

A photograph of two young girls leaning against a large, textured tree trunk in a grassy field. The girl on the left is wearing a red and white striped shirt and pink pants, looking up at the tree. The girl on the right is wearing a light blue tank top and light blue pants, looking towards the camera. The background shows green foliage and a clear sky.

# Together or apart?

*The Nordic Council and the EU*

*Karina Jutila • Terhi Tikkala (eds.)*





# Contents

<i>Introduction</i> . . . . .	3
<i>Earlier reforms in the Nordic Council</i> . . . . .	9
Reforms between 1989 and 2008 . . . . .	10
1990s . . . . .	10
Winds of change . . . . .	12
Current developments . . . . .	13
The effect of the reforms . . . . .	14
Is small beautiful? . . . . .	14
Far-reaching enough?. . . . .	14
Are further reforms necessary? . . . . .	15
Previous reform measures efficient?. . . . .	16
Reforms vis-à-vis Europe and the EU. . . . .	17
Summary and conclusions . . . . .	19
<i>How is the Nordic Council doing?</i> . . . . .	22
Background and values unite member countries . . . . .	23
Lack of political clout a weakness . . . . .	24
A more active approach to EU issues. . . . .	25
More efficiency and results . . . . .	27
The NC in the future: a talking shop or an invigorated actor at the EU level? . . . . .	29
Annex: Questionnaire form. . . . .	31

<b><i>The Nordic Council and the EU</i></b> . . . . .	<b>33</b>
<b>An institution on the wane or on the up?</b> . . . . .	<b>33</b>
<i>Unprejudiced evaluation of the future needed</i> . . . . .	<b>35</b>
<b>The EU needs regional parliaments</b> . . . . .	<b>36</b>
<i>Similar but different parliaments</i> . . . . .	<b>36</b>
<i>The challenges of regionalisation in the EU.</i> . . . .	<b>38</b>
<b>A parliamentary EU?</b> . . . . .	<b>40</b>
<b>NC needs to be reformed and made more European</b> . . .	<b>43</b>
<i>What sort of EU agenda does the NC need?</i> . . . . .	<b>45</b>
<b>Raise the profile of EU affairs in the Council of Ministers</b> .	<b>47</b>
<b>Summary of actions.</b> . . . . .	<b>48</b>

# *Introduction*

**A**s European integration proceeds, the role of the Nordic Council and other regional parliaments in relation to the EU is in a state of flux. What sort of role can the Nordic Council play in an evolving EU-centric Europe? What sort of regional parliamentary cooperation is needed in the European Union? Does a greater EU focus mean that changes are required in the Nordic Council? This report seeks to answer these questions, among others.

Since the Nordic Council was established, the European Union has become a project for peace, and has guaranteed its Member States an unprecedented period of stable development. The EU has been genuinely significant, both for individual Member States and as an actor in the field of international politics.

The EU has deepened in small steps and has enlarged in leaps. The most recent wave of enlargement was at the beginning of the millennium, when 12 new Member States acceded to the Union.

As the Union has enlarged, it has been necessary to reform its activities and structures. In the 1990s cooperation in justice and home affairs was reinforced, and common foreign and security policy was consolidated. The Lisbon Treaty is currently being ratified and it will bring the Union's actions up to date and make it more democratic and transparent. The aim is also to strengthen the role of parliamentary actors.

Regional parliaments like the Nordic Council were born out of the need of national parliaments for mutual cooperation. The Nordic Council is one of the pioneers of regional cooperation. The Council

also monitors other emerging forms of cooperation, such as that in the Mediterranean region at present. Since its inception, the Nordic Council has been involved in developing broad parliamentary cooperation in the Baltic Sea region.

Developments in the European Union have affected the work of the Nordic Council. Since the start of the 1990s the changes in the European Union have been reflected in the Nordic Council. The matters considered by the Council often have an EU dimension. At the same time many of the issues dealt with by the EU have a Nordic or broader regional dimension. Examples include matters related to the environment, food, energy or security.

The historical, cultural and societal similarity of its member countries forms the basis of the Nordic Council. Within the enlarged EU, on the other hand, there are very different regions, countries and interests. Decision-making in the Union is different from that in a small and highly homogeneous community.

In EU matters, the Nordic Council and other regional parliaments mainly act nowadays through their own governments. They may also participate as independent actors in general consultations organised by the European Commission. Direct cooperation may expand in the future. Thus an emerging parliamentary “pole” could act as a counterweight to the power of intergovernmental bodies in the European Union.

This report outlines a future that is only just in the making. We aim to set out ways in which the Nordic Council and other regional parliaments can bring the regional dimension to bear in the European Union. The equation is not an easy one. There is already a wide range of different political actors within the EU. Many of them also strive to exercise power.

There will be a need for parliamentary actors at different levels in the future too. Europe needs to strengthen national, regional and European parliaments, i.e. the parliamentary dimension. In doing so the division of functions between parliamentary actors needs to be refined whilst avoiding overlaps. It is all about democracy.



This report was commissioned by the Centre Group in the Nordic Council and was produced by the Finnish think tank e2. The first article in the report is written by Tobias Etzold and describes the reform projects in the Nordic Council over the last 20 years. The second article in the report is about how politicians and officials in the member countries assess the current state of the Nordic Council and its role in an EU Europe. The article is written by Karina Jutila and Janne Niemi. The third article, written by Karina Jutila and Terhi Tikkala, examines the future prospects of the Nordic Council and proposes concrete sets of actions. In line with the theme of the article, the board of the Centre Group met for a think-tank session in Reykjavik in January 2009 and discussed how to develop the Nordic Council.

The report aims to generate a debate about the role of regional parliaments in the EU. The report also builds on the debate about how the Nordic Council can be developed and taken forward.

We would like to thank the board and members of the Centre Group in the Nordic Council and the politicians and officials who participated in the interview section of the project. ■

Helsinki, 1 April 2009

***Karina Jutila***

*Director*

*Think Tank e2*

***Terhi Tikkala***

*Secretary General*

*Centre Group in the Nordic Council*

## *The Nordic Council*

- The Nordic Council was established in 1952 as a cooperation forum for the governments and parliaments of the Nordic countries. Nordic cooperation already existed, but now it gained an official format and financing.
- In 1971 a new organisation was set up for intergovernmental cooperation: the Nordic Council of Ministers. This also meant that the role of the Nordic Council changed. It became an interparliamentary organisation, whose task was to monitor government cooperation and set the broad outlines of cooperation together with the Council of Ministers. As well as having standing committees, the Nordic Council meets for an annual session, where Nordic governments report on the results of cooperation.
- The party groups in the Nordic Council were set up in stages in the 1970s and 80s. In 1979, the then 14 parties in the Centre Group set up their own party group with its own Nordic party programme. In 1983 the Centre Group gained its own secretariat with one part-time secretary.
- The members of the Nordic Council are elected from among the members of the parliaments of the member countries. The European Parliament operated the same system up until 1979, when for the first time MEPs were elected in direct elections.
- The Nordic Council will publish its first ever EU strategy in 2009.



Nordic Council



## *The Centre Group*

- The Centre Group is comprised of a total of 20 centre, liberal, green and Christian democrat parties from all five Nordic countries – Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland and Iceland and the three autonomous territories of the Åland Islands, Greenland and the Faroe Islands. The Centre Group is the second largest party group in the Nordic Council after the Social Democratic Group.
- The two largest parties in the Centre Group, the Centre Party of Finland and Venstre of Denmark, are, at the time of publication of the report, the main government parties in their own countries. In Sweden, the member parties in the Centre Group, with the exception of the Greens, form part of the current coalition government. In Norway, the Centre Party forms part of the government led by the Norwegian Labour Party.
- The broad political base of the Centre Group means in practice that some of the member parties from the same country are generally in government whilst others are in opposition. However, cooperation within the Centre Group works in spite of rivalries between parties in national politics.
- The Centre Group has traditionally been active in matters with a broader international or regional dimension. The Centre Group has also taken an active role in reforming the work of the Nordic Council in relation to the European Union.





