

Re-start competence mobility in the Nordic Region

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NORDREGIO WORKING PAPER 2022:4

Table of contents

Preface	3
Introduction	4
Cross-border labour market mobility between the Nordic countries	5
Nordic labour market migration	5
Nordic labour market commuting	8
Cross-border labour market mobility in the literature	9
Theories relating to cross-border labour market mobility	9
Policy documents on cross-border labour market mobility in the Nordic Region	11
Cross-border labour market mobility in times of crisis	14
Research project outline	16
Analytical framework	16
Methods	18
Next steps and lessons learned in the Nordic Region	20
Final remarks: Nordic wake-up call for labour market mobility?	21
References	22
Appendix	26
About this working paper	27



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Preface

The Nordic Council of Ministers' vision is for the Region to be the most sustainable and integrated region in the world by 2030. Cross-border labour market mobility in the Nordic Region will play an important role in achieving that goal.

In this working paper, we share the latest data on labour market mobility across national borders in the Nordic Region in the form of both migration and commuting. We also present findings from a review of current literature on labour market mobility in the Nordic Region and present an analytical framework for exploring potential improvements to it.

The working paper was written by Anna Lundgren, Senior Research Fellow and Ágúst Bogason, Research Fellow at Nordregio. A reference group comprising stakeholders from cross-border regions and Info Norden (see Appendix) provided input.

The paper represents our contribution to research in this area and we invite others to comment on it. The project will present its final results in 2023.

This working paper is part of the research project "Re-start Nordic competence mobility" under the thematic group of Green, resilient and innovative regions, which is part of the regional co-operation programme funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers. The first phase of the project resulted in a chapter, "Labour market mobility between the Nordic countries" in State of the Nordic Region 2022.



Roughly 40,000 people relocate to another Nordic country every year and 49,000 commute to a job in another Nordic country. *Photo: Josh Wilburne*

Introduction

Mobility in the Nordic labour market has been one of the cornerstones of Nordic co-operation since the introduction of the Passport Union in 1952 and the free movement of labour which was facilitated by the joint labour market introduced in 1954. Mobility has been substantial since the 1950s (Pedersen, Røed and Wadensjö, 2008). However, in recent years this mobility has faced challenges due to border restrictions imposed to curb the influx of refugees and to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper sheds some light on the current situation of cross-border labour market mobility in the Nordic Region.

The term 'labour market mobility' in this paper covers both migration and commuting: migration in the sense of relocating to take up a job in another Nordic country, commuting in the sense of travelling to work in another Nordic country on a daily or weekly basis.

Despite efforts by the Nordic Council of Ministers and other bodies to facilitate cross-border mobility, such as the Info Norden information service for people wishing to live, study or work in another Nordic country and the Freedom of Movement Council set up in 2014 to remove legal and administrative obstacles to cross-border mobility – many such obstacles seem to remain.

It is also a reasonable assumption that mobility in the Nordic labour market will play a key role in achieving the Nordic vision of becoming the most integrated region in the world by 2030 (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2020). However, to date, the figures for migration and commuting between the Nordic countries remain modest. According to available statistics, of a total Nordic population of 27.2 million, roughly 40,000 people relocate to another Nordic country every year and 49,000 commute to a job in another Nordic country (Lundgren & Wøien Meijer, 2022).



Cross-border labour market mobility between the Nordic countries

In this section, we will look into some of the data on labour market mobility between the Nordic countries, that is, both migration and commuting to a job in another Nordic country on a daily or weekly basis. We will also respond to the first research question: *What parts of the Nordic Region have the greatest cross-border labour market mobility?*

Nordic labour market migration

Traditionally, migration is understood as the permanent relocation of both residence and activity space (Getis et al. 2008). In 2020, 458,000 Nordic inhabitants lived in a different Nordic country than the one in which they were born, corresponding to 1.7 % of the population of 27.2 million.

According to the latest statistics, approximately 40,000 people move to another Nordic country every year (Nordisk statistikdatabas, 2020). People in the Nordic Region move more often than other Europeans, 13–16 % of the Nordic population do this every year, which is comparable to other highly mobile societies such as the United States, Canada and Australia (Heleniak, 2020). However, substantially fewer choose to move to another Nordic country.

The composition of the groups of other Nordic inhabitants in the different Nordic countries reveals an interesting but perhaps unsurprising pattern related to proximity, shared languages and territorial history. Of the working-age population working in another Nordic country than the one in which they were born, we find that the majority of those working in Finland are from Sweden, a large majority of Danes in Greenland and Faroe Islands and a mix of Swedes and Finns in Åland. In Norway and Iceland, the patterns are more mixed, and Denmark has the most mixed group of working-age population from other Nordic countries.

