

The Nordics, together

Finland's
Presidency 2021



Nordic Council
of Ministers

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Prime Minister Marin's greeting



Prime Minister Sanna Marin – a video greeting can be found in [the online version](#)

Finland holds the presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers in 2021, coinciding with the body's 50th anniversary. In a changing world, we in the Nordics are stronger when all of us work together. Finland will promote Nordic co-operation and take responsibility for a presidency full of enthusiasm, collaborating with the government of Åland.

The global pandemic in 2020 underscores the necessity of international, European and regional co-operation. People in the Nordic countries also expect their governments to engage in closer co-operation. Topical themes of co-operation include promoting freedom of movement as well as security of supply and preparedness for future crises.

Global action against climate change dates back three decades. The coming decades will be critical for guaranteeing the conditions for human life. Nordic co-operation reinforces our national efforts to achieve carbon neutrality. The challenges are global and no-one can tackle them on their own. Nordic expertise is held in high regard. In combatting climate change, we are leading the way.

Socially equitable change is supported by the Nordic welfare model, which comprises democracy, the rule of law, good governance, openness, trust and a strong civil society. The model guarantees that everybody has equal opportunities. This extends to healthcare services and social safety nets. Everyone has the opportunity to get

education, pursue success in working life or engage in business activity. I believe that the Nordic countries' capacity to adapt, change and reform is based on these factors. These are important elements of success in a changing world.

The Nordic prime ministers have a vision according to which the Nordic region will be the most sustainable and integrated region in the world by 2030. To achieve this goal, the Nordic Council of Ministers is working for a greener, more competitive and socially sustainable Nordic region. Finland is ready to roll up its sleeves and get down to work.

Over to the ministers for Nordic co-operation

The Nordic region will be the most sustainable and integrated region in the world by 2030. To this end, the Finnish presidency intends to move on ambitiously with the work begun by previous presidencies, and to implement the action plan agreed for 2021–2024. We will collaborate with the Nordic Council, engage with Nordic business actors and involve civil society. Gender equality and the perspective of children and young people must be a core feature of this co-operation.

2020 will go down in history as a year that witnessed an unprecedented crisis. The Covid-19 pandemic has caused suffering, economic losses and social problems, and has tested the resilience of our societies. The future appears uncertain and the pandemic is not over: the societal consequences continue to place demands on Nordic co-operation, impacting all sectors and all councils of ministers. At the same time the climate crisis has not receded, on the contrary. We must shoulder our responsibility for the future sustenance of humanity on a habitable planet. However, opportunities can present themselves in uncertain times: every crisis offers new chances to invest in the future, and this is also true of the Nordics, together.

The commitment to implement the Nordic prime ministers' vision of a sustainable and integrated Nordic region by 2030 remains strong. The presidency programme reflects the three priorities of the vision: a green Nordic region, a competitive Nordic region and a socially sustainable Nordic region. The two key words of the vision – sustainability and integration – run through the chapters, while the presidency projects address the current challenges in order to support the objectives of the vision and promote practical, shared Nordic solutions.

Dealing with the pandemic has once again brought to the fore the strong and positive expectations that our inhabitants have of Nordic co-operation. Before the pandemic we took it for granted that we could study and work, shop and transport goods, as well as travel and spend time with our families without having to pay much attention to national borders in the Nordic region. The presidency is mindful of the challenges to freedom of movement and aims to strengthen Nordic co-operation in mobility. We also have the opportunity to analyse how we can improve our co-operation to ensure better preparedness for future crises, together.

2021 marks the 50th anniversary of the Nordic Council of Ministers. Our anniversary year will be marked by both celebrations and revitalised engagement. The cornerstones of the co-operation remain our shared values, our similar societal institutions, and our deeply rooted sense of community. Our vision aims higher than ever and the Nordics will again face the future together.

The Nordic region will be the most sustainable and integrated region in the world by 2030.

The presidency is mindful of the challenges to freedom of movement and aims to strengthen Nordic co-operation in mobility.



