

## **FROM A NORTHERN PERSPECTIVE: THE BARENTS REGION AND NSPA**

### **SLIDE 1**

My name is Kent Gudmundsen and I am Executive Councillor for Education in the Troms County Government and I am the Norwegian substitute member to the Political Bureau of CPMR.

I would like to thank the Baltic Sea Commission for the invitation to this seminar on territorial cohesion, and your interest in the Barents Region and the Network of NSPA.

The work which is done by CPMR and its geographical commissions is of high value and interest. Regions and regional policy play an important role in developing Europe, and it's crucial that regions are involved in developing new strategies in areas of common concern.

I am asked to give an introduction to the Barents region and the network of NSPA, short for Northern Sparsely Populated Areas. This network is formed on initiative by the northernmost regional EU offices of Sweden, Finland and Norway. The network's objectives is to raise awareness of the region in the EU institutions, influence EU policy and provide a platform for best practise. This is a network fostered and initiated on the long tradition of cooperation in the Barents Region.

### **SLIDE 2**

I will first of all give you an introduction to the Barents Region and some of the arenas of collaboration, where the Troms County Council is involved. These are arenas of collaboration with objectives and topics also relevant in an EU perspective.

The Barents Region refers to the northern regions of Sweden, Finland, Norway and North-West Russia. The basis of the Troms County Council's focus on the High North, is through the Barents Region cooperation.

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If we look back in history, we find old ties between our peoples in the north. One example is the Sami People and their way of living. National borders have been irrelevant for them, living as semi nomads. Another example is the trade relation between the people along the coast of North Norway and Russian settlers in North-West Russia, between 1740 and 1917. The ties between the people of the northern part of Finland, Sweden and Norway are based on, among other things, immigration from northern Finland and Sweden to North Norway during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the common Nordic language.

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The Barents Region today has about 6 million inhabitants and consists of both urban and rural cultures, towns and outback.

When you include the Barents Sea and the Arctic Ocean, the area is referred to as the High North. The area is considered one of the richest areas in Europe when it comes to natural resources like oil, gas, fish, wood and minerals. At the same time the High North is a peripheral and sparsely populated region, sharing common challenges like cold climate, long distances and lack of adequate infrastructure. The regions are specifically affected by globalisation, energy-supply, climate change, centralization and demographic change.

### **SLIDE 5**

The role of the northern and arctic region is becoming more important in the global context, especially due to its geo-strategic location, its attractive natural environment and our natural resources.

The last couple of years we have seen both a national and international focus on the High North, included the Barents Region. The EU launched its renewed Northern Dimension Policy in November 2006.

The High North is the Norwegian Government's most important strategic priority area in the years to come. The overall aim is to enhance knowledge in and about the north, increase Norwegian activity and presence in the area and lay the foundations for sustainable economic and social development.

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Let me then again focus on the tradition of collaboration in this area. The ties between northern Sweden, Finland and Norway was formalized in 1967 when the North Calotte Council was established, to serve as a Pan-Nordic cooperation organisation. Today the North Calotte Council is one out of eight cross-border cooperation organisations funded by the Nordic Council of Ministry. The highest political and administrative authorities are represented in the North Calotte Council from the three northernmost regions of Norway, the region of Lapland in Finland and Norrbotten in Sweden. The cooperation seeks to strengthen the position of the area as a dynamic venue for the European cooperation. Its objectives are to generate new cross-border cooperation in the area, support existing cooperation and remove obstacles that hamper such cooperation. It also aims to create closer contact with other European regions.

#### **SLIDE 7**

When Sweden and Finland became EU members in 1995 they could take part in the Interreg-programs. When the geographical areas within the programs were to be formed, it was natural to build on the already established Nordic constellations, among other the North Calotte cooperation. Sweden and Finland invited Norway to take part in the Interreg-program. The Norwegian county councils showed great interest in participating, as it was an opportunity to strengthen ongoing projects and promote new initiatives in areas like the business and transport sector and enhance environmental development. The Interreg-program also was an opportunity to strengthen the people-to-people cooperation, which has always been an important part of the North Calotte identity.

A program for the North Calotte was developed, the Interreg North, and this new element strengthened the North Calotte cooperation as it received new financial resources. Since Norway is not an EU member, the Norwegian participation is financed through the national budget.

The North Calotte cooperation is an example of how valuable cross-border cooperation can be. How peripheral regions, when they stand together, can succeed in promoting their interests and point of views. Not only through the formally established organizations, as the North Calotte Council, but through new networks and arenas, fostered on the long tradition of cooperations . One example is the network of Northern Sparsely Populated Areas, NSPA, which I will come back to later.

## **SLIDE 8**

I will first like to spend some minutes on the formally organized Barents Region co-operation, established, by the Kirkenes Declaration in January 1993.

The Barents Region cooperation is a successor of the North Calotte cooperation, and is established at intergovernmental level, with a Barents Euro-Arctic Council, and at interregional level, with a Barents Regional Council.

