

Final Report

From gateways to gatekeepers

Resilience, security and development opportunities for East Finnmark's municipalities in times of new economic and geopolitical realities

A Policy Learning Platform peer review

18th-19th May 2026

Scandic Hotel, Kirkenes Norway

Content

1. Brief presentation of the beneficiary	3
2. Specification of the policy challenge encountered	3
3. Participants	5
4. Policy recommendations	6
A Shared Vision to Counter Negative Development Trends :	6
Culture as a Tool for Community Development	7
Third Places as Social Infrastructure	7
Proactive Strategies for Settlement and Inward Migration	7
Generating Local Economic Benefits from Defence and Security Investments in the Region :	8
Cross-Sector Collaboration and a Shared Regional Brand	8
An Action Plan for Implementing Norway's National High North Strategy	8
Benefits for Both Defence and Civil Society	8
Procurement Arrangements	9
Mechanisms for Mobilising Capital	9
5. Possible follow-up meeting	9
6. Proposed actions	9
f) Regional programme to attract new and returning residents	10
g) Regional action plan for the High North policy	10
h) Portfolio of strategic dual-use investments	11
i) Regular strategic dialogue with national authorities	11
j) Supplier development programme for local businesses	11
k) Regional project development and funding capacity	11
l) Follow-up Peer Review session	11
7. Possible timeline of implementation	12
8. Conclusions	12



Final Report

From gateways to gatekeepers

Resilience, security and development opportunities for East Finnmark's municipalities in times of new economic and geopolitical realities

A Policy Learning Platform peer review

18th-19th May 2026

Scandic Hotel, Kirkenes Norway

1. Brief presentation of the beneficiary

The East Finnmark Regional Council is an inter-municipal political council established pursuant to Chapter 18 of the Norwegian Local Government Act. The Council consists of member municipalities from East Finnmark. Its purpose is to promote regional development and strengthen the region in accordance with the strategic plan adopted by the East Finnmark Regional Council and in force at any given time.

The East Finnmark Regional Council supports development by coordinating regional cooperation among its member municipalities and implementing strategic initiatives that strengthen the region's economic, social, and community development. The Council works to address common challenges, promote opportunities for growth, and represent the interests of East Finnmark at regional, national, and international levels.

The East Finnmark region consist of 9 municipalities (Lebesby, Gamvik, Tana, Berlevåg, Båtsfjord, Vardø, Vadsø, Nesseby and Sør-Varanger) covering an area of approx. 19 000 square km with a total population of about 27 000 people. The region has a few urban areas and several villages located both on the mainland and on islands. The area neighbours Russia to the East (197 km land border) and Finland to the South.

2. Specification of the policy challenge encountered

From the application and background paper:

Context:

The East Finnmark region consist of 9 municipalities covering an area of approx. 19 000 square km with a total population of about 27 000 people. The region has a few urban areas and several villages located both on the mainland and on islands. The area neighbours Russia to the East (197 km land border) and Finland to the South.

Geopolitics has a direct impact for our region, both with its limitations, but also possibilities. The East Finnmark council would like to narrow this down to the issues the municipalities themselves (and in cooperation with each other) can have an impact on and improve. We do therefore suggest addressing how the stakeholders can make sure that the population has something to live off, live for and to feel safe in their local communities.

"The region faces a large number of challenges which need to be addressed urgently.

Some of the issues are outside of local decision maker's immediate control, but other issues should be possible to find some solutions to. The peer review should focus on those.

- How to get more diversified industries and stable investment environments
- How to build attractive and resilient communities for businesses and people"

The peer review session was divided into two parallel thematic blocks with relevant peers:

Exchange sessions – Day 1	Peer review group 1: Peer presentations and exchanges A “safe place” approach to local and regional attractiveness in border regions , inter alia addressing: • trust • societal dialogue • everyday security / preparedness • attractiveness for businesses, investors and employees / related integration measures	Peer review group 2: Peer presentations and exchanges Optimising local and regional economic benefits of investments related to defence and security , with a focus on: • dual use • local value creation • business and employment opportunities • the integration of personnel and families into local communities
Exchange sessions – Day 2	Peer review group 1: Peer presentations and exchanges A “safe place” approach to local and regional attractiveness in border regions , inter alia addressing: • trust • societal dialogue • everyday security / preparedness • attractiveness for businesses, investors and employees / related integration measures	Peer review group 2: Peer presentations and exchanges Optimising local and regional economic benefits of investments related to defence and security with a focus on: • dual use • local value creation • business and employment opportunities • the integration of personnel and families into local communities
	Peers: Šarūnas Savickas (Lithuania) Jenny Sandström (Sweden) Marco Costantino (Italy) Dmitri Teperik (Estonia)	Peers: Ieva Strode (Latvia) Britt Vaheer (Estonia) Jan Nylander (Sweden) Erik-Widar Andersson (Sweden)

