



Utrikesdepartementet

Statement by Mr. Frank Belfrage, State Secretary for Foreign Affairs of Sweden, at the 11th Session of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council in Rovaniemi on 15 November 2007

The Barents Co-operation in the Global Context

Let me first convey greetings from my Foreign Minister, Carl Bildt. He regrets that he is not able to attend this important gathering.

And many thanks to you, Mr. Chairman, for inviting us to Santa Claus' country, to Rovaniemi, and for your hospitality, not least at yesterday's marvellous dinner.

Mr. Chairman,

Sweden regards the Barents Region as a strategically important region with its large and rich natural resources and precious natural environment.

Political decision-makers now face the challenge to live up to our high ambitions on combating climate change and at the same time provide for sustainable use of our natural resources on commercially viable terms.

I believe we all recognize that this challenge is becoming increasingly delicate.

The alarming speed of reduction of the Arctic sea ice in 2007 and thawing of the permafrost in the tundra zone will have severe consequences globally and locally. Global warming fundamentally affects conditions in the Barents Region. It will impact on traditional lifestyles, threaten infrastructure and seriously affect biodiversity and ecosystems.

Sweden therefore welcomes the enhanced priority on climate change in our work and looks forward to further initiatives. Important efforts have already started. I want to highlight the new project, supported by the Nordic Council of Ministers, on the impacts of climate change on biodiversity and ecosystem goods and services in the Barents Region.

Sweden is pleased with the Declaration of Ministers of the Environment adopted in Moscow last week. It sets important priorities. New projects related to climate change will be

developed. The work on cleaner production and environmentally sound consumption, which contributes to combating climate change, will focus more on sustainable consumption.

Important directions for the work to eliminate the environmental “hot spots” were also agreed. NEFCO¹’s efforts deserve strong support and require enhanced cooperation between our countries. Access to efficient and relevant co-financing, including public financing as well as funding from enterprises involved, is crucial.

Sweden also welcomes the prospects of linking the elimination of environmental “hot spots” in the Barents Region with the development of Joint Implementation projects through experience gained within the Testing Ground Facility in the Baltic Sea Region. Important benefits, economic as well as environmental, can be achieved that way.

Enhanced energy cooperation in the Barents Region is needed. Energy efficiency and increased use of renewable energy are crucial from a climate change point of view and provide opportunities for cost savings and sustainable development in

¹ Nordic Environmental Financing Corporation

this forest-rich region. The Barents Energy Efficiency Centers should continue their very good work.

We need to look for constructive synergies between the activities of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and those of other northern cooperation fora, such as the Northern Dimension, the Arctic Council, the Council of Baltic Sea States and the Nordic Council of Ministers, where Sweden will hold the Chair during 2008. Also BASREC (the Baltic Sea Region Energy Cooperation) could easily adapt to enhanced coordination with related activities in the Barents Region.

Sweden looks forward to continue discussions on how to best use the various instruments available.

Mr. Chairman,

The Foreign Ministers of the time were very wise when they created the Barents Euro-Arctic Council in 1993 with the aim to promote stability and sustainable development in the Barents Region. Already then, they explicitly highlighted a number of issues that we now refer to as "soft security" or "the wider concept of security" and drew political attention to the importance of regional cooperation.

Thank you, Jonas Gahr Støre, for recalling those early days.

Many public sector tasks cannot be efficiently performed without cooperation across borders between national/federal governments and/or regional administrations.

Customs services is an obvious example. Cooperation among customs services is a long term undertaking that is necessary to support increased trade and travel between neighbours. We appreciate that conditions at the border crossings in the Barents Region are slowly improving.

Prevention of organized crime is another example. Our police and intelligence communities have a joint challenge to ensure that this Region is not used for trafficking or other illegal activities.

Cooperation among emergency and rescue services is a third example. The regularly conducted large scale civil-military "Barents Rescue" exercises enable us to review our joint capacity to handle large emergencies in remote areas. All necessary formalities must be agreed in advance so that emergency and rescue services rapidly can cross national/federal borders to save

lives and property or prevent environmental disasters. Sweden hopes that the negotiations on an intergovernmental Agreement on emergency and rescue cooperation in the Barents Region will be finalized soon.

Mr. Chairman,

Our economies are booming. Prices on most natural resources are high. However, cross-border trade and investment are surprisingly low. Sweden commends the efforts of the Finnish Chairmanship to improve the provision of relevant and timely information to companies that seek new business opportunities. The two "Barents Industrial Partnership" meetings organized by Finland were successful. The new webpage with economic information seems to meet a real need in the business community.

More active participation by regional authorities in the economic cooperation would be helpful. We hope that the Regional Working Group on Investments and Economic Cooperation will be re-established.

Better transport corridors in the Barents Region are necessary to promote growth through cross-border trade and investment.

Sweden welcomes the initiatives suggested by the incoming Russian presidency of the Barents Euro-Arctic Transport Area (BEATA).

Mr. Chairman,

Barents cooperation on health and social issues has been quite successful. Communicable diseases, life style related issues and social conditions influence living conditions across borders. Sweden will do its best to continue this work when we take over this Working Group together with Archangelsk Oblast.

Education and research institutions in the Barents Region cooperate in many forms. Experience has shown that the Barents Working Group format is not ideal. We should try a new format with larger "Barents Forums" at regular intervals. Sweden is prepared to organize the first "Forum" with the support of the Swedish Institute which has extensive experience of successful exchange programs for promoting cooperation on education and research. We propose to focus the first "Barents Forum" on "Health and Social Issues".

Activities at regional level plays a key role in the Barents youth cooperation and should be developed further.

The young people of the Barents Region is our greatest resource in the creation of a prosperous future. I look forward to hearing the message from the youth representatives later this morning. We need to listen carefully to their views and their advice on ways to create opportunities for young people.

Mr. Chairman,

Yesterday, on 14 November, there was an important meeting in Stockholm between the Ministers responsible for Saami issues and the Presidents of the Saami Parliaments in Finland, Norway and Sweden.

They agreed to continue the process towards a Nordic Saami Convention and to continue to elaborate an appropriate approach for the envisaged negotiations.

They also noted with appreciation that the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 13 September 2007. That Declaration represents an important contribution to the further formulation of Saami policy in Sweden.

Mr. Chairman,

The new International Barents Secretariat (IBS) that we have agreed on at this Ministerial Meeting will mean a lot to the Barents cooperation. It will bring long needed resources to support the future Chairs of both the BEAC and the Barents Regional Council. This new component in the organizational structure of the Barents cooperation will be a source of continuity and cohesion. It will strengthen the cooperation and facilitate work for all of us. It will create an institutional memory for our cooperation. Sweden has high expectations on the IBS. We welcome the new Head of the Secretariat, Ambassador Alexander Ignatiev, and Ms Anna Lund to their new jobs.

The Barents cooperation is built on strong cooperation between the regional administrations. And between the national/federal governments in the capitals of our countries.

Sweden thanks Finland and the Republic of Karelia for their good work during the past two years and welcomes the new Russian Chairmanship for the BEAC and the new Oulu Chairmanship for the Barents Regional Council.

Thank you for your attention.