

Theme

A Monday in the service of the Nordics

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The Nordic Council of Ministers' vision for 2030

Editorial

The Nordic cooperation has three clear goals

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Iceland: Paternity leave a boost to men's identity

Jan 20, 2020

Theme: The Nordics towards new goals



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The Nordic cooperation has three clear goals

The Nordic cooperation will soon be going through major changes. A new vision is to be turned into practical politics within three strategic areas. This special edition of the Nordic Labour Journal looks at what is happening in the Nordic Council of Ministers.

EDITORIAL

20.01.2020

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

The Nordic cooperation is so comprehensive and the Nordics are so integrated as a region, that it can be difficult to see where something begins and another thing ends.

When the Nordic Prime Ministers last year launched the vision for the Nordic region to be the most sustainable region in the world in 2030, it was not the ideas around a green shift which set us most apart from other regions in the world. This is also the aim of many other countries and regional cooperations, like the EU.

But since environmental challenges often know no borders, they can only be solved through cooperation. The Nordics have been an inspiration to the world in this. Thanks to the cooperation, it is easier for us to solve the problems, and we can also cooperate on another level compared to many other regions.

The climate crisis and the negative direction international cooperation is heading in generally, has led to an even greater interest in the Nordic cooperation, according to the Nordic Council of Ministers' Secretary General Paula Lehtomäki.

THE NORDIC COOPERATION HAS THREE CLEAR GOALS

She says that ambitions are higher than before. There are also higher expectations for real results, however.

At the secretariat, Deputy Chief of Staff Helle Engslund Karup is gathering the input from the 12 different ministerial councils. This will result in three cross-sector action plans for the period 2021 to 2024. When the Nordic Ministers for Cooperation meet in February, they must agree on next year's budget. This will also be the first signal of how comprehensive the changes will be.

Because, as Helle Engslund Karup underlines: if the Nordic Council of Ministers is to focus its operations and prioritise a green, competitive and socially sustainable Nordic region, other areas will be prioritised less.

That is why the proposed budget will be something that has an influence on many of those who work with Nordic cooperation. Opinion polls show that there is popular support for the cooperation. But there is also a great lack of knowledge about what is actually being done, and about what the Nordic Council of Ministers do.

The Nordic Labour Journal gathered its editorial staff in Copenhagen and the resulting special edition focuses solely on the Nordic Council of Ministers and its relationship to the Nordic Council and the rest of the world.



The Nordic Labour Journal's editorial staff met the four people who are working closest with labour market issues at the Council of Ministers' secretariat. Photo: Tomas Bertelsen.

We hope it will shine a light on what is going on in the Nordens Hus in Copenhagen. The edition has more or less become "A day in the life of the Nordic Council of Ministers". At the same time, we present ourselves in a bit more detail than before. This is what we have been doing:

Danish Marie Preisler followed Paula Lehtomäki through a normal Monday.

Swedish-Norwegian Björn Lindahl interviewed Helle Engslund Karup about the new action plans, and followed the Labour Market Committee to Iceland.

Swedish Gunhild Wallin has taken a look at the Council of Ministers' relationship to the Nordic Council and to young people.

Icelandic Gudrun Helga Sigurdadottir has written about the campaign for paternity leave and met a new Icelandic father.

Finnish Bengt Östling interviewed Tobias Grut about the new international profiling of the Nordic region abroad.

Norwegian-British Lars Bevanger has taken a look at how a podcast series is part of that profiling.

If you are curious about who we are, we have also updated our page [About us!](#)



A Monday in the service of the Nordics

Paula Lehtomäki heads the secretariat for the Nordic governments' official body of cooperation. Yet she has no lifeguards, she cycles to work and gets on the train to open a conference.

THEME

20.01.2020

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER, PHOTO: KRISTIAN SEPTIMUS KROGH

It is Monday morning, and Paula Lehtomäki is on the train heading for the city of Vedbæk north of Copenhagen to take part in a conference on integration. It is hosted by the Nordic governments' official cooperation body, the Nordic Council of Ministers. She is its Secretary General.

She is the Nordic civil servant with the overall responsibility for securing the best possible framework for the cooperation between the eight Nordic governments. She regularly meets with Nordic Prime Ministers and other Government Ministers. But while a Nordic Minister would typically be taken

to a conference in a ministerial chauffeur-driven car, Paula Lehtomäki takes the train.



Paula Lehtomäki takes the train to the city of Vedbæk. Photo: Marie Preisler

“My job is to make sure the Nordic Prime Ministers and governments are well prepared for cooperation on policy areas where it makes sense to cooperate. This means the countries need to share knowledge with each other, and today I will be opening a conference which aims to share experiences on the integration of refugees and immigrants. I get the train, and spend the journey preparing my speech,” she explains.

Integration close to her heart

When it comes to certain policy areas Nordic governments meet with the aim to learn from each other, and in other areas they have entered into binding agreements.

The Nordic countries do not have any shared legislation on the integration of refugees and immigrants, but this is one of the policy areas where they have entered into an agreement to cooperate and share knowledge on integration and new solutions. This means that integration is one of the subjects Paula Lehtomäki regularly discusses with the Nordic Prime Ministers and Ministers for Co-operation.

This Monday she is not on her way to meet Nordic Ministers, however. Most of the participants at the conference on integration in the Nordic region, where she will give the opening address, work with the practical implementation of integration in the Nordic countries. The conference is their chance to present concrete integration initiatives from around the Nordics, and researchers will present results from new reports on integration, commissioned by the Nordic Council of Ministers.

Seeing the Nordic countries learn from each other in order to secure better integration is something which is close to the Secretary General’s heart, she explains.