Ministers for Nordic co-operation Thomas Blomqvist and Annette Holmberg-Jansson



Introduction

More and closer Nordic co-operation – this is what people in the Nordic region want. Expectations have increased over the years in all our countries in times of ever greater global challenges and uncertainties in European and international relations. There is a lot to be gained from this co-operation. Together we are both wiser and stronger than individually.

2021 is a special year with some important milestones. We will celebrate 100 years of autonomy in Åland and 50 years since the Nordic Council of Ministers was established. Eight Nordic governments participate together in the work of the Council of Ministers for a shared sustainable future. The Nordics contribute to research, development and innovations in combating climate change, unsustainable usage of natural resources and other sustainability problems that are becoming increasingly more urgent. One specific expectation of Nordic co-operation is that people living in the Nordic region should be able easily to study, work, run a business, relocate, travel and start a family, unhindered by the borders between our countries. European co-operation supports us in this mission and unites our internal Nordic integration with that of the entire continent. Although our co-operation to remove obstacles to cross-border mobility has progressed well over the years, serious obstacles remain and new ones are appearing. A shared political resolve is essential to achieve the goals that we have set.

Our journey towards sustainable development and Nordic integration has been marked by occasional crises, progress and unexpected setbacks. The Covid-19 pandemic has entailed a variety of consequences for the economy, welfare and international co-operation, for example. These include the travel restrictions across our domestic borders in the Nordic region, representing a serious encroachment on the core of the Nordic co-operation model, which is characterised by a common labour market and freedom of movement. In order to achieve our vision of becoming the most integrated region in the world, we need to manage crises together as far as possible, retaining the opportunities of freedom of movement, trade and business flows in border regions, natural commuter regions and economic zones. The pandemic and the challenges in the way it has been tackled have shown clearly, once again, that effective co-operation is not only desirable, but literally vital. Closer co-

operation within Nordic preparedness, for example, is called for, not least with a view to securing access to pharmaceutical products and healthcare.

The decisive collective measures that were taken to deal with the crisis in our countries once again confirmed that with enough resolve and determination it is possible politically to steer developments. This sense of purpose has already started to gain ground in our co-operation. The Nordic prime ministers clearly understood the expectations, challenges and potential of Nordic co-operation when they approved Our Vision 2030 in August 2019. This vision cements sustainability and integration as the thrust of Nordic co-operation. A greener, more competitive and more socially sustainable Nordic region will become the most integrated and sustainable region in the world by 2030. During its 2021 presidency, the governments of Finland and Åland will join forces to lead the implementation of Our Vision 2030.

Together we are both wiser and stronger than individually.

The pandemic and the challenges in the way it has been tackled have shown clearly, once again, that effective co-operation is not only desirable, but literally vital. Closer co-operation within Nordic preparedness, for example, is called for.



A green Nordic region

In the Nordic region we feel close to our forests and land, our islands, seas and lakes, and our glaciers and mountains. We nurture our ancient bonds to our fields, meadows and fishing waters. The enormous challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and the way it is being handled have once again raised our awareness, in very tangible ways, that all nations share the same planet. Our safety and sustenance, now and in the future, depend on our interaction with animals and nature.

All Nordic co-operation aims at **integration** and **sustainable development**. A clean environment, a resource-smart society, a stable climate and biodiversity have proved to be even more crucial for people's welfare and the viability of the planet. Children and young people are not only stakeholders in a forward-looking sustainability policy, they are also initiative-takers and drivers. The transition necessitated by environmental considerations has to be fair, inclusive and gender-sensitive, and it must have democratic and social legitimacy. Moreover, an innovative and prosperous economy is needed to promote this transition. Nordic integration can contribute to Nordic sustainability and lower emissions. For example, through its co-operation in energy the Nordic region showed early on that growth and the green transition can and should be pursued in parallel.

The Finnish presidency aims to promote a bio-based and circular economy, halt the decline of biodiversity and promote marine protection and, in accordance with the joint declaration of the Nordic prime ministers and environmental ministers of January 2019, pursue the transition to carbon neutrality in the Nordic region. In a specific presidency project, Finland will develop **networks of knowledge and skills for a circular economy in the construction industry**. The construction sector currently uses approximately half of the world's natural resources and is a major source of carbon dioxide emissions.

