



The Kiruna Declaration 4.0

Background to the Fourth Kiruna Declaration

Europaforum Northern Sweden (EFNS) is a political network that brings together Sweden's four northernmost regions to analyse EU policy and formulate common positions on issues of importance to northern Sweden. The forum also serves as a regular meeting place where a wider range of stakeholders gather to participate in and discuss the development of the EU. This year's forum is the thirtieth since its inception in 1999.

On several occasions, Kiruna has been a place where important political choices for northern Sweden, the Arctic and the development of the EU have been highlighted. During Sweden's EU Presidency in 2009, the concept of territorial potential was highlighted in Kiruna as the basis for European regional policy, which contributed to the creation of smart specialisation strategies. The Arctic Council established in Kiruna in 2013 that the Arctic is a living region with communities, economies, cultures and rights. In 2023, Sweden launched its EU Presidency in Kiruna, following which the Bureau of the European Committee of the Regions adopted a Kiruna Declaration to safeguard support for Europe's northern, sparsely populated areas.

At a time when the EU is facing crucial negotiations on its future budget, competitiveness and territorial cohesion, there is a need to clarify northern Sweden's collective perspective. Against this backdrop, northern Sweden is gathering in Kiruna to adopt a fourth Kiruna Declaration, setting out common principles for how EU policy and investment should be shaped for the European Arctic.

1. Europe's strength is built in every part of the Union

EFNS believes that the EU's future depends on its ability to make the most of its entire geography, its entire population and its full economic potential.

Northern Sweden is home to crucial elements for Europe's fossil-free energy production, reserves of critical raw materials, industrial value chains, research and innovation environments, and transport corridors linking Sweden, Norway, Finland and the wider Arctic region.

At the same time, people, businesses and public sector actors in northern sparsely populated areas operate under specific structural conditions, where sparsity, long distances, climatic conditions and limited labour markets affect the conditions for development. EU policy must therefore consistently be based on people's actual opportunities to live, work, run businesses and pursue education where they live.

Vibrant, gender-equal societies with functioning labour markets, entrepreneurship, culture, languages and local development capacity are essential for investments and objectives to have an impact. The perspectives of the indigenous Sámi people, national minorities, civil society and local development processes need to be better integrated into the implementation of EU policy. This is also a prerequisite for Europe's civil preparedness and resilience. Without functioning societies in peripheral and strategic areas, EU security is weakened. The capacity of public actors in European periphery is crucial to the Union's security, resilience and ability to manage geopolitical changes. EFNS therefore believes that Arctic policy, regional policy, industrial policy, labour market policy, transport policy, energy policy and research policy need to be better coordinated and based on territorial perspectives in order to support local communities with limited resources.

Principles

- EU policy must be shaped on the basis of people's actual living conditions throughout the Union.
- The resources and communities of Northern Sweden must be recognised as a strategic asset and an integral part of the Union's development.
- EU ambitions regarding transition, competitiveness, cohesion and security must be realised through targeted and locally tailored investments.
- Resources and tools must be proportionate to the tasks at hand and designed in consultation with regional and local authorities.

2. A regional, place-based cohesion policy strengthens the EU as a whole

EFNS believes that cohesion policy is the European Union's key investment policy for long-term regional development, and that the next multiannual financial framework will be crucial to how the Union translates its ambitions into action in the areas of competitiveness, cohesion, security and transition.

In northern Sweden, cohesion policy has helped to build innovation systems, strengthen cross-border cooperation and social cohesion, develop smart specialisation, diversify the business sector and increase institutional capacity. The policy has thus contributed to economic development, strengthened competitiveness and increased the legitimacy of European cooperation.

EFNS believes that the next EU multiannual financial framework (MFF) should ensure a clear regional impact on planning, implementation and monitoring. The budget should enable implementation across the Union through place-based investments, and be based on multi-level governance where the regional and local levels are co-creators. The partnership principle should guide the entire implementation process.

Regional development strategies, smart specialisation and territorial knowledge should guide investments and reforms with the aim of building innovative, competitive and resilient societies with social cohesion. The regional and local levels should play a structured and decisive role in the design, prioritisation and implementation of EU actions.

Regulatory frameworks, state aid rules and appropriate financing solutions, such as grants, loans and blended finance instruments, must be targeted, accessible and proportionate so that smaller operators in different territorial contexts can participate fully.