“It is perhaps more important than ever that we succeed with our integration policies. I was a state secretary at the Finnish Prime Minister’s office in 2015 and saw the problems arising from the fact that we were not ready to deal with the many people who were fleeing the war in Syria. We had no systems in place to start the integration process, and this led to a realisation in the Nordic countries that there was a need to exchange experiences and ideas in this area.”

Lunch with a Minister

Her job as Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers does not come with a private chauffeur or lifeguards. Paula Lehtomäki usually cycles to work, and when she participates in events outside of the Nordic Council of Ministers’ Copenhagen headquarters, she will travel by taxi or train – or by plane if she needs to go to one of the other Nordic capitals or to Brussels. Today she gets off the train from Copenhagen at Vedbæk Station and walks the final stretch to the hotel where the integration conference will be held.

Before she goes on stage to welcome the participants, she chats to colleagues from the secretariat who have already arrived. Before the official opening, she also has time to eat breakfast with Bart Somers, Vice Minister-President and Minister for Integration and Interior of the Flemish Government in Belgium.



Bart Somers at the Nordic conference on integration. Photo: Department of Foreign Affairs, Flanders

He has been invited by the Nordic Council of Ministers to talk about integration in Belgium, and he is very happy to take part, he explains.

“Being Minister of Integration is new to me, and I want to learn from the Nordic countries’ approach and practice when it comes to integration. This conference allows me to do that,” he says.

A tricky Danish word

Paula Lehtomäki comes from Finland, and her mother tongue is Finnish. But her welcoming remarks to the conference are in Swedish – one of three working languages at the Nordic Council of Ministers’ secretariat, the two others being Norwegian and Danish. Her speech includes one single sentence in Danish, and it contains the word “beskæftigelse” (employment). It is a word she finds tricky to pronounce correctly.

“My family and I have all taken Danish lessons since we moved here, but some words are still a bit difficult to pronounce. For instance a word like “beskæftigelse”, for which I needed help from a Danish participant at the conference to pronounce,” she says.

The position as the head of the Nordic Council of Ministers' secretariat rotates between the Nordic countries. Paula Lehtomäki took over from Dagfinn Høybråten from Norway in March 2019. She and her family moved from the Finnish capital Helsinki to Copenhagen, where the headquarters of the Nordic Council of Ministers is situated just opposite the Danish parliament.

Closer cooperation

As Secretary General, she is the boss for some 150 staff at the Nordic Council of Ministers, and is present during all meetings of Nordic Ministers – of which there are at least 18 every year. The signal from the Ministers is clear, she says: there should be ever closer cooperation between the Nordic countries.

“I see increased engagement for Nordic cooperation from Nordic Prime Ministers, Ministers for Co-operation and other Ministers, and an even greater desire for and willingness to increase the ambitions for the content and results of the Nordic cooperation. They see the need for common Nordic answers to joint challenges, and they see the Nordic countries as a family that shares values which are worth protecting together.”

In the autumn of 2019, the Nordic Prime Ministers approved a vision for the Nordic cooperation going forward to 2030. By then, the Nordics should be the world's most sustainable and integrated region. Paula Lehtomäki and her staff are busy helping the countries turn this vision into a concrete strategy, which will include development goals for each political area of cooperation. Many meetings between civil servants and Ministers will be needed to make this happen.



Paula Lehtomäki participated at the Labour Ministers' meeting in Reykjavik in March 2019. Here she is next to the then Sweden's Minister for Employment Ylva Johansson, who later became an EU Commissioner, sharing a joke with the ILO Director-General Guy Ryder, who was also invited. Photo: Björn Lindahl

That is why nearly 40% of her working hours in 2019 were spent travelling – mostly to Iceland, which then held the

Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers. In 2020 Denmark has taken the helm, which means Paula Lehtomäki's travel calendar is more manageable. She now only has to walk across the street from the Nordic Council of Ministers to Slotsholmen, home to the offices of the Danish Prime Minister, when she for instance needs to attend a meeting with Nordic Prime Ministers.

A team player

Paula Lehtomäki is a natural team player, which she says can be seen in her leadership style at the Nordic Council of Ministers.

“As a leader, I am a team player and very collegial. As leader I have responsibilities, but I really appreciate the exchange of ideas and discussions. I have very competent colleagues, and they should not simply follow orders because I am their boss. They should speak their mind and ask if they have questions about anything I do.”

As part of her role as leader, she also thinks it is important to create space for more cross-sectoral cooperation internally at the Nordic Council of Ministers. This is necessary when you want to support the Nordic countries' cooperation in policy areas like climate and integration.

“There has been a tradition for working in silos. Some concentrated on the labour market, others on culture, but an increasing number of important issues for the Nordics demands an ability to work across sectors. To do this you need the culture change which we have already started, and I want to push for even more cross-sectoral cooperation – including inside our own organisation.”



The Nordic Council of Ministers' vision for 2030

“Now the work begins for real,” says Helle Englund Krarup, Deputy Chief of Staff at the Secretary General’s office. At the end of an intensive process, the Nordic cooperation has a new vision. But how to execute it, and what must give in order to reach the goals within the same budget? The first answers will come in early February.

THEME

20.01.2020

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL, PHOTO: TOMAS BERTELSEN

The vision signed by the Nordic Prime Ministers in Reykjavik in August last year says the Nordic region should be “the world’s most sustainable and integrated region in 2030”.

To reach that goal, three areas are prioritised:

- A green Nordic region. The countries will work together to promote a green transition of their

societies and work towards carbon neutrality and a sustainable circular and bio-based economy.

- A competitive Nordic region. Green growth in the Nordic region should be based on knowledge, innovation, mobility and digital integration.
- A socially sustainable Nordic Region. The countries will promote an inclusive, equal and

interconnected region with shared values and strengthened cultural exchange and welfare.

Three cross-sector action plans

Helle Engslund Krarup now leads the work for turning visions into action plans at the Nordic Council of Ministers.