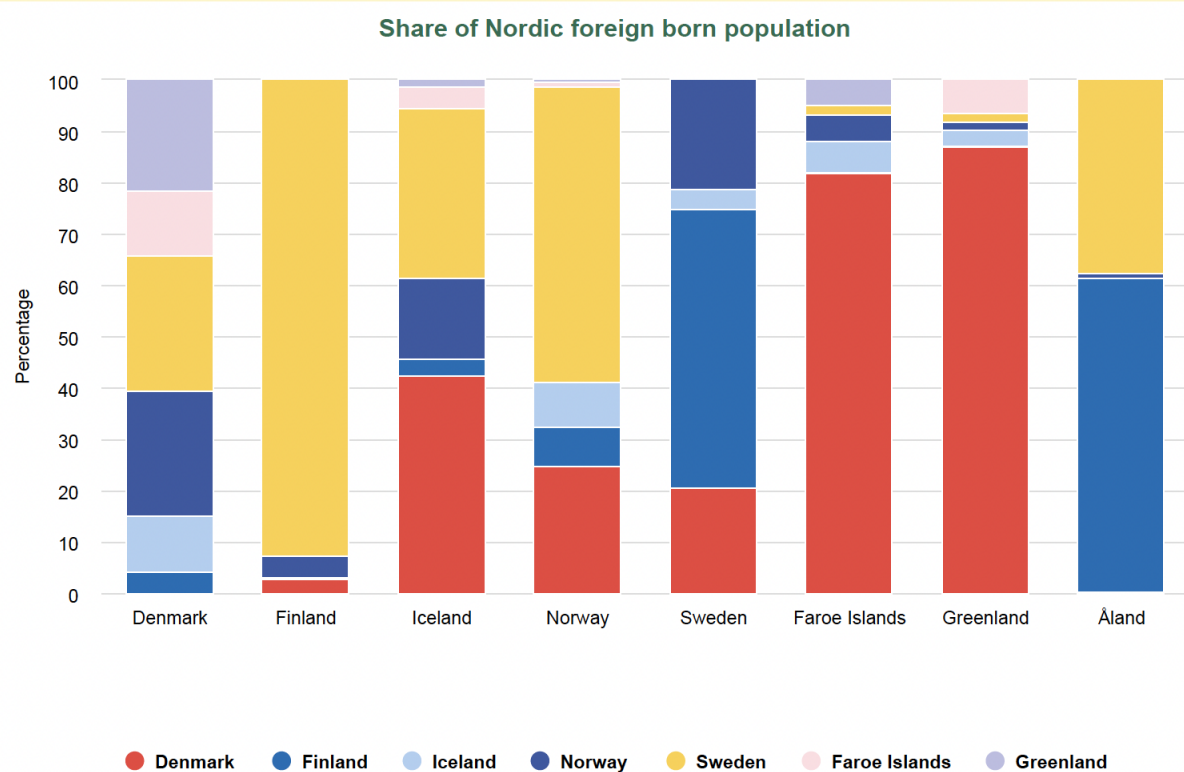
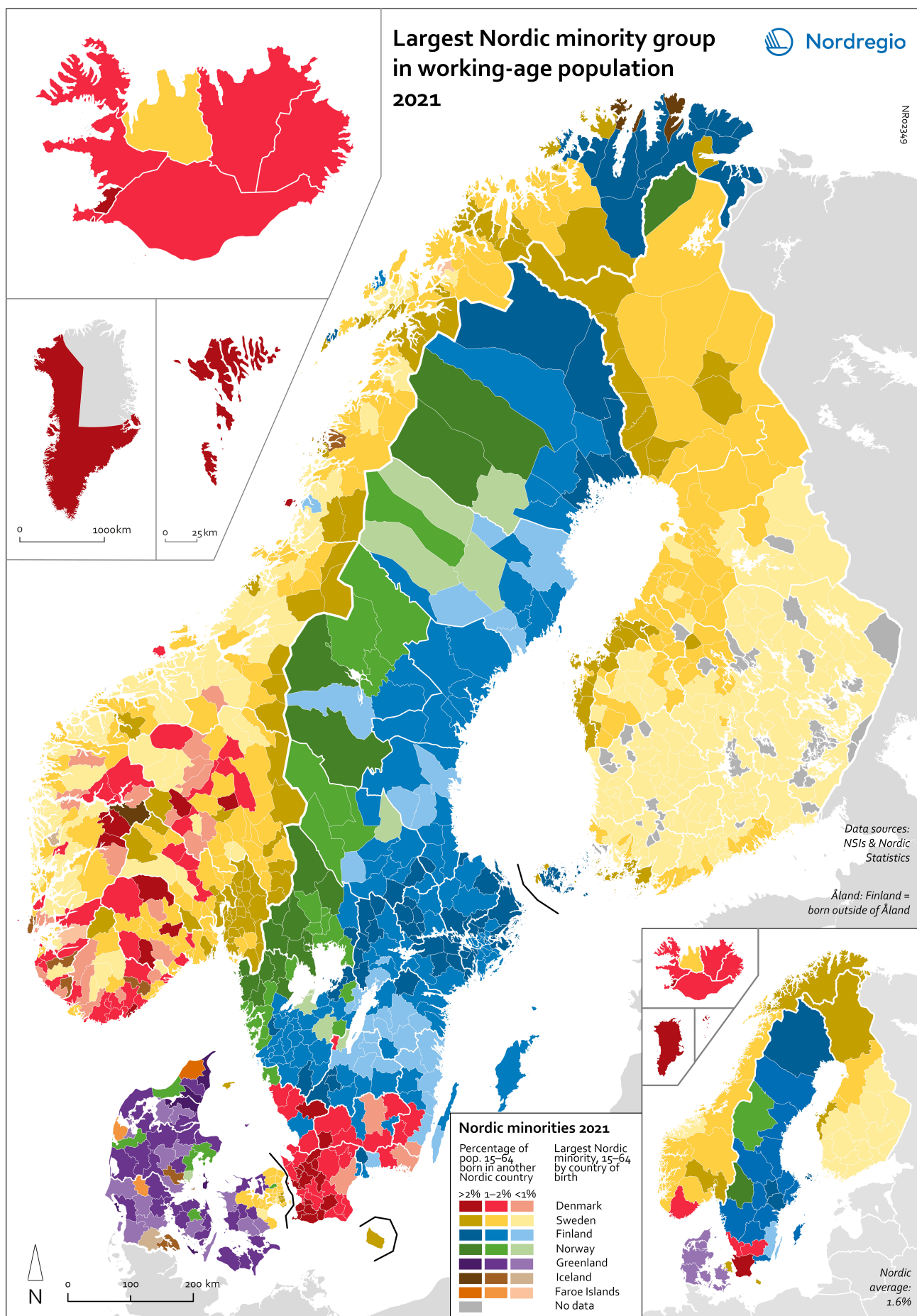


