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Sweden will celebrate the common Nordic labour market in 2024

Dec 06, 2023

Theme: Tripartite negotiations and collective agreements

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Tripartite negotiations as a model for the green transition

The fight for a just green transition is taking place in several and very different arenas. While strike guards brave the cold of winter outside Tesla workshops in Sweden and climate negotiators meet in the heat of Dubai, Nordic employers, trade unions and government ministers gathered in Reykjavik.

EDITORIAL

06.12.2023

BY BJÖRN LINDAHL, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

All these three events are about the environment. Tesla was long a symbol for those who believe technology will save the climate.

But the American car company that kickstarted the EV development might not have survived without generous politicians in Norway – a country that at times has been Tesla's biggest market. That is where it became possible to test on a large scale what is needed to electrify an entire fleet of cars.

People buying EVs in Norway saved tens of thousands of euros in fees, paid nothing on toll roads, could use the bus lane and parked and charged their cars very cheaply.

Now, the Swedish trade union IF Metall has been organising strikes among Tesla employees since October. They want a collective agreement. "Tesla employees deserve fair and secure working conditions just like anyone else in the Swedish labour market," as IF Metall puts it.

The U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission requires all publicly traded companies to describe the risks associated with their operations in what is called the 10-K form. In 2022, Tesla included relations with labour unions as one of the risks.

"Although we work diligently to provide the best possible work environment for our employees, they may still decide to join or seek recognition to form a labor union, or we may be required to become a union signatory," wrote the company.

The contrast to Reykjavik is great, where the Icelandic government hosted a tripartite meeting about the green transition on 1 December. In the Nordics, employers and trade unions do not see each other as enemies. Icelandic employers and trade unions explained how they worked together to reach an agreement on how employees might gain further ed-

ucation or retrain. That way, they can hopefully fill the enormous skills gap created by the green transition.

The government ministers, trade unions and employers also produced a memorandum of understanding which defines what is a just green transition. They agreed that the ILO's guidelines on just transition should be "the central reference for policymaking and a basis for action".

Perhaps the Nordic memorandum of understanding still has time to influence talks at COP28 in Dubai, where a Just Transition Work Programme is being negotiated.

The Reykjavik meeting is special, since there is no common Nordic employers' organisation, unlike the workers' Council of Nordic Trade Unions and the politicians' Nordic Council of Ministers. The agreement will hopefully lead to closer tripartite cooperation on a Nordic level too.

We delve into the history of cooperation between employers, and got some written answers, at least, from the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise on the current situation.

The Reykjavik meeting also marked the end of Iceland's Presidency, which has been run forcefully and with much energy by the Minister of Social Affairs and the Labour Market Guðmundur Ingi Guðbrandsson, who is also the Minister for Nordic Cooperation.

Sweden takes over in 2024, the year of the 70th anniversary of the Nordic common labour market. Nordregio has been commissioned to write a report on what the open labour market has meant.

The fact that it is open, does not mean everyone can access it. A Nordic research project describes the barriers that exist preventing people from finding work.

Cooperation in the Nordic labour market also means being paid the correct rate. In the bus transport sector, it has emerged that companies from low-wage countries systematically carry out inland traffic in the Nordic region – at the wages applicable in the country of origin.

Bus companies in Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden have written a joint letter to the EU Commission demanding clear rules to prevent social dumping.

Finally, we also analyse the consequences of Åland's elections, both in terms of a new autonomy act and possible representation in the EU.



Can the Nordic labour markets survive the green transition?

Nearly one in three Nordic citizens worry they might lose their jobs because of the green transition, according to a new Nordregio survey. How can the social partners work together to make the transition as fair as possible? That was the theme during the Nordic dialogue conference in Iceland.

NEWS

06.12.2023

TEXT AND PHOTO: LINE SCHEISTRØEN

On 1 December, representatives of the Nordic governments, employees and employers met in Reykjavik. Iceland's Minister of Social Affairs and the Labour Market was the conference host.

"No one solution fits all, but I hope that together we can find ways of carrying out the green transition in the labour market. And it is urgent," said Guðbrandsson.

Fearing job losses

And if anyone was in any doubt: We are worried about whether our labour markets will manage the green transi-

tion. That is what researcher Gustaf Norlén from Nordregio concluded quite early on the conference day.



Gustaf Norlén, Nordregio researcher.

Many studies have been carried out to better understand how people will be impacted by climate change and the green transition. One of them is a Nordic survey from 2022 which shows:

- 71 per cent agree that climate change is a serious or very serious problem.
- 27 per cent worry that some jobs in their countries or regions could be at risk because of the green transition.
- 31 per cent of the Nordic population believe climate mitigation initiatives will help create new jobs in their area.
- 35 per cent do not believe climate mitigation initiatives will have any positive effects on the labour market.

Differences between urban and rural areas

The survey shows that people in the Nordics have differing opinions on how climate policies will impact jobs. People in Greenland are the most optimistic while people in Norway and Finland are the most pessimistic.

There are large differences between different regions in the Nordics when it comes to how far the green transition has progressed.

“We see that most of the green jobs are in urban regions, while the “brown”, polluting jobs are found in the districts. People in the districts are also more worried about climate change,” said Norlén.

Honesty pays

Not telling people that their current job might be gone in five years, is doing them a disservice, believes Sólrún Kristjánsdóttir. She is the CEO of Veitur Utilities, part of Reykjavik Energy.



Sólrún Kristjánsdóttir, CEO of Veitur Utilities. Photo: Björn Lindahl

Kristjánsdóttir explained how her company works with employees for the green transition. She thinks it is crucial that leaders are honest with employees.

“It is hard to tell someone you know and care about that the job they are doing today might be gone in five years. But it is far worse not to do it,” says Kristjánsdóttir.

If you fail to tell people about the need for change, employees cannot actively become part of the solution by, for instance, taking further education or retraining.

“We cannot stop the green transition. Jobs disappear, new ones emerge. Our job is to make sure nobody is left on the platform as the train is leaving,” said Kristjánsdóttir.

Own the transition

Inclusion is a keyword, believes Kristján Þórður Snæbjarnarson, the President of the Council of Nordic Trade Unions (NFS).



Kristján Þórður Snæbjarnarson is Chairman of the Icelandic trade union confederation ÁSI, and also President of the Council of Nordic Trade Unions (NFS) in 2023. Photo: Björn Lindahl.

“When you are included, it also commits you. That is why everyone must have ownership in the green transition. This has not been the case in all workplaces, at least not here in Iceland,” he said.

What are green skills?

Johan Hall, research officer at the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO), encouraged everyone to address the following three questions in their workplace:

- How does what we do impact on the climate?
- What do we have to do to gradually become climate neutral?
- What knowledge and skills do we need to manage this change?

It is indeed the lack of the right skills as well as a general lack of labour that worries workers as well as employers and authorities in the Nordic region.

“What are green skills, exactly? There is no one answer to this question. It will vary from job to job and between sectors,” pointed out Mikko Vieltojärvi from the Confederation of Finnish Industries EK.

Vieltojärvi also pointed out the need for investments in innovation and new technology.

“Without new technology, we will not succeed with the green transition,” he said.

Not enough people

Vieltojärvi underlined the importance of a good basic education for all. Without the basic skills, it is difficult to get higher education and/or further education later on.

“But I believe that training people is the least of our problems. The labour shortage is a much bigger challenge, at least in Finland,” said Vieltojärvi.



Finland's Minister of Employment Arto Satonen. Photo: Björn Lindahl.

This worries the Finnish Minister of Employment Arto Satonen too.

“Labour shortages are a common Nordic problem which we must work together to solve,” he said and pointed to the need for more labour immigration and to getting people outside of the labour market back in.

Give the development some support

Victoria Kirchhoff, Deputy President of the Swedish trade union Unionen, said Sweden now has a good model for further education and training. Experience shows that this model by and large allows employees access to further education or retraining. The state pays 80 per cent of the wages of those who want to study, as long as the education is considered to be needed in the labour market.

“We have to get further education during a long working life,” she said.

Kirchhoff underlined that there are still plenty of challenges to get on with, including the lack of experts in technical positions in Sweden.

Several of the speakers pointed out that it is important not to give in to “gloom and doom” and become far too pessimistic.

“We should talk more about technological developments and perhaps less about the green transition. We should focus more on the positive aspects of new technology,” said Ulrika Lindstrand, leader of Engineers of Sweden and deputy leader of the Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations (Saco).

She too is focused on skills.

“We have to renew and improve our education systems. If we do not top up on skills, we will not succeed with the green transition,” said Lindstrand.

She highlighted there is also a need to take care of workers who do not wish or cannot manage to take part in the green transition.

Are we not ready for what is about to hit us?

Far too few workers can relate to what the green transition really is, believes Hans-Erik Skjæggerud, President of the Norwegian Confederation of Vocational Unions (YS). He wants every workplace to have a conversation about the green transition.

“Many workers do not understand how this will impact the job that they are doing. One of our tasks is to make this understandable for people,” he said.

Bernt G. Apeland agrees with the YS President that much can and should be done in the individual workplaces. Apeland is the Executive Director of Virke, the Enterprise Federation of Norway.

He believes it is important to map the skills gap which will emerge as a consequence of the green transition.

“In order to succeed with the green transition, we need a thriving business sector with access to capital. We also need employees with the right skills,” said Apeland.



Nordic employers' important role in the green transition

When we talk about the Nordic labour market model, it often revolves around how high the unionisation rate is. However, it is equally important that employers are organised if good agreements are to be made.

THEME

06.12.2023

TEXT: FAYME ALM, PHOTO: EYÞÓR ÁRNASON/NORDEN.ORG

Nordic employer organisations have been cooperating for more than a hundred years. For a long period it was intensive. EU membership for three of the Nordic countries changed the collaborative work.

A tripartite meeting of representatives from Nordic governments, employer organisations and trade unions was recently held in Reykjavik. The meeting was hosted by Iceland, which

currently holds the Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers, and was the first of its kind for 20 years.

Unlike the trade unions and their Council of Nordic Trade Unions, and the politicians with their Nordic Council of Ministers, Norwegian employers' organisations have no Nordic cooperative organisation.



Göran Trogen is the former CEO of the employers' organisation Almega and between 2004 and 2010 he was a regular member of the board of the International Labour Organisation. During that time, he acted as a representative for the Nordic employers' associations – alternatingly representing them.

“During and after WWII, there was a lot of engagement for Norway and Finland among the bosses at SAF” (The Swedish Employers' Confederation which was replaced in 2001 by the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise).

“The engagement led to more and better-organised cooperation between the Nordic employers' organisations,” Göran Trogen tells the Nordic Labour Journal.

Labour market with international rules

The ILO is an independent entity within the UN, founded in 1919 with Sweden, Denmark and Norway among the first member states. Today, the ILO has 187 members, who all have signed up to follow the organisation's eight fundamental conventions.

These cover basic human rights in the workplace like the abolition of child labour, forced labour and discrimination, and the right to organise and collective bargaining. Conventions and recommendations are adopted during the annual ILO conference for all member states in June.

Strengthening the Nordic cooperation

The Nordic employers' organisations were also active during the founding of the International Organisation of Employers (IOE) in 1920, and Iceland joined in 1945. The cooperation between the Nordic employers has been a foundation for co-operation in the ILO and IOE.



The International Organisation of Employers, IOE, has been led by Secretary-General Roberto Suárez Santos from Spain since 2018. Here he is addressing an event in Dubai, where the IOE's slogan is "a just transition demands green skills.". Photo: IOE

The Nordic employers' organisations shared an office in Brussels as early as 1921, with a permanent director to prepare for meetings at the ILO and IOE. The Nordic office later moved to Geneva but closed in the late 1960s, explains Trogen.

“The ILO conference delegates from the Nordic employers' organisations later met not only in Geneva but also in various places in the Nordics to review current issues on the agenda and develop common positions,” says Trogen.

The Nordic delegates would later present these positions at the ILO conference and also during tripartite meetings for different industry committees within the ILO. Often, things centred on protecting Nordic rules, making sure ILO norms did not clash with them.

It could also involve explaining the Nordic model, where employers and trade unions negotiate wages and working conditions, while the state plays a bigger role in other countries by for instance setting minimum wages. It was also important for Nordic employers to make sure ILO norms did not clash with EU rules.

Early on, a lively collaboration developed in the Nordic region between the many employers' organisations, also on a trade level during annual meetings at various locations in the Nordics.

“Negotiations issues, new labour legislation and organisation issues were on the agenda and the countries compared each other's systems. These were shared, topical issues. As a re-

sult, the meetings were intensive and led to a lot of sharing of experiences.

“We learned a lot from each other and there has always been a strong feeling of cooperation between the Nordic trade organisations. We delegates made both professional and personal connections,” says Trogen.

Winds of change

During the 1990s, the Nordic employers' organisations, albeit at different paces, also came to represent companies in economic policy issues. This meant that the common issues from before became fewer, explains Göran Trogen.

“Nordic meetings were still taking place in several sectors, but they were divided into employer issues and business-related matters.”

“EU issues also began dominating the agenda during the meetings, even though not all of the five Nordic countries were union members.

“During the last meeting in Copenhagen for the IT sector in 2006, I felt that these gatherings might have had their time since we had to speak English to each other. Younger Finnish colleagues spoke no Swedish and others at the meeting struggled to understand Danish,” says Göran Trogen.

The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise on Nordic cooperation

The Nordic Labour Journal asked the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise for an interview to explore the current situation for the Nordic cooperation but only got answers in writing.

THEME

06.12.2023

TEXT: FAYME ALM

Nordic Labour Journal: *How well does the Nordic/European/international cooperation between employers' organisations work?*

Confederation of Swedish Enterprise: It works well. The formal cooperation is mainly Nordic but also happens on a European and international level at slightly longer intervals. On a Nordic level, we formally meet once a year while there is continuous cooperation on many issues. Other levels of cooperation are more informal.

NLJ: *Is the cooperation formalised, and in which case how?*

CSE: There is both formal and informal cooperation, depending on the issues at hand. Regular meetings and exchange of information between our member organisations is a tradition that goes all the way back to the 1920s.

NLJ: *What issues do the organisations collaborate on?*

CSE: Most things within our role as business and employer organisations.

NLJ: *What limits are there to the cooperation?*

CSE: The operational conditions of our member companies and the tasks they assign to us.

NLJ: *What impact has the fact that Norway and Iceland are outside of the EU had on the cooperation?*

CSE: In addition to cooperating with us, a tradition that dates back longer than the EU (see above), they operate within the mechanisms of the Agreement on the European Economic Area and exert influence that way. Both countries have a significant presence in Brussels, as do their business communities.

NLJ: *Are the Nordic employers' organisations more different from each other than what the central trade unions are?*

CSE: We are not in a position to judge that.

NLJ: *Are the Nordic employers' organisations becoming more similar or more dissimilar?*

CSE: The biggest difference is that NHO, EK and SN have a broader mandate than DA and SA* – which are pure employers' organisations. Beyond that, our work is influenced by institutional conditions and, regarding employer issues, by the development of our counterparts.

NLJ: *How is the cooperation affected by the fact that differences within the Nordic business sector are so different – the Swedish internationalised manufacturing companies, Norway's partially state-owned raw material-dependent industries, and Denmark with a higher proportion of small and medium-sized enterprises?*

CSE: We have great opportunities to learn from each other since labour market regulations in all of the countries are mainly built on negotiations with limited state interference.

NLJ: *The Nordic contribution to a green transition for the social partners primarily focuses on ensuring that the transition is fair. If it is not, there will be less support in society. The Iceland conference is about solving this through tripartite cooperation, with the participation of governments. However, it has proven difficult to produce a common document that can be signed. What could be the reasons for this?*

CSE: We are used to change and adaptation in our economies and already have structures to handle this, regardless of the cause. This is due to our approach to change, which is generally also embraced by our counterparts because sustainable businesses can provide favourable conditions while individuals get support if they are made redundant. In Sweden, we cooperate closely with the trade unions.