“The vision has a ten-year horizon, but the action plans will initially cover 2021 to 2024.”

The end result will be three cross-sector action plans – one each for those three strategic points. With five countries, three autonomous regions and eleven ministerial councils – some of which cover so many areas that they supply three different inputs – there must be a lot of adjustments to be made?

“The Council of Ministers has coordinated the whole thing in such a way that I get one or several inputs from each ministerial council. We also have some working groups that provide their own inputs. But you do end up with quite a few jigsaw pieces,” says Helle Engslund Krarup.



Great changes

The result could be one of the largest changes to the Nordic cooperation for many years. Helle Engslund Krarup has spent six years working at the Council of Ministers, and also worked with the same issues under the previous Secretary General. She witnessed how the operation changed during that time.

“Gradually, more space for even more change has been created. Some of the things we do today we could not have done five years ago because the system was not ready for it.”

Do you have any examples?

“We have been working towards creating a more flexible budget. The Nordic cooperation budget has tended to remain unchanged year after year. The budget is partly historically linked. We have spent much of it on culture and education. This is where the Nordic cooperation began. But it might be

wise to consider whether this is where the money should be used now, in light of the challenges we are facing.

“It is of course the individual countries that decides how large the changes will be. But the fact that we have only had minor budget changes in the past, has been a challenge for us.

“If everything which is on the table right now is to be executed, we are facing some considerable change.”

The first signals come in February

The Nordic Ministers of Cooperation will reveal the size of the changes in February, as they decide on a budget for 2021.

“If there is to be a reallocation of funds, this is where we will see it happening. All we have done is to prepare for the debate. I think it would be useful to focus on the operation, but I also know that this is difficult because there are so many interests to take into consideration.”

Is the one billion Danish kroner budget limit for the Nordic cooperation a red line? This year's budget is 960 million.

“That budget limit has been pretty stable for some years now. I have not heard any about any immediate changes. But you will hear voices saying that if you compare the budget to regional GDP developments, it has shrunk in relation to the economies of the Nordics.”

Do you get any signals indicating the budget will face considerable cuts?

“No I don't. But what we are delivering now is making the operation more efficient. If we can do that and communicate this externally, I believe we will get support for a budget that is approximately the same size as what we have today.

“When I say making things more efficient, I think this is partly about being able to better document what we are doing, beyond further digitalisation or similar measures. Five, six years ago we did experience cuts that lasted for three years.”

What is the link between the vision and the international branding of the Nordics? Do you talk to each other?

“The vision is aimed at the Nordic region, and on what we want to achieve here. It says we will be the world's most integrated region, which definitely plays to something – but the major focus has been on the “power of example”, to show what we are doing, rather than running a campaign for our vision abroad.

“You could say that the vision is a kind of intra-Nordic branding.”



Do you look to any other regions for inspiration, for instance the Benelux countries?

“Benelux does come up in conversation now and again, but the Nordic region is quite unique. It is a good idea to look abroad, but I don't think there are other regions as integrated as we are.”

Helle Engslund Krarup feels it makes little sense to pitch the Nordics against the EU. Sure, the EU is pursuing an integration agenda through its legislation, also in the Nordic region. But since the Nordics are so integrated already, we can also work together in areas which other, more recent EU member states would find impossible to do.

“Our focus inside the new vision does not differ that much from the current focus elsewhere in Europe. Perhaps it would be stranger if that was the case? The challenges as described in the vision transcend borders after all.”

More international cooperation

The Council of Ministers has also to an increasing extent been used to address international issues.

“We had representatives at the COP 25 in Madrid, with our own pavilion. But we don't participate in the climate negotiations as the Nordic region. The individual countries act on their own. The Council of Ministers can be important in the early phases as well as the latest ones, when things are to be implemented. The Nordics do not always agree with the EU, it depends on the issue.

“Over the years there has also been a certain reluctance to do things that would make us appear as a Nordic block. But I think that Brexit among other things has shown the need for greater coordination between the Nordics. It also makes a difference if you arrive as the Nordics rather than a single country when you propose something to the EU Commission.”

Does it feel like this is a time where major changes are taking place, a bit like when the Berlin Wall came down?

“I have just returned from Berlin, and I've been thinking a lot about this. That time there were big, positive changes. Now it's the opposite – big, negative changes that represent a threat. We might see a blossoming of the Nordic cooperation when international challenges increase, but we are expected to deliver results.”

And there is a lot of talk about social sustainability in the strategic planning?

“Much of the political conversation between Prime Ministers and Ministers for Cooperation focuses on how the green change can be carried out without too much social impact. We must prevent the creation of large social disquiet, like we see with the *gilet jaunes* in France.

“Some of the changes will hurt, when you go from fossil to renewable energy, eat less meat and so on. The question is how do we get everyone on board? And how will this happen in relation to the existing competencies in the labour market?

“It is a big task to communicate this change which we must make together. The big test will be whether we as societies will manage to do it, so that it does not turn into a project for the elites,” says Helle Engslund Krarup.



Iceland: Paternity leave a boost to men's identity

The Nordic Gender Effect at Work is one of the Nordic prime ministers' most important projects for the advancement of gender equality. It is considered to be an important prerequisite for a good labour market and for economic growth.

THEME

20.01.2020

TEXT: GUÐRÚN HELGA SIGURÐARDÓTTIR, PHOTO: ARNÞÓR BIRKISSON

Grateful. Positive. Proud. The words of Bjarni Þór Guðmundsson, father of seven-months-old Sara Maídís, who has taken paternity leave from his job as a technician in Reykjavík, Iceland.

Bjarni Þór believes staying at home with her for three months gives Sara Maídís a better chance to get to know her father and to bond with him as a parent. The father is delighted to look after his daughter.

