

The Northern Dimension: Nordic Regional Policy in a Brave New European World

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The very concept of 'northernness' is now inscribed in Union documents. Was Finland merely interested in launching the Northern Dimension simply to make the EU more 'Finnish', or does it signal an end to the Nordic countries' previous sense of isolation and of occupying an outsider role, which has characterized Nordic-Central European relations for so long?

The Northern Dimension (ND) of European Union policy was born in Finland. It was first proposed in April 1997 in a letter from the Finnish Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen to the Commission President Jacques Santer (OSCE Review, 1998). Whereas the Northern Dimension is perhaps most immediately relevant to the EU's relations to Russia and the Baltic states, the Finns have stressed that geographically it is a much more comprehensive concept. As the Finnish initiators see it, the Northern Dimension encompasses the area from Iceland in the west across to north-western Russia, and from the Polar Sea in the north to the southern coast of the Baltic Sea. It not only concerns countries around the Baltic Sea. Even Norway, the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada are more or less directly involved (Lipponen, 1997; see map below).

The ND was a concept intended both to focus attention on the need to reduce various threats to security in the European north and to make full use of the region's potential. Accordingly, the first line of argument concerns the region's role as a geographical focus of relations between the EU and Russia. The EU cannot develop into an important global actor without successfully accomplishing its planned eastern

enlargement. This enlargement is bound to draw new boundaries between insiders and outsiders (Christiansen, 1999), but it is necessary to make room even for outsiders within a generally accepted pan-European security structure.

The second line of argument concerns the enormous economic potential which the area covered by the ND is believed to possess – not least in relation to important segments of the entire European economy. In particular, it should be noted that the area encompassed by the Northern Dimension contains some of Europe's and in some cases the world's largest known reserves of natural resources (Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1998a).

However, there is some reason to believe that Finland's introduction of the Northern Dimension was meant to fulfil yet one further important need: studies of developments within the EU have demonstrated that new members tend to underline their special priorities in such a way as to cause the Union to change its policies in a manner commensurate with the member state's own needs.

Finnish researcher Hanna Ojanen (1999) has even maintained that this is the main reason why the Northern Dimension was

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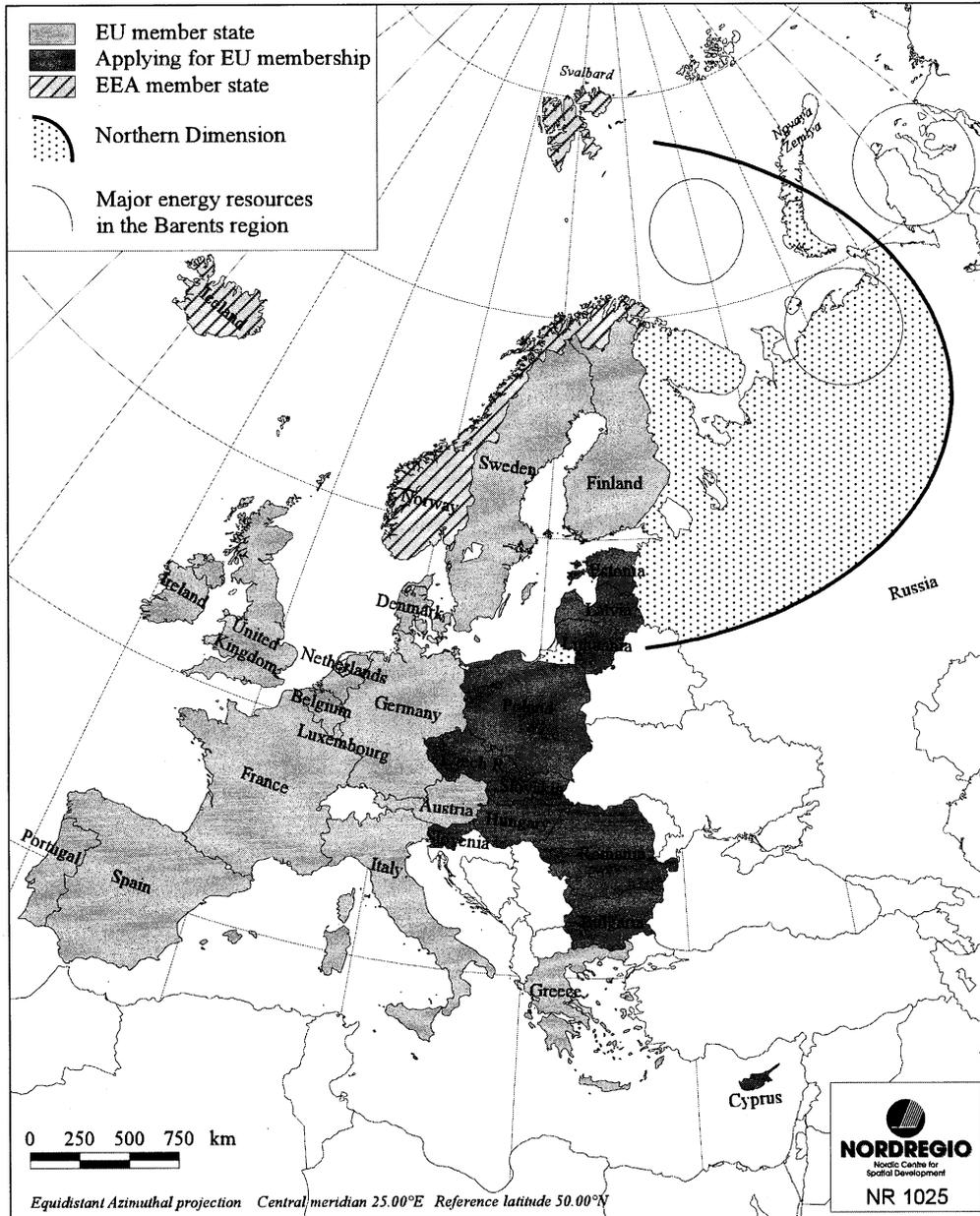