Figure 1. Foreign-born, working-age population (15-64 years old) by country of birth. Source: Lundgren & Wøien Meijer (2022), p 88-89.

However, a more detailed map reveals differences in this general pattern in individual regions and municipalities. For example, there are more Danes in south Sweden and south Norway and more Norwegians in the Swedish municipalities bordering Norway.



Map 1. Largest Nordic minority group as a share of working-age population 2021. [View map in Nordregio's map gallery](#). Source: Lundgren & Wøien Meijer (2022), p. 90. Map: Gustaf Norlén.

Nordic labour market commuting

Nordic labour market mobility involves not only migration but also commuting to a job in another Nordic country on a daily or weekly basis. Due to the lack of data from the statistical offices, the latest data on Nordic labour market commuting patterns is for 2015–2018. In this period approximately 49,000 people worked in another Nordic country, corresponding to 0.5 % of the working-age population.

The figures for Nordic commuting are less impressive than the corresponding European average of 1% and the higher figures in several European cross-border regions such as those in Slovakia, Belgium, and Estonia (Eurostat, 2016, Lundgren & Wøien Meijer, 2022). Again, the differences are large between individual regions and municipalities. The highest numbers of commuters in 2015–2018 were in south and mid-Sweden and Åland, with over 1% of the total workforce (Lundgren & Wøien Meijer, 2022).

More recent data from Region Skåne in Sweden shows that approximately 18,000 people commute in the Öresund area, 16,000 from Sweden to Denmark and 2,000 in the other direction (Region Skåne, 2022). Like the number of migrants, the number of commuters may play an important role in individual municipalities. The lack of statistics on cross-border mobility is problematic for policymakers at various levels. For example, in the Swedish municipality Årjäng bordering to Norway, counting cross-border commuters raised the employment level by 15 percentage points (Lundgren & Wøien Meijer, 2022).



Many people commute in the Öresund area. Photo: Drahomír Postebý-Mach



Kvarken connects Finland and Sweden. Photo: Henrik Morkel

Cross-border labour market mobility in the literature

This section moves from the data to look at descriptions and explanations of cross-border labour market mobility in academic and grey literature.

The academic literature on migration and labour market migration is extensive, and it includes different perspectives and involves various scientific disciplines. This provides a rich background and framework for examining Nordic cross-border labour market mobility. However, there is also plenty of grey literature on the topic, such as reports and declarations by the Nordic Council of Ministers and its various institutions, as well as studies from cross-border regions.

