the European Arctic regions so that they can manage changing geopolitical conditions and overcome the particular challenges associated with long geographical distances, sparse populations and a demanding climate. Europaforum Northern Sweden therefore welcomes the process of updating the EU Arctic Strategy.

The European Arctic is not only the EU's northern border region, with the risk of becoming a weak point in a geopolitically strained environment, but also serves as a gateway to broader global Arctic interests. In this context, the concept of "dual use" – combining defence and resilience with societal and economic development – is particularly appropriate and in practice a prerequisite for maximising the impact of EU efforts in the region.

Resilient and innovative local communities, where different actors can rapidly adapt to changing conditions, are essential for a secure and vibrant European Arctic. This creates added value for the EU and contributes to safeguarding shared European interests and values in a world of increasing geopolitical tensions. Europaforum Northern Sweden therefore calls for a balanced and holistic EU policy for the Arctic that supports the region's long-term sustainable development and positions the European Arctic within the EU single market as a strategic platform. This is crucial to provide the European Arctic with development capacity and to give the EU legitimacy and better opportunities for cooperation across the wider Arctic region.

2. The Arctic requires a balanced and coordinated EU policy

The Arctic offers significant assets for the EU's competitiveness, strategic autonomy, the green industrial transition and the Union's security objectives. Initiatives such as the Critical Raw Materials Act and the Net-Zero Industry Act underline the region's importance. The extensive forest resources of the European Arctic, as well as minerals and other critical raw materials and marine resources, contribute significantly to the EU's climate objectives, the development of bio-based products and a



circular bioeconomy, as well as to ambitions for strategic autonomy. These are central components of sustainable development that should be highlighted in the EU's updated Arctic strategy.

Climate change affects the Arctic faster than other parts of the world and threatens indigenous cultures while also affecting local communities and businesses. These changes make continued global action necessary, and the EU must maintain high climate ambitions as a cornerstone of Europe's long-term competitiveness. In this regard, the Arctic can be part of the solution by offering climate-smart technologies, renewable energy and innovative business models that contribute to electrification and the green transition.

Northern Sweden and the NSPA are at the forefront in many areas and provide significant assets for Europe. However, the growing demand for raw materials requires careful consideration in an updated EU Arctic policy. Tensions between resource extraction, renewable energy expansion, indigenous rights, local economic interests and nature conservation underline the need for coordinated measures and dialogue across all EU policy areas affecting the Arctic. To avoid land-use conflicts in small and sparsely populated communities with limited capacity to manage externally driven large-scale economic interests, the EU needs to develop models and best practices for equitable participation, risk-sharing and the reinvestment of revenues for the benefit of affected local communities.

In the report *"Navigating Transition in European Arctic Regions: Lessons from 14 NSPA Regions"* (2025), funded by the European Commission, the OECD identifies the NSPA as a model for productivity and development in remote rural regions. The NSPA's cooperation with the OECD illustrates the importance of collaboration between actors, sectors and geographical areas, particularly in sparsely populated territories. At the same time, the security dimension is becoming increasingly prominent in issues such as climate change, cyber threats, infrastructure and resource management. This increasingly complex situation requires coordinated EU policies and measures.

Europaforum Northern Sweden therefore calls for the EU's Arctic policy to rest on three equally important pillars: **security**, **sustainability** and **prosperity**. Stronger integration between these pillars is essential for a coherent strategic framework reflecting the needs of remote and sensitive regions with limited local capacity, while also promoting overarching EU interests such as strategic autonomy, competitiveness and security.

3. The EU's targeted soft power is key to Arctic competitiveness and security

Security and competitiveness in sparsely populated regions depend on robust, resilient and innovative communities and vibrant business ecosystems. The EU, with relatively limited financial resources and defence capacity, therefore needs to leverage partnerships and broad stakeholder engagement to achieve its objectives through support mechanisms and investment instruments what can be described as the EU's soft-power toolbox.



The unique conditions in different Arctic contexts make it clear that a uniform model for the entire EU is not effective. Place-based strategies and tools tailored to regional variations are necessary. Local development strategies, including smart specialisation initiatives aligned with EU objectives, promote cooperation and access to investment instruments to develop businesses and research, attract external capital and talent, and strengthen European value chains.

The OECD identifies northern Sweden and the NSPA as innovation-leading regions, but at the same time vulnerable due to a lack of local and regional critical mass and capacity. The Arctic includes indigenous peoples and other minorities with limited opportunities to participate in decision-making processes. Cooperation, integration and participation for these groups require support for locally designed initiatives, particularly since the administrative resources of local authorities and institutions are limited. The EU therefore needs to recognise the wide range of actors that should be involved, including the NSPA regions, in delivering support and facilitating cooperation on joint capacity-building.