Figure 1. The geographical focus of the Northern Dimension. (Source: Hedegaard and Lindström, 1999)

launched. It has simply been in the Finnish interest to make the EU more 'Finnish'. Another Finnish researcher, Pertti Joenniemi has extended this interpretation to cover the entire Northern-EU relationship. Joenniemi

(1998) even claims that the introduction of the Northern Dimension signals an end to the Nordic countries' previous sense of isolation, distance and of occupying an outsider role, which has characterized Nordic-

Central European relations for so long. According to Joenniemi, the Finnish initiative is a signal to the Union that 'Norden' is a part of Europe and that policies have to be adapted to the region's demands – not necessarily because they are Nordic but because they are European.

The Northern Dimension and the Nordic Regional Policy Tradition

What type of fundamental Finnish – and Nordic – needs and priorities could be highlighted by the Northern Dimension?

Apart from Finland's specific security needs (Stenlund, 1998), it is also important to note that, fundamentally, the Northern Dimension proposes a particular policy for a particular region – in fact, a regional development policy. Small wonder, therefore, that the description of the area covered by the Northern Dimension provided by the Finnish Foreign Office (Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1998*a*, 1998*b*) is well-known to the Nordic reader with a background in regional policy. The ND's emphasis on sparse population, infrastructure, long distances and, consequently, expensive transportation, peripheral geographical location and the presence of important natural resources corresponds closely to the fundamentals of the sort of regional policy that has been conducted by the Nordic countries for decades.¹

The ND initiative's identification of a need for cross-border co-operation in order to create functional local and regional economies in peripheral areas is also well in line with the Nordic regional policy discourse. Not even the Northern Dimension's security policy connotations are entirely foreign. As late as during the 1950s, Swedish regional policy was partly motivated by security policy considerations (Hallin and Lindström, 1998).

There is also a further important characteristic of Nordic regional policies which is reflected in the architecture of the Northern Dimension, i.e. the notion of the

role of central authorities as principally responsible for regional and local development.² By and large, the Finnish documents on the ND operate with just two actors, i.e. the territorial states, interpreted in terms of unitary states, and the European Union, which is being interpreted more as an inter-governmental endeavour than as a supra-national actor with its own objectives and developmental logic. Fundamentally therefore, the entire programme for the Union's new Northern policy is imbued with a nation-state perspective in the sense that the problem formulation, remedies proposed and actors given main responsibility for their implementation are clearly anchored at the state and inter-state level.