In line with the vision, the Nordic countries have committed to further expand their

co-operation in environmental and climate diplomacy. A global show of strength is needed to halt the decline in biodiversity in the sea and on land, and Nordic action is also required for this important work, both at home and by ambitious engagement internationally. The Finnish presidency will strive for Nordic co-operation to increase our influence on international climate processes, including, for example, the international negotiations in 2021 on the climate goals of the Paris Agreement, and the negotiations on new goals as part of the framework for the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

The pandemic has illustrated the interdependence of people and nature, highlighted food supply security, and also reminded us of some of the threats inherent in climate change. The Nordic region shares a similar climate and comparable conditions and circumstances for food production that are different from other regions. The Nordic countries can co-operate to achieve food production that is climate-smart and adapted to changes in the climate. The main topical issues of the Finnish presidency include sustainable food systems and a sound, healthy and sustainable diet. Food supplies should also be secured to provide better emergency preparedness and to enable us to face increasing problems of a changing climate, the role of nature and the loss of ecosystem services.

Our energy systems are challenged, for example, by extreme climate phenomena as we are becoming increasingly dependent on the security of electricity supplies, which the Nordic energy market has so far been able to secure. In the transition to a climate-neutral Nordic region, we also need cleaner energy systems. This requires new solutions, not least in areas where reducing emissions is difficult. One central theme during Finland's presidency will be smart integration between sectors, for example through electrification. An update of the energy policy co-operation programme will also be prepared in 2021.

Many Nordic cities have been classified as being among the most sustainable in the world. In Nordic cities and municipalities, many globally attractive sustainability solutions have been developed for essential services that respect the environment and contribute to well-being. Cities play a central role in achieving climate goals. They can act as development platforms, supporting the development of new technologies and the resultant business activities. Co-operation within urban and municipal sustainability solutions will be encouraged. Importance is also placed on regional equality, sparsely populated areas, indigenous peoples and conditions specific to Arctic areas.

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A competitive Nordic region

In many respects, the Nordic countries have been historically successful in combining an innovative and growing economy with a society that embraces the entire sustainability agenda, both in terms of social equality and environmental awareness. Effective public education systems and social support structures provide, for example, the opportunities for young people from different social backgrounds to pursue success and thereby contribute to the competitiveness of our countries. Equality in working life helps our economies grow stronger by having a larger and more skilled workforce. The common electricity market is not only an example of how competition, close **integration** and **sustainability** support each other, but it also shows how close Nordic co-operation in itself can be crucial for the economic success of our countries.

In the future, scarce public resources will need to be used efficiently in order to achieve, for example, the goals set out for business, welfare and environmental policies. Balanced measures should also take into account aspects related to redistribution policies. Socio-economic thinking is based on the understanding that the relationship between economic growth, higher employment and welfare is mutually reinforcing.

Now that major damage has been caused to the livelihoods of many entrepreneurs, employees and self-employed people, Nordic competitiveness is a high priority. It is important for Nordic co-operation to promote a vibrant economic recovery from the pandemic crisis, while strengthening the region's transition to a carbon-neutral and eco-friendly society. The crisis has radically affected different areas of working life, while changes to the way we work and ecological challenges continue to create demands for new competences at work. Once the crisis is over, it will be important to focus on strengthening both economic and societal resilience. This will require local, regional, national and Nordic action.

Education, science and innovative technology as well as a circular and bio-based economy will be important keys in creating a new kind of growth that is sustainable.

Renewed growth will also be supported by new trends in business and working life, including the platform economy, social innovation and multi-locality, as well as an increase in remote working and the use of digital tools. There are new requirements for a skilled workforce and lifelong learning. The traditionally strong Nordic co-operation in labour issues and gender equality is being developed in line with ongoing transitions in the labour market, caused for example by climate change, demographic developments, the integration of newcomers, as well as educational and technological innovations. For many Nordic local societies, border areas and other regions, tourism has been a remarkably important industry that has suffered greatly from the travel restrictions. The future of the tourist industry requires promoting safe and ecologically, socially and economically sustainable methods of travel.