He is also a living example of what the Nordic countries have been working with for decades, leading the way globally. Gender equality politics have brought increased employment, improved family life and economic growth in the Nordic region.

Parental leave is generally seen as a good thing in the Nordics, but can appear completely new and foreign in other parts of the world. When Danish Line Christmas Møller was hired as project leader for The Nordic Gender Effect at Work in 2017, the aim was to highlight gender equality internationally, and paternal leave in particular.

A request from the UN

During the 2017 UN general assembly, the Executive Director for UN Women contacted the Nordics to ask them to help focus on gender equality at work, and in particular parental leave. As a result of the focus on this issue, the Nordic countries have now published the report State of Nordic Fathers, which details paternity leave in the Nordic region and its effect on fathers and families as a whole.



The campaign to elevate the fight to get fathers to take their share of parental leave enjoys support from the Nordic region's highest echelons. Here Iceland's President Guðni Jóhannesson is being photographed for the campaign "Dad on Board". Anna Rosenberg, communications advisor, to the left. Photo: Björn Lindahl

"We began work on this report as a direct result of the UN's request, but also because of what our own government ministers have wanted," says Line Christmas Møller.

The report shows that in Iceland and Sweden, fathers take roughly 30% of the total available leave. In Norway, the figure is 20% and Denmark and Finland stand at 11%. It also shows that fathers who take paternity leave consider themselves to be equally competent at looking after the children as the mothers. Longer periods of leave mean they rely less on the mothers for help, and identify to a lesser degree with traditional male stereotypes. Parents are happier in their relationship when the children are looked after by the father and the mother in equal measures.



Bjarni Þór Guðmundsson (30), the father of seven-month-old Sara Maíðís, met his girlfriend Ástríður Rós Gísladóttir, a psychology student, two years ago. When Sara Maíðís was born, Bjarni Þór decided to enjoy as much time as possible with the baby. He had noticed that if he for whatever reason had not been giving Sara Maíðís her bottle for a while, she stopped wanting to accept it from him.

"This has changed. She now wakes up in the morning laughing. I feel a connection which I think I would otherwise have missed," he says.

Bjarni Þór is a typical Icelandic father. When Sara Maíðís was born, he had just started a new job as a technician in a team fixing professional photo printers. He was a bit worried about taking three months off since he was relatively new, and it was a workplace he really enjoyed.

"This is possibly something everyone goes through," he says.

But his employer proved to be understanding and did not put any obstacles in his way.

Most take paternity leave

Icelandic men regularly use their right to take parental leave, but there are of course some who do not. Most of Bjarni Þór's friends have taken parental leave, but he also knows men who have not, or who have cut their leave short because they feel they are that important to their workplace. This is not the way it should be.

"A good workplace will give all fathers the opportunity to enjoy paternal leave with their baby," he says.

Wants the leave to be shared equally

Fathers' interest in parental leave can be influenced by various issues. Paternal leave usually means a temporary reduction in the fathers' income, as they are only paid 80% of their monthly pay in Iceland. But some fathers prepare for a cut in their income, to enjoy a more comfortable economy during their leave.

Three months parental leave is earmarked fathers, which means the mother cannot use the father's leave. Bjarni Þór took one month off right after the birth, then he was off during December and will take May off too.

"I would like to see all parents share the leave equally," says Bjarni Þór.

Different effects

Paternal leave works as part of the gender equality policy in the workplaces. After its introduction, it has had various effects on fathers, mothers and children, but also on workplaces. Møller believes that paternal leave can lead to great advantages in the future, and for the rest of families' lives.

"The longer fathers can stay at home with their babies, the less job-related stress they feel. They do not feel the need to work while they are at home, and when they return to work they experience that the workplace is positive to their decision to take paternal leave," she explains.

"Longer periods of paternal leave can also be linked to a new kind of manliness and a caring role which is beneficial to the father's identity and health, while their relationship to the mothers is strengthened," says Møller.

A lot of attention

Paternal leave has had a lot of attention internationally. It is considered to strengthen gender equality in the labour market, since it is no longer only the women who take care of the children and family matters. This has created a lot of interest in international organisations and in other countries. Møller gets a lot of attention from other countries. There is always much positive feedback, and other countries also want to know how the Nordics aim to achieve full gender equality in the future.



New profile leaves Nordic traces around the world

The Nordic Region is attractive, with its 27 million citizens over five countries living in peaceful coexistence. We are far from perfect, but perhaps that is what makes us fascinating. The Nordic Council of Ministers tries to look after all this by creating a Nordic brand.

THEME

20.01.2020

TEXT: BENGT ÖSTLING, PHOTO: TOMAS BERTELSEN

Profiling the Nordics abroad is a priority for Nordic governments' cooperation. The project has been running for a few years already, with many joint activities. In 2019, money was allocated for 17 projects divided between four continents. Nordic values are being promoted hand in hand with the UN sustainable development goals.

The process is now being streamlined, focussing on fewer events. Nordic trust in Russia, gender equality in Argentina

and China, Nordic movies in Morocco and Nordic rock stars in a desert festival in the USA are some of the attractions. The project is scheduled to run until 2021.

Focus on similarities means joint progress

After a thousand years of war and fighting, the Nordics now agree on most things. The focus is on similarities rather than differences.

Shared values like transparency, equality, environment and sustainable development have led to progress. It has given us opportunities and welfare, explains Tobias Grut, who is responsible for the branding of the Nordics at the Nordic Council of Ministers' secretariat in Copenhagen.

There is much pride to be found over the progress the Nordic region has made – a sentiment also expressed by Danish Prime Minister Mette Fredriksen during the Nordic Council's session in Stockholm last autumn.



She talked about the Nordic structure as one of the best things that had ever been constructed. The very different Nordic social models contain so much peace, security, strong welfare and well-functioning democratic rules, according to the Danish Prime Minister.