3. Participants

Participants of the beneficiary organisation	East Finnmark Regional Council
Ketil Steigen	Director
Trond Haukanes	Project Manager
Berit Ranveig Nilssen	Nesseby Municipality
Torfinn Vassvik	Gamvik Municipality
Ragnhild Vassvik	Gamvik Municipality
Tor-Erik Labahå	Vardø Municipality
Rolf Laupstad	Berlevåg Municipality
Wenche Pedersen	Vadsø Municipality
Kjell Richardsen	Berlevåg Municipality
Øyvind Hauken	Båtsfjord Municipality
Jon-Erland Balto	Deanu Gielda - Tana Municipality

Participants of the partner organisation	The Norwegian Barents Secretariat
Marit Jacobsen	
Elizaveta (Liza) Vassilieva	The Norwegian Barents Secretariat
Frode Stålsett	The Norwegian Barents Secretariat
Susanne Grenasberg	The Norwegian Barents Secretariat

Local Stakeholders	
Kristina Hamre	Kirkenes Business Association
Heidi Marlene Siri Dervo	Vestre Varanger bygdevekt
Nina Greiner Iversen	Sør-Varanger Utvikling
Solveig Ballo	Sápmi Business Park
Jan Ivvár Smuk	Leader of the Varanger Reindeersami organization
Evgeny Goman	Pikene på Broen
Fransizka Kraiczy	Pikene på Broen
Mariann Wollmann Magga	Tana - Varanger Museumssida
Morten Andersen	Vestre Varanger Utvikling
Ørjan Nergård	Cod cluster

Peers	
Dmitri Teperik	National Centre of Defence & Security Awareness
Šarūnas Savickas	Miško uostas
Britt Vahter	Rõuge Municipality
Jenny Sandström	Gomorrön Östersund
Jan Nylander	Glasir AB

Ieva Strobe	Ministry of Smart Administration and Regional Development
Marco Costantino	Regione Puglia (Apulia Region) - Youth Policies Department
Erik Widar Andersson	

Other Partners / stakeholders	
Olivier Baudelet	European Commission
Mirjami Imponen	The Local Federation of East Lapland
Päivi Ekdahl	Regional Council of Lapland
Anna Jaudzema	Latgale Planning Region
Sebastian Żukowski	Office of the marshal of the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodship
Karol Ostrowski	Office of the marshal of the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodship
Vilma Ohrankämnen	Local Federation of East Lapland
Birgitte Sem	Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development
Johannes Moisio	Alsiha
Hans Martin Schertlk	
Jani Väisänen	Naturpolis OY

Interreg Europe Team	
Mario Vade pied	Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform
Thorsten Kohlisch	Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform
Elena Ferrario	Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform
Vladimir Sestovic	Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform
Mart Velise	Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform
Rene Tonnisson	Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform
Erik Gloersen	Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform
Magda Anagnostou	Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform

4. Policy recommendations

A Shared Vision to Counter Negative Development Trends :

A forward-looking approach and a shared vision for responding to major trends and regional challenges are essential to community development. A common vision for East Finnmark, developed through sound and inclusive processes, will foster ownership and help identify local strengths and advantages.

By involving different parts of society—including the business and cultural sectors—in developing this shared vision, the region can identify its strengths and weaknesses, emerging niches and opportunities, as well as the

qualities that make East Finnmark a good place to live. Such a process will also strengthen team spirit and a sense of community. This is particularly important if the region is not only to retain its current population, but also to become an attractive place for new residents.

Culture as a Tool for Community Development

Cultural life serves many purposes. It should create vibrant communities and engaging opportunities for residents, while also expressing who we are. In this context, culture must also say something about the future: what we hope to achieve and how culture can help build our identity and make both our communities and the people who live in them attractive to newcomers. Those who come from elsewhere should feel welcome to settle here, join our communities and become part of our culture. Cultural life can play a positive role in shaping the identity of East Finnmark.

This is especially important at a time when our border region is experiencing pressure from actors whose interests run counter to ours. Culture therefore becomes an important element of our resilience through its ability to foster identity and belonging.

Investment in culture should not be regarded in isolation, but as a contribution to the wider development of the region. Strengthening cultural life must form an integral part of all strategies aimed at attracting skills and expertise and creating a diverse labour market in which as many people as possible can pursue meaningful careers and build good lives for themselves and their families.