NLJ: *Employers seem to prefer working with BusinessEurope, where Norwegian NHO and Icelandic SI also are*

members. Is that correct? Right now, the organisation is run by a Swede, Fredrik Persson. How does the contact between the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise and BusinessEurope work?

CSE: BusinessEurope is a very good and highly regarded business organisation with which we collaborate extensively. It is membership-based and works on behalf of its members. In addition to serving on the board and executive committee, members also actively engage in policy committees and working groups, among other activities. It is true that Fredrik Persson is the Chairman of BusinessEurope. He is a very capable person who has previously served as the Chairman of the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, so we are naturally familiar with him.

**NHO – Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise; EK – Confederation of Finnish Industries; SN – Confederation of Swedish Enterprise; DA – Confederation of Danish Employers; SA – Confederation of Icelandic Employers*



The Tesla strike – a fight for the Swedish model

A drama is taking place in the Swedish labour market. The trade union IF Metall is taking industrial action to get EV maker Tesla to sign a collective agreement. Elon Musk, one of the world's richest people and Tesla's main shareholder, refuses. After many sympathy actions from other trade unions, he is taking the Swedish state to court.

THEME

06.12.2023

TEXT: GUNHILD WALLIN

After a long fight to get Tesla to sign a collective agreement with IF Metall, the trade union chose to take industrial action on 27 October. Their argument was “to make sure our members have fair and secure working conditions”, according to IF Metall's website.

130 Tesla workers went on strike at Tesla's service centres in Sweden. Since then, the strike has been expanded to include some 500 car mechanics across 17 Swedish workshops.

On top of this, there is an increasing number of sympathy actions. Right now, Tesla's facilities are not being cleaned or maintained. Parts are not being sent to workshops and cars are not being unloaded in ports. The electricians' union has

also expressed its support by no longer servicing Tesla charge points and workshops.



IF Metall's leader Marie Nilsson and contract secretary Veli-Pekka Sääkkälä. Photo: Daniel Roos

Ever since the LO union Seko and the Union of Civil Servants ST, a member of the Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees, started blocking deliveries addressed to Tesla, a lot of car number plates have been stuck in the post. That made Tesla's Swedish subsidiary TM Sweden take the Swedish state to court through the Swedish Transport Authority and PostNord.

Elon Musk and Tesla have been remarkably quiet during the ongoing conflict apart from one message on X, previously known as Twitter and now owned by Musk, where he called the development “insane!”.

Sustainable conditions in sustainable companies

There are not that many Tesla workshop employees, but IF Metall says the scale of the industrial action reflects that this is a fight for the Swedish labour market model.

“It is a very important conflict. Digital and green transition companies are becoming more and more essential for the future labour market and if they don't sign collective agreements, the number of workers covered will fall and workers' rights will be eroded,” says Professor Anders Kjellberg at Lund University, whose report *”Kollektivavtalens täckningsgrad och vita fläckar”* (Collective agreements' coverage and white spots) was just published (Arena idé).

Kjellberg provides the background to the collective agreement's importance in the Swedish labour market. A collective agreement is negotiated and entered into by the social partners. It covers wages, restructuring arrangements, pensions and other terms and rights related to the relationship between employees and employers.

The Swedish labour market model is mainly managed by the social partners with little input from the state, even compared to the other Nordic countries where the state is more involved in decisions.

Trade union membership numbers in Sweden are high, both among employers and employees. 87 per cent of employees work for employers who are members of employers' organisations, and Swedish workers – along with their Icelandic colleagues – are the most organised in the world. Seven out of ten workers are trade union members, but union membership has fallen, mainly among blue-collar workers.

Around 90 per cent of the Swedish labour market is covered by collective agreements. The figure is slightly lower in the private sector, at around 80 per cent. Many countries with a lower rate of unionisation make collective agreements universally applicable, which means they cover more or less all the companies within a sector and the state plays a stronger role.

An 85-year-old labour market tradition

This way of organising the relationship between workers and employers in Sweden goes a long way back. The 1938 Saltsjöbaden Agreement was a labour market treaty that set out how the social partners should cooperate.

The background was decades of unrest in the labour market with many and sometimes lengthy strikes and lockouts. Until the early 1930s, Sweden had more strike days than any other European country.



Anders Kjellberg. Photo: Lund Universitet.

Pressure grew to interfere politically against industrial action, but the Saltsjöbaden Agreement meant the parties solved their issues without the state having to legislate or introduce other regulations.

“After that, we got compromise solutions that gave us labour market regulation without state regulation. But Tesla is anti-union and does not want to adapt to fit into the Swedish model,” says Anders Kjellberg.

When agreements have been reached between employees' and employers' organisations, a peace obligation comes into force which means Sweden has had few labour market conflicts – even from a Nordic perspective.

However, other trade unions have the right to take sympathy action even when they have entered into a collective agreement themselves. This right is stronger and far-reaching in Sweden than in most other countries. Sympathy action is for instance illegal in the USA and the UK.

No trade union agreements for Tesla workers anywhere

Sweden is not the only place where Tesla refuses to enter into agreements with trade unions. In the USA, the United Auto Workers (UAW) recently signed new agreements with the three largest car companies after a long fight. Now, the UAW is looking to Tesla, who so far has refused to sign an agreement with the union.

German IG Metall is following the Swedish strike action, as they too have failed to get an agreement at Tesla's car factory outside Berlin which employs 10,000 people. There are reports from there of working conditions that have led to sick leave levels of 30 per cent in certain departments and sometimes even more.

From Norway, there are reports of employees who are judged on a five-point scale, where those who want high marks, for instance, are expected to work overtime without compensation. The state broadcaster NRK has also documented high levels of sick leave and that people who take sick leave risk losing their jobs.

"Tesla is a trade union enemy that tries to create American conditions in Europe. We won't let them get away with it," Jørn Eggum, President of the United Federation of Trade Unions (Fellesforbundet) told NRK.

"Tesla runs a strict regimen and workers are pitted against each other," says Anders Kjellberg.

Fellesforbundet also supports the Swedish Tesla strike by refusing to offload Tesla cars in Norway that are scheduled for delivery in Sweden. The federation has announced further boycott action to stop Tesla cars from reaching Sweden via Norway if no agreement is reached before 20 December.

And after six weeks of strike action in Sweden, the Danish 3F trade union has said they too will take sympathy action against Tesla. They will not unload or transport Tesla cars headed to Sweden.

One of the reasons for the international interest in IF Metall's fight against Tesla is that a collective agreement in Sweden between the union and Tesla would potentially mean an opening for trade union organisation and agreements at Tesla sites elsewhere in the world.

International attention

Anders Kjellberg has also felt the international attention. Foreign journalists are getting in touch, and the same day we speak he has just been contacted by the Financial Times and a large French newspaper. The fact that the strike at Tesla is taking place in Sweden is not a coincidence, thinks Kjellberg.

"If trade unions were to win against Tesla anywhere, it will be in Sweden with its high trade union membership, high collective agreement coverage and wide-ranging right to strike. IF Metall also has considerable financial muscle with 15 billion kronor (€1.38bn) in their strike fund."

There is strong support for collective agreements in the Swedish labour market for several reasons. One is that most issues concerning the relationship between the parties are regulated through agreements and therefore do not need to be agreed every time someone is hired. Collective agreements prevent unfair competition between companies through

wage dumping and also open the door for dialogue between employees and employers.

Critics say collective agreements are cumbersome and time-consuming because of things like MBL – the Swedish Co-Determination in the Workplace Act. Companies like Tesla want to decide workplace conditions themselves instead.



One of IF Metall's strike guards in front of one of Tesla's workshops. Photo: IF Metall.

Tesla has by and large remained silent since the conflict started, except for Elon Musk's "Insane" comment on X. It is the US head office that says no, and TM Sweden does not have the right to sign agreements. Instead, the company has moved workers from other workshops to workshops that are on strike – strikebreaking in other words.

"We have not seen strikebreaking in Sweden since 1938," says Anders Kjellberg.

Support but also criticism

Some Tesla workers have also been critical to the conflict. Ander Kjellberg says this is because so many of them come from abroad. They have perhaps had help to find housing and have a family to support in their home countries. Tesla workers are also offered stock options and a further career at Tesla.

"It has also emerged that Tesla puts pressure on employees not to go on strike if they want to keep their stock options," says Anders Kjellberg.

Many support the strike – both trade unions and influential opinion leaders. Others, including the employers' organisation Almega, think the sympathy actions have become too comprehensive in comparison to the number of people striking, and that Sweden's lax sympathy action legislation should be reviewed.

TM Sweden's court action against the state-owned Swedish Transport Authority after trade unions Seko and ST's Post-Nord blockade has also raised questions about the state's role in the conflict. Two separate district courts have drawn different conclusions about whether the blockade against the

distribution of number plates constitutes a so-called security situation or not.

“One of the cornerstones of the Swedish model is that the social partners negotiate and reach a peace obligation by signing a collective agreement. Tesla has chosen instead to take matters to the courts. This shows the company does not accept the current rules.

“But Tesla will not achieve a peace obligation through the courts, only through the current collective agreement negotiations with IF Metall,” says Åsa Erba Stenhammar, head of negotiations for the ST trade union in a press release.



Was the Reykjavik tripartite meeting the start of something new?

Did it turn into just another of the thousands of meetings around the world on the green transition? Or did something more happen as Nordic politicians, employers and trade unions met in Reykjavik on 1 December? The Iclenadinc Presidency had great ambitions for this meeting.

THEME

06.12.2023

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL, PHOTO: LINE SCHEISTRØEN

Did it turn into just another of the thousands of meetings around the world on the green transition? Or did something more happen as Nordic politicians, employers and trade unions met in Reykjavik on 1 December? The Iclenadinc Presidency had great ambitions for this meeting.

The prelude to the gathering took place in 2019 during the Council of Nordic Trade Unions (NFS) congress in Malmö. That is when the green transition really emerged as the key issue for Nordic trade unions. The motto was “There are no jobs on a dead planet”.

Iceland’s Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir was hosting and used her speech to emphasise that a green transition needs to be a just transition.

“As governments and trade unions, we have to make sure that what we do when it comes to the climate does not lead to less welfare for ordinary people. We cannot increase the price of petrol so much that only the rich continue to pollute while the poor cannot afford to get to work,” she said.

NFS is the collaborative body of the main trade union organisations in the Nordic region. There is a great range – from the

Swedish Trade Union Confederation LO with its nearly 1.4 million members to Faroese Samtak with 6.000 members.

NFS is as old as the Nordic Council of Ministers, which is the governments' collaborative body that was founded in 1972. But there is no corresponding Nordic organisation for employers.

That is why, two years after the 2019 Malmö meeting, there was spontaneous applause around the tables at Holmenkollen Hotel in Oslo during the NFS congress as Katrín Jakobsdóttir announced via video link from Iceland that she had invited the parties to a Nordic tripartite meeting on a just green transition towards the end of 2023.

The Nordic Council of Ministers' vision for 2030 says the Nordic region should be the greenest region in the world. The path to a CO₂-neutral society will require sacrifices and significant change.

However, the world has been through major changes before, like industrialisation and the ongoing digitalisation of both production and consumption.

It is still important to reduce emissions from the Nordics, but the climate will not be saved because of that alone. The most important thing the Nordic region can do is to show that a green transition can happen in a fair way with the necessary social safety nets in place when workers lose their jobs and have to retrain or get further education.

If the transition is unfair, we risk losing trust in our politicians and end up with populist movements like the yellow vests in France.

The Nordic social model will hopefully help with the rapid training of enough people with the skills needed for the transition – bridging over to the new society. Companies in the “brown” part of the economy cannot be expected to set aside money to train their employees to find work in competing green industries.

The new green companies will also emerge in different places and need labour as well as municipal services in order to grow.

The Icelandic hosts were very clear that the Reykjavik meeting should result in a memorandum of understanding. Negotiations had been held in the run-up to the meeting, where every word was discussed thoroughly.

The memorandum of understanding says that in order to meet the Paris Climate Agreement, the ILO's guidelines on just transition should be “the central reference for policy-making and a basis for action”.

The memorandum goes on:

- We highlight the importance of social dialogue in achieving an effective and successful transition on the Nordic labour market. We recognise the importance of social security, labour market-related rights, and a well-functioning labour market that respects equal treatment and equality as a vital part of the green transition.
- We recognise the need for new types of skills to match new types of jobs as industry is transformed into a low-carbon economy. Good opportunities for re- and upskilling of workers and job seekers will therefore be essential.
- We highlight the importance of good conditions for vocational and geographical mobility for smooth green transition in all regions. We acknowledge the importance of thriving educational systems and broad cooperation to ensure the right match between supply and demand for certain skills and to be well prepared for future developments and impact on the Nordic labour market.

The memorandum of understanding ends with a clear call to promote the tripartite cooperation model and to share experiences with others. It is only when the Nordic progress can be replicated in other countries that you can create the desired effect on the climate.



Cristina Martinez, Senior Enterprise development and Green Job Specialist, ILO. Photo: Björn Lindahl.

The negative consequences of climate change can already be seen. Globally some 80 million jobs could disappear just because of the extreme drought that is affecting parts of the world, warned the ILO's Cristina Martinez.

She considers the Nordics to be a source of inspiration but admits that it might be difficult to replicate Nordic solutions in countries whose democratic processes and social dialogue are not as developed.

“But the Nordic countries can absolutely be an inspiration to the rest of the world. The Nordic tripartite model is a good example of this,” she says.

WAS THE REYKJAVIK TRIPARTITE MEETING THE START OF SOMETHING NEW?



Sweden will celebrate the common Nordic labour market in 2024

As Sweden takes over the Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers next year, it will celebrate the 70th anniversary of the common Nordic labour market. A Nordic-Baltic meeting on fighting workplace crime is also scheduled.

NEWS

06.12.2023

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL

When Minister for Employment Johan Pehrson briefed his colleagues in Reykjavik on 30 September, the thing he was most excited about was inviting his colleagues from the five Nordic countries and the three autonomous areas to visit Skellefteå in November 2024.



The participants at the meeting of Nordic labour ministers in Reykjavik on 30 November: Director International Affairs, Carsten Sander, Denmark; State Secretary Ellen Bakken, Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion, Norway; Minister of Social Affairs and the Labour Market and Minister for Nordic Cooperation Guðmundur Ingi Guðbrandsson, Minister for Employment Johan Pehrson, Sweden; Secretary General for the Nordic Council of Ministers Karen Ellemann, and Minister of Employment Arto Satonen, Finland.

“There is tremendous development happening in Skellefteå and you will be able to see Northvolt’s enormous EV battery plant which is already up and running. The meeting will be held in Sara kulturhus, one of the world’s tallest wooden buildings which is furnished with the very best in Nordic design. It has solar panels to minimise the building’s climate footprint,” he said.

An estimated 14,000 new jobs will be created in the region by 2030, 4,000 of them at Northvolt. The plant will be Europe’s largest producer of lithium batteries for cars and storage when all the production units are ready.

