



The International Barents Secretariat

Annual report 2021

Introduction

2021 represent a significant change for the International Barents Secretariat (IBS) on many levels. Both Finland and Norway have provided voluntary contributions allowing for the Secretariat to grow from four staff members to seven. Additional staff members are expected. The increase in staff has allowed the Secretariat to re-organize and to allocate staff members to specific working groups as well as strengthening its support capacity to the regional chairmanship. This has also meant that the Secretariat has been able to take over the responsibilities from the Norwegian Barents Secretariat for supporting the Working Group of Indigenous Peoples and Barents Regional Youth Council.

The Head of the Secretariat was replaced in January, as the contract had expired. The motto of the Secretariat is “how can we best possible support the chairmanships”. This has first and foremost taken place through dedicated staff members and proactively providing advice.

Administrative reform

The Norwegian together with the Swedish regional chairmanship initiated an administrative reform in 2021. The Secretariat was instrumental in providing assistance in merging some of the working groups. The Barents co-operation consists of a range of working groups, some regional, some national, some joint. The regional and national working groups would in addition deal with co-operation in the same sectors. In order to ease the understanding of the Barents co-operation, regional and national working groups were merged, and referred to just working group, also joint working groups (the term joint working group refers to previously merged regional and national working groups). As a result, a new organizational chart was developed, with focus on where the co-operation takes place (sectors). For 2022 IBS will continue to support the working groups in amending their mandates reflecting the merger or name change.

The Administrative Manual was updated as a result of this reform. This was done in close co-ordination with the ongoing process taking place on a regional level in updating the Barents Regional Council and Committee Terms of Reference. As a result of increased staff, the Secretariat has developed a range of guidance/instructions. This includes guide to relocating to Kirkenes, office administration guide and internship guide. The IBS is currently in the process of updating its salary systems.

The Swedish Chairmanship in 2017 – 2019 initiated a reform for the working groups to rotate their chairmanship according to the national chairmanships. Work still remains in achieving an unified approach.

Office premises

The IBS is co-located in the so-called “Barentshouse” with the Norwegian Barents Secretariat, the Barents Institute, Arctic University, Centre for High North Logistics and the Investment Fund for North-West Russia and Eastern Europe. This allows for a strong degree of synergy. The university is increasing



its presence in Kirkenes, with substantial increase in office space with ensuing refurbishment. This created uncertainty with regard to the IBS, also being in need for increased office space. An amicable solution was however found, and all organizations will continue being located in the same building. The IBS will have its new offices ready in January 2022.

Digitalization

When the pandemic hit in 2020, the Secretariat quickly became a facilitator of digital meetings. This process has continued in 2021, with the Secretariat now being able to host digital meetings using two or more languages. The next step will be for the Secretariat to develop capabilities in facilitating webinars with breakout sessions. This to enable the Secretariat to further strengthen its facilitating role. Since the IBS is facilitating digital meetings, the Secretariat is automatically more closely involved in the work of the different institutions.

Covid-19 continues to pose an obstacle for physical meetings, the IBS however introduced a digital internship, allowing for a continuation of this important program for youth. With autumn and less restrictions in place, the IBS was able to resume physical internship. However, as December approached, uncertainty with regard to continued physical internship reemerged.

Communication

The IBS has through the year conducted an online “facelift” with a new web page and address. This also included change of service provider. With its new web address www.barents-council.org, an effort has been made to align the address more closely with the official name of the co-operation. The new web page has significantly eased the procedures of publishing, and hopefully the page will provide a more user friendly interface. A significant amount of time was used to seek advice with actors from the Barents co-operation, other international organizations and commercial actors. The web page is frequently updated in order to promote events and meetings taking place in the Barents Co-operation.

In parallel with developing a new web page, the IBS developed a so-called “brand book”. This in order to establish guidelines for promoting the Barents co-operation, including a more unified approach in profiling the co-operation. The brand book has been made available for all structures of the co-operation. One of our imminent interns also produced a user-friendly guide on how to publish Barents events on social media.

