

Strengthening Cross-Border Cooperation in the Nordic Region: Analysis of Three Case Studies on the Swedish Border

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SUMMARY

Developing the Nordic Region into the most sustainable and integrated region by 2030 is one of the goals set out by the Nordic Council of Ministers in its Vision 2030. Cross-border municipalities in Sweden and its Nordic neighbours are already well integrated. They have strong links and cooperate closely, in particular through cross-border committees involving local and regional authorities or through direct cooperation at the municipal level. However, issues hindering greater integration of cross-border municipalities and regions remain. This study focuses on three cases in the Swedish-Finnish, Swedish-Norwegian and Swedish-Danish border regions that face different topographical challenges. Through interviews with local and regional stakeholders, the main challenges with regard to furthering cross-border integration were identified. In addition, four research axes for sharing-potential were identified on the basis of the interviews and later discussed during a workshop held with stakeholders from municipalities, regions and national authorities from Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark.

Skandinavisk sammanfattning

Att utveckla Norden till den mest hållbara och integrerade regionen till 2030 är ett av målen i Nordiska ministerrådets Vision 2030. Gränskommuner i Sverige och dess nordiska grannländer är redan väl integrerade. De har starka förbindelser och samarbeten, bland annat genom gränskommittéer som involverar lokala och regionala myndigheter eller genom direkt kommunalt samarbete. Det finns dock fortfarande problem som hindrar en större integration av gränskommuner och -regioner. Denna studie fokuserar på tre fall i de svensk-finska, svensk-norska och svensk-danska gränsregionerna som står inför olika topologiska utmaningar. Genom intervjuer med lokala och regionala intressenter identifierades de största utmaningarna för att främja gränsöverskridande integration. Dessutom identifierades fyra forskningsaxlar för delningspotential utifrån intervjuerna, vilka sedan diskuterades under en workshop med intressenter från kommuner, regioner och nationella myndigheter från Sverige, Norge, Finland och Danmark.



The city of Helsingborg is Sweden's closest point to Denmark.

Photo: Felix Gerlach/imagebank.sweden.se

1. INTRODUCTION

In its Vision 2030, the Nordic Council of Ministers set out the goal of developing the Nordic Region into the most sustainable and integrated region by 2030 (The Nordic Prime Ministers, 2019; The Nordic Council of Ministers, 2023). Facilitating collaboration between regions and municipalities across borders is pivotal to attaining that goal. This study focuses on the needs of border towns and municipalities in the Nordic Region to increase their cooperation, and how national support can support their development. This report is part of the project: *Comparative review of national support initiatives for local urban project development*^[1]. The project was funded by the Nordic Thematic Group for Green and Inclusive Urban Development 2021–2024 (TGA) under the Nordic Council of Ministers.

Throughout the Nordic Region, national support initiatives bolster sustainable urban development efforts through mechanisms from national stakeholders to local stakeholders (Lidmo, Brynteson and Bogason, 2024). Such initiatives are one means by which national authorities can influence planning strategies at the regional or municipality level depending on the country. National authorities can use funding to encourage multilevel collaboration and partnership networks, as well as target national sustainable urban development goals (Lidmo, Brynteson and Bogason, 2024).

In this report, our research focuses on the following key questions:

- What national support for urban-urban development across borders is needed by border towns and cities?
- What coordination efforts (horizontal and vertical) are needed to achieve sustainable and green urban development in Nordic cross-border towns and cities?
- What policy recommendations can be made based on the existing needs in border municipalities?

1. <https://nordregio.org/research/national-support-initiatives/>

Our main focus in this study is on green urban development in cross-border regions with the three selected case studies being located in the Swedish-Finnish, Swedish-Norwegian, and Swedish-Danish border regions.



Svinesund bridge on the border of Norway and Sweden.

Photo: iStock

2. METHODOLOGY

In this section the process by which the case studies were selected is detailed. Each chosen case study is then described in more detail, and finally a description is given of how the data were collected.

2.1. Case Selection

The study started by identifying potentially relevant case study areas on the borders of Sweden and Norway, Sweden and Denmark and Sweden and Finland. Nine such potential cases were identified in the Nordic countries based on desk research, with the focus being on urban-urban cross-border integration. That is understood as sustained flows between relatively densely populated areas such as flows generated by commuting workers or students, flows generated by patients or customers seeking cross-border services such as hospitals, cinemas or events, and local flows of goods crossing borders.

Following review of their characteristics, three areas situated along the borders of Sweden's three neighbouring countries were chosen, to illustrate various contexts and cross-border challenges. In particular, the cases were selected to allow for representation of varying degrees of urbanisation. Based on information gathered through desk research, locations with established collaboration projects or plans to increase and develop urban-urban connections across borders were deemed to be of particular interest.

The selected case studies involving different Nordic countries are Haparanda and Tornio on the border of Sweden and Finland, Strömstad, Dals-Ed and Halden on the border of Sweden and Norway, and Helsingborg and Helsingør on the border of Sweden and Denmark. The case of Haparanda and Tornio illustrates the challenges of a cross-border town. The twin cities have a long history of cross-border cooperation that formally started in 1987, with notable achievements including a common marketplace inaugurated in 2011 and a common travel centre (Tornio, 2023). The cities of Strömstad, Dals-Ed and Halden form part of the Svinesund

region. They showcase the need for collaboration in a region with cross-border commuting across less densely populated areas. The case of Helsingborg and Helsingør illustrates the challenges of commuting and planning not only across a border, but also a sea since the two cities are separated by the Øresund Strait. Currently the only direct link between the cities is by public boat service.

2.2. Data Collection

In the initial stage, desk research was performed to gather information on potential case studies in the Nordic Region. Existing reports, strategies and websites from municipal and regional authorities or cross-border committees were screened to gain an overview of the characteristics of the locations.

Representatives of the municipalities, regions and cross-border committees were selected as potential interviewees. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted between autumn 2023 and spring 2024, with the questions focusing on cross-border relations, planning strategies, and future outlooks.

2.3. Description of the Case Studies

2.3.1. Haparanda–Tornio

City	Country	Pop.	DEGURBA class	Language
Haparanda	SE	^a 9,177	Intermediate density area	Swedish, Meänkieli
Tornio	FI	^a 21,018	Intermediate density area	Finnish

Table 1: Population, degree of urbanisation and spoken language for the cities in the case study.

^a in 2023.

Data: Eurostat 2020b; Statistics Finland, 2024b; Statistics Sweden (SCB), 2024a.

The twin city of Haparanda and Tornio, located far north in the Tornedalen on the border between Sweden and Finland, is an interesting example of a relatively small international city (see figure 1). It is situated by the main land link between Sweden and Finland where the railway between Luleå and Oulu crosses the border. The railway section is currently being electrified (Ainonen 2023). The two cities have a long history of cross-border cooperation, with the two countries sharing several

facilities, including a joint tourism office, a common marketplace and museums (Ainonen 2023). The two cities have built strong links including a common primary school, where the children speak their own native tongue. The Swedish and Finnish languages do not have common roots, which can pose a challenge to cross-border cooperation. However, it should be noted that many inhabitants of Tornedalen on the Swedish side speak or understand Meänkieli, which is also referred to as Tornedals Finnish (Institutet för språk och folkminnen, 2023). A further challenge is that the cities are in two different time zones.

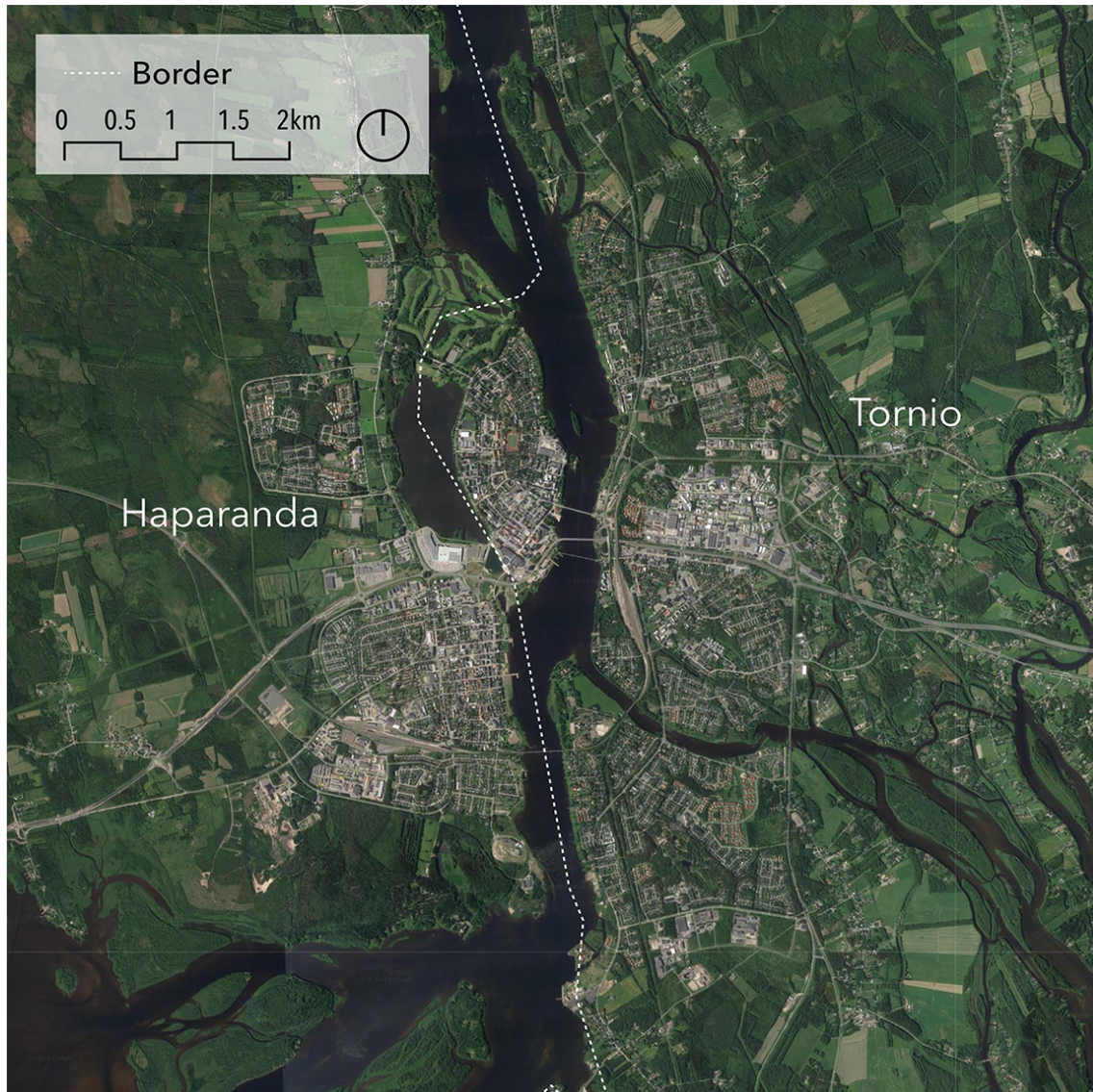


Figure 1: Map of Haparanda, Sweden and Tornio, Finland.

Data: Eurostat 2020a and Google Earth.

Tornio's population is twice that of Haparanda, with over 20,000 inhabitants in

2022 (see table 1). According to Eurostat’s Degree of Urbanisation classification, which categorises municipalities as either urban, intermediate, or rural, both Haparanda and Tornio belong to the intermediate category (see table 1), meaning that they have a moderate degree of urbanisation (Eurostat 2020b). Figures 2 and 3 provide a more nuanced view of what types of territories can be found within the municipalities. The figure is based on Nordregio’s grid-based urban–rural typology (Stjernberg, Vasilevskaya and Penje, 2024), which classifies all Nordic territories into seven different typology classes based on differing degrees of urbanity and rurality. It can be seen that the majority of the population in Haparanda lives in the typology class of urban centre in a rural area, whereas the population in Tornio predominantly lives in rural heartland areas.