The upshot is that the regions – in some cases politically more or less autonomous – which are the subjects of the policies proposed are curiously absent from the copious documentation on the Northern Dimension.³ In fact, regions are hardly mentioned at all. In the 21-page official description of the policy area supposedly covered by the Northern Dimension which the Finnish Foreign Ministry published at the beginning of 1998, regional co-operation is only mentioned three times, and in one case it is expressly a matter of 'regional co-operation arrangements between states'. The only region mentioned in the document – and then only by virtue of having a potentially dangerous nuclear power plant located on its territory – is St Petersburg (Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1998*b*).

Instead, the focus is on the need for greater co-operation between sovereign states with common borders in the area – with some additional funding and help from existing EU institutions. Somewhat pointedly one might claim that the ND is more a question of how the Union and its member states manage the 1,300 km Finnish-Russian border area and adjacent territories than it is a matter of the development potential of the other actors in the area. The future potential of the Northern Dimension, as seen by its

initiators, is first and foremost a matter of strategic location and enormous natural resources. Clever policies and financial investments by actors, often anchored far away from the region, are supposed to free this potential to the long-term benefit of the area and its early integration into Europe's overall economic and political structures.

In essence, this theme is as old as the internal development policies pursued by the Nordic states with their vast and sparsely populated northern peripheries (Lindström, 1997; Hallin and Lindström, 1998). The only difference is that the frame of reference is now widened to encompass the inter-governmental EU level in addition to the national one.

The European Reaction

So far reactions to the Finnish ND initiative have been positive. At the Vienna Summit at the end of 1998, the Commission presented a report on the Northern Dimension which supported the initiative in general terms. Item 109 of the Austrian Presidency's report welcomed the report from the Commission and underlined 'the importance of this subject for the internal policies of the Union as well as its external relations, in particular with Russia and the Baltic Sea region.' The Austrian Presidency also emphasized 'the need for further exchange with all countries concerned on the development of a concept on the Northern Dimension' and invited the Council to identify 'guidelines for actions in the relevant fields' (European Commission, 1998).

This positive official reception, however, did not contain any concrete initiatives for a more forceful European intervention in the Union's northern border areas. On the contrary, the comments by Brussels, as well as by some of the Nordic Member States, are characterized by a great deal of uncertainty as to who ought to do what and at what cost (Hedegaard and Lindström 1999).

Most likely, the explanation of these

vague reactions should be found at several levels.

The collapse of the rouble in August of 1998 was an important contributing factor. At the very time when the EU institutions were preparing their response to the Finnish ND initiative, the Russian crash suddenly made it abundantly clear how deeply flawed the Russian economy really was (Hedlund, 1999). Before the August debacle, it had been the predominant belief that Russia's problems were transient and that in a not-too-distant future, the country's economic and political potential would make it a central partner in the European development project (*Financial Times*, 29 May 1998). After August, this bright scenario was replaced by the most profound pessimism. Instead of opportunities – economic as well as political – there was suddenly nothing to be seen except under-development and perpetual crisis (*The Economist*, 6-12 February 1999).

It goes without saying that this newfound pessimism influenced opinions on the pre-conditions for an active ND policy. Not least because many of the areas whose future development was to be aided by it were on Russian soil. Quite simply, Russia's ability to shoulder the responsibility of becoming a major partner of the EU in the ND region was questioned.⁴

On top of this one had to consider the enormous costs necessitated by a large-scale intervention in the EU's north-eastern border regions – even though both the initiators of the ND policy and the Commission operated on the assumption that expenses could be met within existing financial structures. Thus, in April 1998 the Finnish Foreign Ministry noted that a 20-year investment programme to upgrade important Russian sectors (energy, transport, environment, infrastructure, etc.) would cost over 80 billion euro, of which almost half would have to be spent on oil and gas infrastructure (Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1998b). The question was how these finan-

cial resources were to be raised in a situation where the EU has to give top priority to its very costly eastern enlargement.