During its presidency, Finland will support the development of an innovative and digitally integrated Nordic region. This work includes a specific presidency project aiming to achieve **smooth cross-border mobility and daily life through digitalisation**. We are working towards this goal through more efficient data exchange between authorities in Nordic and Baltic countries whenever and wherever this is required by life-events extending across borders. The project includes a sub-action to promote digital health and supports digital solutions in legislative co-operation.

Essential services are becoming increasingly dependent on data and information as well as data- and information-dependent knowledge and services. The Nordics have several advantages in international competition, where the development of digital solutions is making rapid progress. With a view to making the most of our strengths and the opportunities presented by green growth and digitalisation, we need well-functioning and dynamic labour markets, a variety of skills and competencies and continued success in research and innovation. New digital services and everyday solutions can also be created together in the Nordic countries. This goal will be pursued in accordance with the Digital North 2.0 declaration and the Nordic and Baltic countries' joint programme for 2021–2024 to promote digital mobility through access to digital services. Promoting an integrated 5G region remains a key part of the work of the Council of Ministers. Digitalisation can also be utilised to serve users in sparsely populated areas in a more flexible way.

In the future, artificial intelligence will help inhabitants and companies use services in ways that are timely and adapted to each situation. Future development of the national AuroraAI programme could offer new opportunities for the daily cross-border lives of Nordic inhabitants.

The promotion of Nordic mobility is highly topical following the disruption caused by the introduction of travel restrictions. Once the situation has normalised, we will need more than ever to work ambitiously to promote mobility. It is important to secure an effective internal market and to provide opportunities to study, work, relocate, run a business and start a family, with a minimum of inconveniences caused by the borders between our countries. The Finnish presidency aims to facilitate mobility between the Nordic countries and will work actively to remove and prevent obstacles to cross-border freedom of movement. The current mission of the Freedom of Movement Council will end in 2021 and a new mandate will be prepared

in order to continue its work in 2022–2025. Priority will be given to cross-border solutions in areas related to the right to social security benefits, tax issues and professional qualifications, as well as the harmonisation of specific construction standards, and anticipating any future crisis measures that could have negative consequences for the work on freedom of movement. Ongoing work to assess all border obstacles in the freedom of movement database will continue. Co-operation in the implementation of EU directives will be strengthened. The Nordic-Baltic eID Project (NOBID), which has created a structure for electronic identification interoperability between the Nordic and Baltic countries, will continue. The Nordic Council's project for joint Nordic electronic identification will be promoted, the aim being to enable secure and reliable cross-border identification in accordance with the eIDAS regulation. The Finnish presidency will promote Nordic operational models and good practices aiming at more flexible granting of local personal identity numbers to enable electronic processing of dealings with authorities. Authorities are also being encouraged to integrate into their electronic services the possibility to directly process the personal identity numbers of other Nordic countries in cases where there are no specific reasons to grant a local personal identity number. Administrative and legal obstacles for joint Nordic research using the registers of different authorities will be reduced, including in the field of medical research.

Nordic sustainability solutions are also interesting outside the Nordic region. The Nordic Council of Ministers and the Nordic innovation centres in Asia and North America are able to support countries that want to act together. Additional events in the Nordic Talks series are planned for 2021. The presidency wants to further a green recovery of the global economy ("Building Back Better and Greener"), the promotion of green Nordic solutions in the rest of the world, and welcomes initiatives for examining opportunities for joint export promotion.

Education, science and innovative technology as well as a circular and bio-based economy will be important keys in creating a new kind of growth that is sustainable.

It is important to secure an effective internal market and to provide opportunities to study, work, relocate, run a business and start a family, with a minimum of inconveniences caused by the borders between our countries.