For northern Sweden and eastern and northern Finland, EU's cohesion policy has been crucial for developing societal capacity and local innovation systems by supporting small communities and numerous micro-enterprises across vast geographical areas. Cohesion policy enables the expansion of broadband and smart transport infrastructure across long distances, thereby complementing the core networks financed through the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) and other instruments. State-aid exemptions linked to NSPA measures within cohesion policy also lower the threshold for entering markets and improve access to the EU single market and global business opportunities.

Continued support for the Swedish and Finnish NSPA regions, in line with the accession treaties of Finland and Sweden, is crucial for long-term EU engagement in the Arctic, particularly given these countries' limited regional EU funding. The dedicated allocation to NSPA under the current cohesion policy effectively represents the EU's main – and in practice only – targeted investment instrument for the European Arctic.

4. A resilient, innovative and connected Arctic

An updated Arctic strategy should prioritise local needs, promote resilient communities and strengthen connectivity in order to enhance innovation and sustainable development for people and local communities – benefiting the EU's broader global Arctic interests. A resilient Arctic implies a secure and competitive region that supports the EU's defence and security agenda while also contributing to NATO activities in the North Atlantic and the Baltic Sea region. The current geopolitical situation highlights the importance of cross-border cooperation, both civilian and military.



Significant investments must be made in military and civilian infrastructure in Norway, Sweden and Finland to strengthen connections from the North Atlantic via northern Sweden and the Baltic Sea to the Russian border. East–west integration is essential for the infrastructure corridors identified by NATO, as well as for new trade routes emerging as a result of closed borders. This contributes to necessary redundancy in northern Europe and complements existing north–south corridors connecting continental Europe with the Arctic, which since 2021 form part of the EU’s TEN-T core network.

Satellite-based 5G can further strengthen connectivity in remote regions, combined with inclusion in European 5G corridors along priority infrastructure routes. At the same time, continued expansion of secure and high-quality broadband remains essential. An international high-speed cable between the European Arctic and Asia could also contribute to robust digital connectivity for the EU while strengthening the region’s attractiveness for business and the digital industry.

Existing space infrastructure in the NSPA for satellite monitoring and unique launch capabilities on the European mainland represents valuable European assets that need to be strengthened. These capabilities have gained increased importance for climate monitoring, communications, expanded research and European Arctic defence and security needs.

As major Arctic states have withdrawn from cooperation on Arctic research, the EU must strengthen its role as a global enabler of Arctic research cooperation, grounded in European values and open science, for the benefit of people living in the Arctic. It is therefore important that Arctic research, in addition to climate research, adopts an interdisciplinary, place-based and co-creative approach, covering areas such as security, preparedness, resilience, responsible land use, cold-climate technologies, space activities and social sciences.

Arctic universities, integrated into regional ecosystems and closely connected to local communities, public authorities and Indigenous peoples, act as engines of development and intermediaries between science and on-the-ground actors facing Arctic challenges. The EU can play a decisive role in supporting sustainable cooperation mechanisms and adequate funding for actors based in the Arctic. At the same time, Arctic research must be inclusive and collaborative, particularly with regard to indigenous knowledge and local communities. Flexible, robust and accessible funding instruments are therefore crucial to include smaller actors with limited administrative capacity, which also benefits development in the NSPA more broadly.

Arctic economies have historically been based on traditional cultures and resource extraction. By encouraging small innovative companies to grow in sectors such as sustainable tourism and digital services, a stronger and more resilient local and regional economic base can be created. The most important needs for a thriving European Arctic are to attract talent and capital to close skills and investment gaps. Improving small and dispersed labour markets through distance-bridging solutions



and establishing competence platforms can support businesses and public service providers. An Arctic investment platform supported by the European Investment Bank (EIB) could serve as a tool to connect external capital with the region's unique opportunities, similar to proposals in the EU's recently launched strategy for the Union's eastern border regions.

The EU's Arctic policy must address both existing and emerging challenges and be based on dialogue with stakeholders as well as coordinated and balanced measures. Continued development through annual EU Arctic Forums and strengthened dialogue with all relevant actors offers a path forward. All voices must be heard to ensure long-term sustainable development and to protect the EU's growing interests in a challenging global environment.

By addressing underinvestment and ensuring that revenues are reinvested locally, regional capacity to navigate a changing world is strengthened while maximising benefits for both local communities and the EU's broader interests, in combination with security efforts. The Arctic is not only a region to protect or exploit for resources – it is also a place to live, work and thrive.

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