

XV SESSION OF THE BARENTS EURO-ARCTIC COUNCIL
JOINT COMMUNIQUÉ
Oulu, 15 October 2015

The Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) convened for its XV Session under the chairmanship of Finland on 15 October 2015 in Oulu.

Foreign ministers and senior representatives of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the European Union participated together with representatives of the Barents Regional Council, indigenous peoples, regional bodies, observer states and invited guests.

Introduction

1. The Council affirms the continuing validity of the principles and objectives of Barents cooperation, aiming at promoting stability, well-being and sustainable development in the Barents region as expressed in the Kirkenes Declaration of January 1993 and reaffirmed in the Summit Declaration on the 20th Anniversary of the Barents Euro-Arctic Cooperation in Kirkenes in June 2013.
2. The Council recognizes the significant role of the Barents Regional Council and notes that interregional cooperation and close interaction between national and regional levels are fundamental elements of Barents cooperation. The Council notes with appreciation the Barents Programme 2014-2018, which provides the framework for interregional cooperation.
3. The Council acknowledges the importance of the parliamentary dimension of Barents cooperation and takes note of the 7th Barents Parliamentary Conference held in September 2015 in Helsinki. The Council takes note of the resolution of the Third Barents Indigenous Peoples' Congress held in Tromsø in February 2015.
4. The Council recognizes that a balanced integration of the economic, social and environmental dimensions and respect for democratic values, non-discrimination, gender equality and the rights of minorities, incl. indigenous peoples, are prerequisites for dynamic, inclusive and sustainable regional development.
5. The Council underlines the importance of civil society cooperation, cultural exchange and people-to-people contacts, and supports active involvement of non-governmental organizations in relevant fields of Barents cooperation.
6. The Council welcomes the concrete steps taken particularly at working group level to enhance coherence and synergy of regional and cross-border cooperation between different forums, such as the Arctic Council, the Council of the Baltic Sea States, the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Northern Dimension as well as the relevant financial programmes and calls for continued efforts to this end. The cooperation between the Barents working groups and the Northern Dimension Partnerships could be further deepened in view of the development of the Northern Dimension Euro-Arctic approach.

Economic cooperation, transport and logistics

7. The Council emphasizes the need for intensified economic and business cooperation in releasing the full economic potential of the Barents region. The Council takes note of the Barents Industrial Partnership Meeting held in October 2015 in Oulu to promote cross-border business cooperation and the role of small and medium sized enterprises especially in the sectors of tourism and ICT, as well as the results of the Cleantech Innovations in Minerals Production Conference organized in September 2015 in Helsinki.
8. The Council recognizes the important role of cross-border transport connections for economic development and welcomes the Joint Declaration of the BEATA High Level Meeting in September in Rovaniemi, Finland, confirming the intention to continue work on the proposal for a Joint Barents Transport Plan and to provide guidelines and recommendations for the development of all modes of transport in the border-crossing corridors. The Council welcomes as part of this work the document prepared by the expert working group on the Cross-Border Road Corridors in the Barents region. The Council calls for coordination between these activities and the existing transport networks within the framework of other regional formats, in particular the Northern Dimension Partnership on Transport and Logistics.
9. The Council notes the future potential of the Northern Sea Route which would benefit the Barents region and provide economic and business opportunities to all member states of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, taking environmental aspects into account.
10. The Council calls for strengthened cooperation on renewable energy and energy efficiency in the Barents cooperation framework as well as through partnerships between local authorities and the business sector. The Council acknowledges the role of the forest sector in the development of bio-economy and renewable energy and takes note of the Barents Forest Forum held in September 2015 in Joensuu, Finland.
11. The Council takes note of the growing attractiveness of the Barents region for international tourism and recognizes the importance of Barents tourism cooperation for the development of ecologically, socially and culturally sustainable tourism. The Council encourages the development of tourism-related goods and services drawing on the rich cultural competence of people in the Barents region and acknowledges the potential of ecotourism that sustains the wellbeing of local people and increases environmental awareness.
12. The Council underlines the importance of environmental concerns and corporate social responsibility in all economic activities.

Environment and climate change

13. The Council recognizes the importance of the work to improve air and water quality and waste management in order to enhance the prerequisites for long term prosperity, human health and the good state of the environment in the region. The Council welcomes the progress in reducing the number of Barents environmental hot spots and calls for enhanced action with the aim of eliminating them from the Barents hot spots list. The

Council commends the environmental efforts of the Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership and the Nordic Environment Finance Corporation in the Barents region.