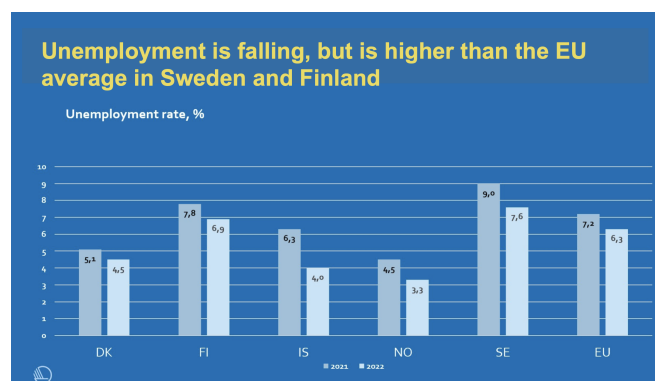
Johan Pehrson highlighted several other Nordic labour market initiatives:

- Celebrating The World Day for Safety and Health at Work on 26 April (the actual date is 28 April, but that falls on a Sunday). The Nordics, in cooperation with the Swedish ILO Committee, will mark the day by publishing the results from a Nordic project examining workplace mortality. The study has been carried out in connection with the ILO’s Global Coalition for Safety and Health at Work.
- On 18 and 19 June, the 70th anniversary of the common Nordic labour market will be celebrated at an event in Malmö. The agreement, signed on 22 May 1954 and ratified on 1 July that year, has been one of the cornerstones in the Nordic cooperation. Nordregio has been asked to report on what the common labour market has meant for the Nordic region and what skills will be in demand in the future.
- The OECD has also been asked to report on the various reforms and changes being implemented by Nordic employment agencies, and the impact this has on the agencies’ role in promoting an inclusive common Nordic labour market. The results will be presented at a future date.
- A Nordic-Baltic seminar on workplace crime will be held in Stockholm on 12 September. Sweden has been considering how to create more formal cooperation to improve access to information and services and also to increase capacity and knowledge. The Nordic and Baltic countries will

present examples of successful approaches, ways of collaborating and initiatives during the seminar.

- A seminar on foreign-born women’s labour market integration will be held in Stockholm in June, in cooperation with the Nordic Council of Ministers for Gender Equality. Sweden is also responsible for organising events during the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in New York in March. The Nordic Gender Institute (NIKK) has been tasked with mapping the work on “honour” violence in the Nordics.

Sweden’s Ministry of Employment has two government ministers. Paulina Brandberg is both the deputy Minister of Employment and Minister of Equality, which makes this kind of cooperation natural. Iceland’s Minister of the Labour Market Guðmundur Ingi Guðbrandsson encouraged fresh thinking from his colleagues.



Unemployment has fallen in all the Nordic countries, and Norway has the lowest unemployment rate overall. Source: NMR.

“We must be prepared to leave our comfort zone in our co-operation. We share the same experiences and can learn a lot from each other. But we should look at things from a cross-sectional perspective.”

The meeting also discussed the future cooperation programme which runs between 2025 and 2030. All of the ministers highlighted the issue of skills shortages that already exist in many professional fields and these are expected to become even greater.

This is partly due to the green transition, which will see some businesses closing down – like in Finland where peat extraction must be halved by 2030. New, green industries also need different specialised skills as well as access to services like schools, roads, housing and healthcare as some areas’ populations are set to grow rapidly.

Will the Nordic countries be competing for the same workers, or can the countries cooperate and find solutions to skills shortages together?

The Nordic Council Secretary General Karen Elleman presented fresh labour market statistics and highly recommended the newly presented report on border barriers which promotes a simplification of taxes and fees when people work across borders in the Nordic region.

Nordic bus industry associations take fight to the EU

Abandon the lawsuit against Denmark and instead ensure that the EU establishes clear rules preventing bus companies from low-wage countries from engaging in social dumping in the Nordic region. This is the message in a letter to the European Commission from the bus industry associations in Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden.

NEWS

06.12.2023

TEXT: KERSTIN AHLBERG

Abandon the lawsuit against Denmark and instead ensure that the EU establishes clear rules preventing bus companies from low-wage countries from engaging in social dumping in the Nordic region. This is the message in a letter to the European Commission from the bus industry associations in Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden.

The letter is the latest move in a fight over so-called cabotage road transport rules which has split EU member states for years.

Various types of transport companies often carry goods or passengers between EU member states. However, as a general rule, they are only allowed to conduct domestic traffic in the country where they are established. In exceptional cases, they may engage in inland traffic in another country, known as cabotage, provided that this is "temporary".

A truck can for instance be allowed to carry out a few inland transport stretches on its way home after an international freight transport job. There are similar rules for passenger transport by bus – typically tourist buses but not city buses.

In the case of such temporary inland journeys, the drivers should receive the pay and other terms and conditions of employment that are applicable in the host country.

However, the Nordic countries have experienced that cabotage rules have been abused by haulage companies from low-wage countries. Some systematically conduct inland traffic in the Nordics while paying the wages of their home countries.

Denmark, in particular, has sought to counter this abuse by adopting clear rules on what constitutes "temporary" inland transport and has repeatedly clashed with the European Commission on this issue.

Recently, the Commission brought legal action against Denmark for failure to fulfil its treaty obligations due to restrictions put on foreign bus companies wishing to carry passengers in the country.

Now, the industry organisations Danish Passenger Transport, Icelandic Travel Industry Association, Norwegian NHO Transport, and the Swedish Confederation of Transport Enterprises have joined forces and contacted the EU's Commissioner for Transport Adina Valean.

There is no definition of "temporary" in the EU regulation that concerns bus transport. The organisations therefore argue that it is entirely misguided to take a member state to the EU Court of Justice for attempting to clarify the matter.

In their letter, they emphasise that Iceland recently adopted rules that, like the ones in Denmark, define what should be considered temporary cabotage – and that Norway is about to do the same. Rather than continue to pursue the legal proceedings against Denmark, the Commission should work towards creating a clear and restrictive definition in the EU regulation and in various guidelines on how "temporary" should be interpreted.

The industry organisations argue that such a definition should ideally be in line with the rules established by the Nordic countries.

Young and older people in the Nordics face the same employment barriers

People outside of the labour market often face many employment barriers, and these are often the same for both young and older job seekers. This should be better reflected in the Nordic countries' employment policies concludes a new report.

NEWS

01.12.2023

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER

All of the Nordic countries have special measures aimed at young and older people who are outside of the labour market, but it does not make sense to define employment measures for these groups solely based on age. Young and older people face many of the same barriers, and more could be achieved by taking a broader approach rather than applying the traditional division into, for instance, youth and senior initiatives.

This is one of the main conclusions in the third and latest report from researchers who, on behalf of the Nordic Council of Ministers, are conducting a comprehensive mapping of the Nordic countries' efforts to include vulnerable groups in the labour market, and how efforts can be improved.

The research is being carried out by the Danish Center for Social Science Research VIVE and the economic advisor company HBS Economics in Denmark. So far, this has resulted in three reports that analyse what the Nordic countries are doing today and what they can improve to create better employment opportunities for four groups of citizens who are outside of the labour market: young people, seniors, immigrants and persons with disabilities.

People at risk of being excluded from the labour market are typically divided into groups based on demography or health status. This type of division is also being used to inform employment policies. The report therefore refers to these four groups as traditional target groups.

Although Nordic employment levels are high compared to the EU average, the number of vulnerable people is sizeable. The researchers suggest that the Nordic countries must adjust their employment policies in order to help all those who are not yet employed.

Two in three face several employment barriers

According to the reports from HBS Economics and VIVE, one-fifth ((21 per cent) of employable people in the Nordics have little or no connection to the labour market, and that does not include students and conscripts.

The first report focused on labour market attachment levels for traditional target groups in each country and found differences in employment levels between countries. It also noted a potential for countries to learn from each other.

If all of the groups surveyed in Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Norway had the same employment level as the country with the highest level, 700,000 more people would be in employment across the four countries.

Now, the researchers have presented a thorough study of the vulnerable group and the employment barriers they face. The report contains some new and remarkable findings. Two-thirds of citizens in the Nordics with low or no labour market connections face at least two employment barriers. 14 per cent of them face at least four employment barriers.



Vibeke Jakobsen from VIVE presents the first report in Oslo 2022. Photo: Björn Lindahl

This is important knowledge that the Nordic countries should take into account when shaping their future employment policies, believes Vibeke Jakobsen, senior researcher at VIVE and co-author of the reports.

“Our analyses confirm that large numbers of citizens with weak labour market connections face several different barriers that prevent them from finding work. We have now been able to document that this is the case for all groups who are without jobs: young and old, immigrants and disabled persons. The countries should adapt their employment measures with this in mind.”

Look at barriers rather than age

The researchers have examined reasons for unemployment beyond the groups that the countries' employment systems typically use to organise employment measures. Their analysis shows that many of the identified barriers are common for job seekers across, for example, age groups. This also ought to inform how measures are adapted, the latest research report recommends.

“Traditional demographic target groups (i.e., young people, seniors, etc.) share common barriers, which challenge their distinct categorisation. These empirical findings demonstrate that future employment policies may derive greater benefits by focusing on the specific employment barriers faced by individuals rather than relying on broad demographic categories as a shorthand for the unique challenges experienced by individuals”, the researchers write.

Research shows that young people and seniors are often used as proxy groupings in policy discussions, assuming that these categories effectively capture distinct sets of employment barriers that can inform policy formulation and implementation (Fernandez et al., 2016). However, it is important to note that being young or being a senior, in and of itself, does not constitute an employment barrier.

Among the barriers that cut across things like age groups are ill health, lack of education, skills and recent work experience. That is why it will be crucial for the measures to distinguish between individuals who have recently been in the labour market and those who have not.

“The simultaneous presence of these barriers amplifies the complexity of the task at hand, making it clear that a multifaceted approach is required to effectively assist these individuals in entering the labour market,” the researchers write.



"Time for a modern autonomy act for Åland"

Åland has a newly elected parliament and a new government. The MPs have one big question to answer: Will Åland finally get a new and modern autonomy act? Can the effects of the tax border surrounding the archipelago be mitigated to make things easier for the business sector?

NEWS

20.11.2023

TEXT: HELENA FORSGÅRD, PHOTO: NYA ÅLAND/STEFAN ÖHBERG

Åland held parliamentary and local elections on 15 October. 30 members of parliament and 16 municipal councillors were on the ballot.

The two largest political parties Ålandic Centre and the Liberals for Åland usually take it in turns to win elections and that was also the case this year. The Liberals, who have been in opposition for the last four years, became the largest party and leader Kartrin Sjögren was asked to form a government.

A friendly tone before the election indicated a future coalition between the Liberals and the Centre. But the question remained: Should Sjögren go to the left or right? Should she choose the Social Democrats or the Moderate Coalition as a

third party in order to secure a broad enough government base?

After four weeks of negotiations, she was ready to present her government with three MPs from her own party, two from the Centre and two Social Democrats.

A never-ending job

As the parliamentary term came to a close with solemn ceremonies at the end of October – in the presence of Finnish President Sauli Niinistö – the outgoing speaker Bert Häggblom had this appeal to the incoming parliament and government: Make sure to land the work on a new autonomy act

for Åland! It is very disappointing that no result has yet been reached here.



President Sauli Niinistö speaks at the opening of Åland's 2023–2024 parliamentary period in Mariehamn on 3 November 2023. Photo: Riikka Hietajärvi/President of the Republic of Finland

Åland's current autonomy act is from 1991. Work to revise and modernise it has been going on since 2010. One parliamentary committee after the other have worked on the issue – one of them headed by ex-President Tarja Halonen who gave extra heft to the work – but no end result has yet been reached.

In March this year, a new step in this process was taken. The Ministry of Justice established a working group that will move the process forward together with Åland's government. An interim report has been promised by the end of the year.

Must be optimistic

Katrin Sjögren, who has 20 years of experience in Åland politics, knows the issue well. It was highly topical also during her last period as head of government between 2015 and 2019.

"We at least managed to secure a part victory back then, with a new and improved system for the economic distribution between Åland och Finland. I have to be optimistic and believe that we will finish the entire job during this parliamentary term.

"So much has happened since our current autonomy act was passed. We have joined both the EU and Nato, for instance. Of course, this is about which areas Åland can take responsibility for, and there are things we need to clarify regarding the autonomy act in relation to the constitution. It is in both our and Finland's interest that Åland has a modern autonomy act," she says.

So why has this issue not yet been solved after so many years?

"It has been strangely difficult in fact. This might come down to some sort of mistrust, that such a small nation should be

given so many rights to self-governance. But Åland, as one of the oldest autonomous regions in the world, is used internationally as a good example of a peaceful conflict solution. I believe Finland should raise its gaze and start looking at Åland as an asset."

A source of irritation

Another issue for the new government is the effects of the tax border surrounding Åland. When Finland and Åland joined the EU in 1995, Åland negotiated a special status that included staying outside the EU's tax union. This was considered important to safeguard duty-free trade on the ships that call at Åland when in traffic between Finland and Sweden.



The Viking Line shipping company has two vessels in traffic between Åbo and Stockholm. They leave from opposite sides and meet in Mariehamn every afternoon. The vessels running the Helsinki-Stockholm and Stockholm-Tallinn routes also dock daily in Mariehamn. They have considerable height capacity but are also floating entertainment palaces with restaurants, nightclubs and duty-free shops. Photo: Helena Forsgård.

But the tax border meant all goods going to and from Åland had to be declared at customs. Both businesses and private individuals are very irritated with this extra red tape. Some companies outside of Åland do not even want to do business with Ålanders.

The tax border is nevertheless more useful than not, according to Katrin Sjögren.

"Thanks to it, we can maintain the frequent ferry crossings that we have and need. Shipping companies are also important employers for people who do not come from Åland. But we have to review the side effects. We are going to negotiate with customs and the relevant government departments and try to reduce the extra administrative work which today bothers and maybe hinders businesses," she says.

An extra seat for Åland in the EU?

Åland has for many years argued it should have a separate seat in the EU Parliament – so far without success. The issue returned to the table when it was announced that Finland would get 15 seats next year, up from 14. Åland's member of

the Finnish Parliament, Mats Löfström, has submitted a motion that the seat should be reserved for Åland.

“This is not an unreasonable demand since we have relinquished our legislative authority, and we could enrich the EU debate with our perspective. The Finnish Parliament is negative, but we will continue to push for that seat,” says Katrin Sjögren.

decades. But now the building has attracted attention. Every day since Russia invaded Ukraine, locals have been gathering outside it in loud protests against the war.



Every day since Russia's 22 February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, people have gathered outside Russia's consulate in Mariehamn to demonstrate against the war. The area next to the building has been unofficially named Ukrainaplatsen (Ukraine square) and the Ukrainian flag flies 24 hours. Photo: Nya Åland/Stefan Öhberg

Demilitarisation remains

Åland's status as a demilitarised area has also been hotly debated in Finnish media lately, in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Finland's joining Nato. There is also the issue of Russia's consulate in Åland. Should this still be manned when Finland revoked the permission for Russia's general consulate in Turku from 1 October this year?

President Sauli Niinistö ordered the Ministry for Foreign Affairs to produce a report on this issue, which was presented in November this year. It says the Åland Convention, which regulates Åland's status as a demilitarised area, cannot be terminated.

The report also concluded that there is no legally secure way to suspend the consulate, which has been on Åland since 1940. The consulate was established as part of the agreement signed by Finland following its loss in the Winter War. The consulate's mission was to monitor the demilitarisation.

Åland is happy with the ministry's report.

“It is very clear and spells out our status. In today's world, it is very good that some demilitarised zones exist,” says Katrin Sjögren.

The consulate and its staff, now presumably only the consul and his family, have led an anonymous existence in Åland for

How do we make the right predictions for the future of work?

The Nordic labour markets are doing well. Several of the countries are seeing record employment rates. Meanwhile, there are major changes to how and where jobs are being performed. Global trends like digitalisation and climate change mean new professions and skills are needed. How do we future-proof our education programmes?

EDITORIAL

06.11.2023

BY BJÖRN LINDAHL, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

The Nordic labour markets are doing well. Several of the countries are seeing record employment rates. Meanwhile, there are major changes to how and where jobs are being performed. Global trends like digitalisation and climate change mean new professions and skills are needed. How do we future-proof our education programmes?