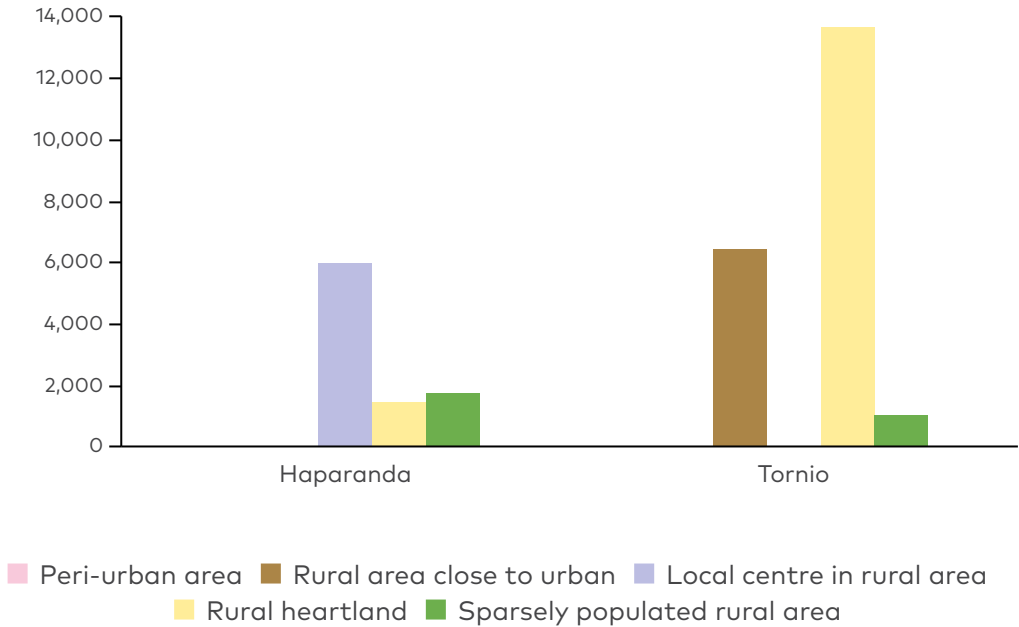


Figure 2: Population by Nordic urban-rural typology for Haparanda Sweden and Tornio, Finland.

Data: Nordregio, based on Stjernberg, Vasilevskaya and Penje, 2024.

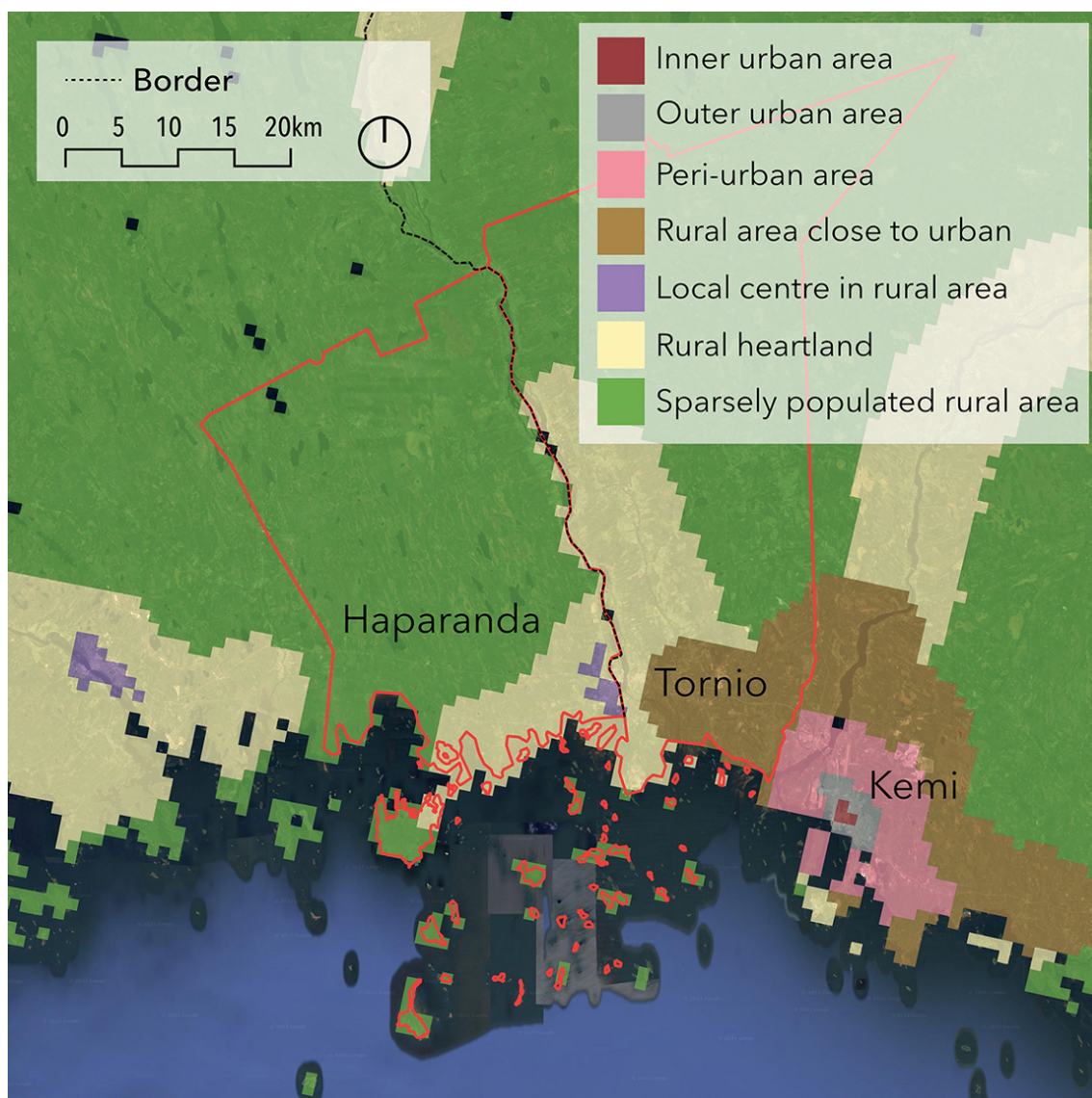


Figure 3: Map of the Nordic urban-rural typology for Haparanda, Sweden and Tornio, Finland.

Data: Eurostat 2020a and Google Earth; Nordregio, based on Stjernberg, Vasilevskaya and Penje, 2024.

Tornio's business sector is focused on the steel industry, mechanical engineering, commerce and tourism (House of Lapland, 2022). Tornio hosts a large stainless steel manufacturing plant using raw materials from the mining site of the neighbouring municipality of Kemi. The plant boasts of being among the most integrated and energy-efficient stainless steel factories and benefits from an on-site port for shipping finished products (House of Lapland, 2018). The plant owner, Outokumpu, employs 2,150 people at the Tornio and Kemi sites, in addition to 300 daily contractors and also creates some 7,000 indirect jobs (House of Lapland, 2018). Health services in Norrbotten rely on Finnish employees, in particular nurses

(Sjaunja 2024). Haparanda's main private employer is IKEA with 175 employees (SCB 2024b).

Tornio's unemployment rate is slightly lower the rates in the region of Lapland and in Finland (see figure 4). As shown in figure 4, the Finnish unemployment rate was higher than in Sweden throughout the time period in question. Though Haparanda's unemployment rate is far lower than in Tornio, it is consistently higher than the Swedish national rate and well above the regional rate in Norrbotten.

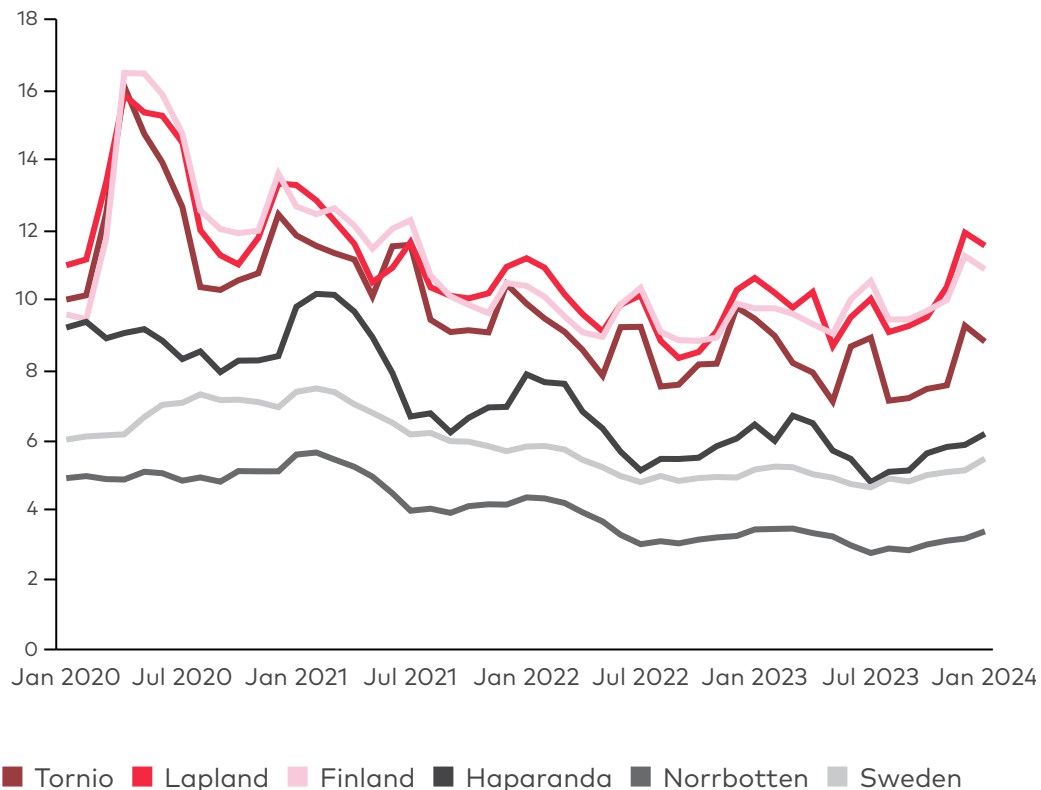


Figure 4 : Unemployment as a percentage on both sides of the Swedish-Finnish border, at the national, regional and municipal level from January 2020 to January 2024.

Data: Statistics Finland, 2024a; Statistics Sweden (SCB), 2024c.

2.3.2. Strömstad–Halden–Dals-Ed

City	Country	Pop.	DEGURBA class	Language
Halden	NO	^a 31,730	Intermediate density area	Norwegian
Strömstad	SE	^a 13,476	Intermediate density area	Swedish
Dals-Ed	SE	^a 4,606	Thinly populated area	Swedish

Table 2: Population, degree of urbanisation and spoken language for the cities in the case study.

^a in 2023.

Data: Geoportal of the European Commission (Eurostat), 2020b; Statistics Norway (SSB), 2024b; Statistics Sweden (SCB), 2024a.

The second case study area is located in the Svinesund region by the southern part of the border between Sweden and Norway. The cities of Strömstad and Dals-Ed on the Swedish side have ties to the city of Halden on the Norwegian side. Halden has a larger population than both the Swedish cities (see table 2). Strömstad is connected by road to Halden, with the journey taking around 30 minutes by car along the E6 thoroughfare and the Svinesund Bridge. Public transport between the cities is limited to buses, with the trip taking about an hour in total. Dals-Ed and Halden are connected by road and railway. Train travel is quicker, taking around 40 minutes compared to around 50 minutes by car (see figure 5).