A socially sustainable Nordic region

Every Nordic country has a good track record in achieving the social goals of **sustainable development**, which reflects a strong sense of community and trust in society. Despite the existence of many specific national solutions, the welfare system and concern for the health and basic security of the inhabitants of the Nordic region can be said to be based on a Nordic model, which is one of the expressions of Nordic **integration**. The recent economic and social crisis has become one of the biggest challenges to the Nordic model for a long time. Depending on the way the situation is handled, an increase in bankruptcies and unemployment threatens to risk social equality and mental health, with potential consequences such as social exclusion, domestic abuse, substance abuse and radicalisation. Underlying demographic and regional challenges remain, requiring active efforts. The Nordic countries benefit from working together.

Future solutions will require sector-wide co-operation, for example among business, regional, housing, labour, education and culture policies, as well as social and health policies, so that we can guarantee social sustainability and effective welfare services in a society in change. The situation of particularly vulnerable groups needs to be safeguarded by implementing specific measures that will also help in countering the segregation of different population groups. The Finnish presidency will follow up the work that has been started on social and healthcare services in sparsely populated areas, striving to promote a more cross-sectional approach. Activities designed to secure the rights of people with disabilities in times of emergency are planned for 2021.

Within the health sector, the crisis has illustrated the need for closer Nordic co-operation to secure access to pharmaceuticals, vaccines and protective equipment, which the presidency wants to develop, alongside initiatives related to anti-microbial resistance and health in conjunction with animals and nature ("One Health"). The

crisis period has also promoted digital approaches to healthcare services. In particular, these can be used to serve ageing populations in sparsely populated areas in a more flexible way. The HIMSS European conference, to be held in Helsinki in June 2021 and focusing on digitalisation and technology in the healthcare sector, will have a special Nordic presence.

Democracy, the rule of law and fundamental freedoms are globally beleaguered values that enjoy high levels of support in the Nordic region. Factors that characterise Nordic countries include freedom of expression, equality and transparent and accountable government. In order to strengthen these values we have to develop our democracy and the legal system, while also working to combat corruption and prevent and tackle criminality. Effective work against human trafficking calls for close collaboration between the Nordic countries.

The public's interest in active participation, influencing decision-making processes in society and the ability to detect and react to the spread of disinformation is in turn dependent on a high general level of popular education and a socially sustainable welfare state. Crises such as that caused by the pandemic always represent serious challenges to the foundations of democracy and test the resilience of society. During its presidency, Finland will highlight democracy, democratic sustainability and societal resilience.

Social equality and gender equality are inalienable values in Nordic societies. During the Finnish presidency, gender equality will form an integral and cross-cutting part of the work of the various councils of ministers. The specific programme for LGBTI rights will be promoted.

Art, culture, sport and youth work shape society and create the conditions for well-being and inclusion, thereby enabling sustainable development. Access to culture and art, and the opportunity to practise them freely, is also fundamental for our ability to understand, react and act when faced with new situations or challenges – such as a necessary green transition or unexpected crises like the Covid-19 pandemic. During the Finnish presidency operational models that encourage creativity and participation will be promoted, utilising digital solutions, for example.

The Nordic sense of community is based on a deeply rooted understanding of shared values, as well as personal contacts and experiences from a young age. Joint Nordic efforts for children and young people, Nordplus, Nordjobb and exchanges between schools and educational institutions are a fundamental contribution to future integration. Digital competence plays a decisive role in the participation of young people and their everyday lives. Children and young people are part of civil society and should be included to a greater extent in Nordic co-operation. Events where young people, officials and experts meet can be organised using existing digital platforms. Experimental and innovative co-operation models should be considered. The ReGeneration Week on Åland, organised by young people from the Nordics and the other countries in the Baltic region in August/September 2021, will be a meeting place for intergenerational dialogue.

A mutual understanding of each other's languages promotes mobility in the Nordic region and enhances a sense of affinity. 2021 marks the 15th anniversary of the

Nordic Language Declaration. The declaration defines the focus areas that the Nordic countries agree to follow up in their national language policy work. A review of the declaration will be advanced in collaboration between the education and culture sectors.