Principles

- Cohesion policy must be robust and long-term to enable the whole Union to build innovative, competitive and resilient societies.
- The partnership principle, multi-level governance and regional ownership must underpin planning, implementation and monitoring.
- The EU must provide targeted support, tailored regulatory frameworks and appropriate funding solutions for northern, sparsely populated areas facing severe structural challenges.

3. Competitiveness is built on vibrant local communities within European value chains

EFNS believes that European competitiveness is shaped within regional ecosystems where raw materials, energy, innovation, industry and skills interact.

Northern sparsely populated regions contribute to Europe's industrial transition and strategic independence. EU policies on industry, AI, research, energy and skills provision therefore need to work together at regional and local level.

Strategies for smart specialisation and smart diversification should guide investment and reinforce the link between regional strengths and European value chains. EU instruments must be accessible, proportionate and feasible across the Union.

Investment in transport systems, energy systems and smart communities should form a central part of the implementation of the industrial transition. An integrated approach to energy, transport, digitalisation, circularity, innovation and resilience shall characterise long-term development. Digital infrastructure and regional collaborative solutions are crucial to ensuring equal access to public services, business development and resilience in sparsely populated areas.

The regions' ability to attract and retain a workforce, as well as their access to education, housing, healthcare, culture, services and social entrepreneurship, is crucial for long-term development. Vibrant and functioning communities require innovative organisations, stakeholders and individuals who drive change and renewal through innovation. The energy system is a fundamental prerequisite for Europe's energy transition. The ongoing electrification in northern Sweden requires the expansion of fossil-free electricity generation, reinforced electricity grids, the recovery of residual heat and increased system capacity.

EFNS believes that EU energy policy should facilitate development through investment, coordination and regulations adapted to local conditions. Expansion must be based on industrial needs, long-term security of supply and clear societal benefits at local and regional levels.

The energy system should be developed as a whole, where production, transmission, distribution, storage, resilience and flexibility work together.

The bioeconomy and the energy system are central components of Europe's transition. Forests and active, sustainable forestry in northern Sweden contribute to climate benefits, industrial development, employment and vibrant rural communities.

EU policy should support the sustainable management of forest resources and ensure that regulations are designed with due regard for regional conditions and established management models. Legislation and data collection shall be based on Member States' systems.

Principles

- European competitiveness should be built through investment in regional value chains and place-based strengths.
- EU energy policy should strengthen capacity, competitiveness and territorial development.
- EU forestry policy should support sustainable management and regional development, whilst respecting the principle of subsidiarity.

4. Transport, accessibility and robust infrastructure build a strong Europe

EFNS believes that a cohesive and robust transport system with good accessibility is a fundamental prerequisite for competitiveness, public services and cohesion.

In northern sparsely populated areas, accessibility requirements also encompass, to a greater extent, emergency preparedness, security of supply and essential public services.

EU transport policy should prioritise northern and cross-border routes as investments of common European interest. Key routes and connections to Finland and Norway should be developed as part of a coherent multimodal system, in which rail links constitute strategic links for Europe's competitiveness and the supply capacity of industry, and contribute to strengthening NATO's accessibility and mobility to northern Sweden, Norway and Finland.

Ports in northern regions should be recognised as strategic transport hubs with a view to promoting industrial development, the energy transition, security and preparedness.

The strategic role of aviation in northern regions is a fundamental part of accessibility and a prerequisite for functioning labour markets, business, public services and international contacts. Airports in the north should be recognised as critical infrastructure.

Transport, energy and communications systems should be planned in an integrated manner to meet both civilian and military needs.

The Connecting Europe Facility should continue to facilitate investment in infrastructure with high European added value, particularly in northern and cross-border corridors.

Principles

- EU should ensure accessibility throughout the Union, including in northern sparsely populated areas.
- Investments should prioritise cross-border corridors, bottlenecks and peripheral connections.

- Infrastructure should be planned in an integrated manner to support the economy, social development and preparedness.

5. Concluding statement

Against this background, Europaforum Northern Sweden calls on the European Parliament, the European Commission, the Council of the European Union and the Swedish Government to ensure that future decisions on the EU budget and policy take full account of the specific situation, strategic value and investment needs of Europe's northern sparsely populated regions as an integral part of the Union's future development, competitiveness and security.