

The Northern Areas: Different Perspectives—One Vision

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The Parliament has now taken up the challenge of giving Norway a vision for a new, comprehensive policy for the north.

Three central reports have been put forward to help the Parliament in its task: *To the North!*, by the Expert Committee for the Northern Areas (December 2003); *For the North!*, by the Regional Committee for Northern Norway and Northern Trøndelag together with the Barents Secretariat (February 2005); and *Opportunities and Challenges in the North*, the white paper submitted to the Parliament by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (April 2005).

The reports share as a common objective to secure Norway's economic, environmental, social and political interests in the North. Where they differ is in their perspective as to how to get achieve it.

Foreign policy

From the outset, the government's St.meld. exhibits a strong bias towards foreign affairs. On the one hand, the government acknowledges that other areas, such as regional development, commercial activities, and national security "may be of relevance for the development of a Norwegian policy for the northern areas." policy." On the other hand, the government has decided that "for the meantime, these should be brought up in other contexts."

The government's strategy is based on establishing dialogue with important western states and expanding the bilateral cooperation with Russia.

When it comes to relations with Russia, Norway traditionally seeks the support and active participation of its friends. Norway has applied this approach with most issues, with the clear exceptions of deciding a maritime boundary and managing resources in the Barents Sea.

Cooperation with Russia

What is new about the government's strategy? First, expanding the range of bilateral cooperation with Russia indicates relations have normalized; security no longer dominates as it once did. Russia is rather seen as an important economic partner. There is adequate confidence to explore a broader range of interest-based relations with Russia.

Second, the strategy envisions including western states in discussions of Barents Sea resources. The reason is not so much fear of Russia. Rather, it is anxiety over the increasing interest Norway's traditional western cooperation partners show for the area. As the Russian threat has

diminished, western states have become more engaged by self-interests. This leads some to see Norway as sitting between three big powers: Russia, the EU, and the USA.

Norway can no longer take for granted that its interests are shared by its old allies in the West. The fear from the Norwegian side is that these allies will enter into their own agreements with Russia regarding resource development in the Barents Sea, and that such arrangements may not take Norway's interests into account, especially environmental interests.

Involving western states doesn't mean giving up control of Norwegian resources; it means ensuring multinational activities on either side of an eventual maritime border are conducted in a way that ensures the sustainability of the entire Barents Sea ecosystem. Western participation could be helpful in moving Russia to acceptable environmental standards.

Regional policy

Foreign affairs will play an essential role in securing economic, environmental, social and political interests in the north. But whose interests are being secured? As the title suggests, *For the North!* makes it clear that the policy for the northern areas must serve the North. It aspires to make northern Norway a regional power center. Taking this view, northern area policy is first and foremost regional policy.

For the North! lays out the challenges. Among other things, the report points out that northern Norway lacks the infrastructure and special skills needed to support the petroleum industry's many needs. This means building the physical, social, institutional, and intellectual base required for a thriving regional economy and society. To do this, it supports the recommendation in *To the North!* to set aside funds through a "Northern Areas Billion."

A comprehensive policy cannot limit itself by considering only northern Norway's interests or even the entire country's interests (see op-ed by Arnfinn Jørgensen-Dahl and Willy Østreng in *Nordlys* 15 April 2005). It must also consider the broader region's interests, no matter how that region is defined.

Barents Cooperation

A policy which develops a broader region, including relevant parts of Russia and the Nordic states, will also benefit Norway and Norwegian interests in the North.

How should the larger region be developed? *To the North!* and the foreign ministry's white paper emphasize strengthening the Arctic Council. *For the North!* is strongly critical of favoring the Arctic Council at the expense of the Barents Cooperation. Rather, it supports using the Barents Cooperation as the key forum for promoting regional development, including western states' engagement in the Barents Sea. This is in contrast to the situation today where all activities related to the Barents Sea—with the exception of the environment—are excluded from the Barents Cooperation.

There are good reasons to consider channelling multilateral dialogue on the Barents Sea through the Barents Council. The Barents Cooperation has a broader scope. It has a strong and vibrant regional component, all of the relevant states participate, and Norway exercises considerable influence within it. The Arctic Council has a more limited focus on the environment and indigenous peoples' affairs. It has not given voice to regional governments or to other residents in the North, and the EU participates neither as a member nor an observer on the council. Perhaps it is time to include the Barents Sea in the Barents Cooperation?

Sector policy

The public debate on the northern areas is concentrated on the various social and economic interests which cross there. Therefore it is impossible to talk about a comprehensive policy without including policies associated with key political sectors, such as environment, commerce, fisheries, energy, security, and so on.

A comprehensive policy must seek to reconcile conflicting interests and promote a vibrant regional economy in harmony with the environment. As put forth in *To the North!*, such a policy requires two things. The first is an integrated and collaborative planning process that involves all relevant sectors at all political levels. The second is to build up northern areas expertise, focusing on commerce, research and development.

Commerce will play a particularly important role as a driving force behind regional development. First, businesses provide the jobs and tax revenues that development requires. Second, active commercial cooperation will form the backbone for a long-term, friendly relationship with Russia. Commercial cooperation will bring together ideas and expertise that can in turn lead to new products and services to benefit the region. For example, combining Russia's navigational expertise in Arctic waters with Norway's expertise in shipping and marine technology could form the basis for the world's safest oil transport system—just as *For the North!* suggests.

Vision

A comprehensive policy for the north needs to integrate all three perspectives which have been named: foreign policy, regional policy, and policies for the various social and economic sectors. To be effective, the policy must be more than an action list. It needs a vision to inspire it, to lead it, and to make it alive. *To the North!* provides such a vision: “to make the northern areas a leading area for sustainable development, where culture and nature form the foundation for new commercial activity and international cooperation.” *For the North!* shows that northern Norway has the ambition to achieve this.

What is needed is a northern areas policy that combines vision and ambition with capacity. This means developing Norway's northern area expertise on the domestic front and securing the necessary political climate for the region's interests on the international front.