National borders are not normally thought of as dividing lines in a socially integrated Nordic region. In addition to commerce and commuting, there are families, leisure activities, tourism, bonds of friendship, associations and social networks that stretch across borders, irrespective of state boundaries. The experience of this kind of community and cross-border everyday life is a cornerstone of the Nordic sense of unity and integration. During the Finnish presidency, experiences will be exchanged and lessons drawn from the special situation caused by the consequences of the pandemic. This theme is planned to be highlighted in, for example, a research project examining the **challenges for in-depth Nordic integration by analysing the social consequences of travel restrictions between the Nordic countries during the Covid-19 pandemic**, against the background of the restrictions to freedom of movement that had already been introduced in recent years.

2021–22 marks the 100th anniversary of the autonomy of Åland. Taking into account the strongly rooted democratic forms of government in the Nordic region, the presidency intends to highlight the participation in Nordic co-operation of the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland alongside the Nordic states and the way in which this increases democratic sustainability in the Nordic region – which appears to be a particular special example by international comparison. To illustrate these **effective co-operation models that contribute to Nordic integration**, the governments of Finland and Åland, in collaboration with the Nordic Council of Ministers, will hold an international conference, where experiences of Nordic co-operation will be highlighted specifically from this perspective of democratic sustainability.

Issues around public safety are becoming all the more relevant as the risk of natural catastrophes is continually increasing in the Nordic region, as in the rest of the world, as a result of climate change. We can be better prepared to deal with the next pandemic or any other threat to our safety by learning from past experiences. Developing security of supply and emergency preparedness between our governments, supported where appropriate by the Nordic Council of Ministers, also addresses concerns flagged up in the recommendation by the Nordic Council on societal security.

Access to culture and art, and the opportunity to practise them freely, is also fundamental for our ability to understand, react and act when faced with new situations or challenges – such as a necessary green transition or unexpected crises like the Covid-19 pandemic.

We can be better prepared to deal with the next pandemic or any other threat to our safety by learning from past experiences.



Together

The Finnish presidency aims to develop international co-operation within the framework of the Nordic Council of Ministers' vision. Support for an ever closer partnership between the Nordic countries and the Baltic countries will be developed in accordance with the priorities set out in the vision, as well as activities in north-west Russia and our neighbours to the west. Furthermore, development of the work of the Council of Ministers in strategically important regions around the world will be supported in collaboration with the Nordic diplomatic services. Moreover, the Nordic countries are strongly engaged in the Arctic region, to which our countries wholly or partly belong themselves. It is in our common interest that the people who live there are able to develop their livelihoods in the sensitive Arctic environment, which we need to protect. All our countries have top-quality expertise in the Arctic region, an explicit willingness to safeguard sustainable use of the resources in the region, and unwavering pledges to ensure compliance with international law. The Nordic Council of Ministers' Arctic co-operation programme is a tool to support the Arctic policies of our countries internationally, and an extension of the programme will be prepared in 2021. Indigenous peoples hold a special position in the Arctic environment, a position which should be developed in close partnership with them. A topical issue during the Finnish presidency will be collaboration with respect to the intellectual property rights of indigenous peoples.

The spring of 2020 gave rise to an immediate need for more Nordic consultation, leading the governments to spontaneously seek new ways to intensify this dialogue. These experiences provide opportunities for seamless Nordic co-operation models in the future, supported by different kinds of digital tools that the presidency wishes to make full use of.

Together, and deploying the most advanced solutions, the Nordic countries can be the driving force leading the world towards peace, sustainable development and welfare for all.

About this publication

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Nordic co-operation

Nordic co-operation is one of the world's most extensive forms of regional collaboration, involving Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland.

Nordic co-operation has firm traditions in politics, economics and culture and plays an important role in European and international forums. The Nordic community strives for a strong Nordic Region in a strong Europe.

Nordic co-operation promotes regional interests and values in a global world. The values shared by the Nordic countries help make the region one of the most innovative and competitive in the world.

The Nordic Council of Ministers

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