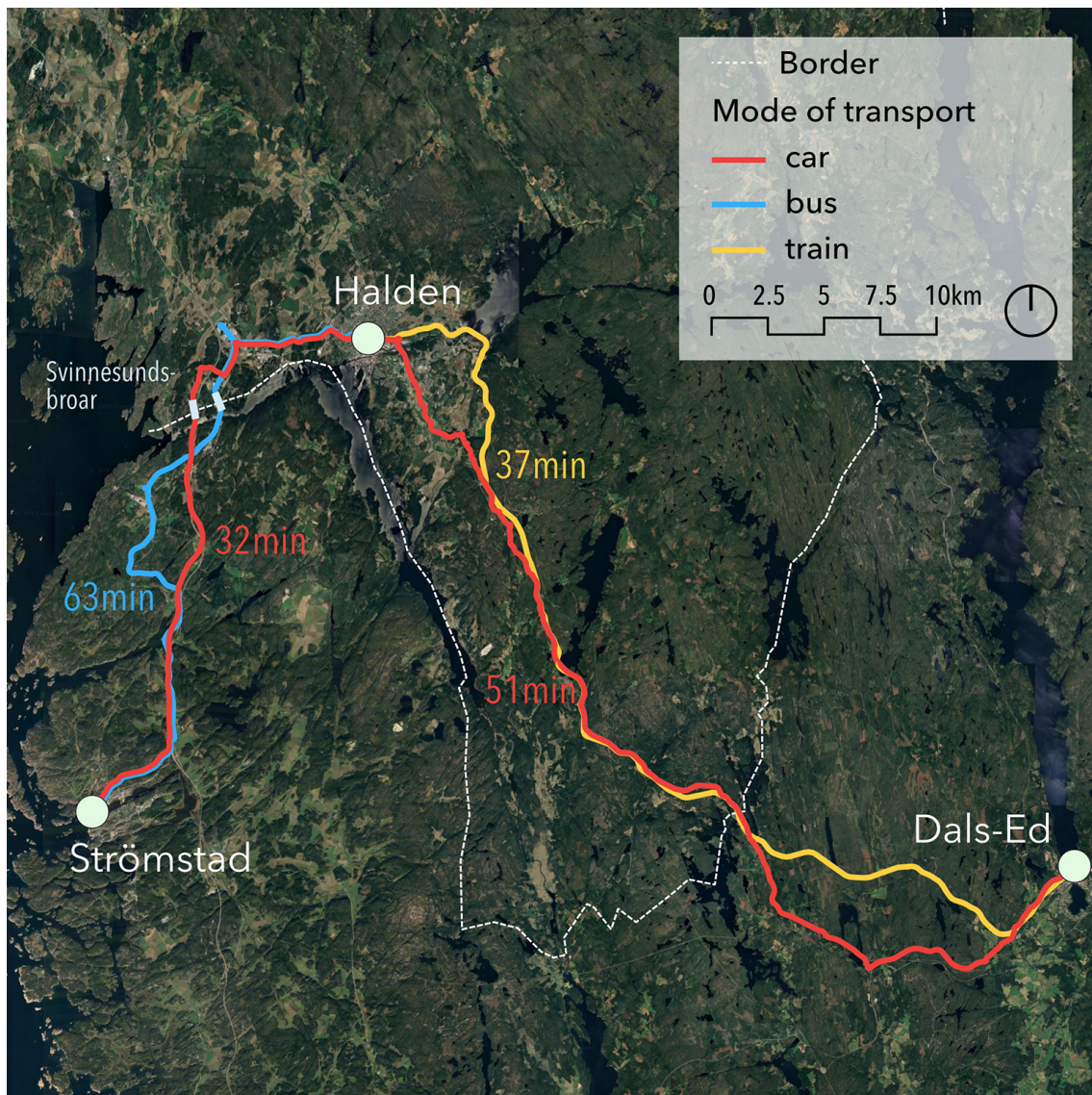


Figure 5: Map of Strömstad, Sweden, Dals-Ed, Sweden and Halden, Norway.

Data: Eurostat 2020b, Google Earth, OpenStreetMap/Openrouteservice, Trafikverket, Bane NOR SF, Eurostat 2020a.

The population of Strömstad is about half that of Halden and nearly three times that of Dals-Ed (see table 2). The population of Halden is mostly urban, while half of Strömstad's population lives in the centre and half in rural heartland areas (see figures 6 and 7). Dals-Ed is more rural and is situated in the north-western part of Dalsland in an area of wilderness featuring some 400 lakes and rivers (Dals-Eds kommun, 2023). All of its population lives in rural heartland or sparsely populated rural areas (see figure 6). Both Halden and Strömstad have an intermediate degree of urbanisation (see table 2). Some residents of Strömstad and of Dals-Ed commute to Halden for work and some local businesses have ties across the border.

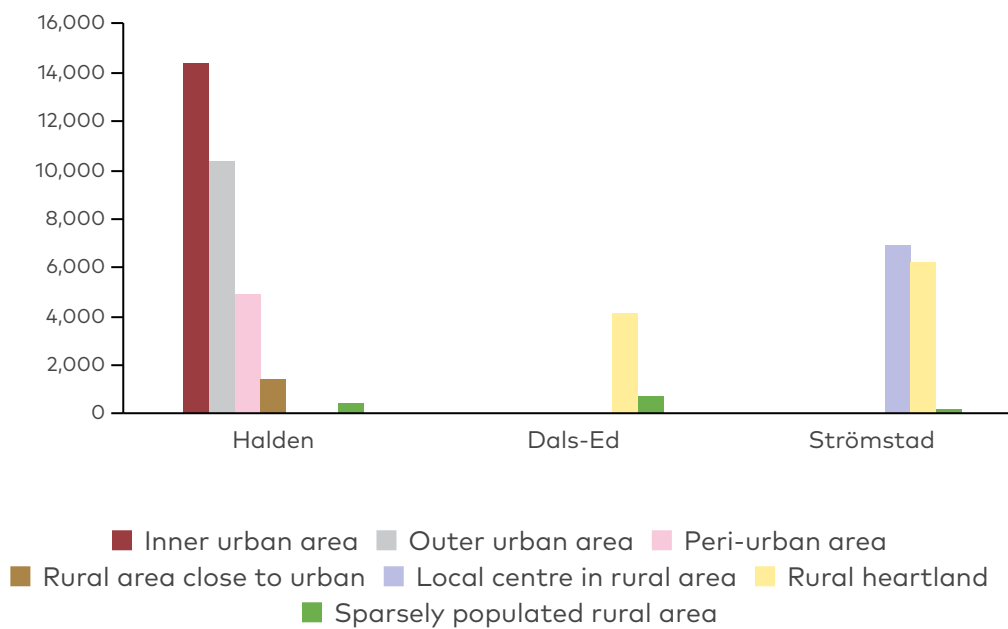


Figure 6: Population by Nordic urban-rural typology for Strömstad, Sweden, Dals-Ed, Sweden and Halden, Norway.

Data: Nordregio, based on Stjernberg, Vasilevskaya and Penje, 2024.

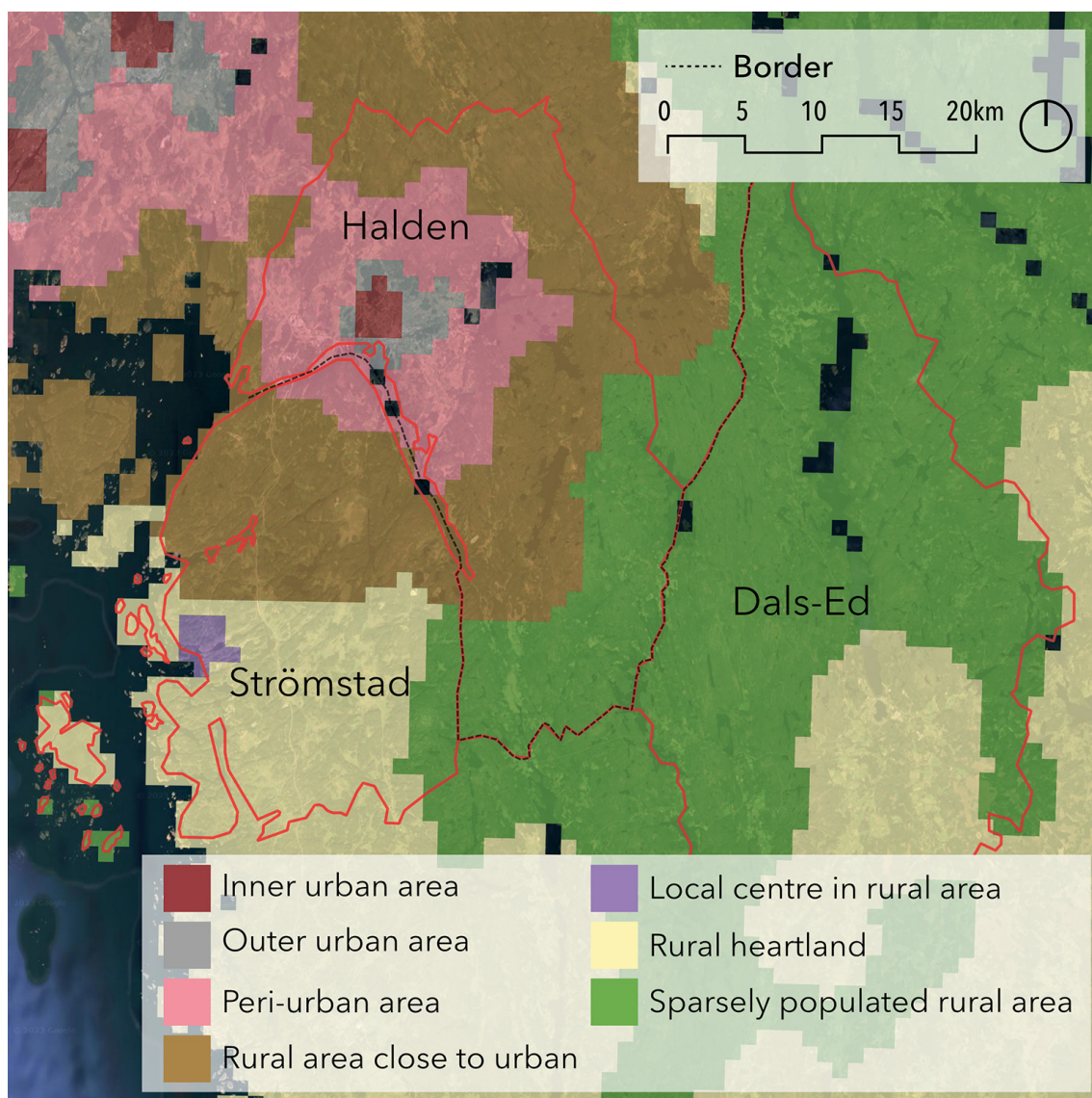


Figure 7: Map of the Nordic urban-rural typology for Strömstad, Sweden, Dals-Ed, Sweden and Halden, Norway.

Data: Eurostat 2020a; Nordregio, based on Stjernberg, Vasilevskaya and Penje, 2024.

Halden's economy benefits from collaboration with Østfold University College and the Institute for Energy Technology (Halden Kommune, 2023). Since 1958, the Halden Reactor Project has been in operation and is currently focused on research related to nuclear safety (NEA 2024). Halden is host to industries in the fields of information technology, electronics, chemistry and production, in particular the cable manufacturer Nexans. Halden also has a long history of timber production (Halden Kommune, 2023).

Strömstad benefits from its proximity to the Norwegian border with many businesses within the hospitality industry. The city also hosts companies operating in the fields of environmental technology and pharmaceuticals and is home to the only Swedish national marine park (Strömstads kommun, 2022). The border shutdown at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic dramatically highlighted the importance of cross-border exchanges to Strömstad's economy. Figure 8 shows the high impact of the lockdown and of reduced cross-border shopping on the unemployment rate in Strömstad compared to the national and regional rates. In early 2020, the unemployment rate in Strömstad was between 4 and 5%, well below the regional average and the Swedish national average and close to the unemployment rate in Dals-Ed. In March 2021, it hit 9.36%, two percentage points higher than the Swedish national average (SCB 2024).

The Covid-19 lockdown also had a critical impact in Halden, where the unemployment rate increased dramatically to 11% in March 2020 from less than 4% in February (NAV 2024b). However the unemployment rate had halved again by June 2020, coming back into line with the national Norwegian rate (Statistics Norway (SSB), 2024a).

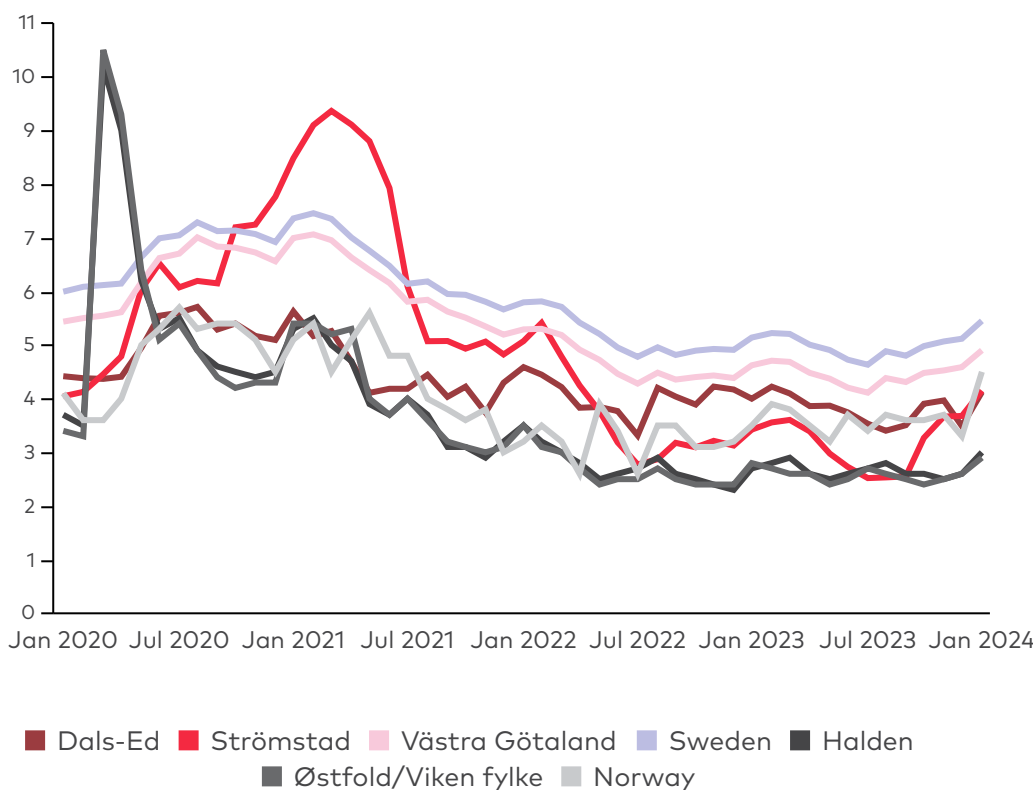


Figure 8: Unemployment as a percentage for the municipalities of Dals-Ed, Strömstad and Halden, the regions of Västra Götaland and Østfold/Viken as well as for Sweden and Norway from January 2020 to January 2024.