A third problem which may have influenced decision-makers was the long-standing competition between the Nordic states – and primarily between the two former great powers in the area, Denmark and Sweden – for leadership in the Baltic Sea region which regularly surfaces. Just prior to the launching of the Finnish initiative, Sweden had announced its own 100 million euro programme to create a European growth zone in the Baltic Sea region, and Stockholm might well have interpreted the Finnish initiative as an attempt to sideline its own ambitions. Nor would it be surprising if the Danes, who had signalled their clear ambitions to play a leading role in an emerging Baltic Sea region ever since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, might have harboured reservations *vis à vis* the Finnish offensive (Archer and Jaeger, 1998).⁵

A fourth important problem is the fact that both the original Finnish initiative and the EU's own considerations on a policy for the Union's north-eastern border areas are characterized by a lack of clarity concerning the partnership between key actors at the local, regional, national and transnational levels. This lack of clarity primarily concerns what role if any should be played by regional actors, which is a result of the Northern Dimension's centralist profile. Quite simply, the vastness of the region, its enormous natural resources and gigantic economic, social and ecological problems demand large-scale policies, and 'Big Government' consequently appears to be the credo of the ND architects.

The problem with this approach is that, in reality, the EU has no centrally organized counterpart capable of effective political action within the Russian parts of the ND territory. In the wake of the 1998 economic collapse, practically all central political authority over the Russian republics and

self-governing regions has ceased to exist. This leaves no other counterpart for the EU than the regional authorities of the relevant Russian areas. Or to quote *The Economist* (3-9 January 1998): 'The regional governments have the power to lure and deter investors, to uphold or flout the rule of law, and to deliver or ruin public services. Thus, to a large degree, can regional governments determine whether Russia prospers or decays.'

The rapid erosion of central government influence in the Russian regions has caused Western as well as Russian observers to claim that Russia – even if the current crisis should be resolved – will never return to the top-heavy political model that was characteristic of even post-Soviet Russian society. In view of the degree of political regionalization one may well ask whether a future Russia will be ruled by anything like the kind of 'soft' nation-state centralism that has dominated most EU members – and not least the Nordic countries – for so long. This realization recently caused US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott to remark that 'Whatever Russia becomes, it will never again be a monolith, in which political power flows rigidly from the top and from the centre outward. That particular Humpty-Dumpty cannot be put together again. Russia of today is a crazy-quilt of regions with wildly different economic and political structures. . . . Coming up with a sensible, workable, albeit Russian definition of federalism is a crucial corollary to the question of statehood itself' (Talbott, 1998).

In view of all these and even other complicating factors – one being the enormous gaps in legislation, the role of courts, etc. which seven decades of planned economy have created between the region's eastern and western parts (Aalbu *et al.*, 1995; Hedlund, 1999) – it is hardly surprising that so far, the ND initiative remains little more than well-intentioned political rhetoric. Be that as it may, it is still interesting to reflect on some alternative development scenarios and what they may entail in terms of

pressure on established Nordic regional policies.

Regional Policy Implications of the Northern Dimension

What road ahead, then? Two main scenarios can be proposed. One is negative: Russia's troubled development accelerates to the extent that all meaningful cross-border co-operation in the ND region is blocked. This would spell the end of all endeavours to integrate the area into a functional European structure, at least for some time.

What would this development entail for the regional policies in the EU's north-eastern areas? In all likelihood it would mean a powerful brake on the role of regions in cross-border arrangements with a regional policy character.⁶ The states (together with certain inter-governmental institutions) with their entire military and security policy arsenal would be left as the only actors capable of ensuring a modicum of stability in areas threatened by the Russian turbulence. In practice all co-operation across the Russian border at the regional level would cease.

A variant of this development would be a situation where instability in the Russian ND regions might be kept in check through a strictly hierarchical European-Russian co-operative structure of the traditional nation-state type, though the fundamental problems would remain unsolved. A good example of this attitude is the European Union's policy towards the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad. Concerns about not offending Moscow and not appearing to challenge its sovereignty over Kaliningrad have prompted the EU to minimize its direct links with the enclave. Thus, the EU's Kaliningrad policy is guided by strictly hierarchical statist-oriented values.⁷

In such a situation, Nordic regional policy would receive few new impulses from developments in the ND territory. In a socially and politically problematic situation

where the central state (and inter-governmental institutions) are seen as the only credible barriers to the spread of problems, it is most likely that Nordic regional policies would stick to the old and tried themes: central government-controlled programmes to equalize living conditions between the countries' economic centres and their sparsely populated peripheries. Thus, a renewed focus on the central state would most likely lead to a relative weakening of the position of Nordic regions within the EU's internal development programmes. The same fate would face their role in cross-border co-operation with third countries in the ND area (the Baltic states and Poland).