The whole world is talking about the Nordics

The Nordic Council of Ministers has started a dialogue with the rest of the world about the Nordic model. The project is called "The Nordics – Traces of North". The aim is to showcase how the region has left its mark in other parts of the world.

The talk is about the Nordics, and not Scandinavia. The latter is not the correct term for the five Nordic countries. The term Nordics will eventually become well-known, says Tobias Grut.

The Nordics have spent decades focusing on cultural projects abroad. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union, cooperation with the neighbouring Baltics and Russia increased and Nordic information offices were established.

Security politics was avoided, on request from Finland. EU issues were not yet considered to be an area for Nordic cooperation in the 1990s. Culture was considered to be a sufficiently innocent issue to be used as a door-opener.

Yet little by little a desire grew to do something together out in the bigger world. The joint profiling aims to strengthen the Nordic region and the Nordic countries' competitiveness and international influence.

Politicians expect great things from the project, and talk about how the Nordic region now enjoys momentum internationally. What is shared can be summed up in Nordic perspectives, values and a culture which stems from a common history.



The Nordic aims are never far from the UN sustainable development goals. In this corridor at the Nordic Council of Ministers, the Nordic ecolabel "The Swan" flies towards the UN goals, quite literally.

Joint values build on Nordic strengths. These can be summed up as tolerance, transparency and freedom of expression, trust, fresh thinking and innovations. Now there is focus on the UN sustainable development goals, gender equality and the freedom and equality of all humans.

“It’s a really good story”

Tobias Grut is the project leader for "The Nordics – Traces of North". His background is from “the creative sector” in Copenhagen, and he has worked with branding and identity for many companies and organisations. He mentioned Danish Police, rock bands, the Danish Royal Theatre and “everything in between”.

“The job was to always find a good story and to develop it further. That can be difficult in certain sectors, but with the Nordics it’s the opposite. It is really difficult to find bad stories about the Nordic region,” says Tobias Grut. The Nordic region is just one, big good story.

He talks about well-functioning societies where the weak are being looked after. There is free education for all and free healthcare. You have child benefits, unemployment benefits, and capital and investments for startups and others.

Some countries call this Socialism, but Tobias Grut disagrees. The benefits of a welfare society looking after its citizens enjoys broad support in the Nordic region.

Tobias Grut feels he has got a dream job in Copenhagen. After just over three years he is still enthusiastic and quickly moves on from questions about obstacles, problems and any latency in the Nordic organisation.

Nordic branding complements national names

The Nordic profiling is a continuation of national branding. The embassies around the world have done a good job here for a long time, says Tobias Grut.

There have also been benefits to be had from other sectors' progress. Danish design is a well-known term globally. The Nordic project avoids cannibalising any national progress. There is no point showcasing a bearded hipster on a bike with his caffe latte in a Nordic capital, jokes Tobias Grut. Such imagery has already been successfully spread by the Nordic countries and companies.

Rather than showcasing the Nordics to the world, the aim is now to showcase the Nordics in the world – which traces of the Nordics can already be found, or should be found? It is also a question of efficiency. It is no use for Norwegians to organise a sustainability event somewhere one week, while Sweden does something similar in the same place the following week. You get more effect from working together, points out Grut.

Useful in the world

But why is this so important? Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen gave one answer to this during the Nordic Council's session last autumn.

“The Nordic region has a strong global brand which can support exports from Nordic companies,” Frederiksen said as she presented the Danish Presidency programme.

She mentioned tourists who increasingly seek out the Nordics, where they find great variations in beautiful nature, history, culture and experiences. Modern, sustainable cities make the region attractive.

The steering group which works on the Nordic project also has a background from tourism and public and economic diplomacy, at the National ministries foreign affairs. With a focus on efficiency, there is very good control of costs and benefits.

Dialogue first, trading later

Tobias Grut underlines that branding first and foremost is about dialogue.

“First dialogue. Then we can sell our products, get tourists to visit the Nordics, get some company to set up shop in Harparanda.”

Branding the Nordics is not about cultural imperialism, nor is it about showing how good or clever we are, he points out.

“The idea is for us to learn something from the world around us, and then it can hopefully learn something about us. After that we can do business, exchange students, visit each other. Dialogue is important,” points out Tobias Grut.

Russian trust, American paternal leave and food in China

The next big project now is “Nordic Talks”, which is held in different parts around the world before being published as a podcast. The first episodes are ready, from a debate at Berkeley University in California, one debate on food waste in China and one is from an event that ran parallel to the climate conference.

The debate in California focused on the experiences around paid parental leave. The USA recently introduced 12 weeks' paid parental leave for federal employees. Earlier the country only had 12 weeks' unpaid maternal leave.

For most Americans, Nordic benefits like paternal leave, free education and healthcare is but a dream. Other Nordic values are being explored on other continents.

A counterweight to populism and ignorance – also at home

There are many in California who support Nordic values, although the rest of the USA is less enthusiastic.

“When Donald Trump came to power, many thought this would be great for anyone working with Nordic branding. We could now be the guardians of decency – and we still are of course,” says Tobias Grut. What we see across the Atlantic might strengthen our values.

But not everyone can agree on everything. We see growing populism at home too. The solution is to not ignore those who think differently, but to open up for dialogue and understanding. The same things that we offer to the world.

Far too few know what Nordic society is about and why it exists.

“This is a communication challenge. But it seems like the Nordics should be branded internally in the Nordic region too,” says Tobias Grut. Some of the material which is now being produced around the world will also be used in the Nordic region, to improve knowledge about Nordic values and cooperation.



The Nordics: practical and industrious cooperation

At an arrival halls café at Reykjavik airport, researchers Kristin Alsos and Jon Erik Dølvik are sat working. They are waiting for the rest of the group arriving from different Nordic countries before sharing a taxi to Hveragerði, an hour from Keflavik.