## ***Earlier reforms in the Nordic Council***

**I**n the last 20 years, the environment in which Nordic cooperation takes place has undergone fundamental changes. In this context, the Nordic Council (NC) and the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM) have been required to adapt to new circumstances and change their outlook, tasks and structures. The overall aim of these restructuring measures has been to justify and legitimise their continued existence and to remain relevant. Then and today, increasing Europeanisation has made changes within Nordic cooperation necessary, but also possible (Sverdrup, B. O., 1998, 'Europeisering som de-institusjonalisering – nordisk politisk samarbeid i endring', in Olsen, J. P og B. J. Sverdrup (red.) *Europa i Norden. Europeisering av nordisk samarbeid*, Arena, Tano Aschehoug, Oslo, p. 165).

The 2004 EU enlargement implied fresh challenges and a new need to adapt. Generally, the growing involvement of the EU in regional affairs, for example preparations for an EU strategy for the Baltic Sea region (BSR) and a strategy for the Arctic, also affecting non-EU members, raised the question as to whether regional cooperation within separate institutions had become redundant. Consequently, fresh debate emerged about the future relevance of the Nordic institutions and Baltic Sea regional organisations.

This article presents an overview of the major changes within the Nordic Council over a period of 20 years, and aims to answer the question of how the Nordic Council has responded to the fundamental geopolitical changes in its external environment, especially

Europe and the EU. First, the article will provide an overview of the reform discussions within the Council in the light of the external changes and specific suggestions for reform of the NC between 1988 and 2008. The second part consists of a brief analysis of the implementation of specific modernisation measures (i.e. changes in committee structure) of the NC and their effects. This is followed by an account of specific measures to deal with EU affairs and to establish closer relations and cooperation between the Nordic Council and the EU. A short summary, summing up several previous debates and reforms and the perspectives for further change and reform within the NC, concludes the article.

## ***Reforms between 1989 and 2008***

### ■ ***1990s***

The Nordic cooperation structures reacted relatively quickly to the fundamental geopolitical changes in Europe starting in the late 1980s. As early as 1988, a commission was launched with the task of examining the possibilities for common Nordic activities in the international arena. One of their proposals was to establish a committee for international affairs which, however, never came about (Schumacher, T., 2000, *Die nordische Allianz in der Europäischen Union*. Opladen: Leske + Budrich, pp.: 212–213). In November 1991, the Mariehamn Declaration by the Nordic heads of government marked the start of essential changes within Nordic cooperation. To that end, the elaboration of reform proposals was delegated to a special working committee (ibid.).

The process continued with a meeting of Nordic prime ministers in Bornholm in 1992 where the first more specific decisions on reform of the Nordic cooperation structures were taken. These measures particularly entailed strengthening the political leadership within Nordic cooperation by involving the prime ministers of the five member countries more closely in the elaboration of its goals. Highlighting and strengthening the foreign, security and European political dimen-

sion of Nordic cooperation was another important issue. Furthermore, it was decided to move the Nordic Council Secretariat from Stockholm to Copenhagen and to strive for better political coordination, stronger content and more focused prioritisation of work.

While most of the measures aimed at improving coordination at the political level, several were also intended to improve the organisational structures of the Nordic Council (and Nordic Council of Ministers). In particular, the merger of the secretariats of the NC, based in Stockholm, and of the NCM, based in Copenhagen, was seen as an important move towards a necessary improvement of the working relations between these two organisations. This measure was expected to create synergy effects, more direct interaction and mutual exchange of information and better possibilities for jointly representing Nordic cooperation within the Nordic area and towards third parties (Schumacher 2000: 216). As this could not be realised immediately, it was restated in the next round of reform proposals in 1994/1995 and finally implemented in 1996.

New institutional adjustments became necessary due to Sweden's and Finland's accession to the EU. In November 1994, the Nordic governments and Nordic Council set up a reform committee. This presented a report entitled *Nordisk samarbeid i en ny tid* in February 1995 that included several new proposals and became an important reference for future reform efforts (Sverdrup 1998: 166-7). The Nordic Council Session in Reykjavik in March 1995 discussed these reform proposals, and generally agreed on them. One of the suggestions was to hold a so-called theme conference discussing just one specific relevant topic instead of the NC session in the spring.

Probably the most important measure was the reorganisation of the NC committee structure, which was the subject of a special NC session in Copenhagen in September 1995. Until then, the NC had six expert committees specialising in finance, the economy, law, culture, the environment and social affairs. The NC decided to establish a new working mode consisting of just three committees along the lines of the new geopolitical three-pillar structure: Nordic cooperation,



Europe (EU/EEA) and adjacent areas. In Copenhagen, the NC also decided on several measures to make its work more relevant politically by strengthening the position of the party groups and instead reducing the influence of the national delegations in the presidium and in the composition of the committees along mainly national criteria (Schumacher 2000: 217).

### ■ *Winds of change*

From 2000 onwards, the previous structural reforms were reviewed and evaluated. A report by a so-called committee of wise men *Öppet för världens vindar – Norden 2000 Vismansrapporten* (Nordisk Ministerråd/Nordisk Råd, 2000, Köpenhamn, at: [www.norden.org/en/publications?set\\_language=en](http://www.norden.org/en/publications?set_language=en)) and the successive report *Ny Nordisk dagorden – opfølgning af Vismansrapporten* (Nordisk Ministerråd/Nordisk Råd, 2001, København) issued suggestions for new changes. One of the major objectives was to bring the geographical focus of the committee structure back to a more issue-oriented one. The idea behind changing the pillar into a circle structure was to build cooperation on a limited number of overlapping circles based on variable geography (including the adjacent areas in the east and west) and content. This was designed to offer more flexibility (Nordisk Ministerråd/Nordisk Råd 2000: 96–97) than the previous pillar structure that was perceived as too narrow. This measure was intended in particular to improve cooperation and coordination with the NCM as it was based on a more issue-based than a geographical structure. Also, cooperation with the national parliaments, with their expert committees, and international organisations, i.e. parliamentary bodies, was expected to become easier (Nordisk Ministerråd/Nordisk Råd 2001: 5). Furthermore, the Report by the wise men had proposed, amongst other measures, to renew and consolidate the environmental provisions of the Helsinki Treaty (Nordisk Ministerråd/Nordisk Råd 2000: 96).

The work of the Nordic Council was also to be made more effective by establishing direct links with the relevant committees of national parliaments (ibid.). It is, however, unclear which of these recommendations have actually been put into practice and to what extent.

The new committee structure was implemented in 2002. Since then, the Council has had five topical expert committees: culture and education, welfare, citizens' and consumer rights, environment and natural resources and business and industry. As well as its overall coordination function, the presidium deals with foreign and security policy.

### ■ *Current developments*

Since the implementation of a number of measures set out in the major reports mentioned above, no major steps towards ongoing modernisation and reform have been taken. Several reports containing a considerable number of follow-up proposals, for instance down-sizing the Council, presidium and committees and establishing an external relations committee, have been issued (for instance Wiklund and Sundelius 2003 and 2005). These, however, were usually discussed only in small (national) circles, if at all. Due to the lack of debate none of these reports' suggestions have been implemented, although they were regarded as useful and feasible by some. Only minor changes have been implemented, such as the introduction of a debate with prime ministers and party leaders in the NC sessions in 2006.

Occasional discussions on further possible reforms still take place in some party groups and the Nordic Council presidium. An increasing number of NC stakeholders particularly recognise the need to cope with ongoing Europeanisation by looking increasingly at the regional level in relation to the European level and to find efficient ways to link these two levels more closely. As the current director of the Nordic Council secretariat put it: 'it is time for a more systematic Nordic policy in an EU context' (Original: "Det är dags för en mer systematisk

nordisk politik i EU-sammanhang.“ Jan Erik Enestam quoted in *Tiden mogen för nordisk röst i EU*, at [www.norden.org/webb/news/news.asp?id=7600&lang=1](http://www.norden.org/webb/news/news.asp?id=7600&lang=1), 24 January 2008).

## ***The effect of the reforms***

As revealed above, the Nordic Council has discussed, elaborated and partially implemented several reforms in the past. But how effective have these reforms been in practice? What do they tell about the actual ability of an organisation such as the NC to adapt to new circumstances and is there a need for further changes?