The region should develop a comprehensive cultural environment that extends beyond individual events. Culture should also be integrated into tourism strategies and other initiatives intended to strengthen the region's attractiveness and resilience.

Third Places as Social Infrastructure

Third places are informal meeting places outside the home and the workplace. They should provide environments in which different forms of resilience can develop. This means creating places where people feel part of a community and where they can find a sense of security and trust at a time of considerable uncertainty.

Third places are locally rooted and operate at the intersection of the public and private sectors. Infrastructure and employment opportunities alone are not enough to make people stay. Other kinds of social spaces must also be created. A third place can provide precisely this: a place in which to experience community and belonging.

Proactive Strategies for Settlement and Inward Migration

Promoting the region is important. This includes encouraging people who have moved away to return to East Finnmark. To a large extent, it is about creating attractive communities where people feel that they can achieve their career ambitions while living in a safe and appealing region. Support for entrepreneurship and high-quality public services are central to this effort.

At the same time, the narrative about the region must reflect the realities of the present and address concerns arising from new challenges, including the changed geopolitical situation in the border areas adjoining Russia. These questions and the uncertainty surrounding them must be addressed openly and credibly in order to foster belonging and confidence in the future.

Generating Local Economic Benefits from Defence and Security Investments in the Region :

Cross-Sector Collaboration and a Shared Regional Brand

Trust-based relationships, a shared vision and agreed strategic objectives will help secure positive development in the region. It is recommended that the relevant stakeholders and the different contributions they can make to a coordinated regional effort be mapped.

A permanent regional platform bringing together municipalities, regional stakeholders, businesses and the defence sector should be established. Such a platform could provide a foundation for “delivering together”, thereby strengthening regional resilience and cohesion through major strategic projects.

Our Ukrainian guest and peer expressed it as follows:

“In my opinion, the real foundation of resilience is not only infrastructure, investments or strategies. It is, above all, the horizontal connections between people—trust, partnerships, mutual support and the ability to work together around shared goals. Strong communities are built through dialogue, collaboration and relationships that continue beyond projects and meetings.”

(**Viktoriia Baltser**, Secretary of the Voznesensk City Council, Ukraine)

It is essential that national authorities are also involved in this work. This would strengthen the region’s visibility and presence by establishing the platform as a partner for national authorities and a source of regional knowledge and insight.

An Action Plan for Implementing Norway’s National High North Strategy

The Norwegian Government has presented a High North Strategy setting out its ambitions for Northern Norway, including our strategically important region. East Finnmark can play an active role in helping to turn these ambitions into action.

Developing an implementation action plan could help ensure that concrete measures are delivered. The plan should draw on local expertise, knowledge and broad engagement among public- and private-sector stakeholders in East Finnmark. Such a process would also help build regional cohesion and a stronger sense of common purpose.

It is important that the municipalities are given a significant and formalised role in this work. This would allow both the process and its outcomes to be aligned with existing local plans and strategies.

Benefits for Both Defence and Civil Society

“Dual use” has become a widely used concept in discussions concerning the strengthening of Norway’s defence presence in the north. It means that defence investments should also benefit civil society and generate wider social and economic value.

Investments should be guided as far as possible by the benefits they provide to different groups. These tangible benefits are more important than the concept of dual use itself. A strong and stable population is the best means of upholding sovereignty and must therefore be given priority.

Decision-makers should prioritise infrastructure that provides substantial civilian benefits. This may include energy infrastructure, ports, air connections and communications networks, as well as other equally important investments in preparedness, such as improved mobile coverage, faster internet connections and strengthened medical capacity. The same applies to security of electricity supply, improved transport options and better connections to regional centres.

Together, these measures will strengthen sovereignty, security and the safety of the region's residents.

Procurement Arrangements

Effective procurement arrangements and simplified procedures that make local businesses more competitive when bidding for defence contracts are essential. Work on this is already under way.

Such measures would enable local suppliers and businesses to become an integral part of the supply chains that support infrastructure and security in the region. The resulting synergies should not be underestimated.

These efforts can and should be strengthened through investment in capacity-building and support schemes for local businesses. Targeted and intensive assistance with networking, partnership development and collaboration on larger contracts will be particularly important.

Mechanisms for Mobilising Capital

Establishing dedicated advisory capacity is essential. This could help businesses become eligible for EU programmes and other funding schemes that require specialist expertise, including support with application processes. The InvestEU Programme was highlighted as one relevant example, although it is still unclear how this can benefit Norwegian regions, if at all.

National schemes offering loans, guarantees and risk-sharing mechanisms for small and medium-sized enterprises can contribute to long-term community and regional development. Such schemes should therefore be strengthened and further developed.