THEME

20.01.2020

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

The wallpaper on a low dividing wall makes it look as if they are sat in a library. Yesterday's well of knowledge has become a pretty backdrop. What counts today is the mobile, the laptop and the nearly finished Powerpoint presentation. The two researchers have been invited to a two-day long Nordic meeting on labour market issues.

They are going to talk about the big research programme on the future of work, headed by the Fafo research foundation and financed by the Nordic Council of Ministers. At the café,

they are also exemplifying today's working life. Any waiting time is spent logging on.

The Nordic cooperation features many abbreviations which can be confusing for those who are not familiar with it. The Nordic Council of Ministers is actually 11 permanent ministerial councils – cooperation units where government ministers who share the same portfolios meet once a year to brief each other and launch joint initiatives. A twelfth ad hoc ministerial council deals with questions of digitalisation.

Committees of senior officials, made up of civil servants from the Nordic countries, prepare and follow up on the issues addressed by the ministerial councils. On labour market issues you have MR-A, the Nordic Council of Ministers for Labour, and below that is EK-A, the Nordic Committee of Senior Officials for Labour, with eight representatives – one from each country and autonomous area.

There are also three committees where representatives for different civil services and public companies meet. The committees have names that reflect their roles: the Labour Market Committee, the Labour Law Committee and the Working Environment Committee.

All the speakers and staff from the Council of Ministers make up a small caravan of maxi taxis travelling from the airport to Hveragerði.

During the journey, the conversation is Scandinavian. The Icelandic taxi driver is addressed in English, and he provides weather and traffic updates.

As we join the ring road which runs around the whole of Iceland, we head east and drive into Suðurland, one of Iceland's nine regions covering 22,000 square kilometres. That is twice the size of Kosovo or Lebanon, but with a population of less than one person per square kilometre. Driving through this deserted landscape we approach an active volcanic area.



Hveragerði lies on the banks of the Varmá river in what is part of the Hengill volcano. The town has 2,500 and is known for its many hot springs and fumaroles – openings in the Earth's crust where steam escapes. The heat is used to run different greenhouses, or in hotels like Örk, where we check in, for heating a swimming pool and a sauna where the hot steam rises straight up through the benches.

Meetings are already underway in the hotel's conference halls. When everyone has arrived, it is easy to see that a considerable number of people are involved in the Nordic cooperation on the labour market alone.

Jon Erik Dølvik, who heads the Future of Work research programme – the Nordic region's contribution to the ILO's centenary – underlined that the meeting was about more than researchers presenting their results.

“We can do research on what is happening in Nordic labour markets up until today, but this does not tell us that much about what will happen in the next five to ten years if we do not also know how politicians and the social partners will respond to the developments that we describe.”

After the researchers' presentations, which is attended by everyone, a group photo is taken to show how many people take part in the Nordic cooperation in the labour market area alone:



Group picture in Iceland where the Nordic Committee of Senior Officials for Labour met, along with three other committees working with labour issues.

Christina Springfeldt, Jens Oldgard, Cecilie Bekker Zober and Louise Svensson from the Council of Ministers' secretariat have prepared the meeting of the EK-A. They write a protocol and make sure everything goes to plan. The head of the Icelandic Presidency Ingí Valur Jónhannsson has experience from innumerable Nordic meetings, and speaks slowly and clearly so that everyone understands.

This is what it can look like, the official Nordic cooperation. It is about the exchange of information, debating and formulating strategic aims, going through and approving the budgets for the different areas – in this case the labour market.

Since Iceland held the Presidency in 2019, most Nordic meetings were held there that year. In 2020, Denmark takes over and many of the participants are looking forward to the fact that some of the meetings will be held in the Faroe Islands and in Greenland.

The host countries often try their best to find interesting places to host the meetings, stopping short of them becoming pure tourism.

One evening, all the participants gather for a dinner inside a large tomato greenhouse, where one of the veterans in the Nordic cooperation is bid farewell – Icelandic Permanent Secretary Gissur Pétursson.



Dan Grannas, standing, gives a speech among the tomatoes for Gissur Petúrssón, who is sat on the right

In his thank you speech, Gissur Petúrssón says working with the Nordic cooperation is the most fun you can have.

Although the programme is tight, there is also some time for some running through the rough landscape, hot water swimming or just walking for a while past the houses near the hotel to reflect on the fact that much is different in the Nordic region.

A few weeks later we talk to Christina Springfeldt about the Nordic cooperation. She heads the department for knowledge and welfare at the Council of Ministers, which also deals with working life issues.

“I have always worked with Nordic issues. Earlier I worked at the Swedish government office. Work here at the Council of Ministers does resemble that of a government office in some ways, but there is one big difference. Here in Copenhagen you’ll find a Nordic, international atmosphere, we speak our different Nordic languages.”

She has also spent time in even more cosmopolitan Brussels, where she took part in many negotiations.

“When I returned from Brussels, I often felt drained and frustrated.”

She sometimes despaired over the time it could take to reach joint decisions.

“It could go on for years, because no one was actually prepared to give up their own legislation.”



Christina Springfeldt. Photo: Tomas Bertelsen.

“When I came home from a Nordic meeting, however, I always felt inspired and full of energy. The Nordic meetings are efficient, and one can really learn a lot. We are very similar, yet at the same time there are also differences.

“In a Nordic setting, you also get to hear about the proposals which have failed. You share information in a completely different way. You are among friends.”

One of the reasons for the big difference between Brussels and Copenhagen is the fact that within the EU you are often dealing with giving up sovereignty, while the Nordic cooperation often focusses on the exchange of information.

“But the cooperation can also be very concrete – like the work which is now being undertaken to make it possible to use your electronic identity in another country. This is something that will make it easier for people who move to a different Nordic country.”