Theories relating to cross-border labour market mobility

Perhaps the best known theoretical model for studies of migration and drivers for mobility is the Everett Lee (1966) Push and Pull Model, which lists four factors that influence migration: 1) driving forces, 2) attraction forces, 3) intervening obstacles, and 4) personal factors. The model indicates that the decision to migrate is based on when the push factors outweigh the pull factors (Barcus and Halfacree, 2018).

Another well-known model takes an evolutionary perspective as its point of departure. The Mobility Transition Model (MTM) says that migration follows trends for demographic transition and modernisation and consists of five phases: 1) migration between rural areas, 2) migration from rural areas to urban areas, 3) migration to urban areas, 4) migration to rural areas and 5) migration between urban areas (Barcus and Halfacree, 2018).

Economic theories can help explain the relationships between quantifiable variables that influence migration, such as wages and unemployment. Transaction cost analyses and institutional theory can help explain how formal and informal rules, such as legal barriers but also language, norms and culture, can enable and hinder exchanges and mobility across national borders. Furthermore, sociological and behavioural theories focus on the behaviour and rationale of individuals.

According to Barcus and Halfacree (2018), migration can be related to work, study or lifestyle. It can also be involuntary – refugees, for example. Whereas local migration usually implies moving shorter distances and is driven by family, housing or neighbourhood considerations, work migration is motivated by labour market demands and career development. Study opportunities influence students, while those moving for reasons of lifestyle change are motivated by the desire for a better quality of life.

If we zoom into research literature on the Nordic countries, we find several explanations for cross-border labour market mobility. Some of them relate to economic arguments, such as cyclical and structural rationales, including wage level differences and labour market demand, whereas other explanations relate more to freedom of movement and the opportunities for taking jobs in other Nordic countries. Many of the studies covered by our literature review are quantitative, however, and only to a limited extent explore the motivations for migration or commuting.

Recurring explanations include the joint Nordic labour market, the passport union and the agreement banning discrimination in the labour market against citizens of other Nordic countries, which were introduced 70 years ago and have facilitated and bolstered cross-border labour market mobility (Korkisaari & Söderling, 2003).

Other explanations frequently pointed out are the similarities between the Nordic countries, in particular those relating to labour market policy and the way the labour markets are organised (Ho & Shirono, 2015), which is assumed to reduce obstacles to taking a job in another Nordic country. However, other commonalities can also be expected to play a role, such as those relating to social security and goals and policies relating to economic and social equality, which are similar and unite the Nordic countries (Shuttleworth et al. 2018).

As regards the motivation for moving to a job in another country, some research literature point to the ones being related to the environment, career development, improving knowledge of a language, the desire for new cultural and life experiences and social relationships (Lundholm et al. 2004; Korkisaari & Söderling, 2003). This is in line with Lundholm (2007), who explored the motivations for relocating in a Nordic context (both changing residence within the Nordic countries and across national borders) and found that relocation was often voluntary and based on social and environmental concerns rather than primarily motivated by a change of job and workplace.

Even though the main motivations found in those studies were not economic, Ho and Shirono (2015) point to economic motivations relating to cyclical economic factors, i.e. economic differences between the Nordic countries in terms of wages and employment. Möller et al. (2018) explored cross-border mobility across the Swedish-Norwegian border and found that it is related to distance and proximity. This is, in all probability, a general pattern (e.g. Heleniak, 2020) and is also confirmed by the data presented in this report.



Photo: Canva

Policy documents on cross-border labour market mobility in the Nordic Region

Apart from the research literature on cross-border labour market mobility, a plethora of other policy documents and reports also relate to cross-border mobility in the Nordic Region.

The most important is perhaps the Nordic Council of Ministers' vision' of the Region being the most sustainable and integrated region in the world by 2030. This vision guides the Council's work, and seamless mobility and digital integration are considered to be key factors in creating an integrated and competitive Nordic Region (NCM, 2020). The Nordic labour market model is seen as key to reaching this goal. The model involves strong trade unions and collaboration between the social partners, i.e. unions and employers working together to provide both flexibility and security for the workforce (Jesnes et al. 2020).

The freedom of movement and joint Nordic labour market established in the 1950s are fundamental to Nordic co-operation. In 1952, passport-free travel was introduced between the Nordic countries. This was followed in 1958 by a more clearly defined Nordic Passport Union (a forerunner of the modern Schengen agreement). The joint Nordic labour market came into force in 2 July 1954 (a precursor of the free mobility of labour that would later characterise the EU) and the Nordic Convention on Social Security was implemented in 1955 (Nordic Council, n.d.a.).

Following the vision, the Nordic Council of Ministers states that the free movement of people and businesses, should be enabled by breaking down obstacles to mobility and to economic growth. For example, its Freedom of Movement Council is tasked with identifying and breaking down obstacles

to freedom of movement (Nordic Council of Ministers, n.d.c.). The Nordic Mobility Action Programme 2019–21 outlined how progress will be made toward these goals by supporting and facilitating mobility, for example, promoting digitalisation, the recognition of qualifications from other Nordic countries to facilitate the mobility of workers and students, and closer collaboration on the implementation of EU legislation (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2019).