When Nordic civil servants from ministries of labour and other authorities hold their biannual meetings, one of the items on the agenda is to assess key performance figures for each country. The latest such meeting was held in Akureyri in North-East Iceland.

“Employment numbers have just passed three million people. Never before have so many people worked in Denmark,” said the Danish representative.

“We have practically no unemployment in the Faroe Islands,” added the Torshavn representative.

But there were also signs that the economic peak had already passed.

“Employment has stopped rising, but there is still low unemployment in Norway.”

“Sweden’s employment figures fell and unemployment rose last month.”

Our visit to North-Eastern Iceland, home to 30,000 people – 20,000 of whom live in Akureyri – left us with many new impressions. In my story from there, I try to show how many-faceted the local labour market is and how important entrepreneurship has become. The quote that stays with me came from Rögnvaldur Gudmundsson, head of the Association of Municipalities in Northeast Iceland:

“We asked: What do we do after 5 pm?”

Because creating new jobs is not enough. People need to want to live where jobs are created. Children and adults must have the chance to do sports, experience art and music, go to restaurants and shop – all the things that give life meaning.

Exactly how small and isolated societies can create sustainable jobs is the focus of planned research. One research project, SunRem, has chosen Dalvik and Husavik near Akureyri and other places in Norway, Sweden and Åland as examples of such societies.

A few weeks ago, I participated during a kickoff for SunRem and four other research programmes supported by Nord-Forsk. Lithuania also participates in two of the projects, and the 30-plus researchers therefore met in Vilnius. This made me wonder what the Nordic countries do to adapt their education programmes to the needs of the future.

So Fayme Alm spoke to the Swedish National Agency for Education and the National Agency for Higher Vocational Education, while Line Scheistrøen visited the Vocational School in Oslo.

It is clear that we need more than the smart brains of IT technicians and computer programmers in the future. We need smart hands too.

This was also the theme for one of the debates during the Nordic Council session in Oslo. Veronika Honkasalo from the Nordic Green Left Alliance quoted analyses that warn of a shortfall of hundreds of thousands of vocational experts in the Nordics within 10 to 15 years.

The Nordic Council is therefore asking the Nordic Council of Ministers to establish a commission for vocational training.

This year's session was marked by the dramatic escalation of the conflict between Palestinians and Israel. For the past year and a half, the war has also been raging in Ukraine. Next year, the Nordic countries will celebrate 70 years with a common labour market, but it has also been significantly influenced by the influx of labour from the Baltics, Poland, and most recently, Ukraine.

But the first wave of Estonians arriving in Finland are now going back home, writes Bengt Östling, while Rólant Dam Waag writes about how the Faroe Islands' economy can be hit by a fish import ban from Russia. Many see a connection between the Russian threat and the fact that the Faroes have signalled that a 50-year-old fishing agreement with Russia might not be renewed.

We also have a story from Marie Preisler about new working environment legislation in Greenland, Kerstin Ahlberg's analysis of a new ruling from the EU Court on whether cabin crew are victims of gender discrimination because they get lower allowances than pilots, and we congratulate Renewcell for winning this year's Nordic Council Environment Prize.

Last but not least: Hallgrímur Indriðason has interviewed Iceland's Minister of Social Affairs, Labour and Nordic Cooperation who has led the Icelandic Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers in 2023. He is a former environment minister and before that a climate activist, so it is no surprise that climate change and the environment have been important themes during his tenure.

“We have a special emphasis on a fair green transition which is covered in that plan, but we’re taking it to a higher level. We are preparing for a summit at the start of December where we use the Nordic labour market model as a role model. We are gathering representatives from everyone; the labour unions, the employers and the governments,” he says.



2023 Nordic Council – dominated by security policy

More defence and security politics in the Nordic Council, but hardly any new money. It is still unclear whether the three autonomous areas can become full-fledged members. Only Sweden opposes a dedicated council of ministers for transport. That is how you could sum up this year's Nordic Council session.

ANALYSIS

06.11.2023

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL

The Nordic Council session was held over four intensive days in Oslo between 20 October to 2 November. There were an unusually large number of participating government ministers and Nato Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg also addressed the session. Many ministers talked about what unites the Nordics, others focussed on the differences.

The session is a celebration of everything Nordic, with speeches, debates, awards, committee work and informal gatherings. Everyone is careful not to say anything that might upset a different nation's representatives, so it is rare for things to get heated.



Jens Stoltenberg addressed the Nordic Council for the second time in two years. Photo: Magnus Fröderberg/Norden.org.

In the middle of all this Nordic “hygge” the outside world did make itself known, however. The two biggest issues by far were Sweden’s upcoming Nato membership and the conflict between Hamas and Israel in the Gaza Strip. For a labour journal, it can be tricky to find news in that area, but the fact that all of the five Nordic countries and the three autonomous areas soon will be in the same defence alliance will also change the Nordic Council.

In Oslo, for the first time ever, all the defence ministers addressed the 87 participants who are elected on the basis of their respective political parties’ strength in their national parliaments. Defence policy has previously not been part of the cooperation in the Nordic Council of Ministers nor a theme during the sessions.

The prime ministers and foreign ministers, along with the Nordic ministers for cooperation, all addressed the participants. Being a Nordic minister for cooperation is normally a side hustle for ministers who run completely separate government ministries.

From Iceland, which holds this year’s Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers, Guðmundur Ingi Guðbrandsson holds that position. He is also the Minister of Social Affairs and the Labour Market. From Norway, the cooperation minister is the country’s Minister of International Development, in Sweden it is the Minister for EU Affairs, in Finland the Minister of Education and in Denmark the Minister for Ecclesiastical Affairs.



The Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs Tobias Billström. Photo: Magnus Fröderberg.

How important the Nordic Council is perceived to be often stands in inverse proportion to the size of the country. Sweden’s Minister for Foreign Affairs Tobias Billström made sure he put the Nordic region in an international perspective.

“We would not only have a place in G20 but also in G10,” he said, alluding to the group of the world’s richest countries.

Sweden takes over the Presidency of the Council of Ministers next year, but Tobias Billström seemed equally interested in the informal cooperation that is happening within what is known as N5. When the Baltic countries are also invited it is known as NB8.

A year ago, the Nordic Council began evaluating the 1962 Helsinki Treaty. It has been called “the constitution” for the Nordic cooperation and is being amended as Finland and Sweden (most probably) are gaining Nato membership.

Many Nordic enthusiasts also see this as a chance to sharpen the treaty text to say the countries not only “desire” to cooperate in certain areas but that they “shall” do it. Defence policy should of course be added as an area of cooperation.

But should the Nordic Council also get its way with the creation of a Council of Ministers for Transport? This was a decision that was taken already in 2018. The cooperation ministers could only promise yet another review which is due to be published in February and which will be considered during the Nordic Council’s special session in April.



Erling Eidesgaard från Färöarna. Foto: Stine Østby

Another sensitive issue is whether the autonomous regions’ status should be upgraded.

“For 45 years, the Faroes have been knocking on the door; we want to become fully-fledged members of the Nordic cooperation, but we are not allowed to play with the others. We are like The Little Match Girl; we are outside looking in through the windows into the living rooms, into the warmth, where the five real members are allowed to be,” said Faroese Erling Eidesgaard from the Nordic Green Left Alliance, and continued with even greater pathos:

“The Faroe Islands is a country, we are a people, we are a nation, and that is why it hurts when our Nordic friends strategically say we are nothing but a region. We are a country and we are kept outside. We have a lot to offer and a burning

desire for full membership. We are knocking (and here he knocked on the rostrum): Listen to us, because we will not be knocking forever.”



Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen. Photo: Stine Østby/Norden.org.

Denmark’s Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen used her speech to present unexpectedly clear support for full membership for the Faroe Islands and Greenland.

“The Nordic cooperation must also develop. We must never get stuck in what we have and what we have always done. That is why I recommend that both the Faroes and Greenland gain a stronger position in the Nordic cooperation.”

Sweden, however, remains uncertain whether reopening the Helsinki Treaty is a smart move.

“From the Swedish perspective, I am quite clear that I do not see the need to invest effort, time, and money in reviewing the Helsinki Agreement. It has served us well,” she said.

“I believe we should focus on our mandate, namely to make the Nordic region the world’s most integrated region. What a renegotiation would mean for EU cooperation I do not know, but that would be a complex issue we would have to take into account.”



Sweden’s Minister for European Union Affairs Jessika Roswall is also the Minister for Nordic Cooperation. Photo: Stine Østby/Norden.org

Iceland is clear in its support for the three autonomous areas, while the issue is probably trickiest for Finland where negotiations for a self-governing agreement for Åland are moving very slowly. Åland has the least self-governance out of all the autonomous areas, at least when it comes to taxing their own citizens.

With only 30,000 residents, the politicians there see it as too great a task to hold the Presidency of the Council of Ministers on their own. Greenland is very willing to influence foreign policy in the Arctic but out of all the eight Nordic Council members the least interested in Nordic cooperation.

The question then, is whether there will be some kind of in-between solution – an N6 or N7 to use Tobias Billström’s terminology.

The Nordic Council would like to see more power to the parliamentarians as well as a bigger budget. This has been fixed at around one billion Danish kroner (€134m) for a very long time. But Mette Fredriksen was also very clear when asked whether there was scope for a budget increase.

“I fully agree that cooperation is good. I do not agree that we should spend more money on it. I have to put this very strongly and honestly. In my view, the most important thing when it comes to Nordic cooperation is that we talk together, and sometimes that is the cheapest thing there is in politics. So I have to be direct and honest: I would support closer cooperation, but I am not for spending more money.”

The defence policy will, however, impact the Nordic cooperation. Several of the speakers pointed out that Nordic transport routes generally run north to south and not west to east. If the member states were to really develop a joint defence programme, railways, bridges and roads must be strengthened and improved. It might also be necessary to establish joint storage facilities.

Sweden’s Minister for Defence Pål Jonson captured the zeitgeist when he pointed out that we have gone from the “just in time” principle to building up storage facilities “just in case”.



Bryndís Haraldsdóttir (right) was elected the new President and Oddný G. Harðardóttir was elected Vice President. Photo: Magnus Fröderberg/Norden.org.

Next year, Sweden takes over the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, while a new 2024 President for the Nordic Council was elected on the season's last day. Bryndís Haraldsdóttir is the new President and Oddný G. Harðardóttir is Vice President.

The news was summed up like this at Norden.org:

“At several points, the Icelandic programme refers to the ongoing process initiated by the Presidium of the Nordic Council to look at the possibility of updating the Helsinki Treaty, which regulates official Nordic cooperation. This process is mentioned as a specific focus for the Presidency, as part of which issues such as security policy, climate policy and the use of languages at Nordic Council meetings could be addressed.”



The Nordic Council worries about lack of experts in the labour market

The Nordic Council believes now is the time to fight for Nordic youths' future. Their exclusion from education and the labour market, alongside a lack of specialists, worries politicians. The Nordic Council is also taking steps to address the increase in cruise ship tourism.

THEME

06.11.2023

TEXT: LINE SCHEISTRØEN

It was time to listen to young voices as politicians on the Nordic Council discussed how to solve one of the largest common challenges of our time; the many young people who remain outside of education and the labour market in the Nordic region.

“Education equals opportunities. Education is independence. Education is freedom. Because education is the foundation

we build our lives and happiness on,” said Anne Jensdatter, a representative from the Nordic Youth Council.

“I believe it is the welfare state's greatest failure when one in six children in Denmark leaves basic education without knowing how to read or write, when youth unemployment in Sweden stands at 23 per cent and when one in ten young people in Norway do not have any links to the labour market or education.

“These numbers do not fit with how we see ourselves as a Nordic region. We thump our chest on the international stage, boasting we are the world’s best societies, the world’s most equal societies and the world’s best free societies. But can societies really be free if so many have no future?”

And the politicians on the Nordic Council listened to the young representative.

“Be good to your children, because they are the ones who will choose your nursing home,” said Erling Eidesgaard (Nordic Green Left Alliance) with a smile.

Many are not doing so well

The Nordic Council is now launching several programmes focusing on children, youths, and exclusion from education and work.



Eva Lindh poses a question during the session in the Norwegian parliament. Photo: Stine Østby/Norden.org

Children and young people’s mental health was also on the agenda. Eva Lindh (the Social Democratic Group) expressed her concern over the fact that far too many young people struggle with angst, depression, stress and suicidal thoughts.

“During the pandemic, mental health issues became worse, especially among children and young people who were already in a precarious situation. Ill health inequalities are still increasing. We must focus on reducing health inequalities in our societies,” said Eva Lindh.

A serious lack of professionals

While too many young people are outside the labour market, the shortage of skilled workers in the Nordic region is significant. The Nordic Council argues more must be done to make it attractive for young people to take vocational education.

The Nordic Council is asking the Nordic Council of Ministers to set up a special commission on vocational training. Veronika Honkasalo (the Nordic Green Left Alliance) underlined the seriousness of the situation by pointing to analyses showing that Nordic countries will be short of several hundred thousand specialist workers in 10 to 15 years.

“If we fail to turn this trend, our societies are facing serious consequences. The lack of specialist labour will make it difficult to carry out the green transition and develop new technology,” said Veronika Honkasalo from Sweden.



Veronika Honkasalo. Photo: Magnus Frødeberg/Norden.org

There was also a call to better facilitate education and work across national borders and to harmonise education programmes so that they can be used in all of the Nordic countries.

Different rules become border obstacles

The Conservative Group proposed that the Nordic Council ask the Nordic Council of Ministers to work toward a common Nordic construction code and common requirements to reduce costs and contribute to increased competition.

“Different rules represent a border obstacle to the free flow of labour across national borders, and a hindrance to using labour across the Nordic countries,” said Norwegian Anne Kristine Linnestad (the Conservative Group).

“This is an issue that is relevant to everyday life, not least for us who live and work near the borders,” said Swedish Kjell-Arne Ottosson (the Centre Group). He believed this should be fairly easy.

“There is a difference between the climate in South Jutland and the northern parts of Finnmark, so there are differences in how you should build and insulate. But there really are differences between the far south of Norway and Finnmark in the north too, so if this works internally in Norway, it works for the entire Nordic region,” said Ottosson.



to be a goal to make it emission-free,” said Norwegian Ola Elvestuen (the Centre Group).

Kjell-Arne Ottosson. Foto: Stine Østby/Norden.org

Cutting cruise ship tourism

The Nordic region has had a summer of high activity along the coastline. Cruise ship tourism is on the increase, not least in Greenland and Iceland. Cruise ship tourism to the Arctic is expected to rise too.

“Cruise tourism gets a lot of criticism, but for large parts of the Nordic region, it is the only possible type of tourism there is. Our nature and our outdoors experiences are pretty unique and tourists want to experience this and are happy to pay. At the same time, we must take into account that our nature is fragile. If we want our nature to remain attractive for tourists, we must look after it well,” said Doris Jensen from Greenland (the Social Democratic Group).



Doris Jensen. Foto: Magnus Fröderberg/Norden.org.

The Nordic Council wants to see sustainable and emission-free cruise ship tourism. The Council also believes there is a need for stricter regulations for cruise tourism in the Arctic.

The Nordic Council is asking the Nordic governments to map the consequences for security and preparedness, with a particular focus on the Arctic.

“Cruise tourism is one of the most polluting travel industries, with high CO₂ emissions. There is also a debate about how much cruise tourism actually contributes economically in the areas where it operates. Cruise tourism is growing and it has



Swedish Education Act amended to match labour market needs with education

The current imbalance between supply and demand in the upper secondary education system will be addressed. The aim is to make it easier for young people and adults to access the labour market and improve the welfare and business sectors' access to skilled labour.