### ■ ***Is small beautiful?***

One could note generally that the NC, as a small organisation, in terms of its membership and the size of its bureaucracy, can change and reform more easily than bigger organisations. Small organisational size offers a certain flexibility and the ability to respond to changes relatively quickly. However, as reality shows, even within a small group of member countries it is not always easy to reach a consensus on the changes required. Nonetheless, the Nordic Council, being formed of a rather homogenous group of countries with similar political systems, bureaucracies, cultures and mentalities, may find it easier to reach agreement on fundamental issues and possible reforms than a big organisation with a more heterogeneous membership (such as the Council of Europe).

### ■ ***Far-reaching enough?***

Perceptions of the actual changes within the NC and their effect differ. For some, the overall will to reform and also the scope of the changes implemented has been large (interview 2008). In the 1990s and early 2000s, Nordic cooperation went through its most far-reaching trans-

formation ever (Hecker-Stampehl, J., 2004, 'History of Nordic cooperation: Success story or a Series of Shipwrecks', in: J. Hecker-Stampehl, A. Bannwart, D. Brekenfeld, U. Plath (eds.) *Perceptions of Loss, Decline and Doom in the Baltic Sea Region*, Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag: Berlin, p. 272). Others perceive the scope of the changes and the actual effects of the reforms implemented as rather small. Generally, there are different perceptions of how useful and sufficient the minor organisational changes are. At least they indicate that organisations acknowledge a certain need to reform due to external changes and challenges. It keeps an organisation going, for the time being, and gives its stakeholders a feeling of moving with the times. In contrast, however, small-scale organisational and administrative-bureaucratic changes may rather be seen as holding up the truly important discussions (and decisions) on fundamental structural and political changes. Small-scale changes could be perceived as an excuse for not deciding on and implementing truly far-reaching reforms that help to give an organisation a new mission and fresh legitimacy.

### ■ *Are further reforms necessary?*

Opinions also differ on the need for new changes within the NC. Several stakeholders do not regard any new major structural reforms as necessary. For them, the current structures are fine as they are. They do not, however, exclude a possible improvement of current working methods and making better use of the current structures, instruments and opportunities. Often, once problems appear, it seems easier to change the organisation. The main question, however, should be whether the current working methods and structures are effective, efficient and focused enough. Problems cannot automatically be solved by introducing new structures. Therefore, it would seem more important to strive for effective problem-solving within the existing structures and to possibly improve them rather than always calling for new structures immediately (interview 2007). It also takes time until new structures work properly. Changing structures

continuously may therefore be contra-productive and increase uncertainty among stakeholders.

Other stakeholders, however, do not seem to be satisfied with the current state of affairs and think that the previous changes were not far-reaching enough. In their view, new fundamental changes in structures, working methods and content are required to render the work more efficient and effective. In practice, such a divergence of views among political and administrative stakeholders makes the discussion interesting. On the other hand, it makes the actual reform of the decision-making and implementation process, which requires consensus, rather difficult.

### ■ *Previous reform measures efficient?*

The repeated reform of the Nordic Council's committee structure begs the question whether the idea of further changes only a few years after the previous reform provides any indication of the success of the reforms. The change to the committee structure along geographical criteria in 1995 seemed justified as it was in line with the then predominating political situation and reflected the prevailing mood (interview 2007). Six years later, however, the situation had changed again, particularly due to impending EU enlargement. It was thought that a new structure was required to cope with the new developments. It appeared very soon that the pillar structure was not working very well. Therefore, under new circumstances it was not seen as a model for the future (Sundelius, B and C. Wiklund, 2002, *Femtio år nordiskt samarbete*, Utrikespolitiska Institutet, Stockholm, p. 24).

A particular problem of the pillar structure was that it was imbalanced. The Norden pillar was too big compared to the other two, and the range of issues covered was too broad. This made it difficult to deal with all the relevant areas effectively and properly within the Norden committee. It also appeared problematic to link the NC working committees with the working structures of the NCM as these were built along different lines (interview 2007). It was unclear which



of the 18 ministerial councils each committee had to correspond to (Nordisk Ministerråd/Nordisk Råd 2001: 21). The three committees were treated as debating clubs rather than working committees, making discussions on solving problems within them difficult (Hanne and Hecker-Stampehl 2003: 26). Also, as similar committees did not exist in the national parliaments, it was difficult to link the discussions and consultations within the Nordic Council to those within the Nordic states' national parliamentary structures (ibid.).

The old pillar and committee structure does not necessarily have to be regarded as a mistake as a whole, although some think it was (interview 2007). It would rather have been a mistake not to change the structure once it became obvious that it did not work and was not in line with the changing environment. The new amendment of the committee structure provides some evidence that the Nordic Council has to some extent been able to reflect critically on previous measures, correct them when necessary and adapt to new changes in its environment continuously and incrementally. Seven years after its implementation, the committee structure is perceived to work well overall. Around the time of its 50th anniversary in 2002, the Nordic Council seemed to have managed to make the doubts about its legitimacy not too obvious by reacting to criticism and new challenges in an appropriate manner (Hanne and Hecker-Stampehl 2003: 26). Considering the current challenges faced by regional cooperation, the search for new legitimacy and the need to adapt to external changes and reform continues.

## ***Reforms vis-à-vis Europe and the EU***

Around the time of Sweden's and Finland's EU accession, several proposals were made on how to cope with increasing Europeanisation and how to establish closer relations and cooperation between the Nordic Council and the EU. One of these proposals was to organise sessions and meetings of the NC and the NCM along the lines of the semiannual working programmes of the EU Presidencies (Schumacher

2000: 216). One of the major responses was the establishment of a new committee dealing specifically with Europe and EU-related issues as an essential part of the Council's new committee structure. Overall, the new working structure reflected the weight of European affairs within Nordic cooperation (Hanne and Hecker-Stampehl 2003: 26). However, of all the three committees, the Europe committee was regarded as the most problematic and least successful and effective, as its actual tasks and responsibilities were not clear. It appeared difficult to decide whether certain issues should come under the EU or the adjacent areas committee, creating unnecessary overlap in dealing with them (interview 2007). Amongst other things, this particular problem led to the reform of the committee structure outlined above. Not all stakeholders, however, share this perception. Some considered it a mistake to abolish the Europe/EU committee as even after EU enlargement it would have offered a good way to deal with and follow up on issues of joint Nordic interest in cooperation with the Baltic states and other EU members (interview 2007).

A discussion about the place of the NC in the European institutional architecture and relations between the NC and the EU is in the process of being re-established. It became obvious that it was necessary to continue the topic and make the discussion more concrete, including issuing specific feasible proposals on how to improve cooperation. A useful approach to the debate could be that Nordic cooperation cannot replace EU cooperation but could become supplementary to it (Husmark Pehrson, K., 2008, *Framgångsrikt samarbete i Norden – och i EU*, at: [www.regeringen.se/sb/d/10181/a/100290](http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/10181/a/100290), 7 March 2008). The aim should not be to establish a Nordic block within the EU, but rather to strive for closer cooperation where possible and feasible (*Inget EU-block men tätare samarbete* at: [www.norden.org/webb/news/news.asp?id=7602&lang=1](http://www.norden.org/webb/news/news.asp?id=7602&lang=1), 25 January 2008).

## ***Summary and conclusions***

In the past the Nordic Council dealt with the changes in its external environment and the question of how to adapt to them and increase the effectiveness of its work in numerous debates and reports. It seems fair to conclude that at least to some extent the NC has been able to adapt to new external conditions and to adopt new structures, tasks and functions. However, a certain dissatisfaction amongst some stakeholders confirms that more should and possibly could have been done and achieved in this respect.

Many suggestions for reform and specific proposals for improving the structures and the work have been made over the years. Several of these were implemented and proved to be at least partially successful, others were either not regarded as successful and had to be amended or never reached the implementation phase. Despite being regarded as useful and feasible, several proposals did not achieve consensus among NC stakeholders and were not even thoroughly discussed. An interesting feature of the current debate about possible changes and improvements to Nordic cooperation is that several reform proposals have been made many times before without leading anywhere.