The Nordic Future of Work project (2017-2021) identified challenges faced by the Nordic labour markets and highlighted that policies to support cross-border mobility are obvious ones on which to work together at the Nordic level. However, other labour market challenges are also of relevance in a cross-border context, such as the legal position of workers in platform companies, taxation policies and competition policies for international big tech companies (Alsos & Dølvik, 2021). Issues of social security and the transfer of retirement pensions are also frequently brought up, for example, in a Nordic-Baltic study in 2013 (Kahila et al., 2013).

To make up for the lack of comparative statistics and statistics on cross-border mobility, the Nordic Council of Ministers ran a project 2016–2020 involving the statistical institutes from Denmark, Iceland, Finland, Norway and Sweden.

The report Nordic Cross-border Statistics represents a first step towards the systematic and collective collation of data on Nordic mobility. The project improved the quality of statistics on cross-border mobility, and results were published in the open Nordic statistics database. Collecting the statistics is more difficult than it may sound, partly due to legal obstacles imposed by data protection legislation and rules governing the exchange of personal information (micro-data) across national borders, and partly due to different methods of collecting data. However, the need for reliable cross-border statistics on mobility remains undisputed, and the Nordic Council of Ministers has called for the collation of these statistics to be made permanent. As part of the Council's work on digitalisation, "permanent solutions for cross-border data exchange and co-operation between authorities will be created" (Nordic Council of Ministers, n.d.c., Nordic Council of Ministers, n.d.d.). However, an initial report focusing on Nordic co-operation in education, health and legislative affairs shows that the legal obstacles and technical challenges of interoperability between different national systems should not be underestimated. Stepping up work on cross-border statistics will require both financial resources and a clear political will and motivation that weighs the benefits of shared statistics in various areas against the costs (Dahl et al., 2022).

The call for better statistics on cross-border mobility comes not only from national level authorities but also to a high degree from the cross-border regions in the Nordic Region. By their very nature, they possess extensive local and regional knowledge of cross-border mobility in their own regions.

In studies conducted by different actors in the cross-border regions (e.g. regional and local employment services, business organisations and chambers of commerce, cross-border organisations and committees from all of the Nordic border regions), we find results for obstacles to cross-border mobility similar to the ones presented previously. The most frequent barriers and challenges to cross-border mobility are, for example, temporary ID checks, social security issues, challenges with taxation and banking, pension payments, transport issues and difficulties verifying professional qualifications. In addition, digital communication across the Nordic Region does not always work, and non-EU citizens encounter problems in commuting between Nordic countries (Øresund Direkt, n.d.).

The long history of collaboration between municipalities and regions across Nordic borders represents a huge asset for many regions. Aside from social relations across borders, the soft-border collaboration enables labour mobility and the expansion or complementarity of supply chains. Considering the low population density in many areas, collaboration with actors (e.g. between municipalities, business organisations and other institutions) on the other side of the border allows for greater critical mass to boost competitiveness and for public authorities to make their public services accessible to larger groups (Giacometti et al., 2019). Collaboration across borders expands the market for products and services as well as it extends the labour market area and makes cross-border regions economically stronger (Wøien, 2019). Cross-border labour mobility has also been seen as important in closing some of the skills gaps in particular border regions. While mobility may entail the risk of a brain-drain of highly educated people, it perhaps represents even more of an opportunity to gain skills from cross-border networks and complementary labour markets (Giacometti & Cuadrado, 2020).

Challenges to freedom of movement and cross-border mobility are often addressed by cross-border actors in reports and sometimes lobbied for at the national and international levels. Sometimes political support is achieved, but often the results are mixed. There is strong local, regional and international level support, for example, from the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers, for improved conditions for cross-border mobility. However, while these issues are also addressed at the national level, the weaknesses of the freedom of movement principle often become clear when crises occur. During the refugee crisis of 2015/16 and the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020/21, the national governments were quick to impose restrictions that limited freedom of movement. This shows that in the event of a crisis, the autonomy of the nation-state and the national governments' priorities at the time outweigh the perspectives of the cross-border regions.



Temporary ID checks, social security issues, challenges with taxation and banking, pension payments and transport issues affect labour mobility. Photographer: Christiaan Dirksen



The COVID-19 pandemic led to border closures, also called 'covid fencing', across Europe. Photo: Jeswin Thomas

Cross-border labour market mobility in times of crisis

Like the rest of the world, the Nordic countries now find themselves stumbling from one crisis to another; the refugee crisis in 2015/16, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020/21 and the Russian war on Ukraine in 2022. All those crises have already had consequences and will most probably also have additional ones for cross-border labour market mobility in the future.