Data: Arbeids- og velferdsetaten (nav), 2024a, 2024b; Statistics Norway (SSB), 2024a; Statistics Sweden (SCB), 2024c.

Halden, Strömstad and Dals-Ed form part of the Svinesund Committee, a cross-border committee initiated in the 1980s that brings together politicians from both sides of the border with participation and support from Region Västra Götaland in Sweden and from the region of Viken in Norway. The committee is based on cross-border political cooperation between Swedish and Norwegian municipalities, Østfold county municipality, and Region Västra Götaland with the focus being on blue and green growth, tourism and border opportunities (Svinesund Committee, 2024). The committee's missions include providing institutional infrastructure to facilitate cross-border political collaboration and development for local and regional actors, carrying out cross-border development projects, alleviating obstacles to regional opportunities, relaying regional cross-border concerns at the national level and contributing to the cooperation plan of the Nordic Council of Ministers for regional development and planning (Svinesund Committee, 2024).

2.3.3. Helsingborg–Helsingør

City	Country	Pop.	DEGURBA class	Language
Helsingborg	SE	^a 151,306	Densely populated area	Swedish
Helsingør	DK	^a 63,865	Intermediate density area	Danish

Table 3: Population, degree of urbanisation and spoken language for the cities in the case study.

^a in 2023.

Data: Geoportal of the European Commission (Eurostat), 2020b; Statistics Denmark (DST), 2024b; Statistics Sweden (SCB), 2024a.

The third case study focuses on Helsingborg on the west coast of Sweden and Helsingør. This case highlights the challenges of cross-border urban planning across a body of water. The two cities are strategically located at the shortest link between Sweden and Denmark, separated by less than 5km (less than half the distance spanned by the Öresund Bridge between Malmö and Copenhagen).

A boat connection carries passengers, cars and lorries over the strait, with the journey taking around 20 minutes (see figure 9). Discussions on the creation of a fixed road and railway link to improve transport reliability, capacity and security are underway (Lundgren, Löfving and Westin, 2023). The cities form part of the Greater Copenhagen Region. Helsingborg is about 40 minutes away from Malmö by car and by train and about 80 minutes from Copenhagen across the Öresund Bridge. Helsingør is within an hour of Copenhagen by train and car.

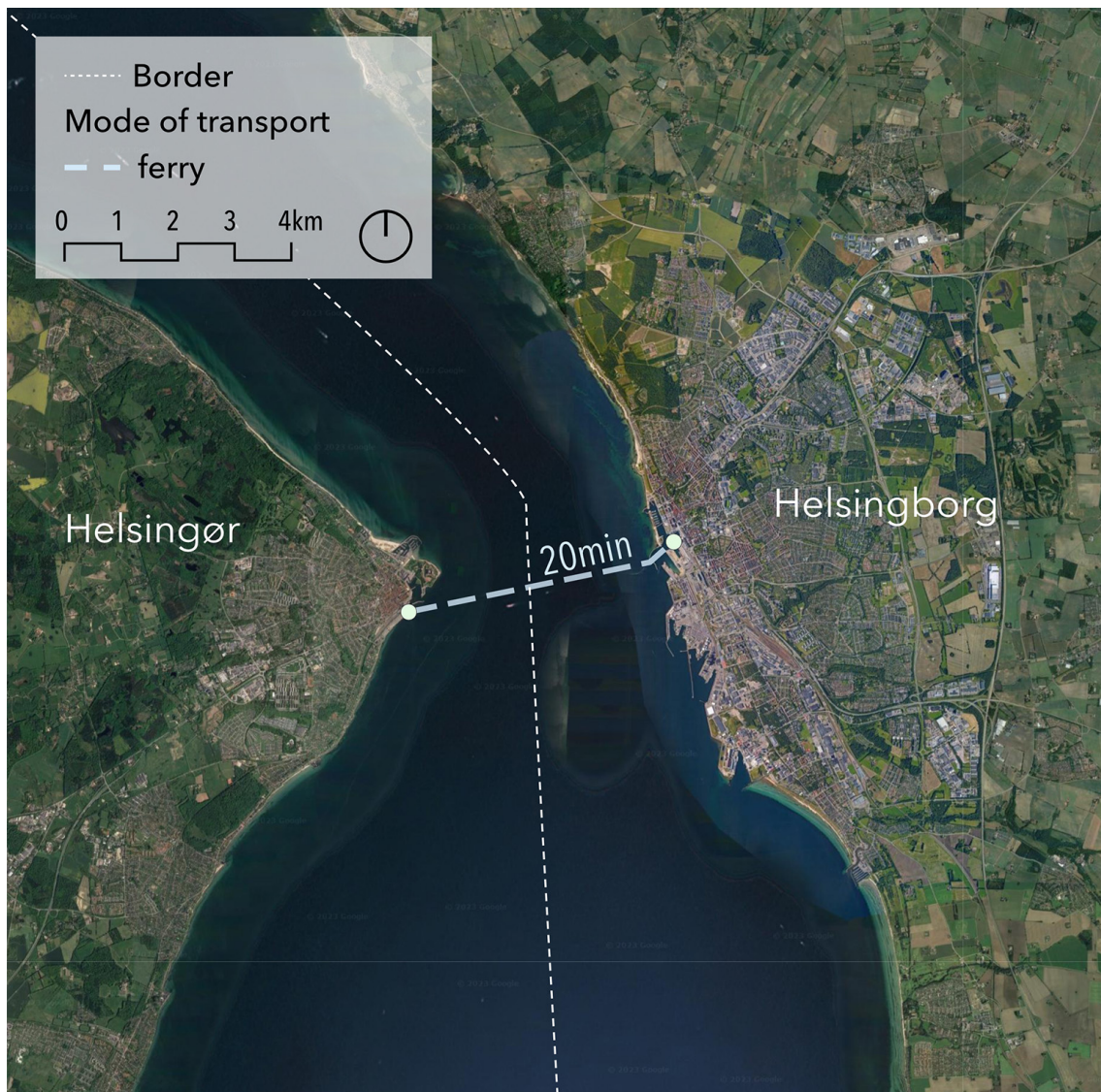


Figure 9: Map of Helsingborg, Sweden, and Helsingør, Denmark.

Data: Eurostat 2020a and Google Earth.

The population of Helsingborg is more than twice that of Helsingør. Helsingborg is urban while Helsingør has a moderate degree of urbanisation (see table 3). Both cities have a large majority of their populations living in urban areas, namely inner urban, outer urban or peri-urban areas (see figures 10 and 11). Helsingborg has larger inner urban areas and a higher proportion of its population living in such areas.

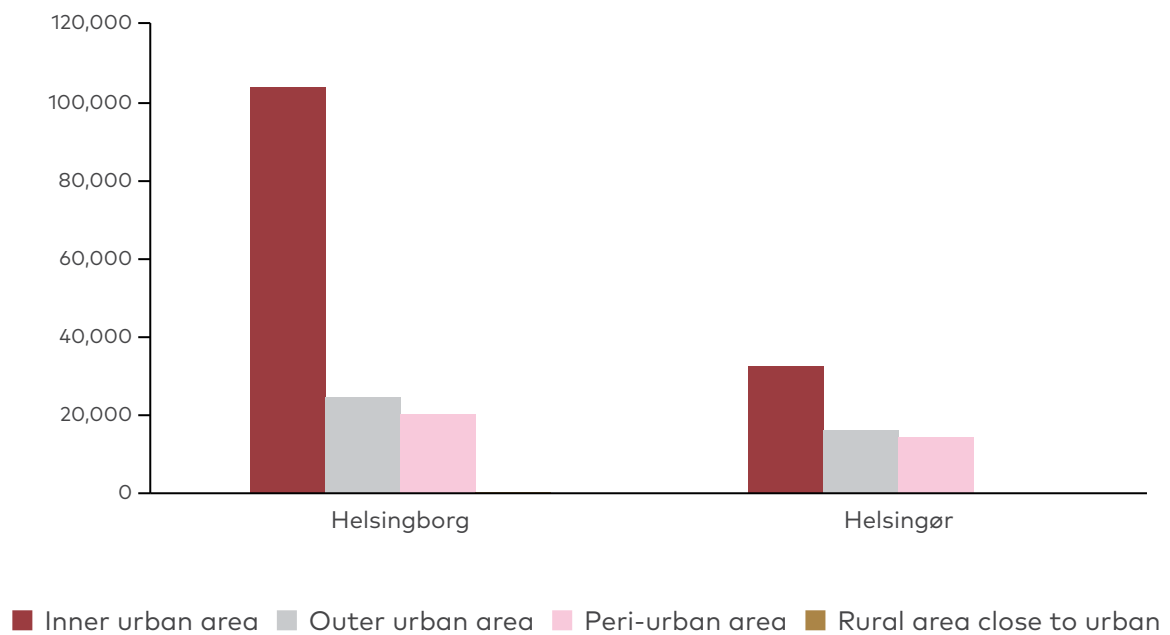


Figure 10: Population by Nordic urban-rural typology for Helsingborg, Sweden, and Helsingør, Denmark.

Data: Nordregio, based on Stjernberg, Vasilevskaya and Penje, 2024.

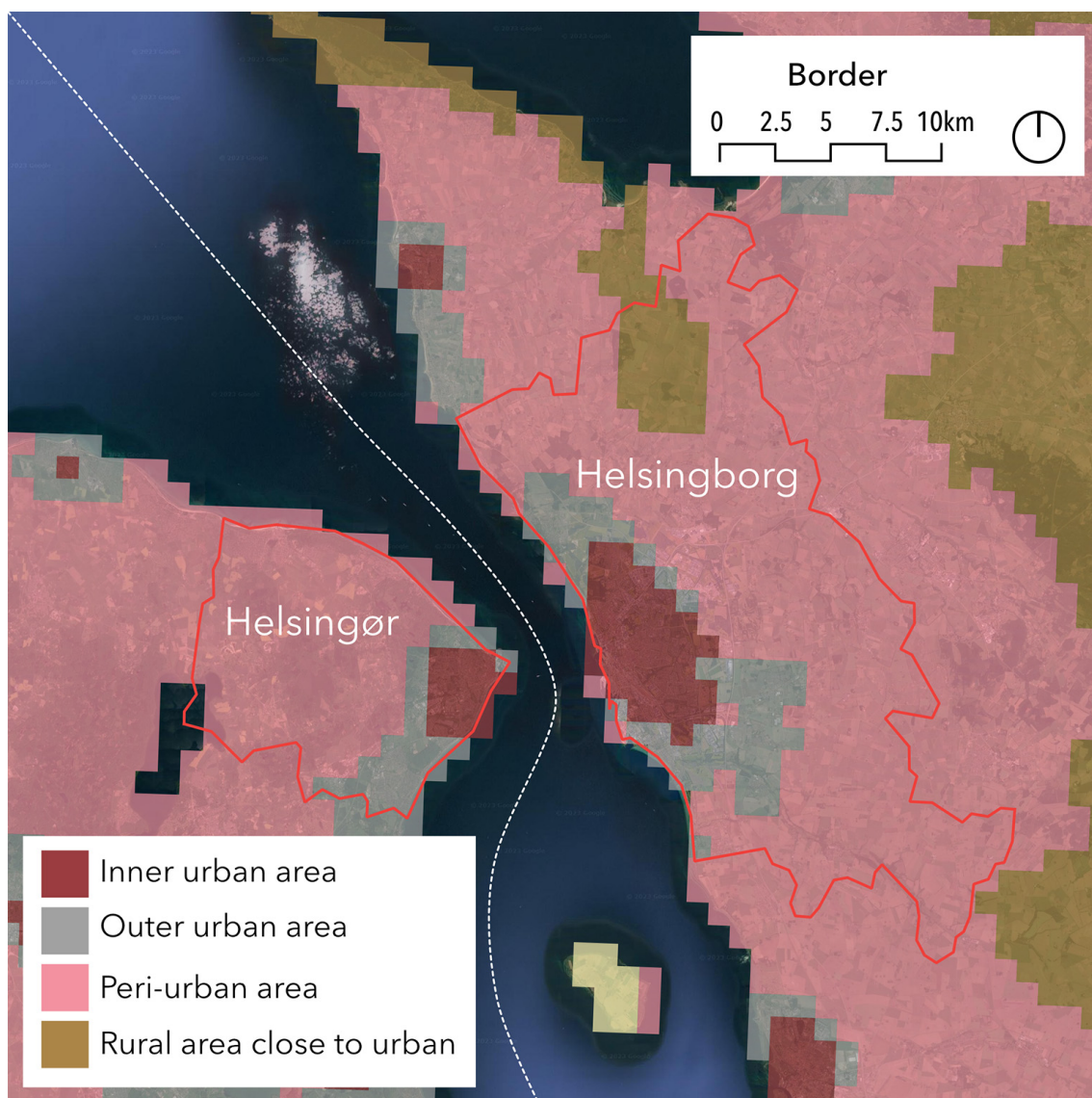


Figure 11: Map of the Nordic urban-rural typology for Helsingborg, Sweden and Helsingør, Denmark.