The fact that proposals for change leading to a possible improvement in structures and more efficient cooperation are being made currently and that some old points have been taken up again may show that there is interest in change. However, instead of proposing and discussing the same or similar good suggestions again and again, it would be useful and important to implement at least some of them. The way in which the Nordic Council does not consider, let alone implement, a number of good reform proposals because of fears that consensus would not be reached due to national interests, has to be regarded a general weakness of the organisation. Examples of such proposals are reducing the number of cooperation issues and reducing the number of representatives in the Nordic Council (and as a consequence having a smaller presidium and committees) to reduce costs but also to make the Council's work more efficient and effective.

(This was suggested for example by Sundelius/Wiklund 2005, by NC stakeholders in interviews with the author of this article in 2007 and in the chapter by Jutila and Niemi in this volume). The proposals to change the voting mode from consensus to majority voting and the improvement of relations between NC working committees and the relevant committees within the Nordic national parliaments have also not been properly discussed and implemented.

To avoid confusion and frustration, it seems important to avoid continuous repetition of more or less the same proposals. The alternatives should be either to examine them thoroughly once a majority perceives them as useful and feasible and then quickly implement them or to dismiss them unambiguously. If the Nordic Council manages to conduct a constructive debate, to reflect critically on the ways in which it can adapt and reform, to find a consensus for necessary changes to improve current working structures and, finally, to adapt successfully to new situations, its future prospects may not be too gloomy. ■





# ***How is the Nordic Council doing?***

## ***Entering a new heyday or unsure of its role?***

This article examines assessments by politicians and officials of the current state of the Nordic Council (NC), the reforms it needs and its role in the future. The article is based on interviews and e-mailed responses. The material was collected in autumn 2008.<sup>1</sup>

The views of the current role of the Nordic Council can be divided into two parts. Some respondents considered that the NC is currently experiencing a resurgence. In their opinion EU enlargement and new challenges such as environmental policy have made the organisation's activities more necessary. Active inter-governmental cooperation also reflects positively on the NC.

The other group of respondents considered that the NC's great years are behind it. According to this critical view the NC today is little more than a talking shop and politicians' interest in it has dwindled.

---

**1** *The article is based on five interviews and four e-mail responses. The material was collected between August and November 2008. Two of the respondents are officials at the Nordic Council and seven are politicians, four of whom are or have been Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and three are members of a national parliament. All of the politicians interviewed belong to parties in the Centre Group in the NC. The breakdown of the respondents' home countries is as follows: Sweden 2, Denmark 2, Norway 1 and Finland 4. Interview requests or e-mail surveys were sent to a total of 26 persons, five of whom declined to answer mainly because they felt they did not know enough about the activities of the NC. Twelve persons did not respond to the request. The questions used to acquire the material are appended to this article.*

The operating environment has changed following the end of the Cold War and the EU membership of Sweden and Finland. The NC has not kept up with the changes.

Those whose appraisal of the current state of the NC is critical stress the organisation's past achievements, such as the removal of border obstacles between countries and a common labour market. In their view the NC used to be an important forum for gifted young politicians to meet and learn. Personal contacts between decision-makers fostered developments in the Nordic countries.

Both those with a positive and a negative view of the current state of the NC see room for improvement in its activities. The organisation has partly lost its role.

### ***Background and values unite member countries***

The respondents consider the strength of the Nordic Council to be the historical, cultural and societal similarity of its member countries. Familiarity with northern conditions is cited as a further strength. Shared values and a common background form the basis of the NC's activities and reinforce cohesion.

Those with a positive assessment of the current state of the NC consider that the cooperation and achievements built up over decades guarantee the organisation a competitive position, especially in matters relating to the northern and Arctic region and the Baltic Sea. Respondents also feel that the NC could have an important role in climate policy. The NC is also considered a neutral actor, for example when it comes to constructing relations with Belarus. The member countries still have common interests.

In a number of responses the NC is seen as a useful actor in cooperation with Russia. Individual member countries engaged in negotiations with Russia may derive support from their Nordic links.

The high level of acceptance of Nordic cooperation among citizens is considered a strength of the NC. The political groups in the NC and

their internal dialogue are also viewed as important. Some respondents thought that the NC is able to use publicity as a means of influence.

### ***Lack of political clout a weakness***

The weaknesses of the NC are considered to be its slowness, bureaucracy, minor political influence and the lack of commitment by politicians. Party leaders and other top politicians are not actively involved in the organisation's activities.

Many respondents were of the view that the NC's decisions are not binding on anyone. The slowness of its processes means that in practice the NC does not react quickly to emerging problems in society. The NC is felt to have a strong committee culture, but weak political clout.

The main source of criticism has to do with the substance of policy. It is felt that, given its resources, the NC concentrates on too many issues, and as a result its activities lack focus. Some felt that the NC deals with the same questions from one year to the next without any concrete results. Another point of criticism is the considerable resources directed at cultural cooperation.

One respondent felt that now that member countries are members of the EU and the EEA "finding meaningful items to put on the agenda can be difficult", since there is no common Nordic front to the same extent as before, for example in the United Nations.

The responses indicated that the consensus principle in the Council of Ministers is reflected in the NC's activities. Confrontation and political wrangling tend to be avoided and therefore many difficult issues do not get on to the organisation's agenda. Whilst the consensus culture is well suited to the NC's activities, it weakens the organisation's political weight.

The responses reveal national differences. Some respondents considered that interest in the NC has declined, especially in Finland. Language problems and the lack of interest in the NC by the media partly contribute to the situation.

One respondent considered that Nordic cooperation is not valued as much in Finland as in the other Nordic countries. The respondent thought that this is a challenge for the NC, which at its best could reinforce the Nordic identity in Finland. The respondent said that “the NC’s focus on planning and bureaucracy are in this sense a problem for Finns, who prefer concrete actions”.

The special status of Norway also featured in the responses. The NC is thought to offer Norway, which is not in the EU, a forum for gathering information and influencing EU policy issues. It is felt that Norway makes active use of this possibility.

### ***A more active approach to EU issues***

*“More cooperation with Nordic colleagues (in the European Parliament) and more contacts between officials”*

*“Cooperation is not yet what it should be  
– but it’s getting there”*

The majority of respondents considered that parliamentary activity at the European level is concentrated in the European Parliament and its links with national parliaments. The NC is of almost no significance in the overall picture at the moment. One interviewee described the European Union as follows: “the EU is so self-satisfied that it looks no further than its own system”.

Respondents were asked for their views of practical cooperation between the NC and the EU. Based on this material MEPs do not see there being any meaningful cooperation.

Those working for the NC mention several forms of cooperation, such as participation in seminars and NC opinions on EU approaches to northern Europe. The Northern Dimension, development of the Baltic Sea region and cooperation with Russia are cited as prime examples. Examples of practical cooperation are very common.

Although the dialogue between the EU and the NC is considered weak, individual officials are thought to have useful contacts. Indeed contacts are reliant on the activity of officials and appear to be highly sporadic and disorganised.

The respondents seem to take it as read that some of the NC's member countries are in the EU and some are not. The NC adapts accordingly.

When it comes to contacts at the EU level respondents stress the role not only of the European Parliament but also of the Commission. On the other hand, the Committee of the Regions does not figure in the responses at all.

The majority of respondents are unable to evaluate what role is played in the EU by other parliamentary actors similar to the NC (e.g. the Benelux or the Baltic countries). However, because of its achievements and the shared background of its member countries some see the NC as being more important than other comparable actors.

Even though the current role of the NC at the EU level is seen as weak or even non-existent, there are expectations regarding the future. It is thought that EU enlargement will lead to a regionalisation of the Union. The Mediterranean region, the eastern part of the Union and the western Balkans and Turkey will take the Union's attention away from the north. That being so, many respondents feel that the Nordic countries should step up cooperation in EU matters and here the NC could act as a bridge-builder. Some respondents also incorporate the Baltic region within the scope of Nordic cooperation.

The responses also stress the importance of the EU's Russia policy for NC member countries. One example mentioned is that the EU-Russia-NC link could help to resolve the dispute between Norway and Russia over energy resources in the Arctic Ocean.