In the modern era, the Nordic countries have been comparatively successful at adapting to change –demographic changes, urbanisation, automation of jobs and the declining importance of core industries. However, this cannot be taken for granted, and in recent years several elements of the well-regulated Nordic model for working life have been disputed (Dølvik and Steen, 2018). Historically, whenever there has been tension between the national desire to maintain control over borders and moves to guarantee free movement, the national interest has always come out on top (Tervonen, 2017).

This was also the case with the refugee crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, often with difficult consequences for cross-border municipalities and regions dependent on cross-border commerce and a larger cross-border pool of labour. Travel restrictions imposed to stop the pandemic had devastating effects for commuters (e.g. workers and students) through longer travel time, greater insecurity, loss of access to public services, friends and family and for businesses and cross-border commerce. Those problems were particularly severe in areas with frequent commuting, such as the Öresund area, Torneå-Haparanda and Svinesund. Several of the problems are also similar to those encountered during the refugee crisis and the subsequent border controls in 2016, when four types of effects were found: emotional and image effects; practical obstacles for travellers; higher costs to maintain the border controls and economic consequences at regional level (Andresen et al.,

2016). However, statistics reveal that a downward trend in commuting had set in even before the pandemic made mobility more difficult. The number of cross-border commuters fell significantly from 2015 –2017, and the data also shows that fewer young people are applying for jobs in neighbouring countries (Brun et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic led to border closures, also called 'covid fencing', across Europe and affected the approximately 1.9 million people (2018) who work on the other side of a border in the Schengen area. Not only were different sectors severely hit, such as health, transport and public transport, but the ideas of a globalized world without borders and de-territorialism took a hit, triggering an intense debate about border closures (Medeiros et al. 2021). In their study, Medeiros et al. (2021) explored the effects by means of a Territorial Impact Assessment (TARGET-TIA) on the dimensions of accessibility, institutional co-operation, economic co-operation, social co-operation and cultural co-operation. Although data has been collected by organisations such as the Committee of the Regions, the OECD and the Association of European Border Regions, the impact of the closed borders and covid-fencing should be further investigated as the effects are not yet fully understood.

Some say that the effects of the pandemic and the resulting cross-border travel restrictions represent the lowest point in Nordic co-operation since its formal establishment some 70 years ago. This has since been addressed by the Ministers for Nordic Co-operation (MR-SAM) in a joint declaration issued in summer 2022. In it, they admit that the pandemic presented the Nordic societies with a number of new challenges, many of which had a serious impact on relations between the Nordic countries and, in particular, restricted freedom of movement. "We agree on the need to learn from all of these experiences, both positive and negative. Living, working, studying and running businesses across Nordic borders should be easy," they say in the declaration. Later, they add: "... we also have a particular responsibility for cross-border freedom of movement. We have, therefore, renewed and strengthened the mandate of the Freedom of Movement Council to remove obstacles to freedom of movement and stop new ones from arising" (Nordic Council of Ministers, n.d.c.).

While the pandemic was a crucial challenge to both cross-border mobility and to Nordic co-operation itself, it also triggered a rapid rise in remote working (Nordic Council of Ministers, n.d.b; Randall et al., 2022). If the trend of more remote working and living continues, we can expect to see greater political interest in good transport infrastructure. Past findings show the importance of access to reliable public transport for cross-border mobility (Grunfelder et al., 2020) and that well-functioning, robust and sustainable infrastructure is essential to enhancing mobility and boosting economic growth and welfare (Greater Copenhagen Committee, 2016). This is also reflected in the post-pandemic recommendations for the border region between Norway and Sweden, which include connecting Oslo and Stockholm with a fast and long-term sustainable train link, greater freedom of movement by creating the right conditions for cross-border labour markets, digitalised joint social security systems and e-services and more support for cross-border co-operation (Region Värmland, 2022).

The lessons learned so far from the crises include that they resulted in severe obstacles to the free movement of people in the Nordic countries and that the impact on the regions differed across the Nordic countries (Creutz et al., 2021). There also seems to be a general acceptance that Nordic governments should work more closely together in the future.



Unemployment may be an economic driving force to take a job in another Nordic country. Photo: Miquel Perera

Research project outline

Based on the literature review on migration and labour market mobility and cross-border labour market mobility in the Nordic Region, we will now describe the analytical framework and project outline for the research project in order to answer the two research questions:

- 2. What drives labour market mobility in the Nordic Region?
- 3. What are the obstacles (previously known and recently learnt) for labour market mobility in the Nordic Region?

Analytical framework

Based on the Push and pull model (Everett Lee, 1966, in Barcus and Halfacree, 2018) referred to earlier in this paper, we will take as our point of departure the assumption that the decision of an individual to take a job in another Nordic country is based on both push and pull factors, including driving forces, attraction forces, intervening obstacles and personal obstacles.