Data: Eurostat 2020a, Google Earth and Nordregio, based on Stjernberg, Vasilevskaya and Penje, 2024.

Helsingborg had a relatively high unemployment rate of between 8% and 10% during the 2020–2024 period, as shown in figure 13. Its unemployment rate is consistently higher than the regional rate in Skåne (1 percentage point higher) and higher than both the Swedish national rate (3 percentage points higher) and the Danish national rate (5 percentage points higher), see figure 12. The unemployment rate in Helsingør and in the region of Hovedstaden is close to the Danish national rate. In 2021, 27% of the 76,782 inhabitants in employment commuted from Helsingborg to their workplace (Helsingborg, 2024). An analysis by Statistics Denmark found that an estimated 700 people living in Sweden commuted to

Helsingør to work in 2022 (Søndergaard Møller, Stender and Thrane, 2023). Comparable up-to-date statistics for Danish workers in Helsingborg could not be found. However, the number of people crossing the strait each year was over 7.5 million in 2015 and expected to increase (HH-samarbete, 2016).

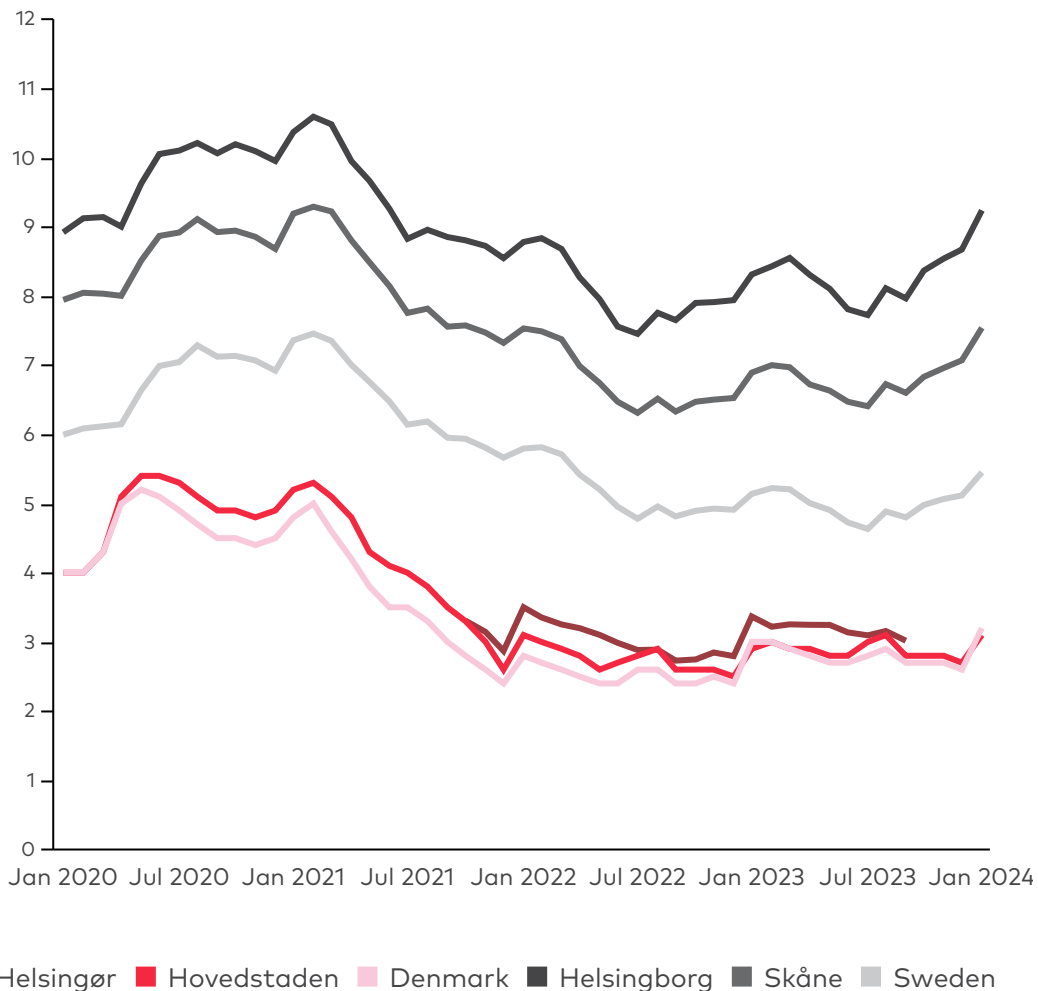


Figure 12: Unemployment as a percentage for the municipalities of Helsingborg and Helsingør, at the regional level for Skåne and Hovedstaden and at the national level for Sweden and Denmark from January 2020 to January 2024.

Data: Statistics Denmark (DST), 2024c, 2024a, 2024b; Statistics Sweden (SCB), 2024c.

Helsingborg and Helsingør work together on several committees. At the local level, they cooperate within the HH-samarbete, a dedicated cooperation scheme that aims to improve the quality of life and growth in the region around northern Öresund and brings Helsingør and Helsingborg together to work on joint strategies (HH-samarbete, 2016). The strategy is based on the vision of two cities becoming

one cohesive city by 2035. The cohesion focuses on the labour market, urban life, infrastructure, schools and culture and revolves around the concept of a borderless region. Being part of the Greater Copenhagen Region, they cooperate with municipalities of varying sizes in the area, as well as with the regions (Greater Copenhagen, 2024). Since they are strategically located on the narrower section of the strait, another important form of cooperation is the String megaregion, which connects actors along the corridor between Hamburg and Oslo (String, 2024).

2.4. Nordic Workshop in Copenhagen

A workshop involving stakeholders from municipalities, regions and national authorities from Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark was organised in conjunction with the Värmland-Østfold cross-border committee in March 2024 in Copenhagen. Most of the participants were members of the Nordic cross-border committees^[2]. The aim of the workshop was to allow for exchange of experiences on cross-border issues and discussion of how those could best be addressed.

For the workshop, we mapped the various cross-border services for each case. To accompany the maps, we grouped the four types of cross-border collaboration in a table that we placed alongside the maps. We completed the tables using information gathered from our research and data collected during the interviews.

The interviews and desk research highlighted four sharing-potential axes, which were used to frame the group discussions during the workshop and are presented in the "Results" and "Discussion" sections of this report. We structured the workshop around cross-border challenges, sharing-potential and national support.

2. See <https://www.norden.org/en/information/contact-details-border-committees> for links to the webpages of the committees.



Oceanview towards Helsingør in Denmark from the aft of a boat.

Photo: iStock

3. RESULTS

3.1. Findings of Interviews from the Nordic Region

The interviews we conducted enabled us to identify several challenges in terms of urban integration in cross-border regions.

It was observed by several interviewees that the state level needs to better understand the specific needs of cross-border regions. Some interviewees mentioned that a lack of such understanding was shown when the border was closed during the Covid pandemic (Wøien Meijer and Giacometti, 2021). It was noted that administrative procedures and taxation for cross-border workers could be improved. Issues tend to be addressed at the municipal level, with support from regions but without a formal common masterplan. Some challenges are also discussed within larger cooperation networks such as the String megaregion, which brings together regions and large cities from Oslo to Hamburg through Gothenburg, Helsingborg, Malmö and Copenhagen (String, 2024). Two of the cases selected for this study are in the String megaregion, namely Strömstad, Dals-Ed and Halden and Helsingborg and Helsingør.

3.1.1. Haparanda–Tornio

These two cities have many years' experiences of cross-border cooperation, starting in the 1960s with the sharing of Haparanda's swimming baths when Tornio lacked such facilities. Since 1987, the two municipalities have employed a common coordinator dedicated to cross-border issues and have established several agreements in areas such as education and infrastructure (Ainonen 2023). Over the years of collaboration, the cities have solved many problems related to the border and achieved a high level of integration.

In 1995, the EU membership of Sweden and Finland opened up the possibility of EU funding for Tornio and Haparanda to further develop their collaboration. The two cities are a strategic logistics hub as they constitute the main land link between

Finland and Sweden, serving as a key lorry and rail connection to Europe (Ainonen 2023). Obstacles to financing the development and maintenance of road and rail connections are being overcome, prompted by the NATO membership of both Finland and Sweden and increased attention to national security concerns in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Mikkola 2024; Sjaunja 2023).

The high integration of Haparanda and Tornio entails regular exchanges between the municipalities' officials and staff. The cross-border coordinator shares an office with the municipalities' leaders and meets weekly with them. A technical group composed of the municipalities' mayors, the development director of Tornio, the chair of Tornio city boards and the cross-border coordinator meet monthly. A larger group consisting of five members from both municipalities, plus the cross-border coordinator and development director meet bimonthly. This is the case study with the most frequent meetings between representatives of the municipalities.

In addition, the city boards meet a couple of times a year and the city councils meet once a year during workshops where they discuss issues that can be later raised at their respective assemblies. The cross-border coordinator liaises between both municipal councils and municipal boards, with formal discussion of adoption of measures during the workshops. The cross-border coordinator also brings together workers from both municipalities and promptly arranges meetings for new municipal employees with their counterparts in the other municipality (Ainonen 2023).

The difference in the countries' time zones and timing of their elections pose challenges to day-to-day work. Election of the municipal boards and councils in Finland and in Sweden are two years apart. This means that the timeframe for cross-border issues is two years with short gaps every two years at election time (Ainonen 2023).

Many problems related to shared infrastructure have been solved over the years (e.g. shared public schools, a bus terminal, swimming pool, tourism info centre). Closure of the border during the Covid pandemic highlighted the high degree of integration of the two cities. The functioning of the Swedish healthcare system in Haparanda relies on Finnish residents who cross the border to work. Closure of the border highlighted that dependence and posed many challenges in terms of ensuring that the system continued to function (Sjaunja 2023). Another issue involved buses in Finland, which could not access the common bus terminal used by the buses of the two cities located in Sweden just a hundred meters from the Finnish border (Ainonen 2023).

There are legal and economic challenges to joining up services across the border. For example, the difference in ownership and management systems between Finland and Sweden makes it harder to operate trains across the border. In Finland, the rail network is owned and managed by the state while private operators handle

rail traffic in Sweden. However, the railways crossing the border are currently being electrified and will return to operation in 2025 with strengthened interest in and funding for such infrastructure in view of logistics and security. Legal challenges also arise for buses and taxis, which cannot fully operate across the border. While the municipalities would benefit from cross-border public transport by bus, their buses can travel to Finland from Haparanda but cannot pick up passengers on their return (Ainonen 2023).

There are also issues concerning operation of ambulances across the border. Currently, ambulances from the other country do provide their services across the border, but without a clear legal basis for doing so. There are legal uncertainties as to what would happen in the event of an accident or other issue involving the ambulance (Sjaunja 2023).