THEME

06.11.2023

TEXT: FAYME ALM, PHOTO: WORLDSKILLS SWEDEN

The Swedish parliament decided to make changes to the Education Act in June 2022. The changes pertain to the planning and dimensioning of certain educational programs in upper secondary schools and municipal adult education (Kommvux).

A few weeks later, the Swedish National Agency for Education (*Skolverket*) was tasked with continuously developing regional planning documents to assess "how well the educational offerings in each county match the demand for edu-

cation among young people and adults and the labour market's need for people with upper secondary education," writes *Skolverket* in its report "*Utbud och efterfrågan på gymnasial utbildning. En nationell bild*" ("Supply and demand for upper secondary education. A national overview").



Evelina Fält competes in service during the WorldSkills competition in Gdansk 2023 (see sidebar). Photo WorldSkills Sweden

“The old wording in the Education Act said that when planning education programmes, the students’ preferences should be taken into account as much as possible. This requirement remains, but now the labour market’s needs should also be considered,” Anders Håkanson, head of the school information unit at *Skolverket* tells the Nordic Labour Journal.

The decision is partly supported by surveys that have found the following:

- Seven in ten companies face recruitment challenges. (Source: The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise’s recruitment survey)
- Swedish welfare is facing major competence needs (Source: The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions)
- If current education planning remains unchanged, the skills shortage will worsen. (Source: Statistics Sweden)

Municipalities will cooperate

The amended Education Act also brings another significant change – a requirement for municipal cooperation. All of Sweden’s 290 municipalities are required to cooperate with at least two other municipalities in education planning and implementation.

“Many municipalities were already doing this before the amendment and much has happened since this became law on 1 July this year. For instance, all of Skåne County’s 33 municipalities cooperate with the municipalities of Sölvesborg, Karlshamns, Olofström and Ronneby in Blekinge County,” says Anders Håkansson.

Skolverket published the first regional planning document on 31 October 2023. This is the initial step on the road to improved regional cooperation, explains Anders Håkansson.

“Regional planning documents allow us to determine how well education provisions in each county match with the ed-

ucational needs among young people and adults, and to estimate the labour market’s need for people with upper secondary education,” he says.

Regional planning documents will be published every three years in future.

The new legislation, like the old version, does not impose any demands to take into account the overall upper secondary educational needs on a national level.

Lack of supply



A majority of students in Sweden choose to take upper secondary education that prepares them for university. Meanwhile, vocational education programmes are short of places on some courses and struggle to fill others.

“The biggest adjustment needs to be made in the industrial technical programs in upper secondary education, such as welding, industrial manufacturing and similar professions. There is a huge demand here, alongside a shortage of education programs for these professions almost everywhere in the country, both in upper secondary schools and in Komvux,” says Anders Håkansson.

But this is about more than just increasing the number of education spaces. There is also a considerable need to boost interest in these professions.



Daniel Åhman competing in private car technology at the WorldSkills competition in Gdansk (see sidebar). Photo: WorldSkills Sweden

“When *Skolverket* visits the regions to host various network meetings, the idea is to create dialogue and cooperation so that we can face these challenges. In this context, career counsellors and those who work with APL (work-based learning) play a particularly important role.

No quick fix

Ander Håkansson takes a long-term perspective. Changes like these require major decisions and long processes.

“This is for instance about reducing the shortage of vocational teachers and access to APL in certain areas. Those are bottlenecks that make it difficult to expand rapidly. So, this has to be the starting point for something new,” says Anders Håkansson.

Cooperation between authorities

One of the authorities *Skolverket* works with – beyond the Swedish Higher Education Authority, the Council for Higher Education and the Public Employment Service – is the National Agency for Higher Vocational Education. This is a central administrative authority under the Ministry of Education whose key function is to take responsibility for “Higher Vocational Education in Sweden (HVE) to ensure that HVE programmes meet the labour market’s needs for a qualified workforce”.

Higher educational education programmes are available throughout Sweden and in various industries. They are at a post-upper secondary level and typically run over two years.

Analyses determine the supply



The Nordic Labour Journal spoke to Jenny Twana, head of analysis and applications at the National Agency for Higher Vocational Education. We asked her how the Agency finds out which education programmes will be sought after.

“We monitor the labour market’s needs in various ways. The regional development responsibility that we have, shortened RUA, means that each region has at least one RUA function with the responsibility of meeting the labour market’s needs within that region. This way we find out whether the needs vary between regions, which they sometimes do.”

The Agency also maintains contact with various trade organisations and can in addition gauge the needs in the labour market based on applications they receive from education providers.

“We also extensively monitor the ongoing situation and create and publish our own area analyses. They are now even more detailed than before. This is something we have decided to do to increase transparency in our work, says Jenny Twana.

So far, the Agency has published 35 area analyses and aims to publish 50.

Possible delays

She points out that it can be difficult to predict what will happen in the labour market and make long-term analyses beyond five years.

“During the pandemic, sectors like entertainment, film and television were hard hit, but this market has recovered, so it is important not to draw too many conclusions from such events.”

Right now, Jenny Twana does not predict any acute events that should herald a sudden change in the education programmes approved by the Authority.

“We have already taken into account the development in the green industry that we currently see in the north of Sweden. It can be difficult to suddenly change, but as an agency, we are more flexible than many other educational authorities,” says Jenny Twana.

There can be a certain lag in the supply of education programmes even at the Authority for Higher Vocational Education. This could happen if the demand for certain professions suddenly increases or decreases.

"Our time frame is three to five years. Our assessments should remain valid during that time. If sudden needs should arise, it is necessary to keep in mind that there might be a certain lag. After all, we need to review and evaluate the applications that come in from education providers," says Jenny Twana.



Norway faces tough competition for green expertise

Norway lacks the necessary competencies for a successful green transition. The Vocational School in Oslo is trying to do something about it.

THEME

06.11.2023

TEXT AND PHOTO: LINE SCHEISTRØEN

“We notice that we are attractive in the labour market,” say the students we meet at campus “Kuben” in Oslo.

Companies are queueing up to showcase their wares for students at the Vocational School in Oslo, and to offer them jobs.

Need to be better prepared

In June, the Norwegian Committee on Skill Needs launched their report “Future skill needs – challenges for a green transition of the labour market”. The committee concluded that Norway lacks the necessary skills to succeed with the green transition.

“The green transition demands more specialised skills, but parts of the population are not sufficiently prepared. There is, for instance, a lack of basic skills. Attitudes to climate change might also hinder change,” said Sveinung Skule, head of the Committee on Skill Needs, as the report was presented.

Skule also pointed out that many of the skills that Norway needs must be created among those who are already in the labour market, which will necessitate a lot of further education and learning in the workplace.

Opening many new doors

Roheel Yaqub (27) and Aleksander Trøftmoen (23) are already trained electricians and electric power engineers, while Kawsica Rashasingham (20) is both a concrete worker and carpenter. They all attend various courses within BIM – Building Information Modelling.



Aleksander Trøftmoen (23), Roheel Yaqub (27) and Kawsica Rashasingham (20) together with their teacher Kristine Tveit at the Vocational School in Oslo.

The study gives them skills in 3D modelling, digital leadership for construction and technical installations and infrastructure – skills that are sought-after in the trades they already have been working in.

“We see how this opens several doors into the labour market,” say Yaqub and Trøftmoen.

The important digital skills

The idea behind the vocational schools in Norway is for them to offer skills that companies need. And businesses are currently very much asking for two types in particular: digital and sustainability skills.

The vocational schools offer short, practical courses building on apprenticeship certificates, or at least five years of practical experience. Students can attend full or part-time, in the daytime or evenings.

Courses at the Vocational School in Oslo aim to turn students into specialists in digital cooperation and digital learning. There is also a focus on subjects like the circular economy and the development of students’ skills in innovation and entrepreneurship. The courses are as practically oriented as possible.

Innovation camp

The idea is to make the skilled workers more confident in thinking innovatively. The students the Nordic Labour Journal spoke to had all been thrown into a two-day innovation camp early on in their course. This is a programme focusing on creativity, the joy of creation and innovation. Businesses present a challenge which the students must solve within a

set time. They have to look at things with fresh eyes and find new solutions.

“We learn how to ask questions about why things are the way they are. It is very educational and exciting,” says Rashasingham.

Green trade courses

Anne K. Eggen Lervik is the head of innovation and communication at the Vocational School in Oslo. She is in no doubt that the industrial digital and green transition has to start with the skilled workers.



Digitalisation, digitalisation, digitalisation, says Anne K. Eggen Lervik when asked what the labour market demands in terms of skills. Eggen Lervik is head of strategic innovation and communication at the Vocational School in Oslo.

But to succeed they need skills, not least digital ones. That is why the school, in cooperation with the trade, has developed the course “The digital skilled worker for the construction and civil engineering trade”.

The course “Future buildings – circular economy, technology and entrepreneurship” was created from that same need, also in cooperation with trade representatives from the innovation cluster Construction City. This course offers improved specialisation in sustainability, digitalisation, circular economy and entrepreneurship.

“We must dare to think in new ways. This is crucial if we want to succeed with the green transition across many trades. That is why innovation plays an important part in several of the Vocational School’s courses,” says Eggen Lervik.

She wants workplace learning to be valued.

“Many of our students combine work and studies,” she says.

Competition for the same skills

This summer, the Committee on Skill Needs published their conclusions based, among other things, on a report they had commissioned from researchers at the Nordic Institute for Studies of Innovation, Research and Education (NIFU). NI-

FU researcher Håkon Endresen Normann led the work on the report “Skills for a green transition”.



Researchers have been looking at what skills are particularly important for a green transition across the whole of the labour market. They also studied the oil and gas sector very closely as well as new green businesses, and also municipal administration.

What they found was that everybody, regardless of trade, is asking for the same skills. The municipalities’ needs for skills linked to the green transition, for instance, overlap to a large extent with the skills needed in the rest of the labour market.

Two-thirds lack expertise

NIFU uncovered a significant need for technical expertise, especially in ICT and electrical engineering. The greatest demand is for engineers, electricians and electronic technicians, ICT technicians/ICT consultants, and scientists and technical engineers.

There is also a major unmet need for skills in climate reporting, accounting and circular economy.

Nearly two-thirds of companies say they already have an unmet need for expertise, regardless of potential needs linked to the green transition. Nearly as many expect the green transition will require other skills and also lead to changes to existing tasks.

“There is already competition for these people. A green transition will amplify the competition for this expertise,” says Endresen Normann.

Workers need retraining

Workers’ skills improvement is considered to be the most important activity to meet future competence needs. Three out

of four businesses say this is very important. More than half say recruitment is important.

“This might point to possible challenges linked to the fact that many businesses must compete with each other in the recruitment of much of the same expertise,” according to the report.

Courses and in-house training are by far the most relevant form of skills enhancement. Only a few companies consider higher education in combination with work as relevant.

“It is in many ways surprising that so many companies think that a major change like a green transition is best solved by relatively “low-key” internal skills enhancement, while more comprehensive formal skills enhancement is considered less relevant,” the researchers write in the report.

Political choices

Endresen Normann points out that political choices play a big role when it comes to which skills businesses will need in the future. He provides an example:

Say that politicians decide to halve emissions from the production of meat and dairy products. This would put a great deal of pressure on farmers to find new ways of running their farms.

Endresen Normann believes dramatic, albeit controversial, policies like that are needed to speed up the green transition across all trades, not only in oil and gas. But he fears that change will carry on in today’s tempo, which he believes is too slow to meet the necessary climate goals.

Someone will be hit, but who?

The NIFU researcher will be taking a closer look at the relationship between the green transition and the labour market. Endresen Normann and colleagues will look at the consequences of a green transition for different social groups, with a focus on skills and the labour market, in the project “Green and Just Labour Market”.

“A green transition and changing competence needs could lead to less demand for certain occupations and skills in parts of the labour market. Some will probably be hit, but we don’t yet know enough about which groups this will be. During the latest oil crisis, we saw that people with the lowest education levels were the ones who were most likely to lose their jobs,” says Endresen Normann.



Finland still tempting, but many Estonian workers are returning home

Estonia's capital Tallinn is a charming city that boasts both medieval sights and rapid development. Not much remains from its period as a Soviet republic. Crossing the Gulf of Finland from Helsinki to Tallinn only takes a couple of hours.

NEWS

06.11.2023

TEXT: BENGT ÖSTLING, PHOTO: CATA PORTIN

There are three companies running ferries between Finland and Estonia, and it is not just Finns who make the crossing to buy cheap alcohol. The shipping companies have increased the number of departures and traffic is back to pre-Covid-19 levels, despite price increases in Estonia.



Tallinn – modern high-rises are emerging behind the old town.

While tourism remains the main reason for the frequent ferry departures, job commuting also plays a major part – in the opposite direction. It comes from the three Baltic states and from further afield.

Started with the fall of the Soviet Union

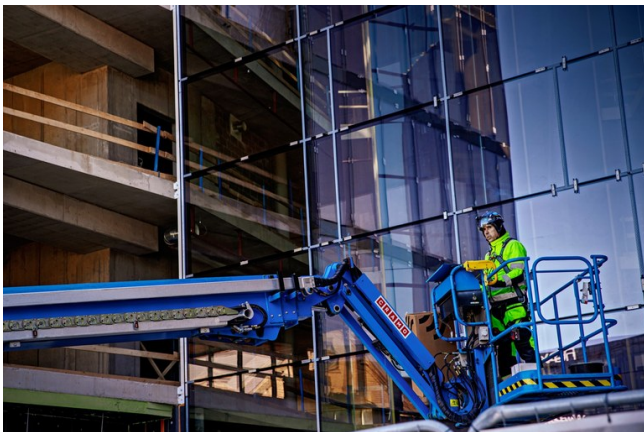
There is no exact number for how many foreign workers there are in Finland, but it is believed to be in the tens of thousands. The Covid-19 pandemic changed the traffic, just like it changed the Finnish economy.

The first guest workers were Estonian construction workers who arrived as soon as the borders opened in the late 1980s, as Estonia was gaining independence from the Soviet Union.

Wages were significantly higher and paid in “Western currency”. Working conditions and living standards were also better.

Hard work, risk of abuse

Construction work and similar heavy-duty jobs still appear to employ most of the Baltic men who dominate the labour migration to Finland. Health care, cleaning and seasonal work employ a lot of women from the Baltic states.



Construction workers have made up a large part of labour immigration from the Baltics to Finland. But here we see a Finnish construction worker on project in Tallinn.

As migration from the Baltics increased, some worried about wage dumping, crime and trafficking. Today, prostitution rarely figures in debates about labour mobility from the Baltics.

There is a current criminal case in Finland, however, centring on allegations of serious human trafficking. 21 workers are said to have been tricked into working in Finland in slave-like conditions.

Around a dozen Estonians are suspected to have made more than two million euro by exploiting complex regulations, unrealistic dreams and poor language skills. Police believe there might be hundreds of victims who have been working as

small business owners but who have been left without pay and benefits.

Worse jobs and worse pay

Both men and women with foreign backgrounds seem to be regularly offered worse jobs than Finns. A survey of trade union representatives done by the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions in the autumn of 2022 showed there were foreign employees in 70 per cent of Finnish workplaces. Three years earlier the number was 56 per cent.

A clear majority of the union representatives said Finns and foreign workers got along well in general. There is a worry among Finnish people that foreign workers are discriminated against and that this leads to worse conditions for Finnish workers as well. There is still a belief among some in the new government coalition member the Finns Party that foreigners take Finnish workers' jobs for lower pay.

Labour shortages on both sides

Trade unions warn of a two-tier labour market in Finland. They welcome labour immigration but underline that Finnish rules must be followed and Finnish wages paid.