The positive assessments stress the general importance of interaction and discussion. One respondent describes the importance of regional parliamentary activity as follows: "All institutions are weak, but cooperation is always a good thing."



Those of a critical view hold that Baltic Sea questions already have their own set of actors, such as the Council of Baltic Sea States. According to the critical view, the EU's activity in creating a Baltic Sea strategy also shows that there are already several actors in that field and there is no need for the NC.

The majority of respondents felt that the NC should become more active in EU matters. In their view, the NC should concentrate on a few topics and resolutely pursue its aims there. Rather than ambitious priority programmes and strategies the NC should set small concrete targets. Successes in small matters would help to foster cooperation.

There appears to be a willingness in the NC to develop cooperation particularly towards the European Parliament. The present material indicates that MEPs are not very familiar with the NC's activities nor has there been especial interest on their part to deepen cooperation.

There are also problems when it comes to deepening cooperation. One respondent stresses that the NC's opinions remain outside national preparation of EU matters. This can lead to situations where a member country has one position in the NC and ends up adopting another outcome in the EU's Council of Ministers. The respondent stresses that for this reason informal cooperation should be the way ahead for EU cooperation in the NC.

## ***More efficiency and results***

*"The (NC's) agenda is rather slim, since most matters are dealt with in a broader context and it (the agenda) appears partly artificial. This has of course meant that interest has dwindled significantly."*

*"The NC hasn't found a role after the EU came along. What should its work focus on?"*

*"The old core tasks haven't gone away by any means."*

The view that the NC is searching for its role in a changed operating environment recurs in the responses. The respondents also put forward ideas to remedy the situation.

There is a call for more efficiency in many of the responses. Decision-making should also be speeded up.

The respondents feel that it is necessary to slim down the agenda. The NC should concentrate on matters where it can genuinely achieve concrete results. When there are results it is easier to gain the commitment of politicians. It is also the way to strengthen the political weight of the organisation.

Apart from the changes needed, the respondents stress the importance of the NC's core functions. Removing and preventing border obstacles is as topical as ever. Cultural cooperation is also highlighted, even though it is thought that culture receives too great a share of resources.

One respondent thought that the Nordic Council of Ministers would survive into the future, but was not at all sure about the outlook for parliamentary cooperation. The respondent felt that future activities are dependent on cooperation yielding concrete results. At the same time it is stressed that the NC's activities are dependent on the level of activity in intergovernmental cooperation.

*Six specific proposals for improvements can be identified in the interview and questionnaire material:*

- 1. The number of politicians should be cut and those who remain should commit themselves to the NC's activities more closely than before.*
- 2. Party leaders should be encouraged to participate in the NC's activities.*
- 3. The activities of party groups need to be improved.*
- 4. Cooperation with committees in national parliaments needs to be increased.*

**5. *The agenda needs to be clarified.***

**6. *Decision-making procedures need to be faster and more efficient.***

The number of politicians participating in the NC's decision-making needs to be cut and the responsibility of those remaining increased. That would make for more efficient decision-making and increase the motivation of participants. However, this might be a problem in that it could reduce the representation of small parties in the NC.

The second point made is that party leaders should commit themselves more closely to the NC's activities. This would strengthen the importance of Nordic cooperation and the NC's role.

There is also a desire to strengthen the role of party groups in the NC. Among other things, it is proposed giving them further rights of initiative and funding.

There is also a desire to increase cooperation between the NC's committees and committees in national parliaments. One element in this proposal is better coordination of NC parliamentarians and their membership of committees in their home countries.

Clarification of the NC's agenda has been proposed in the past. The central message from the respondents is that the NC must focus on what is essential and above all on solving concrete problems.

### ***The NC in the future: a talking shop or an invigorated actor at the EU level?***

The assessments of the politicians and officials who responded reveal two main approaches to the NC: **1)** a critical view based on history and **2)** a positive and forward-looking view.

Those with a critical evaluation of the current state of the NC stress the achievements and role of the NC in previous decades. In comparison they consider the NC today to be of minor significance.

The NC is a talking shop, and a stronger role in EU or Baltic Sea policy, for example, is not especially called for.

Those with a positive assessment of the current state of the NC look hopefully to the future. They consider it important for the NC's links to the EU to be strengthened and for the NC to take a clear role in EU policy. They consider that the regionalisation of the EU and global challenges make the NC's activities more necessary.

Several respondents stress the importance of a common language for Nordic cooperation. The disappearance of a common language would hamper political cooperation in the NC and increase interpretation expenses. On the other hand it is acknowledged that English has become more important in all member countries and is therefore a potential working language in the NC.

The question of involving the Baltic countries in the NC's activities is raised in the responses. Some respondents oppose membership of the Baltic countries especially because they feel it would disrupt the unity of the NC, which is based on cultural and historical ties. Cooperation with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania is not criticised per se. Closer cooperation with Poland and Germany may also become topical in Baltic Sea matters.

It is considered important to get leading politicians involved in the NC's activities. Some respondents felt that party leaders' involvement in the NC largely depends on what subjects they are interested in themselves and their timetables. In practice key politicians allocate their time on the basis of political expediency. Time is devoted to whatever is essential in terms of priorities and power. This needs to be borne in mind when reforming the NC's activities.

It was a challenge to try to get MEPs to participate in this survey. Most declined to be interviewed on the basis that they were not very familiar with the NC's activities. One long-serving MEP commented that the NC does not figure in MEPs' work in any way. One can also speculate whether the reluctance to respond indicates that those approached see no reason to strengthen the NC's role. ■

## **ANNEX**

### ***Questionnaire form***

1. How would you rate the work of the Nordic Council (NC):
  - In general?
  - From the EU's point of view?
  - From the national point of view?
2. What are the NC's strengths and weaknesses? How do you assess the NC's influence?
3. In your opinion, should the NC enlarge in future? How do you see the relationship between the NC and the Baltic countries?
4. What is your assessment of the significance of parliamentary cooperation in Europe in general? How do you assess what the NC does compared to other European parliamentary actors (such as the Benelux countries, Great Britain and Ireland, the Baltic Sea region)?
5. Is there any practical cooperation between the EU and the Nordic Council? In what political sectors do you know there to be cooperation?
6. How significant and useful do you consider cooperation between the Nordic Council and the EU to be at present?
7. How should the Nordic Council be developed in the future?
8. What do we need the Nordic Council for in the future?
9. Any other comments.







## *The Nordic Council and the EU*

**W**hat direction is the Nordic Council (NC) going in? What is the future role of the institutions of Nordic cooperation? What does Nordic cooperation amount to in the EU era?

The NC can play a new, stronger role in an EU Europe. In addition to its present role, which is closely linked to the Nordic Council of Ministers, as a regional parliament it could assume responsibility for matters directly linked to EU decision-making. Working together with other parliamentary actors, the NC could exert parliamentary influence in the EU.

Taking on a new role presupposes the ability and desire to overhaul the NC's activities and working methods. It is also important to evaluate and try to influence the trend towards regionalisation in the EU. At the same time thought should be given to how EU cooperation between Nordic governments should be developed.

### *An institution on the wane or on the up?*

Political institutions go through phases when they enjoy the broad support of governments and citizens and their activities are driven by committed and ambitious stakeholders. This is the case when there is both a concrete and symbolic need for the institution to exist.

The Nordic Council was founded in post-Second World War Europe in 1952 as an organisation for cooperation between Nordic govern-

ments and parliaments. The organisation's heyday was during the Cold War, especially in the 1950s and 60s. Then the NC had a specific task to promote mobility between the Nordic countries. It was also of symbolic significance, especially to Finland. The NC acted as a bridge between the eastern and western worlds.

Since the founding of the Nordic Council of Ministers in 1971 the NC has been specifically an inter-parliamentary cooperation body. Inter-governmental contacts split off into their own organisation. This was the first and in a sense the decisive step in the weakening or at least a radical alteration of the NC's position.

The Nordic Council has been in a sort of crisis ever since the end of the Cold War. The situation culminated in the EU membership of Sweden and Finland in 1995. Then more and more question marks appeared over the future of the Nordic organisations.

What happens to political institutions when the imperative for their existence fades? What happens when the institution's time passes?