Another possibility is that, despite everything, Russia's problems would gradually be brought under control and that slowly but surely, the ND region would be 'normalized' through activities such as cross-border co-operation. This happy turn of events would probably require some form of INTERREG that is specifically adapted to the special conditions in the ND area. This type of EU-based action is characterized by a complicated mosaic of actors from the local to the European level. Important actors include not only representatives of the political-administrative sector at various levels because the partnership ambition very much encompasses non-governmental actors and representatives of private enterprise.

Among the specifically Russian conditions, apart from the gigantic social, environmental and economic problems, is the weak central government, which underlines the importance of conducting cross-border development work in direct co-operation with the ND area's Russian republics and autonomous territories. To the extent that further development brings even more decentralization of operative political power, it is evident that the need of direct cross-border regional collaboration will grow further.

One possible – not to say probable – effect of such a development towards gradually

closer networks in the ND region would be increasing pressure for change in Nordic regional policies. The demand for cross-border co-operation with Russian regions would most likely also imply a growing demand for more independent action even among neighbouring Nordic regions.

Traditionally, the Nordic central states have not favoured direct cross-border contacts with regions of neighbouring countries. This even applies to regions with extensive political autonomy and their own legislative competency. The Swedish government, for example, has always been very wary of contacts with the self-governing neighbouring region of Åland – evidently for fear of harming Finnish national interests. This even applies to policy areas where the Åland parliament has a sovereign legislative competency *vis à vis* Finland.

If regional participation in co-operation within the ND area is to be strengthened, it would consequently appear to require some initiative on the part of state actors. The European tradition of relatively strong regions (Fagerlund, 1998) together with the EU's Structural Funds policies, based as they are on narrow collaboration with regional actors, would seem to point in the same direction (Mariussen and Virkkala, 1999).

This might lead to a situation where the Nordic regional policy tradition of state monopoly on both defining what the regional problems are and determining what instruments should be used to solve these problems will gradually be replaced by a situation where the regional level acts far more independently. This might even mean that Nordic regional policies, the main aim of which has been to even out differences within the state territory (Norberg, 1999), will become more adapted to regionally specific solutions for development and growth.

Even though traditional state-run regional policy may thus be faced with important changes in connection with a more de-

veloped cross-border co-operation within the ND territory, it remains clear that the 'Nordic model' still has a lot to contribute. In contrast to the European tradition of clear, often constitutionally-determined division of powers among various territorial levels, Nordic policies are based on informal actor networks – often without any explicit institutional links to a specific territorial level. This means that the decentralizing elements in the Nordic policy tradition are 'functional' rather than 'territorial' and that the Nordic countries are influenced by broad grassroots-based organizations, openness in decision-making and strong democratic traditions (Hallin and Lindström, 1998).

One possible development of future cross-border co-operation within the ND area might thus be to encourage the regional political actors to assume responsibility (the European tradition) combined with a long-term build-up of well functioning actors' networks without any particular institutional links to a specific geographical-administrative level (the Nordic tradition).

Conclusion

The fundamental task of a policy for long-term integrative development of the ND area is to build a region which at present only exists as a 'discursive construction' (Paasi, 1999). It is no easy endeavour to create regions across received state borders, regardless of EU integration and globalization (Lindström, 1996; Anderson, 2000). The task is not even a simple one within state borders. Not least the Nordic example has demonstrated that it is far easier to stay with a policy of state transfers with no other effects than the uniformization of living conditions – despite the fact that officially, all regional policy is about creating well integrated and economically progressive regions (Courchene, 1995; Lindström, 1997).⁸

From this perspective, the formulation of future initiatives in the ND region will be a real challenge. If they are to contribute to

long-term, 'self-generating' growth in the area, policies must avoid the regional policy trap of becoming dependent on outside transfers leading to unproductive consumption, dependency and passivity (Jacobs, 1984). In addition, future initiatives must also create a legal platform for a regional policy with a cross-border character which could be interpreted as posing a potential threat to the territorial sovereignty of the established states.