The Barents Regional Council has representatives from the highest political and executive level in each region and includes 13 county councils, or equivalent from the northern part of Norway, Russia, Finland and Sweden. In addition, there is also a representative of the indigenous peoples.

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From the beginning of this cooperation the overall interests have been to secure a peaceful and stable development of the region. People-to-people cooperation, focusing on culture, indigenous peoples, environment, youth, and health issues have been main perspectives in this field.

### **SLIDE 10**

The objectives of the cooperation are to develop the cultural ties between the peoples; encourage bilateral and multilateral relations in the region; work for an environmentally sustainable economic and social development and to take care of the interests of the indigenous peoples. This is probably why it has been called the largest peace-making exercise in the north ever.

The Barents Region is an example of cross-border cooperation both at intergovernmental and interregional level, which has brought the countries closer together, fostered a feeling of unity and laid ground for further collaboration.

Troms County Council officially took on the regional chairmanship in the Barents Regional Council, in October 2009, for a two year period. This is held by the President of our County Council.

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During the chairmanship period, Troms County Council would like to strengthen the structures of political cooperation both within the Barents Region and with other European regional arenas of collaboration. The EU work towards an Arctic policy may influence the Barents Region and should be closely followed. The Northern Dimension Policy and EU-programmes are also of high relevance to the region. Closer contact between the different arenas of collaboration would increase the knowledge about each other's regions, agenda and way of working. The Brussels based network Northern Sparsely Populated Areas (NSPA) is one of the arenas which is considered as an important constellation in this perspective.

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The network of NSPA includes the northernmost counties of Sweden, Finland and Norway. It is a network established on the initiative of the EU offices of Mid-Sweden, North-Sweden, East Finland, North-Finland and North Norway. The network includes regional politicians, civil servants and regional EU-offices from the regions

The network's starting point is the region's many common circumstances such as sparse population, harsh climate and long distances. The NSPA region has a population density of only 4.9 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>, something that cannot be found in any other part of the European Union. The region is as well characterised by large amounts of natural resources, advanced research institutions and high performance process industries.

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The network of NSPA has emphasized the area as a strong, specific and promising region and an important part of the EU. The network's objectives, is

as mentioned, to raise awareness of the region in the EU institutions, influence EU policy and provide a platform for best practise.

The ambition is to demonstrate that, while NSPA economies requires specific treatment in some respect, they provide inputs to European industries. Building on existing strenghts and identified resources it is possible to significantly increase the contribution of the NSPA to European overall levels of economic performance. This requires that some targeted measures are implemented to overcome demographic and transport related obstacles in the region.

#### **SLIDE 14**

The NSPAs joint vision for 2020 is:

- NSPA comprises dynamic and modern regions with diversified economic profiles and functional labour markets
- Our enterprises are highly competitive and at the forefront of developing green technology, making a globally important contribution to sustainable development
- The regions offer attractive living conditions for women and men of all origins, as well as world class higher education opportunities

In January this year the NSPA presented its political position to DG Regio, regarding the framework on the future EU Cohesion Policy. The political position is based on a foresight study for 2020, produced by Nordregio and commissioned by NSPA. A steering group has worked on the political position, consisting of 5 politicians and 5 officials from the regions, using the study as a basis.

The position focuses on the region's opportunities and how the region can maximize the added value brought to Europe. NSPA emphasizes how the region can contribute to fulfilling the objectives for EU 2020.

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Let me mention that the region can contribute to the climate change strategy of Europe. The region has the potential to further contribute to development of renewable energy resources and the securing of European energy supply. To share innovative solutions for the development and the service provision of sparsely populated, rural and peripheral regions.

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The region has as mentioned, vast natural resources such as oil, gas, wood, fish and minerals and excellent access to the resource-rich Barents Region. Opportunities within these sectors are strengthened because of the long tradition of partnership with North-West Russia. We have excellent universities, and there is a unique natural environment and cultural heritage for recreation and tourism, in cooperation with the Sami people.

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The NSPA position to the EU Commission highlights the need to further develop the territorial cohesion and territorial cooperation as a part of the future cohesion policy. NSPA strongly supports the future cohesion policy and the availability of structural funds that are offered to all regions in all EU member states. The EU policy of strengthening the territorial cohesion with a multi level governance for a sustainable development of all parts of the European Union is warmly welcomed.

It is important to continue focusing on areas defined by geographical characteristics, like the NSPA and other regions with sparse population and long distances. These regions have a legal base in Protocol 6 of the Accession Treaty for Sweden, Finland and Austria and article 174 of the Lisbon Treaty. It has been proved that earlier and ongoing programming periods have had a positive impact on NSPA's regional development and interregional cooperation.

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The northern perspective and the cooperation in the Barents Region have, as you see many aspects and dimensions. It is natural to believe that the different arenas of collaboration can benefit from each other, and new experiences and different ways of working can be reached. I believe the same can be said about the work on the future EU Cohesion Policy.

### **SLIDE 19**

I thank you for your attention and wish you all an interesting seminar.