In 2021 the website was visited by 20 897 users who viewed the pages 94 712 (an increase of 18 000 compared to 2020) times during 37 265 sessions (thus each user opens approx. 3 pages during each visit). 75 % of the users read the pages with a desktop computer, 24% used the website with mobile phone. The year 2021 was second best in terms of page views after 2019, when the number of page views was 96 410. An important yardstick will emerge at the end of 2022, as the new web site was launched on 25 October 2021.

Secretariat meeting assistance

On 16 September, the Secretariat assisted the Chairs (Norway and Vasterbotten) in organizing a meeting with all working groups to sum up the work during their chairmanships. Several of the working



groups were currently undergoing or planning activities looking at Covid-19 impact on the co-operation. Both the Joint Working Group on Youth and the Barents Regional Youth Council could report that the lack of physical contact, had made it difficult, with a decrease in number of activities. Several others also voiced the challenge of border crossing as a result of the pandemic. Several of the working groups welcomed the strengthening of the Secretariat as this would allow for improved co-ordination and support for the working groups.

The Secretariat facilitated a range of digital meetings among working groups and other structures, including a record number of CSO meetings. The main event in 2021 was the XVIII BEAC Ministerial Meeting followed by the Youth Summit, held physically in Tromsø on 26 October. These meetings were preceded by a BRC meeting and a meeting of the Working Group of Indigenous Peoples on 25 October also held physically/hybrid in Tromsø. During these meetings, the Chairmanships were handed over to Finland and Nenets autonomous okrug. October represented a peak month for the Secretariat with the Ministerial meeting, Barent Youth Summit, Barents forest forum, BEAC transport minister meeting and other meetings taking place.

With the assistance of the Secretariat, the Barents Scholarship for Cultural Cooperation was awarded for the third time to the recipients from all four Barents member countries during the BEAC Ministerial. This meeting further adopted the Barents Financial Mechanism (BFM) and an updated Action Plan of Climate Change. Both of which was developed with the assistance of the Secretariat, and which now will be followed up. Thanks to a voluntary contribution by Finland, a dedicated adviser for the financial mechanism has been hired. Preparations for launching the BFM will be continued and first call for proposals is expected to be open by the end of April 2022. The IBS will promote the BFM for potential applicants and mobilize Barents working groups to apply for financing

The Secretariat provided assistance to the Working Group of Environment meetings as well as facilitated the implementation of numerous meetings within the Subgroups on Hot Spots Exclusion and Nature and Water. With the assistance of the Secretariat, ten Barents Working Groups contributed to the updated Action Plan of Climate Change. Implementation of WGE and Subgroups' online meetings, webinars and other events, including an extensive webinar on a Climate Smart Barents Region, were facilitated by the IBS by providing digital platforms, interpretation, registration etc. [Finland's Barents Biodiversity Initiative](#) was successfully launched by the WGE with assistance of the IBS to support the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, CBD. IBS has also contributed to implementation of the External Evaluation of Barents Environmental Hot Spots, to be completed in 2022, and hosted a webinar on Barents Environmental Cooperation and Hot Spots for the Nefco Board.

A list of working group meetings that was facilitated by the Secretariat can be found in attachment 1.



Observations/looking ahead

Follow up on the Action Plan of Climate Change

For 2022 preparations for the ministerial meeting in 2023 will be undertaken and the evaluation of the work concerning hot spots will be finalized. Other important issues will be the follow up of the Action Plan of Climate Change as well as communication with member regions.

Barents Programme

On the regional level, a process on renewing the current Barents Programme would need to be initiated.

Education and research

The Working Group on Education and Research had one digital meeting in September. The meeting was organized with the assistance of the Secretariat after an agreement in the CSO to revitalize the working group that had been inactive for some time. Participants agreed that there is a need for dialogue between central governments and local actors in the sphere of education and research through the working group. It was also agreed to include different stakeholders in this co-operation and to build on existing structures and coordinate rather than duplicate activities that are taking place in the Barents region and in a broader Arctic context.