Driving forces	Intervening obstacles
Attraction forces	Personal obstacles

Table 1: Push and pull model

Three of these parameters are general in nature and refer to institutional factors. In the following, we will focus on those, i.e. the driving forces, attraction forces and intervening obstacles.

In the literature, we found enabling and hampering factors for cross-border labour market mobility in three different realms or spheres of society: economic, political/legal/administrative and social/cultural. In our analysis, we will, therefore, supplement each of the driving forces, attraction forces and intervening obstacles with those three realms.

Driving forces - Economic - Political/ Legal/ Administrative - Social/ Cultural	Intervening obstacles - Economic - Political/ Legal/ Administrative - Social/ Cultural
Attraction forces - Economic - Political/ Legal/Administrative - Social/ Cultural	

Table 2: Driving forces, attraction forces and intervening obstacles in three different realms, i.e. the economic, political/legal/ administrative and social/cultural realms

Examples of driving forces in different realms include that unemployment may be an economic driving force to take a job in another Nordic country, while meeting a future partner may be a social driving force. Higher wages in neighbouring countries usually represents an economic attraction force, while attitudes towards immigrants may work both as a political/legal or a social/cultural attraction force. Price rises for commuting represent an intervening economic obstacle, while lack of clarity on taxation is a political/legal/administrative obstacle and living far from friends and family is a social obstacle.

Institutional analysis will be used to deepen our understanding of and further explore the nature of the driving forces, attraction forces and obstacles. Institutional analysis sees institutions as humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic and social interaction (North, 1990). Those constraints may be formal rules, such as legislation or regulations, or informal rules, such as norms, values and what is understood to be appropriate behaviour in a particular situation. Another distinction is to differentiate between de jure and de facto institutions. Although informal rules often support formal ones, it is important to recognise that institutions may be complementary, substitutive or even conflicting (Voigt, 2013).

We will apply an institutional framework when analysing the results in order to gain further insights into enablers and hampering factors for cross-border labour market mobility in the Nordic Region.

Driving forces			Intervening obstacles		
	Formal rules	Informal rules		Formal rules	Informal rules
Economic			Economic		
Political/Legal/ Administrative			Political/Legal/ Administrative		
Social/Cultural			Social/Cultural		
Attraction forces					
	Formal rules	Informal rules			
Economic					
Political/Legal/ Administrative					
Social/Cultural					

Table 3: Institutional analysis of driving forces, attraction forces and intervening obstacles in the three different realms of the push and pull model

Methods

The project will use a multi-method approach to answer the research questions. In addition to statistical and GIS data, which was also presented in a special chapter (Lundgren et al., 2022) of *State of the Nordic Region 2022* (Norlén et al., 2022), the project will also include a literature review, three case studies and interviews in the case study regions.

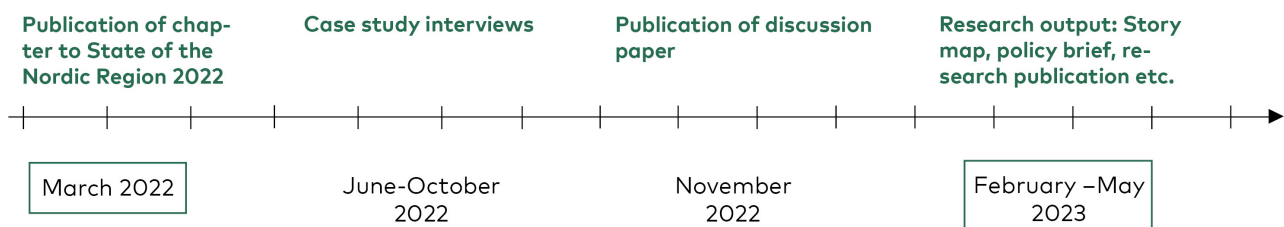


Figure: Overview of research process

The literature review includes scientific literature based on searches in Scopus and ScienceDirect using search terms relating to mobility, migration, commuting and the labour market in combination with the names of the Nordic countries and Scandinavia. It also includes "grey literature", i.e. reports and policy documents, among them recent surveys on cross-border mobility by, for example, the Freedom of Movement Council, Info Norden and cross-border regional councils.

Three case studies will be conducted in three very different regions: Greater Copenhagen, which is a metropolitan region on the border between Sweden and Denmark, Vestfold Telemark on the Norwegian south coast which has connections to and attracts labour from both Sweden, Denmark and elsewhere, and Greenland which is a remote region highly dependent on foreign workers and has links to Denmark.

The aim of the study is explorative, i.e. it will seek to understand the different motivations, obstacles and attraction forces for labour market mobility. As a result of this approach, the selection of case studies will be based on a strategy of looking into different rather than similar case studies (Bryman, 2008, Yin, 2014).