Both Finland and Estonia suffer labour shortages in many sectors. Health sector workers in Finland are in great demand, but language barriers often throw up problems. The hospitality sector also needs more people because so many started working in other sectors during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Unemployment in Estonia has risen to between five and six per cent. Some quote a figure of eight per cent, but that includes a large number of refugees from Ukraine.

Many find jobs themselves in the Nordics or via contacts. It has also become more common to job hunt using branches of Finnish job centres in Tallinn.

Heikki Mäki is a part owner of the Finnish staffing company Finesta, one of the larger players in the Baltics.

Around 800 people find work through his company every year. Finesta operates across the Baltics and the Nordics, providing temporary staff to businesses primarily in the industrial, IT, hotel and restaurant sectors, says Heikki Mäki.



Heikki Mäki, part-owner of the Finnish staffing company Finesta. Photo: Finesta.

Attempts by the Finnish government – and in particular the Finns Party – to stop immigration does not cause Heikki Mäki to lose sleep. All EU citizens enjoy freedom of movement and are welcome to work in Finland, he points out.

But the government can of course make life more difficult, especially for asylum seekers and workers who arrive from non-EU countries.

The Nordics are popular

Estonian workers do not only look to Finland for work. Norway is also a popular destination for people from the Baltics. But since the country is not an EU member, red tape like work permits make things more difficult.

Neighbouring Sweden is closer geographically and well-known for offering a safe society with good wages.

Seasonal workers have increased in numbers too. Many want to work and spend the winter in Lapland's ski resorts and the summer on the coast or in their home country, says Heikki Mäki. Working periods are becoming shorter.

Movement in the opposite direction too

Some Finns and other Nordic citizens also want to try to work in the Baltics, despite lower wages and recent high inflation figures. The price of sugar, for instance, has doubled in one year, according to news reports.



Estonia also tempts workers from other parts of Europe, like Italian restaurant chef Federico Bontorin. Here he is with waiter Laura Vähk at Tule Estonia.

Estonian wages have increased, however, especially in the IT sector, and there is a lot of opportunity to work remotely in that trade, points out Heikki Mäki.

Wages remain low in other trades. In May, Estonia's social partners agreed to increase the minimum wage by 50 per cent by 2027. Right now, it stands at 725 euro a month, or 4 euro 30 cent an hour.

Estonians returning home

Neighbouring countries can, in other words, offer much in terms of higher wages, when the medium wage for construction workers in Finland, for instance, is 15 to 20 euro an hour.

But the Finnish construction industry, which has used Estonian workers to fill the labour gap, is no longer doing that well. Construction activity has fallen in Finland. The lack of jobs has seen many Estonian construction workers end their memberships in the Finnish Construction Trade Union and go home, says Urmet Aru, who is from Estonia himself.

He has spent the past seven years as a union official at the Finnish Construction Trade Union. He began working as a painter in Finland aged 21.

The union can only help members

Aru knows how big a decision it is to start commuting or to move away from your home country. It can be akin to being at sea. Many work hard for three weeks before having one or two weeks off when they can travel home, away from their often poky accommodation in Finland.

Trade membership is low in Estonia, which is also evident when workers arrive in Finland. Many Estonian workers do not join the union until they discover the need to do so, by which time it is often too late.

If wages are not paid, the employer goes bust or you are threatened with unemployment, you might need legal

aid. But the rules say you need at least six months of membership before you can get help from the unemployment fund or the union, underlines Urmet Aru.

Union membership not enough

From a Nordic point of view – where trade union membership stands at nearly 70 per cent in many sectors – the Baltics are in a difficult situation. Several Nordic cooperation projects have tried to increase membership figures in Baltic trade unions.

“The issue was not that we could not get new members to sign up. We just couldn’t keep them. There were no structures in the trade union movement,” explains Jaan-Hendrik Toomel, President of the Estonian Trade Union Confederation EAKL.



Jaan-Hendrik Toomel, President of the Estonian Trade Union Confederation EAKL.

Toomel’s challenge remains to attract and keep more members in Estonia’s trade unions. Fewer than 10 per cent of workers are members, and around 20 per cent are covered by a collective agreement.

It is not clear why Estonians are uninterested in joining a union. Some think it could be historically linked to Soviet times when trade union membership got a bad reputation.

There are differences between sectors, however. There are no unions at all covering agriculture and construction, but transport, education and health are all sectors with high union membership figures – up to 70 to 80 per cent of all workers.

Narrowing wage gap

Wages have risen considerably in Estonia although they are far from even with Nordic medium wages. But the gap has narrowed over the past 30 years, says Jaan-Hendrik Toomel proudly.

Changes in work migration patterns are natural, he believes. There is mobility in both directions. Older Estonian workers

are returning home despite lower wages, and younger ones take their place.



Before Toomel became the EAKL President, he worked for the transport union and before that, he was in road construction. But he has never worked in Finland.

He understands why construction workers want to try working in the Nordics and in Germany. Workers in other sectors go elsewhere, like office workers who often choose the UK, explains Toomel.

Migration shows that Estonian wages must increase

Toomel notes that few foreigners want to work in Estonia. They would rather go on to the more attractive Nordic labour market.

Migration is a current trend in the EU. However, it seems many Estonians want to leave. It would, of course, help to increase wages in Estonia. When the wage gap sucks labour out of the country, Estonian employers must pay more. Estonian jobs must become more competitive in order for positions to be filled, points out Toomel. Higher wages also indicate success for the trade union movement.



Renewcell awarded the Nordic Council Environment Prize for clothes recycling

Swedish company Renewcell has won the 2023 Nordic Council Environment Prize for its groundbreaking solution for recycling and reusing textiles into new clothes and products.

NEWS

06.11.2023

TEXT AND FOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

Martin Stenfors, head of strategy and sustainability, received the prize during the Nordic Council's gala at the Oslo Opera.

"This prize is an enormous recognition. We have done a big job since we started out in 2012. Taking a good idea from the research stage all the way to building a new industry in Sweden is quite a challenging process. Being appreciated and seeing that we are not alone in thinking this is an important issue is a huge deal for us," Martin Stenfors told the Nordic Labour Journal right after the awards ceremony.

The theme for this year's environment prize was the sustainable production and consumption of textiles. There were seven nominees. Swedes buy on average 14 kilos of new clothes and textiles per person every year. But a lot of this is never

used. Nearly eight kilos are thrown in household waste and incinerated.

Chuckling 80,000 tonnes

"Swedes throw away around 80,000 tonnes of clothing. At our plant in Sundsvall, when we scale it up, we will be able to process 60,000 tonnes a year," says Martin Stenfors.

Renewcell does not manufacture the fibre products themselves in the form of textiles like viscose and lyocell but makes the raw material for them.



Renewcell's raw material can be old jeans – but not sports clothing. It has to be cotton or wool socks. Photo: Alexander Donka.

“It is a type of pulp. Today, this raw material is made from forest wood. We use the cellulose in discarded, cotton-rich clothes instead and manufacture the same product. We remove textile waste from incineration while the trees in the forests can be used for other things than making clothes.”

Renewcell calls their cellulose mass product cirkulose. Both H&M and Levi's already use it in their collections. The company employs 130 people, most at a factory in Ortviken near Sundsvall in Sweden.

Renewcell earlier announced having signed a contract with Chinese Tangshan Sanyou, one of the world's largest viscose fibre producers. The contract runs for five years and is worth over two billion Swedish kronor (€169m).

“This is huge for us and in fact for the entire industry, where longer-term contracts are unusual. We will deliver 40,000 tonnes of mass every year to Tangshan Sanyou, which means we have already sold two-thirds of our future capacity in Ortviken,” Patrik Lundström, the Renewcell CEO, told Di Digital when the news broke.



Renewcell has moved into the Swedish cellulose company SCA's old pulp and paper factory. In 2020, SCA decided to close down production of printing paper, which had employed 700 people. Photo: Henrik Bodin.

Renewcell looks like a paper factory, but old jeans have replaced timber as the raw material.

“We partly use the same machines as a paper factory. Our drying machine that dries the pulp is a second-hand machine, although it is not from SCA. Their localities were perfect for our production and former employees became a resource for us.

“We are now planning to scale up to produce 360,000 tonnes. This should generate 500 jobs. This is a processing industry after all, so it is not very labour-intensive. Most jobs are linked to controlling the process through screens. But there will be more jobs in total since there is an increasing demand for these products,” says Martin Stenfors.



Iceland's Labour Minister: Challenges of a fair green transition must be faced together

Guðmundur Ingi Guðbrandsson has been Iceland's Minister of Social Affairs, Labour and Nordic Cooperation since 2021. In that role, he has led Iceland's Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers this year and will chair a summit with representatives from Nordic trade unions, employers and governments in Reykjavik in December.

NEWS

06.11.2023

TEXT: HALLGRÍMUR INDRÍÐASON, PHOTO: ARI PÁLL KARLSSON

We sat down with Guðbrandsson to discuss these and other priorities of Iceland's Presidency.

Guðmundur Ingi Guðbrandsson says Iceland's plan for the Nordic Council of Ministers has been very ambitious.

"We have prepared this in an atmosphere that revolves around two factors. One is that the pandemic has just finished, and we are working our way out of all kinds of resulting consequences, for example in the labour market and socially.

"The other factor is Russia's invasion of Ukraine which leads to an increased focus on peace in our leadership plan. Since the start of the invasion, other things have happened of course that increases the need to focus on peace. But Ukraine is closer to the Nordic countries and we've had cooperation in certain fields with Eastern European countries.

"Now we, the Nordic cooperation ministers, have reduced cooperation with Russia but still have the possibility to support specific work there, for example humanitarian work."

Focus on the climate and environment

Guðbrandsson says Iceland is also working on a special plan for how to adapt to big changes facing the labour market. The plan runs until next year. Guðbrandsson was previously the Minister of the Environment and before that a climate activist. So it comes as no surprise that climate change and the environment are big factors during the Presidency.

“We have a special emphasis on a fair green transition which is covered in that plan, but we’re taking it to a higher level. We are preparing for a summit at the start of December where we use the Nordic labour market model as a role model. We are gathering representatives from everyone; the labour unions, the employers and the governments.”

More on that meeting later.

Iceland is also working on improving inclusion in the labour market.

“That means an open labour market for all. We are particularly focusing on disabled people and immigrants. I’ve worked on this a lot here in Iceland. And we’re also working on revaluing jobs in a gender-based labour market, which the office of the Prime Minister is supervising as a matter of equality.”

Guðbrandsson adds two more of Iceland’s focus areas for Nordic cooperation.

“Number one is research, especially when it comes to things that will clearly change soon in terms of the green transition and labour inclusion. We should focus on this to build a base for future policymaking. This is already ongoing.

“Second, we should pay closer attention to people’s skills and how we can give them a better chance to increase and improve their skills so they can do the jobs that will change in the future, both because of technology and the green transition. There is a huge discussion about this in Europe.”

“We can learn a lot from each other”

But back to the Reykjavik summit. Guðbrandsson says it has the potential to be a very important meeting.

“Each time you’re facing something new you will do it better when you bring more parties to the table, especially if you can do it in an international context. This summit will gather the labour unions, employers and governments in the same room.

“That is very important because it’s clear we have to face the challenges of a fair green transition together, not only in order to enjoy the changes themselves but also to spread the burdens in a fair manner. This is in accordance with the Nordic countries’ common vision for the year 2030, where we aim for a green, competitive and socially sustainable Nordic region.

“So I think it is very important to get some kind of a starting point with a good meeting with these parties. There we can turn to the main issues we have to face in terms of the green transition and how we address these as part of our cooperation. Much of this happens within each country, of course, but we can learn so much from each other as we have shown previously in our Nordic cooperation.

“I have to say I’ve been a minister for almost six years in two different ministries and in my view, at the core of Nordic cooperation is the exchange of views and learning from each other in order to strengthen our common values. This meeting is a very good venue to further this work.”

Guðbrandsson says the biggest challenges with the green transition revolve around people’s skills.

“It’s important we realise what changes lie ahead. One of the things to consider is artificial intelligence, which will not make the task simpler. But it can also create opportunities to help us move things in the right direction.

“In my mind, we have to find ways to make sure the labour market has the necessary skills to face these changes and make sure people who either lose their jobs or face significant changes in their jobs get the chance to improve their skills.”

When asked, Guðbrandsson concedes that this is also something the educational system, run by the state, has to participate in.

“We are therefore reviewing our secondary education system, and we expect a report in November. My goal is to put forward new legislation in parliament based on that.”

Guðbrandsson adds that it is also important that the employers and the labour unions can agree on green solutions. He says a special ministerial committee on the Icelandic language is currently in session to discuss how to strengthen the position of the language, especially as a second language. That is important when you want to include immigrants in the labour market.

“It is crucial to support this development and important that this fits together.”

Transport and agriculture main challenges to carbon neutrality

Like many other countries, Iceland aims to be carbon neutral by 2040. Guðbrandsson says the biggest challenge facing Iceland is to finish the conversion to green energy.

“Here we are mainly looking at fishing trawlers, road transport and aviation. Other factors in the energy conversion are on track, for example public transportation and private cars.”

The other big challenge is agriculture.

“Here we have to do better, not only in Iceland but in all of the Nordic countries. You can’t change enteric fermentation in cattle and sheep like you change engines in cars and planes. So emissions from livestock have to be reduced with different uses of fertiliser, for example. This relates to the condition of the Icelandic ecosystem and the destruction of land that has taken place. We have managed to improve that. But these are the main challenges.”

Guðbrandsson says the goal is to keep on reducing CO₂ emissions even after Iceland reaches carbon neutrality.

“We can keep on doing that by reclaiming land and wetlands. That is what we should aim for while we reach for a better climate balance in the world.”

We end our interview by looking at what lies ahead for the Icelandic labour market. The short-term collective agreements signed at the end of last year expire in January and chances are that negotiations for new ones will be difficult since inflation and interest rates are high.

“For me, it’s important to reach long-term agreements. They bring more stability to the economy since we know what to expect. I think it is clear that the state will bring something to the table to support the goal of long-term agreements. But they also have to support our efforts to lower inflation and interest rates because that’s what we all want, no matter who we represent. So the Central Bank, the state and the labour market all have to do what they can.”

Guðbrandsson says he wants to see an increase in the lowest salaries – either in the next agreements or later.

“We have taken some steps in the past few years and I think the labour unions did a great job there. I also hope we can improve pay for women in certain jobs compared to that of men with similar education levels. This is what I think is most important now.”



Northeast Iceland's manyfacedet labour market

María Pálsdóttir throws out her arms and exclaims: “Welcome to the hospital!” Dressed in an old-fashioned nurse’s uniform, her joy and enthusiasm are almost out of place. We are, after all, visiting an old sanatorium. This is the story of “the white death” – the tuberculosis that hit the island hard.

NEWS

06.11.2023

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

Hælið, which the museum is called, is part of the dark tourism phenomenon. Like the catacombs of Paris, Ground Zero in New York or Tsjernobyl, this is about death, pain and suffering. But it is also about the will to live and the desire to make use of what is available and make the best out of things.

Maria Pálsdóttir grew up on a farm neighbouring Kristines Hospital – built in 1927 to treat tuberculosis patients from the northern part of Iceland. A total of 5,900 Icelanders died from the disease between 1911 and 1970. Globally, TB has been the deadliest disease of all over the past 200 years. The sanatorium is near Akureyri in the north-eastern part of the country.

When Maria Pálsdóttir visited her old stomping grounds in 2015, she was saddened to see how many of the buildings had fallen into disrepair. She originally trained as an actor, but decided that something had to be done.



The walls in one of the rooms in the museum have been covered in copies of letters written to and from the sanatorium.