"More hard issues should be discussed at the Nordic Council"

Protect democracy, fight fake news and protect biological diversity. These are issues on the agenda for Iceland's 2020 Presidency of the Nordic Council. Another focus area is to improve knowledge of Nordic languages.

THEME

20.01.2020

TEXT: GUNHILD WALLIN



“Democracy is one of the basic values that characterise our Nordic societies. Looking forward, we must secure democracy for each new generation. Targeted and long-term efforts are needed to carry this through, and we do it best together. We are partners in democracy on the international arena,” said Swedish parliamentary speaker Andreas Norlén as he welcomed the 87 parliamentarians and Nordic Prime Ministers to Stockholm and the 71st session of the Nordic Council in October.

It took some time for the delegates to settle down and listen to the speaker and the singing afterwards. Many of them seemed to know each other, and as the hall was filling up people waved, shook hands and got chatting. The Swedish parliament, the venue for this session, seemed to be filled with expectations, happiness and hope for the coming days of meetings about common Nordic issues.

“It almost feels like a cliché to say that this is something unique. The fact that we once every year get to meet parliamentarians, most of them Government Ministers from the other Nordic countries, with an agenda of cooperation. Maintaining direct contact between Nordic decision-makers on all levels is at the core of the Nordic cooperation,” Høgni Hoydal later tells the Nordic Labour Journal in a telephone interview. He is one of the participants from the Faroe Islands, and a veteran of these sessions.

Many setbacks but also gains

It is now nearly 70 years since the Nordic Council held its first ever session in February 1953 at Christiansborg in Denmark, with participants from Denmark, Norway, Iceland and Sweden. Finland joined 1955 and today the autonomous areas of the Faroe Islands, Åland and Greenland also have their own representatives. The Nordic Council of Ministers was founded in 1971, and since then the Nordic Prime Ministers have been meeting regularly, as well as other Government Ministers. There is cooperation on pretty much everything except foreign policy.

In the history of the Nordic cooperation there are many examples of great ambitions that failed or came to nothing. But decisions have also been made that have fundamentally changed Nordic citizens' opportunities. The Nordic passport union was introduced as early as in 1952, the common Nordic labour market was introduced on 2 July 1954 and one year later a Nordic convention on social security came into force.

“The 1954 agreement which regulates the common labour market is very important. The fact that I, as a Nordic citizen, can work or study in another Nordic country, is what people see and feel to be important,” says Christina Springfeldt, head of knowledge and research as well as welfare and social issues at the Nordic Council of Ministers' Copenhagen offices.

She has also spent many years working with EU issues at the Swedish Prime Minister's office, and compares the long and comprehensive processes that take place within the EU with the Nordic cooperation; the Nordic cooperation works better.

“We can learn a lot from each other in the Nordic region, and it is easy to transfer experiences. There is also a level of trust, we are among friends and can also share problems,” says Christina Springfeldt.

”A huge level of activity in the different areas”

The Nordic Council can influence the budget for the Nordic cooperation and come up with recommendations to the Nordic Council of Ministers for certain areas which parliamentarians consider to be particularly important, says Daniel Jaakkola, who works on the Secretary-General's staff at the Copenhagen office.



Daniel Jaakkola

"These questions and recommendations can be compared to motions tabled in the national parliaments. And if the Nordic Council delegates are not happy with the proposals from the Nordic Council of Ministers, they can demand to have a dialogue with their government representatives," he says.

One of Jaakkola's jobs is to prepare meetings for the Nordic Committee for Cooperation, NSK, and for the Ministers for Cooperation, MR-SAM, which are held four to six times a year. The Nordic Prime Ministers are ultimately responsible for the cooperation between Nordic governments, yet the Nordic Ministers for Cooperation take care of this in practice. They then delegate jobs as they happen to the NSK. The NSK is made up of senior civil servants from the Nordic countries' civil services, and also operate as the board for the Copenhagen secretariat.

"I have now gained a bird's eye view of the Nordic cooperation, and I see that there is a huge level of activity in the different areas. This has surprised me," says Daniel Jaakkola.

The important direct contacts

The Nordic Council decides the budget for the Nordic cooperation and will give recommendations to the Nordic Council of Ministers on issues which parliamentarians feel are particularly important to focus on. Høgni Hoydal, a parliamentarian from the Faroe Islands, is one of those who have participated at the Nordic Council many times. He is part of the Nordic Green Left party group and sits on the committee for welfare. He is passionate about the Nordic cooperation and would like to see it go even deeper – perhaps even a union.



In his 20 years of participating at the Nordic Council sessions, he has witnessed both progress and setbacks. Many major steps have originated in grandiose failures, which little by little have turned into conventions which have granted Nordic citizens important rights – like a common labour market and access to Nordic educations.

When Finland and Sweden joined the EU, the Nordic cooperation experienced a setback. It almost became an appendix to the EU, as Høgni Hoydal puts it. Another sign of falling interest was that spaces at the Nordic Council were seen as less attractive or interesting than before.

"But the cooperation regained some of its vitality in 2006 and 2007 with the Stoltenberg report on defence and security in the Arctic, which is one of the most important regions for Nordic cooperation," he says.

As a Faroese politician, Høgni Hoydal sees the advantage of pushing issues through the Nordic cooperation first, before taking them to Europe and out into the wider world. He is therefore concerned about the fact that the Nordic cooperation is not very well known, especially among younger people.

Current issues which he feels to be particularly important include creating joint Nordic policies for all of the ocean areas in the North and in the Arctic – areas which are attracting more and more international interest.

"In order to vitalise the cooperation I also want to see more 'hard' issues being discussed at the Nordic Council, and what is being discussed there should always be brought back to the national parliaments. If not, the issues being debated at the Nordic Council are easily forgotten," he says.