14. The Council underlines the value of large areas of clean environment and untouched wilderness in the region and the importance of further cooperation and measures on protecting intact forests, wetlands and coastal areas in order to preserve the region's rich biodiversity in the light of economic activity and climate change. The Council welcomes the finalization of the 1st phase of the Barents Protected Areas Network project implemented at the regional level.
15. The Council emphasizes the need to limit the rise in the global average temperature to below two degrees, and to this end reaffirm the commitment of the member states of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council to contribute to the adoption of an international climate agreement in Paris in December 2015. Adaptation to climate change requires cooperation not only at the global but also at national, regional and local levels. Barents cooperation can contribute to the mitigation of climate change by reducing emissions of local greenhouse gases and short-lived climate pollutants, such as black carbon, and by promoting the use of renewable energy sources.
16. The Council acknowledges the launch of concrete activities for the implementation of the Action Plan on Climate Change for Barents cooperation adopted in 2013 and calls for all the BEAC Working Groups to further implement the priorities and projects envisaged in this plan. The Council foresees an update of the project list in the Action Plan by the end of 2016, with contributions from all relevant working groups.
17. The Council emphasizes the need for the Barents region countries to contribute to the implementation of the post-2015 Development Agenda, including sustainable development goals, as well as to the global 10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production. The Council calls for improved resource efficiency and emphasizes the importance of a circular and green economy, which contributes to mitigating climate change and reducing environmental degradation at the same time as it creates business opportunities and new jobs.
18. The Council commends the cooperation among emergency and rescue services in the Barents region and notes that the Barents Rescue 2015 was successfully held in September 2015 in Kittilä, Finland. The Council notes that prevention and response to natural and man-made disasters, including oil spills and radioactive pollution, should be further developed and possible synergies with other regional forums, especially the Arctic Council, should be considered in planning the improvements needed for enhancing operational efficiency.

Human and social development

19. The Council acknowledges the important work done for the empowerment and social inclusion of young people in the region and welcomes the initiatives to strengthen the knowledge-base on young people's living conditions in the Barents region. The Council calls for continued efforts on the part of all member states to support cross-border mobility and people-to-people contacts in the region.

20. The Council pays special attention to the protection and social inclusion of vulnerable groups in the region and welcomes the valuable contribution of the Children and Youth at Risk programme in this regard.
21. The Council recognizes that health and social development are vital for the individual and for society in the Barents region. The Council welcomes the adoption of the 5th Barents Cooperation Programme on health and related social issues, which focuses on communicable diseases, non-communicable diseases and the development of health systems and social services. Exchange of information and experience is important, especially for the prevention and control of communicable diseases.
22. The Council acknowledges the central role of cultural cooperation in promoting the Barents identity and contacts between civil society and culture institutions. The Council appreciates the dedicated work for the development of the Barents Culture Scholarships and takes note of the new Barents Cultural Initiative Incubator project which supports the creation of cultural events and projects. The Council welcomes the meeting of core regional structures operating in the field of culture, held in Kotka, Finland, in May 2014, which adopted recommendations on how to secure synergy and build a more systematic approach in relevant regional activities.
23. The Council underlines the need for further strengthening of academic cooperation and mobility in the Barents Region in response to needs in the field of human resources, research and innovation.
24. The Council reaffirms the commitment of the Barents Member States to protect and promote the rights of indigenous peoples and to fulfil their obligations in this regard, including by ensuring indigenous peoples' effective participation, through their own representative institutions, in decision-making at all levels on issues affecting them. The Council further reaffirms the right of indigenous peoples to freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development. The Council confirms that Indigenous Peoples' knowledge, traditional practices and strategies to sustain their environment shall be respected and taken into account in the Barents Euro-Arctic region.
25. The Council recognizes the right of the Working Group of Indigenous Peoples to participate at all levels of Barents cooperation and affirms the commitment of the four Barents region countries to provide financial support to this end.

Financing

26. The Council welcomes the final report and the recommendations of the Ad Hoc Expert Group investigating the possibility of establishing a financial mechanism for the Barents region and concludes that at this stage there is no common ground for establishing a new financial mechanism. The Council calls on the International Barents Secretariat in cooperation with other relevant bodies to start implementing the recommendations of the final report in order to enhance the use of existing financing instruments for the benefit of the Barents region.
27. The Council underlines the importance of the Kolarctic and Karelia Cross-Border Cooperation Programmes in the implementation of Barents projects and notes with

satisfaction that during the preparations of the 2014-2020 programme period, the geographical scope and the objectives of Barents cooperation have to a large extent been taken into account.

28. The Council expresses its appreciation to the outgoing BEAC chair, Finland, and to the outgoing chair of the Barents Regional Council, the region of Arkhangelsk, Russia, as well as to the International Barents Secretariat, the working groups and all other parties for their excellent work and welcomes the incoming chair of the BEAC, Russia, and of the Barents Regional Council, the region of Kainuu, Finland.
29. The Council welcomes the Russian chairmanship's priorities and the kind invitation to the XVI Session of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council in 2017 in Russia.