“When I announced the plans to restore the sanatorium, I immediately got contacted by Icelanders who had had relatives there or who had experienced being treated there as children,” she says.

To her surprise, one of them was former Icelandic President Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, whose mother Svanhildur fought TB for most of her life until her death at 51. He gave Pálsdóttir two million Icelandic kronor (€13,600) as startup capital and others followed suit with smaller amounts.

Today, the museum is a captivating experience – especially if Maria Pálsdóttir herself is the guide. As an actor, she knows exactly which stories will touch your heart.

Before the 1970s, there was no cure for TB other than rest, vitamins, sunshine and fresh air. Sometimes, the body’s immune system managed to beat the disease. One extreme operation that was used involved removing parts of the ribs, causing the lungs to collapse and starving the tuberculosis bacteria of oxygen.

“I still need to hold down three other jobs, so I cannot make a living from the museum and café alone. But it tells an important story which feels much more relevant after the Covid-19 pandemic,” she says.

Not far from the old sanatorium lies Jólahúsið (the Christmas House) which “everybody” who comes to Akureyri visits. The house offers a year-round orgie of Christmas decorations of all kinds and sweets are sold at a fast pace.

“We are nine employees here now, but this is still very much a family business,” says Erna Rún Halldorsdóttir, whose parents built the Christmas house.

“We actually get most visitors in summer.”



Erna Rún Halldorsdóttir at the Christmas House sells sweets and Christmas decorations all year round.

Under all the sugar there is a slight bitter undertone because the Icelandic Christmas is not like that of other countries. There are 13 Santa Clauses who are all children of the troll witch Grýla. In the 13 days leading up to Christmas, every morning children get presents in socks that have been hung up, but if they have been naughty they get an old potato instead – although we doubt many children risk getting that today.

Icelanders are after all like most people, but they often have a slightly different perspective on things. With just 1.3 people per square kilometre, the relationship between people and nature is different from more crowded areas of the world.

That is also why Hjalti Páll Þórarinnsson, project leader for Visit Northern Iceland, concludes that this part of the country runs no risk of becoming a victim of over-tourism.

“There are still many places where nothing happens at all. But large numbers of tourists can be a challenge, of course. Especially at airports or in harbours, where we might get bottlenecks when many people arrive at once.”



Rögvaldur Gudmundsson and Hjalti Páll Þórarinnsson, with Akureyri in the background.

Northern Iceland can boast that 97 per cent of visitors are very satisfied or satisfied with their experience. 44 per cent of visitors to Iceland go to the northern side, and these are often people who have been there before. In the south, “The

Golden Route” has been promoted for 40 years – a round trip which takes you to Thingvellir where the great continental shelves meet, the water-spouting Geysir and the large Gullfoss waterfall.

“Here in the North, we didn’t want to be outdone, so we started promoting “The Diamond Circle” a few years back and it has been a huge success,” says Hjalti Páll Þórarinnsson.



The number of overnight hotel stays in Northern Iceland so far this year compared to the record year of 2018. The red line is 2023, which has remained above 2018 every month bar January. Source: Statistics Iceland. The picture of Dettifoss was taken by Tim Bekaert, Wikipedia

The most important stops on the tour, which is hard to fit into only one day, are the small town of Húsavík, the deep valley of Ásbyrgi, lake Mývatn och Dettifoss, the most powerful waterfall in Europe whether you measure the amount of water, the height or the width.

Tourism is Iceland’s most important industry. It is organised in a different way to most other countries where the travel industry is made up of larger companies. This is particularly the case in Northern Iceland.

“There are 900 tourist companies outside of Reykjavík – most are made up of only one or two people,” says Hjalti Páll Þórarinnsson.

They are guides with their own all-terrain vehicles, small restaurants that sometimes operate out of private houses and fishing boats that are used for whale safaris. This is combined with a very strong support for culture and sport, which benefits both locals and tourists.

Out of the 39,000 people who live in the North-East, 20,000 are in Akureyri. It might not sound like a big place, but it is actually the largest town in Iceland. Compared to other Nordic towns of a similar size, it boasts:

- A university with 2,000 students
- 8 sports halls and 4 indoor swimming pools
- A cultural center with a large 590-seater hall
- A music school with 400 students



The Akureyri Cultural Center is circular and the only building next to the Harpa concert hall in Reykjavík to be finished after an economic crisis hit Iceland in 2018.

“Getting people to want to live here in Northern Iceland is not only about offering enough jobs. We also asked: ‘What do we do after 5 pm?’,” says Rögnvaldur Guðmundsson, who heads the Association of Municipalities in Northeast Iceland.

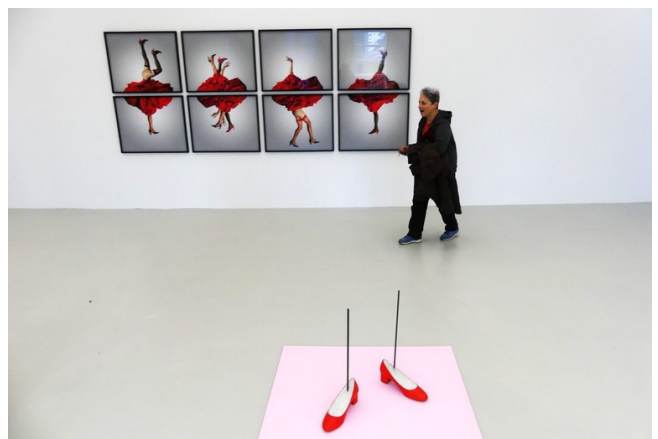
“Culture is important, just like making sure children and young people have it good. So we support many different cultural projects every year – one of them is the tuberculosis museum.”

He admits that as long as unemployment is as low as three per cent, there will not be that much innovation.

“Everybody’s already got a job,” he says.

But when we look around the town, we are struck by the number of unexpected experiences – like the art museum showcasing works that might as well have been exhibited in New York.

Akureyri Art Museum is one of the newest art museums in Iceland, opened in 1993. It is housed in what used to be a co-operative, a building with strong Bauhaus and Funkis design influences.



Akureyri art museum is one of Iceland's youngest, founded in 1993. It is housed in a former cooperative, designed with strong Bahaus and Funkis influences.

“Oh wow! This is fantastic! How provocative,” exclaims a group of three American women who look like they have visited many art exhibitions in their lives, as they watch Icelandic artist Brynhildur Kristinsdóttir’s images, videos and objects that explore what it is to be masculine and feminine.

“Some of us choose to spread like rats – in all directions – while others choose to go straight ahead,” she writes in her presentation of her exhibition.

Northern Iceland does not live off tourism alone, however. Fishing is still a major industry, and the situation for energy-intensive industries is good in Iceland, where energy prices are not linked to the European market.



Grétar Thór Eythórsson and Hjalti Jóhannesson from the University of Akureyri are doing research on how global trends will impact North-Eastern Iceland's labour market.

On both sides of Akureyri are towns that are dominated by a few companies. As a result, they have been chosen to participate in a Nordic research programme called SunRem – short for “Sustainable Remote Nordic Labour Markets”. It looks at a number of isolated labour markets across the Nordic region. Researchers Hjalti Jóhannesson and Grétar Thór Eythórsson in Akureyri represent the Icelandic part of the project, which is partially financed by NordForsk.

“We will be looking at how labour markets are influenced by trends like digitalisation, globalisation and climate change, which we cannot control ourselves,” explains Hjalti Jóhannesson.

The town of Dalvík has 1,906 inhabitants and the labour market is completely dominated by the Icelandic company Samherji, which is one of the Icelandic fishing industry’s largest businesses. It runs fish processing plants in both Akureyri and Dalvík.



Samherji's Dalvík processing plant. Photo: Samherji.

“The Dalvík fish processing plant is the world’s most modern and it employs 165 people. There has been a lot of work to improve the working environment there, where they filet cod and other white fish. Since it lies just 40 kilometres from Akureyri, there are quite a few who commute in both directions. The number of immigrant labourers is also relatively large. 13 per cent of the inhabitants are foreign nationals.”

Húsavík is somewhat bigger with 3,156 inhabitants. This is a whale-watching centre, for tourists who want to go out on boats to see sperm whales. Húsavík is also home to energy-intensive industry – a factory that produces silicone metal. This is a shiny, grey semiconduction metal used in the manufacturing of solar panels and microchips.

The company is owned by the German company PCC which started construction on the factory in 2018, in the middle of the Icelandic financial crisis.

The process involves heating the raw material, quartzite, which comes from a mine in Poland, to 2,000 degrees. The addition of silicon metal makes aluminium alloys strong and lightweight.

The town is 75 kilometres from Akureyri, making it too far away to commute from there. At 22 per cent, the number of foreign citizens is nearly double that of Dalvík, thanks to the tourism sector as well as the very specialised production that PCC is involved with.

Both towns have seen a slight dip in the number of citizens since 2000, but Húsavík has grown in later years. Yet there is a significant shortage of women, especially in Húsavík where there are 89 women for every 100 men.

“Dalvík has already taken a step into the future and enjoys a technological advantage. But this also means that there is an increasing need for IT and process control expertise. A town like Dalvík will always be dependent on the success of one company,” says Grétar Thór Eythórsson.

“But North-Eastern Iceland has seen big change before. There used to be thousands of employees in shoe and textile production in Akureyri, but the industry faltered when the

Soviet Union fell. The Russians were big customers. The joke is that Akureyri was the place that was the hardest hit by the fall of Communism,” says Grétar Thór Eythórsson.

Denmark and Sweden on the barricades over pilots and crew compensation

Denmark and Sweden are once again out defending the Nordic labour market model. This time it is about a new case before the EU Court questioning whether cabin crew receiving lower allowances than pilots constitutes gender discrimination.

NEWS

06.11.2023

TEXT: KERSTIN AHLBERG

Since their terms of employment are regulated through two separate collective agreements, the answer must be no argue Denmark and Sweden. Otherwise, it would no longer be possible to maintain the freedom of negotiation.

The cabin crew and pilots have the same employer but are organised in different trade unions. The cabin crew signed their collective agreement in 2019 and the other collective agreement was entered into by the pilots' trade union just over a year later.

It is easy to understand that the cabin crew felt unjustly treated when they saw that the pilots got higher allowance levels than them for work-related costs. They also argued that the difference in compensation effectively amounted to gender discrimination because cabin crew are predominantly women while the majority of pilots are men.

They took the matter to court, and eventually, the issue ended up in the EU Court of Justice, which will now decide if they are right or if this differential treatment is justifiable.

It is justifiable, according to both the Danish and Swedish governments, both of which have delivered their opinions in the case. Another approach would have unforeseeable and negative consequences for the autonomy of the social partners and their ability to negotiate and enter into collective agreements, argues the Swedish government.

The government underlines that it is common for employers to be bound by two or more separate collective agreements negotiated at different levels and with different groups of employees. During negotiations, the parties represent different interests and make different priorities based on the interests of the company, the industry, and the members.

While one party may prioritise higher wages, another may prioritise shorter working hours or more generous rules for work journeys.

If you start comparing conditions in different collective agreements negotiated between different parties, you risk ending up with a situation where the freedom of negotiation for the parties can no longer be maintained, according to the government.

This could, among other things, mean that parties that are in the process of negotiating a collective agreement become indirectly bound by conditions in other collective agreements to which they are not party because they would be required to consider the provisions of the other agreements.

The question is whether the EU Court will agree.



Russian rubles in the Faroe Islands' economy

People on the Faroe Islands are holding their breath these days. At least those working in the pelagic fishing industry. So far this year their export to Russia has been worth 800 million Danish kroner (€107m). Now it might all end, as the Russian fisheries authority has recommended an import ban on Faroese fish products.

NEWS

06.11.2023

TEXT: RÓLANT WAAG DAM, PHOTO: IDA MARIE ODGAARD/RITZAU SCANPIX

Meanwhile, the Faroe Islands are deciding whether or not to renegotiate a fisheries agreement with Russia.

Reality has set in on the Faroe Islands. While the industry and much of the political system were calling for a statement from the Faroese government on whether they would renegotiate a fishing agreement with Russia, there was a very clear message from the Russian side:

"The Federal Agency for Fishery has presented a proposal to the Russian government to impose a ban on the import of

fish products from the Faroe Islands," the message from Rosrybolovstvo, the fisheries agency, stated.

The Faroes are now considering this statement. Because what does it mean? How should it be interpreted?

Wave goodbye to several hundreds of millions

In concrete terms, this is saying goodbye to a market of 143 million people. Exports to Russia represent around ten per cent of the Faroese export market. 800 million Danish kro-

ner (€107m) so far this year – nearly half of the total Faroese export of pelagic fish products in the same period.

But how real is the Russian threat right now?

“I reckon the decision has already been made and that this will become a reality,” Flemming Rose, editor-in-chief at Frihedsbrevet in Denmark and former Russia correspondent for Berlingske Tidende, tells Frihedsbrevet in the Faroese and expands:

“It has already been presented as a proposal to the government from a public body. You do not normally do that without the case having been decided for those it concerns.”

His comments are supported by what the Russian ambassador to Denmark, Vladimir Barbin, told Frihedsbrevet in August in connection with the actions taken by the Faroese government against Russian ships.

“The Faroe Islands are now moving away from developing mutually beneficial cooperation with Russia. This new situation might demand a reaction from Russia. This is both a lesson and a new reality. Russia must therefore re-evaluate its trust in the Faores as a fishing industry partner,” said the Russian ambassador.

Remarkable timing

The final and official Russian withdrawal has not yet been announced, but the recommendation has made many Faroese worried. Because it is reasonable to interpret the Russian recommendations of 23 October as a bad sign for the decision that must be made soon: should the fishing agreement between the Faroe Islands and Russia be extended or abandoned? These negotiations usually start in November – the recommendation from Russia came in late October.



Sjørður Skaale, Faroese member of the Danish parliament. Photo Johannes Jansson/Norden.org

In an interview with the Danish Politiken newspaper, Sjørður Skaale, a Faroese member of the Danish parliament, said it was “remarkable” that the import stop was announced right now.

Heini í Skorini, associate professor in international politics at the University of the Faroe Islands, Fróðskaparsetur Føroya, also finds the timing significant.

“The timing is interesting as this could be interpreted as Russian pressure, that Russia is flexing her muscles. The fishing agreement runs back to 1977 so the question is whether decades of cooperation on fishing has come to an end or not,” Heini í Skorini was quoted as saying on the Danish Broadcasting Corporation website.

This is where it is important to remain cautious because export and the fishing agreement are two separate things – and yet:

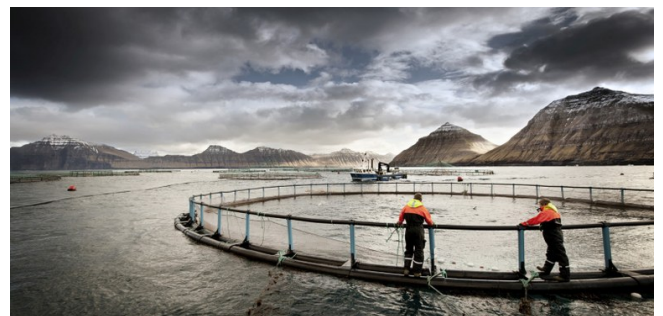
“It is not unfeasible that Russia would impose an import ban if the Faroese parliament decides not to enter into negotiations on an extension to the fishing agreement. And if the was to be extended, this would not happen. In that case, it is remarkable that this happens right now,” Skaale told Politiken.

Nearly 50 years of cooperation with Russia

So this is where the Faroese government is at right now. A threatened import ban and an undecided situation about the renewal of a nearly 50-year-old cooperation agreement with Russia.