Nicholas Kujala, leader for the Nordic Youth Council. Photo: Magnus Fröderberg

The newly elected leader for the Nordic Youth Council, Nicholas Kujala from Finland, represents the Nordic centre-liberal youth parties. He believes it is important to support the role played by young people in the Nordic cooperation, and would like to see Nordic measures aiming more money being on the youth sector in general as well as on the political youth organisations in particular.

“The political youth organisations represent the backbone of the Nordic system, so it is important to give young people influence and the opportunity to participate in the Nordic cooperation,” he says.

He says his was a “strong, Nordic upbringing”, with both his mother and grandmother active in the Finnish Norden Association.

“The Nordics mean a lot to me. As long as you are here you don’t really see all there is, but travel abroad and you see the Nordic countries’ community clearly,” he says.

The Nordic Council in Stockholm was his second session, and he felt the young people were heard.

“During the Swedish Presidency, we have been listened to more and there is a shared willingness to take young people into consideration on issues relating to climate change and the future labour market. There is pressure on people to listen to us now,” says Nicholas Kujala.

He highlights the importance of creating a Nordic electronic ID card, which could ease young people’s mobility. But he also underlines the importance of strengthening the Nordic cooperation on issues concerning the Arctic region.

“Many others are taking an interest in the Arctic, and the Nordics must remain strong and protect Arctic interests both for the native indigenous populations and for the environment. Climate change cannot be ignored, and we must find solutions that go beyond mere words,” says Nicholas Kujala.



Inspired by TED Talks: Nordic podcast launch in the USA

Nordic Talks is the Nordic Council of Ministers's own podcast series aimed at highlighting Nordic values to a global audience. The idea is also to create a lasting dialogue with the rest of the world.

THEME

13.01.2020

TEXT: LARS BEVANGER, PHOTO: THE NORDICS, SEAN PETTIS/BERKELEY UNIVERSITY

Nordic Talks is inspired by TED Talks, which is designed to spread ideas through relatively short and concentrated presentations by people who have a passion for their particular field.

“Nordic Talks is built around our shared Nordic values, so the podcast series will be both democratic and seeking to create a dialogue. We want to get the rest of the world to talk with the Nordics about a given topic,” says Tobias Grut, Project Manager at the Nordic Council of Ministers' Communications Department in Copenhagen.

Universal ideas that are worth sharing

Nordic Talks is part of the Council of Ministers' profiling plan, which aims to inspire dialogue and cooperation with the rest of the world by shedding light on Nordic values which the Council of Ministers feels are universal and worth sharing.

“The podcast format is fundamentally a debate with two to three participants and one moderator. We want at least one of the participants to be from a non-Nordic country, which allows us to have both a Nordic and international perspective on the issues at hand. We are good at many things in the

Nordic region, but there are definitely many things we can learn from others. This dialogue is precisely what we want to strengthen through Nordic Talks,” says Grut.

The first pilot episode is soon ready for publication, and will easily be found on the most common podcast platforms like Apple Podcasts, Spotify and Google Podcasts, explains Grut.

First episode from California

The pilot episode was recorded in November 2019 at Berkeley University in California with Professor Robert as moderator. He does research on the differences between American and Nordic capitalism, while also working on his latest book project called “Sustainable Vikings”.



Professor Robert Strand from Berkeley University moderated the first episode of Nordic Talks

“Strand led a conversation with Anu Partanen, the Finnish author of “The Nordic Theory of Everything: In Search of a Better Life”, and American Professor of Sociology Caitlyn Collins who recently wrote the book “Making Motherhood Work”. The theme was parental leave and what California can learn from the Nordics,” says Grut.

From 150 people to worldwide

The result was precisely what Tobias Grut and his colleagues at the Communications Department had hoped the Nordic Talks podcast might become, he explains.

“We managed to highlight the two different systems, while also creating a debate around whether the way in which we solve things in the Nordics might be an inspiration for other parts of the world. There were 150 people at the event, but when we edit this into a podcast we can spread the message worldwide.”

This is exactly what makes the podcast format such a useful tool, according to Grut.

“Our Nordic embassies around the world often organise debates and meetings which are interesting to those who are physically present. With Nordic Talks, these events can suddenly get a global audience,” he explains.

An easy-to-use template

The Nordic Council of Ministers has developed a template which all embassies and other Nordic actors can use to adapt their events to become a Nordic Talk podcast.

“So if you are passionate about an issue and want to make a Nordic Talks, we are able to offer a brief, a template for everything you need. It is also possible to apply for support to organise the physical event. We are cooperating with a production company here in Copenhagen which edits the send from each event into a Nordic Talks podcast,” says Grut.

The Nordic Council of Ministers is also open for different podcast episodes having slightly different formats.

“We’ve been thinking that the podcast can be produced in “small”, “medium” and “large” editions. You could make an episode from a big symposium, but a Nordic Talks podcast could also be three people in dialogue over an interesting theme, recorded in a forest somewhere in Finland – as long as it ends up with good material that we can use to make a good podcast,” says Grut.

From children’s climate questions to ugly vegetables

So far, three episodes of Nordic Talks are in production and will be published as soon as they are ready.

In addition to the California pilot, episodes have been recorded in Sweden and China. Podcast number two was made during the Nordic Climate Actions Weeks in Stockholm, which were held parallel with the Madrid climate summit in December 2019. It was a debate between Swedish actress Lena Endre, Norwegian snowboard ace Terje Håkonsen and Head of Sustainability at Hennes & Mauritz Anna Gedda, about how they as parents talk to their children about climate change.

“Episode number three was recorded in Beijing, and it focuses on the environmental advantages of buying “ugly” vegetables. You could say that this illustrates the fact that a Nordic Talk podcast can cover pretty much anything, as long as it helps create conversations about the Nordics and our region’s values are focus areas,” says Tobias Grut.