To be successful, a policy for the Northern Dimension must accomplish the task of (1) creating an entirely new and in a sense cohesive transnational region with (2) its own capacity for action and (3) ability to create economic development, which (4) may in time free itself from outside economic transfers. What is really interesting is that today the same challenges are felt within the established Nordic and European regional policies. Even here there is a growing need for genuine cross-border regional development co-operation, the importance of which is also demonstrated by the growing significance of the EU's common Structural Funds policy, the INTERREG programmes and the development of a common European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) in recent years (Jørgensen and Nielsen, 1998; Schmidt-Thomé and Bengs, 1999).

Concerning Nordic regional policy, it is also becoming increasingly evident that solutions must be tailor-made for every single regional productive environment and that uniform national policies cannot in the long run solve specific regional problems (Maskell, 1999). It is, furthermore, obvious that established policies are faced with a difficult balancing act between traditional transfers (the main effect of which is to equalize living conditions and the supply of public services among various types of regions) and a policy aimed at self-generating economic growth – even if that means giving up some nation-state and EU ambitions of territorial equalization.

Viewed from this perspective, a successful policy for the Northern Dimension area not only depends on developments in its eastern, crisis-ridden regions. To a large extent, it also depends on institutional capabilities and capacity for innovative thinking within the European and Nordic regional policy environments. Nor should one forget that a lack of success for the Northern Dimension is bound to influence the future development of regional policies in the European Union and particularly in the Nordic member states.

NOTES

1. The exception here is Denmark's more Central European approach. For a survey of Nordic regional policies, see, for example, Mønnesland (1997), Aalbu, Hallin and Mariussen (1999).

2. Even in this respect there is a difference between Denmark and to some extent Norway, on the one hand, and Finland and Sweden, on the other. Whereas the latter have a strong centralist tradition, and in the case of Finland this tradition is further strengthened by the fact that the nation state is a late creation, Denmark has had a tradition of leaving considerably more power to the regional level (Lindström, 1996; Mariussen and Virkkala, 1999).

3. The central parts of the ND area are the Karelian Republic and the more or less autonomously organized *oblasts* of Kaliningrad, Leningrad, Murmansk and Arkhangelsk. Outside the ND's core areas, but still within the part of Europe which the Finnish initiators define as being touched by the Northern Dimension are the northern German *länder* and the demilitarized and autonomous territory of Åland. If we follow the Finns in extending the area to encompass the North Atlantic (see map), then we have to consider two further autonomous areas, the Faroes and Greenland (Hedegaard and Lindström, 1998).

4. A further obvious problem was the fact that the price of oil – which the architects of the ND had considered to be the region's perhaps most important contribution to the European economy next to natural gas – was more than halved from July 1997 to December 1998 (*Financial Times*, 11 December 1998).

5. Though one should not overstate the weight of Swedish-Danish problems, it remains a fact that

the clearest and most unreserved support for the Finnish policy has come from Norway. Undoubtedly this stance owes a lot to the fact that – together with Iceland – Norway remains the only Nordic state outside the EU. Norway, therefore, needs the assistance of its EU neighbours to make Europe pay attention to policy needs in north-western Russia and the Barents region. As opposed to Danish and Swedish Baltic interests, the Finnish ND initiative is precisely focused on problems in north-western Russia, which are also of great interest to Norway.

6. An important example of this role for the regions has been the emergence of the EU INTERREG programme, aimed at furthering integrationist development work across state borders within the Union and even *vis à vis* regions in non-member neighbouring states (Östhol, 1996; Hallin and Lindström, 1998).

7. The EU preference of dealing with Kaliningrad in exactly the same manner as it would deal with the rest of Russia has recently been characterized as an old-fashioned statist policy 'which has been eclipsed by globalization' (Fairlie, 1999).

8. For a current analysis of the limited ability of traditional regional policies to create economic progress in Swedish regions, see for example, Norberg (1999).

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