Many inhabitants of Haparanda can speak some Finnish and it is common for them to use the hospital in Kemi, Finland, which is about 25 kilometres away (Ainonen 2023). There are few dentists in Norrbotten and residents can benefit from the higher capacity in Finland (Sjaunja 2023). That may, however, be administratively challenging. Some issues are addressed through healthcare and welfare cooperation between the regional health authorities in the North Calotte regions. However, those need to be revised when reforms occur at the national level such as reform of the healthcare and social care systems in Finland in 2023 (Mikkola 2024).

3.1.2. Strömstad–Dals-Ed–Halden

Cross-border cooperation between Strömstad, Dals-Ed and Halden is supported by the Svinesund cross-border committee which brings together Norwegian and Swedish municipalities. Both the Region Västra Götaland and the region of Viken have seats on the committee's board (Laupsa 2023). The committee acts as the primary link for cross-border issues for the region of Västra Götaland. The Swedish region grants financial support to the committee through an "*operating grant*" to fulfil the role of cross-border connections at the political level (Catoni 2023). The Svinesund committee is not legally regulated either in Norway or in Sweden but arose on a voluntarily basis to resolve cross-border issues (Widen 2023).

The committee facilitates development of opportunities across the border, but the municipalities also discuss issues on a one-to-one basis. For example, Halden and Strömstad are working together to develop businesses and workplaces and to attract new businesses and workplaces to the region (Laupsa 2023). The committee meets once a month and is an important platform for politicians and municipal authorities to liaise across the border (Laupsa 2023).

There are no fixed forums for cooperation at the municipal level between Halden and Strömstad, but the two municipalities have good lines of communication and work to maintain the cross-border infrastructure and the highway and bus route

that connects both cities (Widen 2023). The municipalities meet several times per year to discuss strategic cross-border issues (Hansson 2023). There is currently no set political cooperation in place between Halden and Dals-Ed. However, the municipalities are endeavouring to strengthen their cooperation and members of the administration on both sides have been in close contact (Laupsa 2023).

The economy is inter-dependent across the border, with Halden benefiting from labour from Strömstad, Dals-Ed and the area towards Gothenburg (Laupsa 2023). Conversely the Swedish municipalities benefit from tourism and workplaces in Halden and further afield in Sarpsborg and the greater Oslo region (Widen 2023; Hansson 2023). Despite that strong degree of interconnectedness, there are obstacles that limit individuals and small businesses when it comes to working across the border.

An issue that was raised in several interviews with municipalities is the lack of statistics regarding cross-border exchanges, in particular the number of commuters between each country. Such data would allow for better understanding of the needs of commuters and businesses on both sides of the border. Nevertheless, it may be stated that a fair proportion of the population in Dals-Ed and in Strömstad, commute to Norway to work and many companies operate on both sides of the border. However, taxation and administrative difficulties, such as obtaining a D-number –a unique identification number that is often relevant for those with a temporary connection to Norway–, and other issues put individuals off working across the border. For businesses, the transport of goods across the border may be onerous due to customs, such as when goods are held for a lengthy period on the other side of the border (Hansson 2023). There are also issues with handling lorry traffic transporting goods inside or outside the EU (Laupsa 2023). It is difficult to ensure smooth entry for transport from a non-EU country such as Norway due to customs. Accordingly, there is need for support at the national and Nordic levels to facilitate the integration of cross-border regions (Catoni 2023).

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the asymmetric nature of trade between the Swedish and Norwegian sides. Strömstad's economy was shown to be strongly dependent on cross-border shopping from Norway. When Norway closed its border with Sweden, Strömstad's economy was hit very hard (Hansson 2023). That large impact can be seen in the unemployment rate in Strömstad, which rose from 4.5% in March 2020 to over 9% a year on (SCB 2024c).

To remedy that imbalance, Region Västra Götaland, together with the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth, launched a project to diversify the labour market and increase the level of education in the area (Catoni 2023). From Strömstad, higher education in Norway is within commuting distance while the connection to higher education in Sweden is slightly worse, with the journey taking over an hour and a half (Hansson 2023). There are administrative hindrances to studying across the border that are being addressed to ensure that Norwegian students can take courses in Sweden and vice versa (Nilsson 2023).

Municipalities also cooperate across the border on tourism. Halden and Strömstad are discussing the development of the border crossing via the Old Svinesund Bridge as a tourist attraction. The bridge offers beautiful scenery of the strait and of the new bridge. However, the area surrounding the bridge has fallen into disrepair since the new bridge was built because commerce in the area depended on the flow of traffic. Both sides of the border want to improve the area and discussions involving the Svinesund committee are underway on its development (Hansson 2023).

The municipalities do not co-create common development strategies or get heavily involved in each other's master plan but maintain good lines of communication on cross-border issues. Since the municipalities are separated from each other by the Svinesund Strait or by a longer distance, they do not cooperate on their development strategies on a continuous basis. However, they do treat their counterpart as a consultative body on relevant issues and can comment on their neighbour's development plans (Widen 2023; Nilsson 2023)

The Swedish and Norwegian border near Strömstad follows the course of the Iddefjord with the Svinesund at its mouth. The fjord and the two bridges crossing the Svinesund attract tourists. On the Swedish side, the strait forms part of a Natura-2000 area with strict environmental protection rules. The Svinesund is shallower than the rest of the fjord and hosts a variety of marine species of molluscs, anemones, crustaceans and sponges (Hedström, 2021). However, the sediments in the fjord are heavily polluted due to the past activities of the paper industry on the Norwegian side of the fjord (Hedström, 2021).

Environmental concerns and the protection status of the area on the Swedish side are in opposition to development strategies on the Norwegian side to deepen the strait and increase the connection capacity of the fjord for industries located in Halden (Hansson, 2021; Hansson 2023). There are also concerns that the pollutants lying at the bottom of the fjord could enter the coastal area, including near Strömstad, or the sea if development work, such as deepening the strait, is carried out in the fjord (Hansson 2023). Swedish authorities as well as environmental non-governmental organisations in Sweden and Norway, appealed against the plans to develop the strait in 2021 (Hedström, 2021). Swedish authorities are engaged in ongoing discussions with the county administrative board on the Norwegian side to move forward on the issue, with the elaboration of an environmental impact assessment at the centre of the discussion (Hansson 2023).

3.1.3. Helsingborg–Helsingør

Cooperation between Helsingborg and Helsingør takes place through the steering group made up of politicians called HH-cooperation, as well as a smaller steering group composed of the heads of the municipalities and a secretariat dedicated to cooperation. The HH-cooperation steering group is composed of the chairperson

and vice-chairperson of the municipal council in Helsingborg, the mayor of Helsingør, the state directors of the two cities as well as Helsingør politicians from the opposition parties (Kipowski 2023). In addition, there is further collaboration between municipal employees on specific activities such as culture and tourism (Kipowski 2023).

Challenges related to the cross-border job market are addressed in the Greater Copenhagen Network or String (Kipowski 2023). The former is a cooperation initiative between eastern Denmark and southern Sweden including Region Skåne, Region Halland, the region of Hovedstaden, the region of Sjælland and 85 municipalities (Greater Copenhagen, 2024). At the municipal level, urban investments are financed by the municipality that initiated the development, but the operating costs of projects on which municipalities collaborate are shared. Helsingborg is larger than Helsingør and has a larger budget to contribute to co-financing (Kipowski 2023).

Cooperation in recent years between Helsingborg and Helsingør has focused on infrastructure development, tourism, the labour market, culture and education as well as government cooperation (Kipowski 2023). Recent projects include the organisation of job fairs and tourism development. The latter includes marketing campaigns, press trips, bike tours and events under the concept of *two countries – one destination* (Kipowski 2023). The two cities have also collaborated on the elaboration of attractive playgrounds, learning from each other to create a joint planning strategy in 2014 (Kipowski 2014).

Representatives from Helsingborg and Helsingør, namely politicians and officials from both cities, co-created a planning strategy during workshops in 2013 and 2014. That strategy highlighted elements of attractiveness such as the fast link between the cities that connects to coastal promenades on both sides of the strait, to natural areas and to key cultural points of interest (HH-samarbete, 2014). The planning strategy stresses key aspects that enhance the living environment of both cities: historical urban architecture; the rich marine environment on the seabed; the strong economy in the fields of crafts, production, trade, tourism and logistics; educational facilities including Campus Helsingborg and many vocational schools; and complementarity between the cities with regard to cultural activities, events and tourism (HH-samarbete, 2014).

Another important aspect of the cooperation is the lobbying of national authorities to build a second road and rail connection between Denmark and Sweden at Helsingborg and Helsingør. The cities adopted a strategy to support such infrastructure in 2017 (Kipowski 2023), but the idea was already formulated back in 1866 (Trafikverket, Vejdirektoratet, and Transport-, bygge- og boligstyrelsen, 2021). Region Skåne is also contributing to supporting such infrastructure, which it hopes will simplify the lives of cross-border workers, provide more opportunities to access the job markets on both sides and integrate Helsingborg even better into the

Greater Copenhagen Region (Malm 2023). It is expected to create greater redundancy in the event of problems with the Öresund Bridge between Malmö and Copenhagen and to strengthen the connection between the Helsingborg and Helsingør job markets (Lundgren, Löfving and Westin, 2023; Kipowski 2023).

The level of unemployment in Sweden is high, especially in the Skåne region. In Denmark, the national unemployment rate ranged between 2.6% and 3.2% between January 2023 and January 2024 and between 2.8% and 3.1% for the Hovedstaden region (DST 2024c, DST 2024c). During the same period, the national unemployment rate in Sweden remained above 4.6%, with the figure being 6.4% in the Skåne region and 7.7% in Helsingborg (SCB 2024c). Accordingly, there are opportunities to work in Denmark but not all Swedish residents can benefit from the Danish job market since it depends on their immigration status. There are also limitations due to tax barriers and variations in exchange rates between the Swedish krona and the Danish krona (Kipowski 2023).

To facilitate labour market integration between Denmark and Sweden, the Nordic Council of Ministers finances collaboration between authorities from both countries called Öresunddirekt. The organisation has offices in Malmö and gathers expert knowledge from the Swedish Public Employment Service, the Swedish Tax Agency, the Swedish Social Security Agency and the County Administrative Board of Skåne (Malm 2023). The organisation operates mostly in southern Skåne and Copenhagen, but it is also engaged in activities in Helsingborg aimed at the integration of Helsingborg and Helsingør (Malm 2023). It provides help and assistance to both individuals and employers in relation to working on the other side of the strait and moving there (Malm 2023).

3.2. Sharing-Potential Along Four Research Axes

To improve urban-urban integration, we identified four main axes:

- sharing of capacity,
- sharing of specialisations,
- sharing of services,
- cross-border joint-services.

Sharing of capacity means that both municipalities provide the given service, but one can benefit from the surplus of the other if necessary. An integrated healthcare system such as in Tornedalen –where Kemi Hospital can treat patients from Sweden– is an example of that.

Sharing of specialisations means that both municipalities have the same general service, but only one has a specialised form of the service. An example is the case of

vocational and higher education in Helsingborg and Helsingør or higher vocational education in Svinesund, allowing students to select a broader range of programmes and specialisations.

Sharing of services refers to services that are provided in only one of the municipalities but that can be accessed from both. The bus terminal in Haparanda, which is used by buses from both Tornio and Haparanda, is an example of a shared service, as were the swimming baths at the inception of the strong cooperation in the twin city.

Cross-border joint-services are services operating across national borders. Examples of cross-border joint-services are the bus service or the ambulances in Haparanda and Tornio. Another example is that of the common police patrols between Norway-Sweden initiated in recent years.

The maps in figures 13, 14 and 15 show the identified sharing-potential along the four axes just described above for each of the Nordic cases.