Generally attempts are made to save existing institutions. This is because bureaucratic structures tend to be self-perpetuating. Political decision-making is also more often based on continuity than change. Any attempts to reform political institutions need to take this into account. By finding them new tasks, a new justification is found for the existence of institutions.

Integration has advanced in leaps and bounds and there are no longer any major political dividing lines in Europe. Under these circumstances, it is apt to enquire what the NC's existence is founded on. Unlike the EU, enlargement has not been identified as an aim of Nordic cooperation. The EU has put many of the traditional topics of Nordic cooperation on its agenda.

Today the EU is in its golden age. It was founded in the same historical situation as the Nordic Council was. The EU is the main actor in constructing a Europe without borders. It continues to have an important symbolic significance as the unifier of the peoples of Europe following the Cold War.

### ■ *Unprejudiced evaluation of the future needed*

According to opinion polls, only a small proportion of the citizens of the Nordic countries question Nordic cooperation. Surveys show that Nordic cooperation generally enjoys even stronger support than EU cooperation. For example, an attitude survey by the Finnish Business and Policy Forum EVA indicates that despite Finland's EU membership 92 per cent of Finns consider Nordic cooperation important for Finland (Haavisto Ilkka – Kiljunen Pentti, Whose side are you on?, EVA, 2008; [http://www.eva.fi/files/2167\\_EVA\\_attitude\\_survey\\_2008\\_summary.pdf](http://www.eva.fi/files/2167_EVA_attitude_survey_2008_summary.pdf)). Comparable opinion polls in other Nordic countries have yielded similar results.

The NC, then, enjoys solid general support. According to opinion polls, however, the substance of the work done by the Nordic Council and Council of Ministers does not fully meet citizens' expectations. Citizens would like the Nordic countries to cooperate in areas like combating cross-border crime and in foreign and security policy. Conversely, cultural or language cooperation, for example, are considered less important (Hvad er vigtigt i Norden? Norboerne om det nordiske samarbejde. Opinionsundersøgelse, 2008 (in Danish), p. 8; [www.norden.org/pub/ovrigt/statistik/sk/ANP2008752.pdf](http://www.norden.org/pub/ovrigt/statistik/sk/ANP2008752.pdf)).

There is, then, a clear disconnect between the NC's activities and citizens' expectations. Combating international crime or cooperation in foreign and security policy are not on the agenda of the NC or the Council of Ministers, but there is significant cultural and language cooperation.

Opinion polls commissioned by the NC and the Council of Ministers suggest that citizens do not question the existence of these organisations. However, significant cooperation in areas including foreign and security policy is conducted precisely outside these organisations. When charting the future of Nordic cooperation, then, it is not enough to rely on the support of citizens, rather an unprejudiced assessment is needed of what type of institutions are maintained and why.

## ***The EU needs regional parliaments***

### **■ *Similar but different parliaments***

The Nordic Council, the European Parliament (EP) and the parliaments of the EU Member States have much in common. In all of them, business is conducted in committees and politicians belong to party groups. In this sense the NC stands out from comparable regional organisations: it is constructed along the same lines as the parliaments of its member countries and the European Parliament.

For example, the NC's sister organisation, the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC), has no committees and does not even have the resources for them. There have been and still are temporary working groups. However, the status and influence of these are limited by the fact that they have no official connection to Baltic Sea intergovernmental cooperation.

The NC offers MPs in the Nordic countries a direct link to the Nordic governments. This is a distinguishing feature of the organisation. Individual NC members may put questions to any government and are entitled to receive an answer within a stipulated period. Based on members' initiatives the NC makes recommendations to Nordic governments, and governments must give a progress report at the annual session.

In the European Parliament, politics is based on party groups. There is no recognised role for national or regional perspectives. The Nordic Council differs from the European Parliament in that national delegations of the member parliaments operate alongside the party groups. Even though the focus within the NC has also increasingly moved towards activity in party groups, there is a clear difference between the EP and the NC in this regard. Both party political and national interests are clearly represented in the NC. At its worst, this paralyses or at least hampers the Nordic Council's activities.

It would be important to strengthen the NC's parliamentary dimension if it is to have a parliamentary and political role vis-à-vis the EU and

not just be a lobbying forum for national interests. This would mean operating more at the party group level without regard for nationalities.

A key difference between the EP and the NC is the way in which members are elected. Members of the European Parliament have been elected in direct elections since 1979. The members of regional parliaments like the NC are elected from among the members of the constituent parliaments. This might be thought to weaken the legitimacy of regional parliaments since their representatives do not have a direct mandate from citizens. If a regional parliament is to be a strong political actor such problems of legitimacy need to be solved.

Unlike regional parliaments, the parliaments of EU Member States have a recognised status in the Union's decision-making. In practice there are currently great differences in the way they see their relationship to the EU's legislative work. Some parliaments consider that they are an integral part of national EU deliberations, whilst others feel that they have little influence. There are also differences between the Nordic parliaments in this respect. Generally speaking one can say that parliaments in Member States that currently consider themselves to have enough influence on the EU are not particularly interested in strengthening regional parliamentary cooperation.

Regional parliaments have no recognised status in the EU's activities in the same way as Member State parliaments have. From the EU's point of view regional parliaments operate outside of the decision-making process. In practice they are on a par with all the lobbying organisations.

One of the most important aims of the Lisbon Treaty is to strengthen democracy. In that vein, the aim is to strengthen the influence of Member State parliaments. In practice the Treaty is of little significance in these respects. Member State parliaments will continue to be dependent on their own governments. The Lisbon Treaty does not offer them any new facilities to be independent or proactive in EU affairs (Antola Esko 2008, Kadonneen EU:n metsästäjät. Suomi ja EU:n tulevaisuuskeskustelu (in Finnish)).

In terms of practical influence in the EU, regional parliaments are in the same position as Member State parliaments: in practice the ability of either to be proactive when it comes to Commission initiatives, for example, is very limited.

The EU's official decision-making process should be developed in such a way that regional and Member State parliaments are guaranteed more initiative in EU policy. Regional parliaments can only function well if they are made part of the European Union's official decision-making process.

### ■ *The challenges of regionalisation in the EU*

The European Commission is developing regional strategies at EU level, which attests to the regionalisation of the EU. The Baltic Sea Strategy is the first of the regional strategies. It is likely to be adopted during the Swedish Presidency in the second half of 2009. There are likely to be further such strategies. For instance, strategies for the Danube Basin, the Alps and the Black Sea have been discussed.

The European Commission is not the initiator of the regionalisation trend in the EU and does not define the criteria of the regions. They can be geographical, economic or political, for instance. The main thing is that the initiative is expected to come from the regions themselves, from the bottom up. In the Baltic Sea Strategy, for example, the initiative came from a group of MEPs called the Baltic Europe Intergroup. The Commission's job is to weigh up the merits of an EU strategy on a case-by-case basis.

The fact that Iceland and Norway are outside the EU can be seen as a problem for the Nordic countries from the perspective of the EU's regionalisation. If Iceland and Norway were EU members, the Nordic countries as a whole would form an internal region in the EU. This would influence the status of Nordic cooperation in the EU. Now Iceland and Norway are only involved in EU regional cooperation through the Northern Dimension and they are treated as non-EU countries.

When it comes to the Baltic Sea Strategy, the European Commission has insisted that it is specifically an internal EU strategy. Against that background, a Nordic strategy, for example, would be unthinkable for the present. The Commission's Directorate General for Regional Policy, which is the lead DG in preparing regional strategies, does not deal with matters relating to Iceland or Norway.

At the EU level, the subsidiarity principle can be understood as clearing the path for the main business. Some matters that are devolved from the EU level may in future be treated at the regional level. One may ask what subsidiarity means in practice from the regional perspective, and what role parliamentary actors will have in overseeing regional democracy.

The problem in regional parliamentary cooperation today is the underdevelopment of regional parliaments and their problems of legitimacy and lack of an official role in cooperation at the EU level. The Nordic Council could point the way for regional parliamentary cooperation. The numerous regional parliamentary actors in the Union should be developed in parallel, whilst strengthening the symmetry between them.