The export part of the Faroe Islands’ relationship with Russia is easy to understand. It became particularly prominent when the EU imposed sanctions on the Faroe Islands in 2013 in connection with a dispute over quotas in the Atlantic.

Russia became the answer to who the Faroes would sell their fish to, and a pelagic fairytale began for the islands, which went from exporting for less than half a billion Danish kroner (€67m) to more than two billion (€268m) per year at its peak.



Bakkafrost is the leading producer of salmon in the Faroe Islands. Photo: Bakkafrost

But then came the war in Ukraine and Bakkafrost, the largest of three salmon farms in the Faroes, was one of several companies that stopped selling salmon to Russia.

“We simply feel that our values require us to stop the supply of fish to Russia for the moment,” Regin Jacobsen, the

Bakkafrost CEO, told the Fishfarmingexpert magazine back in March 2022.

“For the past 15 years, we have been exporting salmon to Russia, and 10 to 15 per cent of our turnover has been from exports to Russia – at a value of around 600 million kroner a year (€80.4m). We had a very good relationship with our customers there.”

We are talking about a lot of money, in other words – an annual total of 2.6 billion kroner (€348m) at its peak. Now that is down to one billion kroner.



Feeding time for the salmon. Photo: Bakkafrost

The fishing agreement with Russia is a bit harder to translate into kroner and ører. It is a kind of barter trade where Faroese trawlers have primarily been able to fish for cod in the Barents Sea while Russian fishermen can catch blue whiting in Faroese seas.

A total of four Faroese shipping companies have had fishing quotas in the Barents Sea while around 30 Russian ships have been able to fish in Faroese waters as part of the agreement.

In the autumn of 2022, the then-government calculated that the agreement with Russia broke even – meaning the Faroe Islands received as much on one end as they lost on the other. Other economists have said the agreement is worth 200 million kroner (€27.8m).

The agreement will be renewed

The current Faroese governing coalition is made up of the Social Democratic Party, the Republic and Progress. A year ago, they were railing against cooperation with Russia. The election campaign was underway, and they were aiming for victory. They secured it in December 2022, but now reality has caught up with them.

This means there is a lot pointing to a renewed fishing agreement with Russia will be renewed. The coalition partners no longer say what they said in November 2022 because it does not reveal much about the issue. The main reason is probably

that they are struggling to find a majority that will support an end to the fishing agreement with Russia.

This is something that has been repeated many times by political commentator and journalist Árni Gregersen both in the national broadcaster Kringvarp Føroya and in Danish media.

“If you ask me, then yes – I believe this will end up with an extension. There is a parliamentary majority for it. The opposition supports extending the agreement. Both the Union Party and the People’s Party have said this to Politiken and elsewhere.”

The question is if he is right, what will happen to the recommended import ban on Faroese fishing products in Russia? In the Faroe Islands, people are waiting for the answer to that question with bated breath, while people are also waiting to see whether the Faroes will choose to enter into new negotiations with Russia on an extension to the historic fishing agreement.



Greenland: New legislation to secure improved working environments

Working environments in Greenland should improve after new labour legislation sharpens the focus on mental well-being and imposes higher fines for companies that break the law.

NEWS

06.11.2023

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER, PHOTO: ROYAL GREENLAND

There will be added focus on workplace challenges like sexual harassment, stress and PTSD in Greenlandic workplaces and within the country's Working Environment Authority, which is tasked with policing working environments.

Greenland's working environment legislation has not been updated for 18 years and is outdated in terms of protecting workers' psychological working conditions. The Danish parliament, responsible for working environment issues in Greenland, has therefore passed new working environment legislation for the autonomous territory.



Aaja Chemnitz. Photo: Johannes Jansson/Norden.org

The new legislation came into force on 1 July 2023 and placed far more focus on the psychological working environment than before. The change is being welcomed by Aaja Chemnitz, who represents Greenland's government party Inuit Ataqatigiit (IA) in the Danish parliament.

"The fact that the new legislation also focuses on the psychological working environment is a great step forward. It means we will be able to prevent psychological strain like stress, harassment and sexual harassment in a much better way. This is needed."

Stress and PTSD are issues that are far more common among police officers and prison staff in Greenland compared to in Denmark, points out Aaja Chemnitz. She hopes that the new legislation can also reduce the harsh and psychologically draining tone that sometimes exists between managers and employees in some workplaces.

Invisible authority

The Government of Greenland is responsible for the majority of employment issues in the territory, but the working environment is still governed by the Danish Ministry of Employment, and Aaja Chemnitz has criticised Greenland's working environment policies several times in the Danish parliament.

She has accused the Greenlandic Working Environment Authority of being far too "invisible" and she has also criticised the Greenlandic Working Environment Council, which is made up of trade union members, and the Danish government as well.

"I welcome the fact that the Danish government is now taking the criticism seriously, and I will keep a keen eye on how the legislation is implemented. It is important that it comes with the necessary resources."

During negotiations for the 2024 budget, she argued that more workers and managers in Greenland should be given access to online working environment training.

"This is mandatory training for companies, but there is far from enough capacity and this is very unfortunate," says Aaja Chemnitz.

Government minister visit

The Danish Minister for Employment Ane Halsboe-Jørgensen from the Social Democrats said that there is now "a solid basis for our continuing work to secure a safe and healthy working environment in Greenland" as the new legislation was being passed.

The legislation means there will be:

- Increased focus on psychological working environments in Greenland
- Higher fines for companies that violate rules in the working environment act under particularly aggravating circumstances

- Stricter rules on companies' Risk Assessments (APVs)
- A modernising of rules concerning companies' cooperation on health and safety



Jess Svane, Naalakkersuisoq (minister) of Social Affairs, Home Affairs and the Labour Market in Greenland, and Ane Halsboe-Jørgensen, Minister for Employment in Denmark. (Photo: Naalakkersuisoq/Marie Hald).

After the legislation was passed, Ane Halsboe-Jørgensen visited Greenland to learn more about working environments in Greenlandic workplaces. She and her Greenlandic counterpart visited several companies, including a fish processing plant owned by Royal Greenland.

The fisheries industry represents 95 per cent of Greenland's exports and Royal Greenland is one of the country's largest employers with 2,286 staff, 48 plants and production facilities across Greenland, Canada and Europe plus a large number of fishing vessels.

Aaja Chemnitz considers Royal Greenland to be "an important role model" for other Greenlandic companies when it comes to working systematically for a good working environment.

Knife and falling injuries

Royal Greenland has in recent years carried out legally required Risk Assessments (APVs) both at onshore and offshore fish processing plants.



At Royal Greenland's factory in Qasigiannguit 25 ton halibut can be processed per day. Photo: Royal Greenland.

This has provided data on a range of dangerous working conditions and the company has identified some of the most dangerous as being:

- Falling and tripping accidents on slippery and uneven floors cause the most injuries
- Knives and non-mechanical tools also cause a relatively high number of injuries
- Falling objects that hit a toe or similar
- Heavy lifting
- Cold weather and draughts

Some workers also point to bullying and unwanted sexual behaviour, although this is a small group, writes Royal Greenland on their website.

The number of injuries per full-time employee fell in 2022, according to the company, which is due to “increased focus on the working environment in recent years”.

Royal Greenland is currently establishing an integrated system for quality, working environments and the natural environment. A working group will make sure that local representatives are trained to discuss private issues if colleagues need this. If the challenge requires additional skills, it will be possible to seek further assistance through the supervisor and HR.

The aim is to fully implement an integrated working environment and environmental system across the whole of Royal Greenland by 2030.

Greenlandic in the Danish parliament

The Danish-Greenlandic relationship was also addressed by Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen (Social Democrats) in her traditional speech at the October opening of the 2023-2024 parliamentary session.

She said this about the unity of the realm between Denmark, Greenland and the Faroe Islands:

“It is not Denmark that decides the future of Greenland or the Faroe Islands. This is a decision that rests with Nuuk and Tórshavn. But for now, we have the unity of the realm. And personally, I hope this remains for many years to come. While we retain an equal cooperation between the three countries, three peoples, three governments. And three languages. Which from now on can be used from this rostrum.”

With this, the Prime Minister alluded to the fact that the parliamentary presidium has decided that members of parliament from Greenland and the Faroe Islands can now speak in their own languages when addressing the Danish parliament, before providing a Danish translation.



Kick-off for the Future of Work in Vilnius

Five Nordic research projects on the future of work recently held a joint kick-off event in Vilnius, Lithuania. NordForsk has provided 15 million Norwegian kroner (€1.28m) in funding. Lithuanian researchers are participating in two of the projects. Åland also has an independent role.

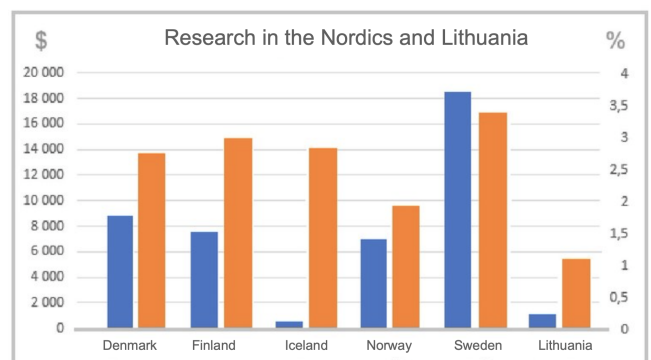
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To qualify for NordForsk funding, at least three Nordic countries must participate and other research bodies must contribute two thirds of the funding for each project. So there are five projects with a total funding amount of 46 million kroner (€3.93m), a considerable sum within the field of labour research.

Lithuania participates and contributes as much as the Nordic countries. Since independence in 1990, Lithuania has been focused on developing its research.



The bars show each country's 2022 R&D investment. Blue bars represent millions of dollars, orange bars represent share of GDP. Source: OECD

With 2.8 million inhabitants, Lithuania's research investments in dollars are just over twice as much as that of Iceland, according to the OECD. In terms of the share of GDP, the gap to the Nordic countries is not as large.

"We try to balance our national needs with the fact that the research is becoming increasingly international," said Jurgita Verbickienė from the Research Council of Lithuania as she opened the meeting.



Jurgita Verbickienė, professor of history and head of project at the Research Council of Lithuania.

It was held at Talent Garden Vilnius, which describes itself as "a unique facility located in the Oldtown with flexible workspaces and digital skills training for over 230 members". That was a good fit since hybrid and flexible workplaces are themes in several of the projects.

In the research grant announcement, there was an opportunity to apply for funds to study the situation of Lithuanian labour migration after the pandemic. Lithuanian labour has become an important factor in several Nordic countries. In both Norway and Iceland, Lithuanians now make up the second-largest immigrant group.

However, the Research Council of Lithuania chose to fund the AGE-SWAP project instead, which looks at how to convince older people to remain in the labour market, as well as REMOTE-flex, which looks at hybrid working.

There is a simple explanation for this.

"Lithuania and Latvia have the worst demographic development of all EU countries when it comes to the labour market," said Antanas Kairys from the Department of Psychology at Vilnius University. They participate in the project alongside researchers from Sweden and Iceland.

A shrinking labour force

He quoted EU statistics predicting the number of Lithuanians aged between 20 and 64 will fall by nearly 30 per cent by 2045.



Antanas Kairys from the Department of Psychology at Vilnius University.

The acronym SWAP stands for Sustainable working-life for ageing populations, and the research project's aim is to study the rapid changes facing people over 50 from a Nordic-Baltic perspective. Or, as one of the working groups in the project put it: Work until you are 72 – dream or nightmare?

"Perhaps because people simply don't want to work for longer? Iceland used to be a country where people worked into old age, but attitudes are changing," said Kolbeinn Hólmur Stefánsson from the University of Iceland.

The other four projects with equally cryptical acronyms are:

REMOTE-Flex

which will look at hybrid working, which is the preferred term these days when many jobs are not necessarily performed in an office.

"What impact does remote and flexible working have on employees' motivation? That is one of our main questions," said project leader Andreas Stenling from Umeå University.

"The problem with a lot of the current research is that it is ambiguous. Hybrid work can reduce stress, improve the work-life balance and improve productivity. But it can also reduce satisfaction, productivity, information exchange and increase loneliness."

SUNREM

looks at labour markets in remote areas (the acronym stands for Sustainable Remote Nordic Labour Markets).

The project studies places like Slite and Skellefteå in Sweden, Stord and Hammarfest in Norway, Dalvík and Húsavík in Iceland, and also Åland.

“We will make use of backcasting, a technique where you define a desired result at a point in the future and work backwards to find out what is needed to reach that goal,” said Gustaf Norlén. He is the project’s deputy leader, and Anna Lundgren is the project leader. Both work at Nordregio.



Gustaf Norlén, deputy project leader for SUNREM and Nordregion researcher.

The idea is to involve local decision-makers both in identifying goals for the green transition and how to reach them.

“Backcasting is not about predicting what will happen, but identifying what you wish to happen.”

The towns and cities that have been selected are relatively different, from Skellefteå with 32,000 inhabitants and rapidly expanding industry, to Norðurþing with one tenth the number of inhabitants.

SIWH

is short for “Sustainable and inclusive hybrid workplaces - anywhere and anytime?”, and will look at hybrid work from a new angle. The research group comprises four architects, four engineers and two sociologists. They will investigate the impact of the hybrid workplace on office workers and their organisations, on urban planning, and on the climate.

They will study four Swedish companies – the SEB bank, gaming company TocaBoca, Gothenburg Municipality and the property company HIGAB.

Working in a Nordic group also means that certain issues are more important to certain countries.

“In Iceland, dampness in houses is a very big problem. Energy is so cheap that people just leave their windows open, and we don’t have ventilation systems with fans,” said Ólafur H. Wallevik from Reykjavik University.



Icelandic researcher Ólafur H. Wallevik from Reykjavik University.

This means that the work environment for people who work from home does not live up to the standards set for ventilation. It is not a damp environment in itself that is the problem. The main issue is that it leads to mould damage which in turn can result in allergies.

The research group aims to present its findings at the European Healthy Buildings conference in Reykjavik in June 2025.

Four companies will be identified for investigation. Some of the research will also concentrate on how hybrid work fits into the Nordic model.

“Legislation and local agreements were created for the ‘old working life’ and need adapting,” said Marianne Skaar from Sintef in Trondheim.



Marianne Skaar, researcher at Sintef, represents Norway in the SIWH research project.

Two companies – one public and one private – will be studied in Trondheim and in Bærum, a neighbouring municipality to Oslo.

UISH

looks at sexual harassment in the workplace. The research group used a video presentation of themselves and the pro-

ject, but only sent one of their researchers to the event in Vilnius.

There are high expectations from NordForsk to UISH, however, since this group will be following up on one of the research themes which has attracted the most attention – a study of sexual harassment in the police force, led by Dag Ellingsen.

After presenting their projects, each research group was asked to put questions to another group. The most common comment was that the projects might be too ambitious.

Anna-Karin Florén is responsible for the Fortes research council's ten-year national labour market research programme, which has contributed the most money. She was satisfied after the meeting of researchers in Vilnius.

"I am very pleased with these research projects. They respond well to some of the major societal trends such as the green transition, digitalisation, and demographic development. Forte appreciates the opportunity for collaborative learning that the research within the NordForsk projects offers."

It is important for NordForsk that the research they are funding results in something that will benefit the Nordic region.

This can be achieved either by building up a critical mass of researchers within a specific field, establishing networks, and making research more cost-effective by sharing resources. It can also be that the research can only be conducted in the Nordic countries, for example if specific registry data is available only there.

It is also worth taking into account the ideas and insights that emerge through the meeting of researchers with different backgrounds and nationalities. In this instance, Baltic researchers can also contribute with their own perspectives on these issues.



All the researchers who participated in Vilnius, plus some representatives from NordForsk and the Nordic Council of Ministers.