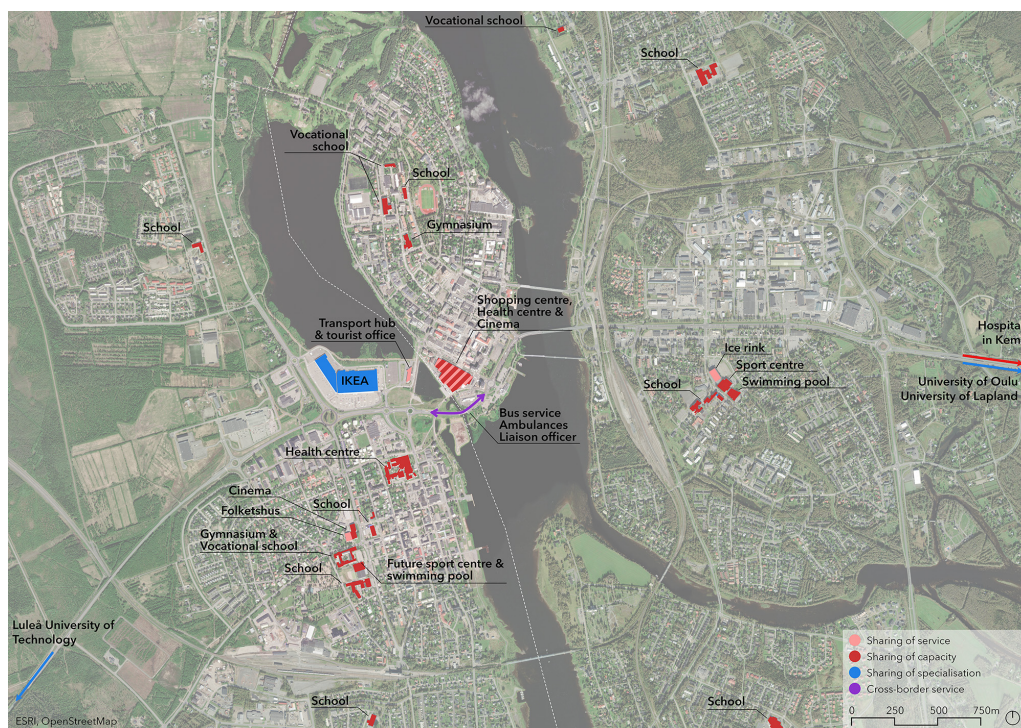


Figure 13. Map of the sharing-potential in Haparanda and Tornio.

Base map: ESRI.

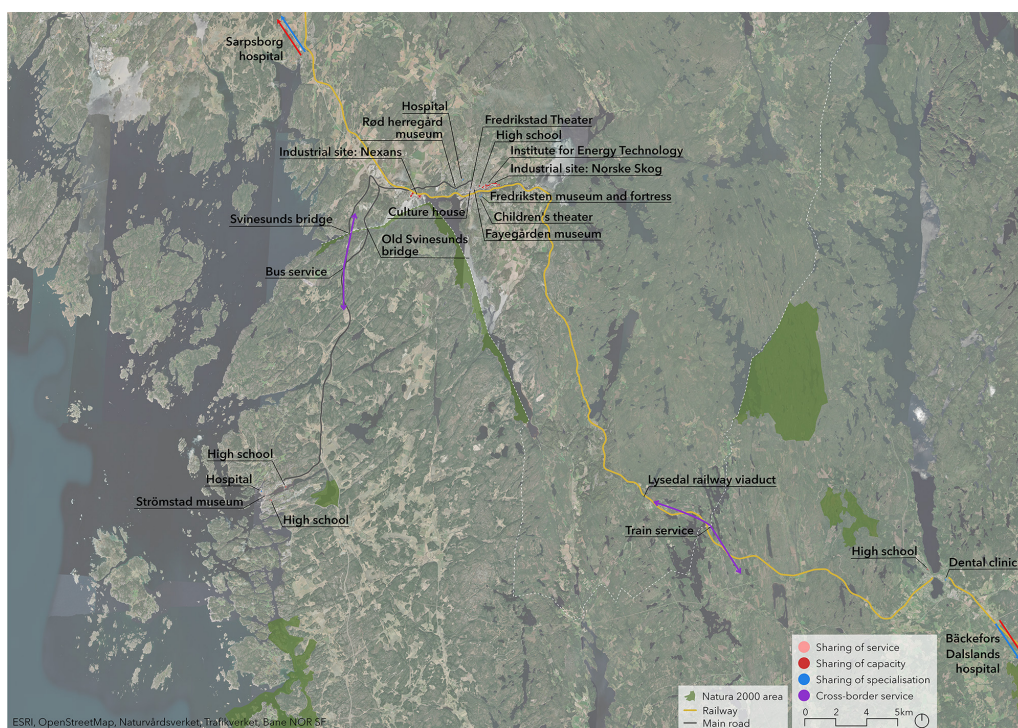


Figure 14: Map of the sharing-potential for the Svinesund region.

Base map: ESRI.

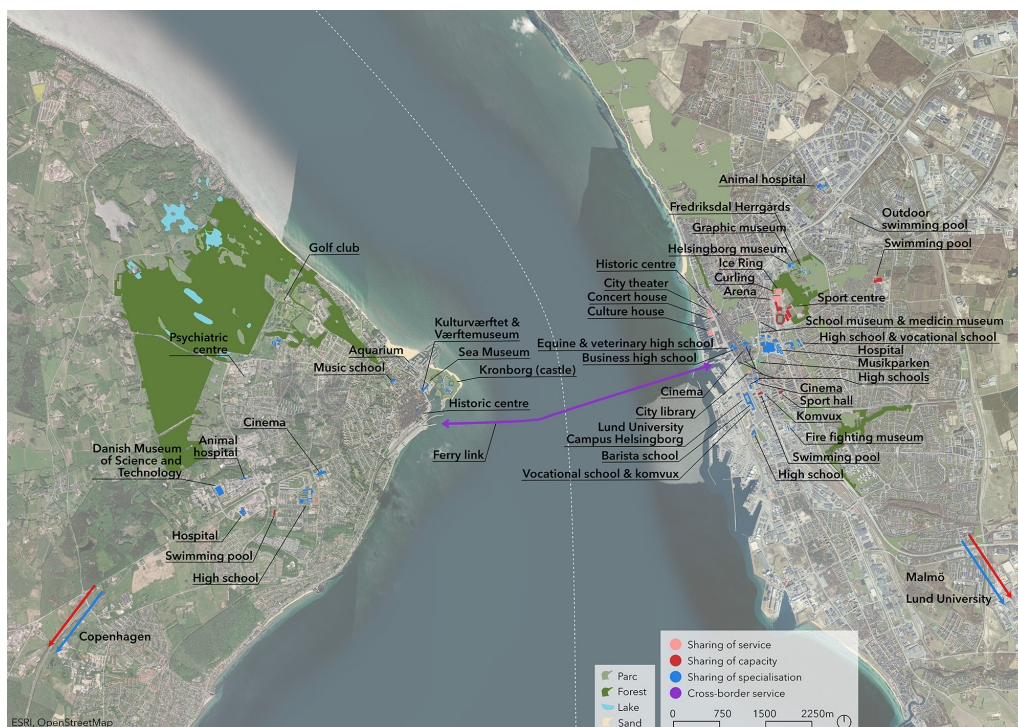


Figure 15: Map of the sharing-potential in Helsingborg and Helsingør.

Base map: ESRI.

3.3. Workshop: Group Discussions on Nordic Cases

During the workshop discussion, several key challenges were identified by the participants. The participants stressed the already high level of integration in these cross-border regions, to the point that they almost know no borders. Hence, these regions are already well integrated in the minds of the people living there, but harmonisation of legal and administrative challenges is necessary to facilitate daily life in the cross-border regions and to achieve the goal of the Nordic Region being the most integrated region in the world. Otherwise, those barriers will remain a major hinderance to integration.

There was consensus amongst the participants that to achieve more integrated regions, harmonisation is required and that support from higher-level authorities is necessary, either at the national or international level (NCM, Interreg, EU). In that context, they stressed the need for cross-border agreements regarding taxation and the need for common payment schemes between countries, including mobile payment systems.

The participants highlighted the importance of seeing the border more as an opportunity than a barrier and to think in terms of the Nordic level in order to address the remaining challenges.

They identified a need for statistics and background facts on cross-border realities to show the challenges and benefits of cross-border integration in order to draw the attention of national authorities to the importance of cross-border challenges. To that end, national statistics agencies need to increase their cooperation too.

Infrastructure and public services are fundamental when it comes to facilitating cross-border integration. In particular, participants raised the issues of continuity in public transport across the border and of maintaining local stops in smaller localities. Such issues are rendered even more complex due to the different systems for national transport planning. That is a challenge for cross-border integration.

Coordination and harmonisation between national, regional and local authorities were discussed by some participants. They noted the need for increased harmonisation between planning authorities that work on different levels across the border in Norway (county level) and Sweden (municipal level). Similar difficulties also arise in the healthcare system between Finland and Sweden; patients using healthcare services in the other country need to complete a lot of paperwork to have money refunded from Kela (FI) or Forsäkringskassan (SE), the national social security agencies in their respective countries.

The participants highlighted the need to include more officials from municipalities in work on cross-border challenges and to increase financial support for cross-border initiatives. Organising more meeting platforms for civil servants was

suggested as a way of promoting cross-border integration. Increasing cooperation and communication with governments and decision makers was also highlighted as a key element for improving the efficiency and appropriateness of decisions.



The Torne River and the bridge of Hannula in central Tornio, Finland.

Photo: Methem (Mikko J. Putkonen) / commons.wikimedia.org

4. DISCUSSION: MAIN CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED

In our interviews with municipality officials and politicians, as well as with regional authorities, we identified several main challenges to cross-border integration for Sweden and its neighbours. Tackling administrative challenges to integration remains important to facilitate commuting, working and studying across borders, as well as access to services. Legal challenges hinder some cross-border services and shared services across borders. Planning challenges that require enhanced collaboration also remain. Language is critical to supporting common understanding and integration of populations across borders. It was highlighted by most municipality officials that national authorities need to make an effort to better understand and take into account the realities in cross-border regions.

Through our interviews and desk research we identified cross-border sharing-potential along four axes, namely sharing of capacity, sharing of specialisations, sharing of services and cross-border joint-services. Those will be detailed in the relevant section below. Finally, before presenting policy recommendations for overcoming cross-border challenges, we will discuss funding challenges in relation to cross-border Nordic cooperation.

4.1. Administrative Challenges

Working or studying across borders or using services such as healthcare systems in the neighbouring country are administrative challenges that can potentially be alleviated by better cooperation between administrations. On the Swedish-Norwegian border, obtaining a D-number in Norway or a coordination number in Sweden may prove difficult and involve bureaucracy when it comes to cross-border working (Laupsa 2023). Taxation is also an issue.

The Nordic countries adopted a treaty on avoidance of double taxation in 1983 and a cross-border agreement on taxation was concluded in 1996 with the general rule that the country of employment where the employer is established receives the tax contribution for workers that live in a Nordic country and work in another (Øresundsinstituttet, 2017). That system serves as the ground rule for the agreement between Sweden and Denmark adopted in 2003, which has been criticised as being unfair to Sweden. Based on a survey conducted in 2008, the Øresundsinstituttet notes that most healthcare costs are incurred in the country of residence for cross-border workers between Sweden and Denmark (Øresundsinstituttet, 2017). On the other hand, a change to taxation in the country of residence could affect the job market in the Oresund area due to an imbalance in taxation between Sweden and Denmark (Øresundsinstituttet, 2017).

Border municipalities between Sweden, Norway and Finland are subject to a special agreement that sets taxation in the country of residence. Individuals still have to apply once a year for special income tax and there may still be delays that can burden employees for several months. Efforts to increase effectiveness of the taxation agencies are underway (Norden, 2022).

Some interviewees remarked that improved coordination of public services would be beneficial to cross-border integration. For example, it was suggested that the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Agency (NAV) and the Swedish Public Employment Agency could increase cooperation on the availability of work across borders (Laupsa 2023). Stronger cooperation in relation to healthcare and public transport has the potential to add value to cross-border integration (Malm 2023).

There is also potential within the education sector to open up more higher education opportunities and increase integration. Interviewees in Halden and Dals-Ed suggested that allowing students to take part in courses across borders as part of validated programmes would be beneficial to cross-border integration (Nilsson 2023; Laupsa 2023).

4.2. Legal Challenges

Transport of goods across borders, notably to and from Norway due to the EU-border, involves challenges related to customs especially for businesses that work in cross-border regions and need to transport goods and equipment across the border.

Operating public transport across borders and cross-border services, such as ambulances, can involve legal challenges. In the regions of Norrbotten in Sweden and Lapland in Finland, ambulances do intervene on the other side of the border even if the legal implications in the case of an incident or accident are a grey area (Sjaunja 2023). Similarly, buses and taxis are limited in their possibilities to operate

on the other side of the border, reducing their efficiency and the service offered to residents.