The concept of a region is open to interpretation, which is also somewhat problematic in the current situation. There are many regional actors at different levels in the EU. One could also say that there are sub-regions, or regions within states, such as provinces. These are the counterparts in the EU's Interreg programmes, for instance. The EU's Committee of the Regions is composed of representatives of sub-regions.

Alongside sub-regions, one can also identify macro regional actors such as groupings of countries or regions within them. For example, the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference brings together the parliaments of both member countries and provinces bordering on the sea. On the other hand, only the parliaments of member countries and the autonomous regions (Åland Islands, Greenland and the Faroe Islands) are represented in the Nordic Council.

Based on the above we can say that concepts of regional cooperation in the European Union require clarification.



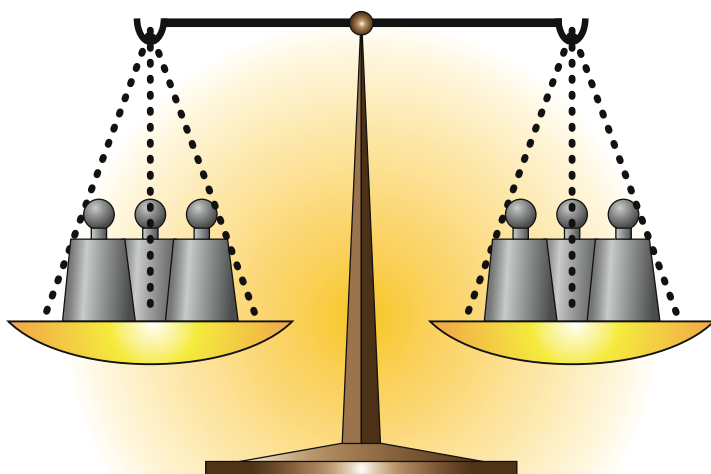
*When it comes to strengthening regional cooperation in the EU, the following questions are important:*

- *How are regional parliaments defined from the EU's point of view? For example, could the procedures laid down in the Lisbon Treaty for Member State parliaments be thought to apply to regional parliaments as well, now or in the future? Will regional parliaments be mentioned specifically in future EU treaties?*
- *What criteria will apply in practice to the formation of macro regions at the EU level? This is a central question when assessing the viability of Nordic cooperation compared to the Baltic Sea region, for example.*
- *What importance will be accorded to the subsidiarity principle and how can it be reaffirmed in the EU in the future? Could regional parliaments act as a sort of guardian of the subsidiarity principle alongside Member State parliaments? Could subsidiarity mean greater regional (rather than national) decision-making in a particular set of issues?*

## ***A parliamentary EU?***

In the Europe of the future, parliaments – Member State parliaments, regional parliaments and the European Parliament - will have their own clear role relative to intergovernmental cooperation. This role could consist in bringing citizens' views to bear, identifying long-term social trends or overseeing the subsidiarity principle. It would not, for example, consist in overseeing national interests.

The idea of pan-European parliamentary activity and a division of tasks between parliamentary actors is closely associated with the idea of a European political space (see Antola Esko 2008, Kadonneen EU:n metsästäjät. Suomi ja EU:n tulevaisuuskeskustelu



#### **INTERGOVERNMENTAL ACTORS**

- EU Commission
- EU Council of Ministers
- Regional councils of ministers

#### **PARLIAMENTARY ACTORS**

- European Parliament
- EU Member State parliaments
- Regional parliaments

(in Finnish)). In this vision, the EU is more than just the sum of the Member States.

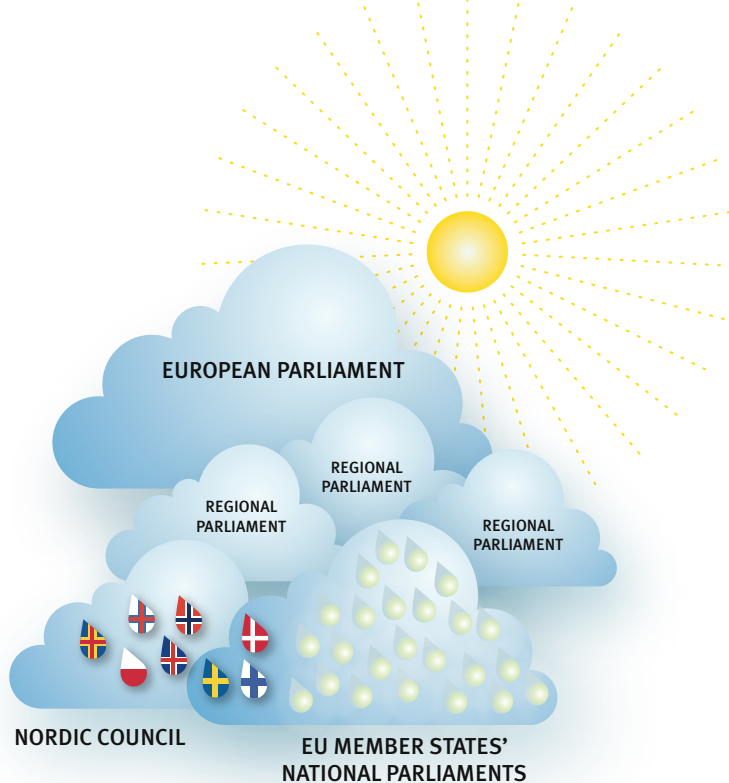
As the European dimension becomes stronger, one can assume that the role of Member State parliaments will also change. For the present they are national political institutions that promote and oversee national political interests in a European framework. In a European political space they could have a role that goes beyond overseeing national interests (see above publication).

Regional parliaments are by definition cross-border rather than national in nature. They may therefore find it easier to assume a

European role than Member State parliaments. The European role of Member States' own parliaments could partially be channelled through regional parliaments.

***Actions:***

- *More cooperation and exchange of information between the European Parliament, regional parliaments and Member State parliaments*
- *Closer contacts between political groups in the European Parliament and regional parliaments (meetings of parliamentarians, regular meetings of chairmen of party groups, joint hearings, declarations, programme work, campaigns, information, theme seminars etc.)*
- *Networking of regional and national parliamentarians and Members of the European Parliament by political sectors, e.g. the Northern Dimension Parliamentary Forum as a networking forum for parliamentary actors*
- *Regional parliaments to form part of information networks for legislative initiatives in the European Union*
- *Observer status for representatives of regional parliaments in European Parliament committees*
- *Representative offices for regional parliaments in Brussels*
- *Upgrading of status of regional parliaments and solution to legitimacy problem through intergovernmental negotiations*



## ***NC needs to be reformed and made more European***

The Nordic Council has a dual role in a Europe of the regions. The NC is

- a regional actor that works together with the Nordic governments
- a parliamentary actor that works together with other parliamentary actors

The Helsinki Treaty, which is the basis of the NC's activities, only mentions the first task – the Nordic Council's role in monitoring and developing cooperation between the Nordic governments. The organisation's role as a regional actor is also stressed in practical politics. The only real arena it has is the influence it can exert via member country governments and the Nordic Council of Ministers. Now that the operating environment has changed, however, one can ask whether the NC's role as a parliamentary actor at EU level should be strengthened. Can these two functions be combined? Does an EU dimension require amendments to the Helsinki Treaty of 1962?

At present the Nordic Council is only tenuously linked to the European Union. In practice it is a case of informal contacts maintained by individual persons. The NC is also outside of cooperation between Nordic parliaments. It is not part of COSAC, the Conference of Community and European Affairs Committees of Parliaments of the European Union.

One way to strengthen the role of the NC in EU affairs would be to give the NC a coordinating role in EU cooperation between Nordic parliaments. In practice, this new role would require the Nordic parliaments to give the NC a new mandate, at least. This may not be possible without reforming the Helsinki Treaty.

Something that would make a coordinating role problematic is that at present the positions of national parliaments are generally also the positions of the member countries' governments. If the idea is to make the NC a regional parliamentary actor (i.e. one not based on national interests), it is pertinent to ask whether its starting point should be the positions of member countries. In an evolving European political space parliamentary actors do not represent national interests.