The project will use both quantitative and qualitative methods for the case studies. The quantitative part will consist of statistical analyses of labour market and cross-border mobility in the selected case study regions (Greater Copenhagen, Vestfold Telemark and Greenland). Based on accessible statistics, we will make comparisons between the case study regions and national-level data for both migration and commuting and conduct a cross-case analysis.

The qualitative part will consist of document studies, among them surveys of mobility in cross-border regions and interviews with relevant actors from the selected case study areas and cross-border regions. These will include people working on labour market issues on both sides of the borders within the municipalities and regions, trade unions, chambers of commerce, employers' associations as well as organisations, both public and private, which promote a more closely integrated cross-border labour market.

Based on the analytical framework presented in this paper, the interviews will focus on identifying driving forces, attraction forces and intervening obstacles for labour market mobility in the case study regions. In the analyses of the results, attention will be paid to the nature of the forces, i.e. are they economic, legal/political/administrative or social/cultural. We will also analyse whether they are formal, for example, laid down in legislation or regulations or informal, relating to norms, values and habits, for example.



Photo: Wonderlane

Next steps and lessons learned in the Nordic Region

The project's fourth research question is "What can the Nordic Region learn, and how can Nordic labour market mobility be re-started"? By identifying both the realms and the nature of the obstacles to cross-border labour market mobility, the project will seek to present the lessons learned in the Nordic Region and present recommendations to policymakers about how to promote greater cross-border labour market mobility.

A reference group comprising representatives of cross-border regions and Info Norden was set up to make the research more relevant and provide input (see appendix for a list of participants). The reference group will meet 3–4 times during the project. A workshop involving key stakeholders will be held in late 2022 to discuss the results and provide input into the Nordic lessons learned and into the policy recommendations.

Initial results from the case studies will be presented at Nordregio's annual [Nordregio Forum event](#) in Hamar, Norway, 23–24 November 2022. The Forum will also provide an opportunity to engage with stakeholders and learn more Nordic lessons.



Photo: Hamar Regionen

Final remarks: Nordic wake-up call for labour market mobility?

The COVID-19 pandemic and the border restrictions to which it led brought new insights into Nordic labour market mobility (Giacometti & Wøien Meijer, 2021). Not only did it become clear that some sectors in cross-border municipalities and regions are dependent on labour from the other side of borders, but also that many people in the Nordic Region have taken freedom of movement for granted when establishing a family, studying or working abroad, changing residence or engaging in business activities on the other side of borders.

Overnight, these activities could no longer be taken for granted and for many freedom of movement turned out to be a Potemkin façade. The impact was felt most strongly, but not exclusively, in cross-border regions, where many people found it challenging to cope with the different rules and measures introduced to slow the spread of the virus without any coordination between the Nordic countries. For people having to deal with these obstacles on a daily basis, cracks started to appear in the reality of Nordic cross-border mobility. For some, it was not the first time either – the refugee crisis in 2015 with double controls, ID checks and border controls between Sweden and Denmark was still fresh in the memory.

Another key lesson learned from COVID-19, a more positive one, concerns digitalisation and the remote working tools introduced in many workplaces. Remote working seems likely to be here to stay and can pave the way for hybrid ways of working, which may involve occasional attendance and commuting but also working from home (Randall & Norlén, 2022; Randall et al., 2022a; Randall et al., 2022b). Maintaining Nordic freedom of movement, including in practice, and removing obstacles are, therefore, important for securing a better integrated and sustainable Nordic Region. Access to reliable and comparable statistics on migration and commuting is important to support this development. Moreover, the changing geo-political situation since the Russian invasion of Ukraine has increased support for European and Nordic co-operation, which may stimulate progress toward a more seamless and integrated Nordic labour market.

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About this working paper

Re-start competence mobility in the Nordic Region

Authors: Anna Lundgren and Ágúst Bogason

The project "Re-start competence mobility in the Nordic Region" explores the labour market mobility and the possibility of re-starting and enhancing it in the Nordic region. The core research question is in which regions and sectors we find the largest cross-border labour market mobility. The study is conducted under the Nordic Thematic Group for Green, Innovative and Resilient Regions (2021-2024).

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<https://nordregio.org/research/re-start-competence-mobility-in-the-nordic-region/>

<https://nordregioprojects.org/innovation/>

Maps & data: Gustaf Norlén, Nordregio

Cover pictures: Joel Mott, unsplash.com

Layout: Nordregio

Nordregio working paper 2022:4

ISBN: 978-91-8001-029-0 (online)

ISBN: 978-91-8001-030-6 (PDF)

ISSN: 1403-2511

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.6027/WP2022:4.1403-2511>

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

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