The impact of Covid on cross-border relations has already been studied at length, in particular by Nordregio researchers (e.g. Wøien Meijer and Giacometti, 2021). Nevertheless, this issue was also mentioned by most of the interviewees in this study. They remarked that the state level needs to better understand the specific needs of cross-border regions and that a lack of such understanding was shown when the borders were closed during the Covid pandemic. An interviewee from Halden summarised the issue as follows:

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For many years we have been working on national unification and creating a cross-border housing and labour market across borders. It has been taken to make it easy to live and work on the border. The pandemic showed us some of the challenges that lie there. The pandemic showed that we are not able to have a common understanding of how to manage a pandemic. This means that two countries choose completely different strategies. [...] We felt that national authorities had no understanding of what it is like to be a border municipality.

– *Laupsa 2023*

After hard borders between neighbouring countries were reintroduced, people underwent border controls with daily inspection of their health certificates. Closure of the borders highlighted people's own nationality in integrated regions where differences in nationalities had slowly faded (Malm 2023). Since border regions had been developed for years into integrated common labour market regions, many essential workers, such as nurses, were living on the other side of the border and had to adhere to the stronger rules set for crossing the border (Moberg 2023). In the Swedish region of Norrbotten, numerous health workers live in Finland and work in Sweden. Closure of the border was thus described as a near disaster for the health and social care sector and was only narrowly averted by finding solutions on the spot (Sjaunja 2023). For the people living in Tornedalen on the Finnish and

Swedish border, the border is very porous and integration is very high. However, legal issues remain that were exacerbated during the pandemic when the border was closed. In Tornio, buses could no longer reach their terminal located in Haparanda and the twin city centre located in Tornio could not be reached by residents on the Swedish side (Ainonen 2023).

Many politicians we interviewed voiced the feeling that national authorities lacked an understanding of the reality in border municipalities. Decisions taken at the national level impacted commuters and people with family across the border; suddenly they were impeded daily on their way to work or could not see or help their relatives for several months. After so many years of work on integrating border regions, there was a lack of thinking about how decisions at the national level would affect border regions and how that should be handled. An interviewee noted that *"as soon as border controls are introduced, the labour market region deteriorates by several hundred thousand jobs because travel times are extended by about 20-30 minutes between countries"* (Kipowski 2023). He also noted that the national authorities need to see the benefits of cross-border cooperation and to be present and active in border regions to a greater extent (Kipowski 2023).

That sentiment was summarised by another interviewee, who said that when they alerted national authorities to the impact of the handling of the pandemic on border regions, they realised *"it was a long way between Strömstad and Stockholm"* and that it was only when representatives of national authorities came on site and said they *"had a completely dead city"* that they grasped the severity of the situation (Hansson 2023). Another interviewee supported that view, saying that *"Stockholm and national politics need to have a greater understanding of the issues we experience in the border areas and perhaps include the Nordic Council more [...] when discussing these issues specifically"* (Nilsson 2023). Raising the issue of the handling of the pandemic and its impact on cross-border regions is essential so that cross-border regions –which are increasingly integrated– are also made more resilient. As the same interviewee said, *"when the next pandemic comes, we will handle it in a better way than we did"* (Nilsson 2023).

4.3. Planning Challenges

Municipalities have specific ways of coordinating their development strategies. They consult their counterpart on issues of common interest arising in their respective plans and coordinate through cross-border committees such as the Svinesund committee or the HH sammarbete or through the common municipal employee and working groups in Tornio and Haparanda. Helsingborg and Helsingør elaborated overall strategies for their cooperation, with a development vision designed to attract residents, jobs and tourists. Tornio and Haparanda have strongly integrated political processes to co-develop the twin city. They adopt strategies and measures discussed by representatives of both cities with the support of their coordinator and several working groups. In the Svinesund region, the committee serves as a bridge to coordinate and complement collaboration between municipalities and to support development of the region at a higher level.

The lack of specific statistics on cross-border commuters and cross-border related issues was highlighted during the interviews and workshop. A report by Statistics Denmark noted that 700 Swedish residents commuted to their workplace in Helsingør in 2022 (Søndergaard Møller, Stender and Thrane, 2023). Statistics on the total number of commuters in and out of Halden, Strömstad, Dals-Ed, Helsingborg and Haparanda are available from SCB and SSB, but they do not distinguish between cross-border and national residents. Statistics including specific information about yearly cross-border commuting are not generally available for our case studies to our knowledge.

Infrastructure is the foundation of better integration. Infrastructure in cross-border regions has already been examined several times in Nordregio's studies (e.g. Lundgren, Löfving and Westin, 2023). Several interviewees reiterated the importance of infrastructure for better integration. Frequent and reliable public transport is important for the development of the link between Halden and Strömstad. There is currently no sustainable public transport due to the low population density (Catoni 2023). Discussions are ongoing in String on developing the railways to support alternatives to the E6 thoroughfare for transporting people and goods in the regions (Catoni 2023).

A further difficulty is the lower importance accorded at the national level to infrastructure development for sparsely populated areas. An interviewee noted that *"in transport, it is pivotal but very challenging to get support for regional initiatives from the national level. The low number of inhabitants is often used as an excuse for not supporting cross-border initiatives (not worth the investment due to high costs)"* (Mikkola 2024). Nevertheless *"there is a great need for infrastructure to facilitate urban development"* (Kipowski 2023).

4.4. The Language Barrier

The language barrier may impede better integration in border regions. That is evident in Haparanda and Tornio where Swedish and Finnish are spoken, two languages with different historical roots. However, it can also become an issue in the case of Swedish, Norwegian and Danish. One interviewee noted that though Norwegian, Danish and Swedish are close and native speakers can commonly understand the other languages, changes in exposure to those languages can detract from mutual understanding and the capacity to integrate on the other side of the border (Laupsa 2023). She perceived a cultural change: *"in Norway we always watched Astrid Lindgren, Pippi and Emil, for example and it wasn't dubbed, we watched it in Swedish, but for the new generation that is coming it is much more difficult to understand Swedish. That is the case even in the border region"* (Laupsa 2023). The same was made by another interviewee concerning Danish and Swedish: *"when I grew up, I grew up with Danish television so I can speak Danish, but my children can't [, they] speak English with Danes"* (Kipowski 2023).

4.5. Funding Challenges in Nordic Cross-Border Cooperation

Cooperation in cross-border regions could benefit from more flexible funding instruments targeting broader areas. Region Norrbotten in Sweden and region Lapland in Finland cooperate well. That cooperation could be further improved by more funding for areas that are not currently covered by financing instruments according to one interviewee (Mikkola 2024). Another interviewee felt that support for cross-border initiatives is not sufficiently prioritised at the national level, suggesting that there should be an increase in the funds provided for cross-border integration projects (Catoni 2023).

According to one interviewee, national authorities could also get more involved in cross-border issues and better consider the realities and implications of their decisions in border areas (Laupsa 2023). One interviewee recalled that prime ministers from the Nordic countries had set themselves the goal of becoming the *"world's most integrated region and that it should be possible to live, work and have businesses on all sides of the Nordic Region"*, so *"they must also act on a daily basis to make it a reality"* (Malm 2023). The Nordic Council and cross-border committees are seen as pivotal to elevating issues of cross-border integration to the national level (Hansson 2023, Laupsa 2023, Nilsson 2023). Regions can also join forces to communicate their needs to their respective national authorities more strongly (Mikkola 2024).

As mentioned before, cross-border regions and municipalities do not perceive national authorities as being heavily involved or showing understanding of their situation. One interviewee explained that *"cross-border perspectives get little attention in national planning because in the capital areas, borders are quite far away from the decision-makers who have little experience from the daily life on the border"* (Mikkola 2024). The national level is crucial to support development in general terms, but it is even more critical in cross-border regions because cross-border barriers need to be resolved at national level as they often involve legislation (Sjaunja 2023). Some positive developments were perceived by an interviewee in relation to the perception of the cross-border situation by national authorities from Sweden and Finland. That was helped by the strategic interests and investments in northern Sweden and Finland, but also by visits to the area: *"we usually take them to Tornio City Hall to the eighth or ninth floor [...] so you can see to Sweden that the border is so close"* (Ainonen 2023).

Increased communication between national authorities and cross-border representatives is essential. An interviewee highlighted that issue, pointing out that *"what is needed is greater coordination and more dialogue and to move from dialogue to action, so that it is not just talk"*; such dialogue should lead to funding or tangible support (Catoni 2023). By way of example, he pointed to the case of traffic congestion in String, noting that the Fehmarn Belt link needs more support, cooperation and greater willingness to invest (Catoni 2023). Another interviewee noted that while government and state authorities do cooperate with one another across borders in the Nordic Region and within the scope of EU cooperation, such communication falls short at the regional and municipal level (Malm 2023). Accordingly, the interviewee underlined that it would be useful for the national authorities and governments to communicate more on their meetings about issues that concern border regions and to tell the regions and municipalities *"a little more about what is actually happening"* so that they know such issues are being addressed (Malm 2023).

Currently, lack of communication leads to the sentiment that the state is oblivious to the concerns of border municipalities and regions: *"We get very little attention and interest from the states to solve things. Nothing has happened in the last 20 years to help us"* (Kipowski 2023). The same interviewee asked for the state to be more proactive and for the Nordic Ministers to take the initiative to meet in border regions and to talk to border representatives more (Kipowski 2023).

Since Finland and Sweden joined NATO, border regions have attracted increased interest, especially Haparanda and Tornio with their rail and road link and Helsingborg and Helsingør with the alternative route from Sweden to Denmark. That is expected by some to facilitate integration between Sweden and its neighbours and draw financial support. However, as was said by one interviewee, *"there is also a need to look at what obstacles exist and solve them"* (Sjaunja 2023).

Infrastructure is one element that is central to greater integration and that generates much expectation among border municipalities. An example is the development of a double rail track from Halden down to Copenhagen and Germany. Currently, the project is stalled, "*there are big dreams without anything concrete coming out of it, [...] it is expensive*"; support from the state is lacking according to the interviewee, so financing is a challenge (Laupsa 2023). Cooperation on infrastructure across borders is also difficult, "*we can see that the national transport plans do not involve much thinking across borders*" and despite some improvement in recent years, "*cooperation could definitely be better at the cross-border level*" (Catoni 2023).



Öresundsbron connects Sweden to Denmark and the European continent.

Photo: Janus Langhorn/imagebank.sweden.se

6. CONCLUSION

The goal set by the Nordic Council of Ministers of being the world's most sustainable and integrated region is ambitious. Integration in the Nordic Region is already strong, but barriers that impede living, working and doing business across borders still remain. The fragility of integration in the border regions was highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Differing responses to the pandemic mostly ignored the reality at borders and hit those regions hard. Better integration might be achieved if border regions are given more autonomy on specific issues, providing them with the leeway for more dynamic implementation of decisions taken at the national level that have serious implications for cross-border integration.

Understanding these regions better is also crucial. There is a lack of reliable statistics on cross-border commuting and on cross-border integration overall. Representatives from the cross-border regions we interviewed also underlined the importance of relaying their concerns and realities to the national level. That might include visits to cross-border regions for increased awareness of the realities in those regions.

The next steps for strengthening integration in cross-border regions might include the identification and development of sharing-potential, either by sharing capacities between regions in more efficient ways, promoting sharing of specialisations by mapping such potential, ensuring the resilience of shared services and solving legal challenges to cross-border services. This can be promoted in particular with detailed statistics on cross-border exchanges and needs.



Place where the border of the three Scandinavian countries passes: Finland, Sweden, Norway.

Photo: iStock

6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Strengthen visibility and focus on cross-border cooperation as well as support for cross-border committees.
- Increase autonomy of cross-border regions on specific issues to facilitate integration with border municipalities.
- Support coordination of the healthcare system and social system in border municipalities to allow unrestricted cross-border access.
- Collect and analyse statistics on cross-border commuting and the cross-border economy in cooperation between National Statistics Agencies.
- Map and connect shared capacities in key areas (e.g. healthcare, education) in cross-border regions.
- Map and promote shared specialisations in key areas (e.g. healthcare, education, culture) in cross-border regions by removing administrative barriers to access.
- Support enhanced integration of cross-border businesses with special customs status for businesses operating in border municipalities.
- Facilitate sharing of services by ensuring functioning even in the event of crises.
- Clarify the legal status of cross-border services such as ambulances, taxis and public transport in coordination with border municipalities and committees or through enhanced regional/municipal autonomy.
- Offer more flexible funding that covers more areas for cross-border integration.

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Alix Vuithier

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Cover photo: Young woman stands in place where the border of three Nordic countries passes: Finland, Sweden, Norway (iStock)

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