5. Possible follow-up meeting

The East Finnmark Council is interested in a follow-up meeting—either one in-person and/or one online meeting—with at least one of the same peers. The meeting should be organised within one year of the Peer Review and facilitated by the Platform.

Suggested peer: Britt Vahter.

6. Proposed actions

The actions below have been developed on the basis of the Peer Review recommendations. The feasibility rating indicates how easy each action is expected to be to initiate at the regional level. These are proposals for discussion by the Council and may also inspire additional suggestions.

a) A shared vision for the future of East Finnmark

Conduct a broad-based process involving municipalities, businesses, the cultural sector, young people, voluntary organisations and knowledge institutions. The process should result in a small number of shared objectives and priorities towards 2040.

Feasibility: High

b) A permanent regional collaboration platform

Establish a permanent forum where municipalities, regional stakeholders, businesses, the cultural sector, emergency preparedness organisations and the defence sector can develop and follow up major joint projects.

Feasibility: High

c) A shared and credible narrative for the region

Develop a shared message about the opportunities to build a good life, pursue a career, develop businesses, enjoy cultural activities and participate in the community. The narrative should also address the border situation openly and honestly.

Feasibility: High

d) Culture as a strategic tool

Link culture more clearly to quality of life, identity, inclusion, inward migration, tourism and resilience. Prioritise year-round activity and collaboration across municipalities.

Feasibility: High

e) Third-place pilot programme

Develop libraries, cultural centres, volunteer centres, cafés or vacant premises as open meeting places. Begin with a small number of pilot projects and document the lessons learned.

Feasibility: High

f) Regional programme to attract new and returning residents

Create a shared point of access to information about employment, housing, schools, childcare and leisure activities. Connect employers with potential candidates and give particular attention to people who previously moved away from the region.

Feasibility: Medium to high

g) Regional action plan for the High North policy

Translate national ambitions into an action plan for East Finnmark, setting out priority measures, responsibilities, funding requirements and deadlines. The plan should be aligned with municipal plans.

Feasibility: Medium to high

h) Portfolio of strategic dual-use investments

Prepare a prioritised overview of investments that both strengthen defence and preparedness and deliver civilian benefits, including investments in power, ports, transport, communications and healthcare.

Feasibility: Medium

i) Regular strategic dialogue with national authorities

Establish regular meetings with relevant ministries and government agencies, based on a concise annual status report covering development trends, results and priority needs.

Feasibility: Medium

j) Supplier development programme for local businesses

Provide businesses with support relating to tenders, security requirements, certification, networking and partnerships, enabling them to compete for defence, emergency preparedness and infrastructure contracts.

Feasibility: High

k) Regional project development and funding capacity

Establish an advisory function to support municipalities and businesses with project development and applications to national funding schemes, Interreg and relevant EU programmes.

Feasibility: Medium

l) Follow-up Peer Review session

Hold an in-person or online meeting within one year to assess progress and further develop selected actions. Relevant participants should be identified based on the topics to be addressed.

Feasibility: High

7. Possible timeline of implementation

At this stage, it is difficult for the mayors to commit their municipalities to specific actions, resources or deadlines. Any such commitments would need to be considered through the political and administrative processes of each municipality.

However, there is strong motivation to take the recommendations forward, both within the municipalities and through continued dialogue with regional and national authorities. Several of the issues raised require national involvement, policy decisions and funding, and cannot be addressed by the municipalities alone.

It is therefore difficult to establish a fixed implementation timeline. Follow-up will be an ongoing process across several policy areas and at different levels of government. The Peer Review recommendations will provide an important framework and set of tools for this work, helping the region to identify priorities, develop concrete initiatives and maintain momentum over time.

8. Conclusions

The peer review provided a valuable opportunity to discuss regional challenges and exchange experiences with partners from different European regions. The feedback received was constructive and helped us validate ongoing work while identifying areas for further development. The process also strengthened cooperation between stakeholders and contributed to new perspectives on policy implementation and regional resilience. Overall, the peer review was a useful learning experience and provided relevant input for our future activities and strategic planning in the municipalities in East Finnmark.

For us in East Finnmark, gaining attention and securing political priority is a constant challenge. There are not many voters in this part of the country, and many others compete more successfully for national attention. The changing geopolitical situation has brought somewhat greater focus to our region, which has also increased engagement and interest.

That is why it is so inspiring for us, for our mayors, and for the people who live here, to see the European Union establish a process like this, bring together expertise from across Europe, and spend two days working alongside us to help create better conditions for growth and development in our region.

We believe that this, too, is an important part of what the Peer Review programme contributes.

We would like to take the opportunity to thank the Interreg Europe team and the peers who took part in the workshops.