The second reform, which would be very simple to implement, would be to make the NC's operating culture more European. For example, functions and responsibilities could be more closely tied to individual persons than at present. Currently matters are just dealt with in committee in a general way. Instead the NC should appoint rapporteurs who would be responsible for individual dossiers. They would do the background and preparatory work, consult experts and network with the European Parliament and national parliaments, for example. Rapporteurs would issue progress reports and their preparation would be interactive to ensure openness. This procedure would make the NC more efficient and bring it into line with the EP. It would also facilitate joint committee hearings with the EP and the NC, for example.

When discussing a stronger role for the NC, it is often said that party leaders need to have a greater profile in the organisation. This is not necessarily a central issue. Having a person responsible for Nordic matters in individual parties' national parliamentary groups would be more important than a key role for party leaders. These

persons would be responsible for preparing sets of issues in their groups. This would lead to better dissemination of information and would help to commit MPs to joint Nordic objectives.

The easiest way to forge closer links between national parliaments, the NC and the EU is to increase contacts between parliamentarians. It would be natural to start this work during the Swedish EU Presidency in autumn 2009. The newly elected MEPs should then be invited to join the Nordic debate at the start of the parliamentary term.

The NC ought to make itself better known in the EU. To that end, information, especially in English, needs to be provided. Access to meeting documents is another objective to pursue.

### ■ *What sort of EU agenda does the NC need?*

For the present the EU agenda of the Nordic Council only exists in indicative terms. The EU agenda of the Nordic Council, and of the Nordic region more generally, is shaped by the way in which regionalisation evolves in the EU and what importance is accorded to regional parliaments in the EU system. The political operating environment and cycles affect the agenda more generally.

Two main strands can be identified in the Nordic EU agenda:

1. matters where common influence is exerted at EU level, including the environment, equal opportunities, democracy, transparency.
2. matters which, under the subsidiarity principle, are rather kept in regional or national hands, including Nordic agriculture and fisheries, security of supply, internal security and disaster preparedness.

To exert influence at EU level, efficiency, speed, specific objectives and a proactive stance are of the essence. It is also important NC member countries and politicians commit themselves jointly to the objectives set. Moreover, coordinated action must be seen to be justified from the EU's perspective. In addition, the NC's objectives must be separate

from the Nordic governments' objectives, thus underscoring the NC's role as a parliamentary actor. The NC should aim to use its agenda to achieve greater subsidiarity and transparency in the EU.

*Actions to reform and make  
the NC's working methods more European:*

- *In the NC, shift the focus from monitoring the Council of Ministers to monitoring at the EU level (NC committees and party groups monitoring the Commission and EP in an proactive manner)*
- *Introduce a rapporteur system in the NC's committees*
- *Develop committee and party group networks at EU level*
- *Nominate persons responsible for Nordic affairs in the parliamentary groups of member country parliaments, the objective being to commit NC parliamentarians more closely to its activities*
- *Clarify deliberation of EU matters in the NC, e.g. through a coordinating committee for EU affairs acting as a counterpart to EU committees in national parliaments*
- *Increase transparency: put NC committee agendas online, improve information generally and from party groups*
- *More meeting and information material in English to increase interest in the NC's activities at EU level*
- *Network MPs active in the NC with other regional parliaments*
- *Reform the Helsinki Treaty to reflect the NC's role as the representative of Nordic regional parliamentary cooperation towards the EU*
- *Open an NC office in Brussels (similar to the representations of national parliaments)*



## ***Raise the profile of EU affairs in the Council of Ministers***

The NC monitors Nordic intergovernmental cooperation and can submit proposals in that area. The NC, then, can already exert influence on governments to cooperate better in EU matters.

A recent report on intergovernmental cooperation in the Nordic countries found that there are no established procedures for dealing with EU matters in Nordic ministerial meetings. According to the report, EU matters are treated very differently depending on the ministerial composition (Stellan Ottosson, Nordiska ministerrådet. Fortsättning på reformen, 2008, p. 26 (in Swedish)). The NC ought to be a proponent of EU affairs being treated in a more systematic way at ministerial level.

The NC's annual session could be a forum for consideration of joint Nordic EU interests. For example, thematic ministerial panels could be held at the session. At present ministers generally attend the sessions to present Nordic action plans in various areas, and the EU dimension barely comes to the fore. The NC's committees could also stress EU matters more in their ministerial hearings in future.

### ***Actions to improve cooperation between the Nordic Council and the Council of Ministers from the EU perspective:***

- ***More emphasis on EU matters  
in Nordic ministerial meetings***
- ***Use NC sessions to coordinate Nordic EU  
positions, e.g. ministerial panels on EU topics***
- ***More emphasis on EU matters  
in ministerial hearings by NC committees***
- ***Composition of Nordic ministerial groupings  
should be in line with EU ministerial groupings***

## ***Summary of actions***

- ***Closer cooperation between the European Parliament (EP), national parliaments and the Nordic Council (NC).***
  - Close contacts between political groups/ parties
    - ▶ meetings of chairmen, joint hearings, thematic seminars, joint programme work, campaigns etc.
  - Holding meetings of parliamentarians by policy sector
- ***Reform of the activities of the Nordic Council***
  - Focus to shift from monitoring the Council of Ministers to EU-level monitoring
  - Introduce rapporteur system in NC committees
  - Networking of NC and EP committees and party groups
  - Appoint persons responsible for Nordic affairs in parliamentary groups in NC member country parliaments
  - Clarification of consideration of EU affairs in the NC, e.g. through a coordinating committee for EU affairs in the NC
  - Increased transparency: NC committee agendas put online, improved general and party group information
  - More meeting and information material in English to increase interest in the NC's activities at EU level
  - Reform of the Helsinki Treaty; mention of NC's EU role in the treaty

■ ***Improving cooperation between the Nordic Council and the Council of Ministers from the EU perspective***

- More emphasis on EU matters in Nordic ministerial meetings
- Use NC sessions to coordinate Nordic EU positions, e.g. ministerial panels on EU themes
- Greater emphasis on EU matters in ministerial hearings by NC committees
- Bring composition of Nordic ministerial groupings into line with EU ministerial groupings



**TOBIAS ETZOLD** holds a master's degree in political science from Radboud University Nijmegen (Netherlands). He is a PhD student and works as a researcher of European politics and assistant lecturer at the Manchester European Research Institute (MERI, UK). In his PhD thesis he examines how organisations in the Nordic countries and the Baltic Sea region are adapting to the post-enlargement situation in the EU. His publications deal with aspects of regional cooperation and EU activities in northern Europe. He has worked in the secretariat of the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS) and in the European Commission's office in Berlin.

**KARINA JUTILA** is a doctor of social sciences and heads the think tank e2 in Helsinki. Previously she worked as an expert in the secretariat of the parliamentary group of the Finnish Centre Party and as special assistant to the vice chairman.

**JANNE NIEMI** holds a master's degree in social sciences from the University of Tampere and a bachelor's degree in humanities from the University of Oulu. He has studied international politics and the history of Finland and Scandinavia.

**TERHI TIKKALA** holds a master's degree in social sciences from the University of Tampere. Prior to her present position as Secretary General of the Centre Group in the Nordic Council she worked in Nordic cooperation for several years, first in the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs and subsequently in the Parliament of Finland.



© Think Tank e2, some rights reserved.

For further information on the Creative Commons licence:  
[www.creativecommons.fi](http://www.creativecommons.fi)

ISBN 978-952-67200-2-9 (bound)

ISBN 978-952-67200-3-6 (PDF)

ISSN 1798-1905

**Texts** Tobias Etzold, Karina Jutila, Janne Niemi, Terhi Tikkala

**Translation** Entrans Oy

**Layout** Juha Rätty, [www.j-form.fi](http://www.j-form.fi)

**Images** Gorilla

**Cover photos** © Karin Smeds /Gorilla

**Printed by** Priimus Paino Oy, Helsinki 2009



■ What direction is the Nordic Council going in? What does Nordic cooperation amount to in the EU era? What is the role of regional parliaments in the EU of the future? This report sets out ways in which the Nordic Council and other regional parliaments can influence the regionalisation of the EU. The report outlines a future that is still in the making. ■



**Centre Group**

■ Nordic Council