Physical meetings

Experience has demonstrated that digital meetings are often more efficient and attract participation as the threshold for participation is lower with travel taken out of the equation. However, it is challenging to establish platforms for informal discussions. Further, for new members of the co-operation, physical introductions are probably better. The Secretariat takes note however that the number of regions participating in regional council meetings, seems not to have improved.

Increased need for regular contact

The Secretariat note that there are initiatives taken for meetings outside of the formal structures of the Barents co-operation, which is very positive. An indicator perhaps of the need to have regular meetings.

Recent geo-political developments elsewhere, also suggest the importance of maintaining a close, frequent, and regular dialogue. This to maintain the Barents co-operation as an island of friendliness in an otherwise cooler atmosphere. The intention of the incoming Finnish presidency of having all working groups identify concrete co-operation projects, would constitute an important contributor. The IBS will assist the Presidency of achieving this goal. The Secretariat looks forward to promoting the BFM for potential applicants and mobilize Barents working groups to apply for financing

Barents Financial Mechanism

The additional worsening in relations outside of the Barents region have the potential to negatively impact the Barents Financial Mechanism. Covid-19 would also continue to pose a risk. Flexibility towards applicants would therefore probably be needed.



The Secretariat intends to continue to actively work for the proliferation of the Barents Financial Mechanism in order to maximize the amount of applicants.

Improved support

The IBS will continue developing its capacities in organizing digital meetings, in order to further lower the threshold for dialogue platforms. Thanks to its strengthened capacity made possible by voluntary contributions from Finland and Norway, the Secretariat will be able to provide stronger support to the working groups and other Barents institutions.

Communicating Barents

Communicating the unique Barents co-operation would also be important. It would provide a positive message in a situation marred by an increased sharpened rhetoric stemming from outside the Barents region. The strengthened visibility would also assist in visualizing the co-operation as the attention has turned towards the Arctic and the competition for visibility has become harder. The Secretariat looks very much forward to strengthen its communication capabilities thanks to voluntary contributions from Finland and Norway.

A region divided in two

The de-facto delimitation of the Barents region in two, as a result of non-recognition of vaccination certificates continues and would be an issue for the Barents structures to be aware of.

Synergy of the four Regional Sister Councils

Since 2009 it has been a custom to organize once a year a working level meeting aiming at improving cross-cutting coordination and reducing overlaps between the Four Councils in the North (Arctic Council, BEAC, Council of the Baltic Sea States and Nordic Council of Ministers). This year's annual meeting was hosted by the Nordic Council of Ministers and held in Copenhagen on 10 December. The Council of Baltic Sea States has in 2021 taken the initiative to initiate a process of identifying a sector where more close collaboration may take place. The Finnish BEAC presidency have offered to host the next meeting in 2022.



Attachment 1: Meetings and events facilitated by IBS in 2021:

Meetings of the CSO

Online, 11 February
Online, 11 March
Online, 15 April
Online, 3 June
Online, 2 September
Online, 5 October
CSO meeting in Rovaniemi, 15 November (hybrid)
Online, 14 December

Meetings of the Regional Committee

Online, 13 April
Online, 23 June
Online, 7 October
RC meeting in Tromsø, 25 October (hybrid)

Ministerial Meetings

Ministerial Meeting on Transport, 14 October
XVIII BEAC Ministerial in Tromsø, 26 October

Meetings of the Barents Regional Council

BRC Meeting, 22 April (online)
BRC Meeting in Tromsø, 25 October (hybrid)

BRYC board meetings (after IBS took over the responsibility for BRYC)

6 September
20 September
4 October
11 October
18 October
1 November
8 November
22 November
4. December BRYC annual event

JWGER

Online, 7 September



WGIP

Online, 18 February

October 24 WGIP meeting in Tromsø, first physical/hybrid meeting since the start of the pandemic

JCRC

Barents Rescue Initial Planning Conference, 20-21 April (online). General presentation of IBS and services offered related to webpage articles and sharing on social media.

Online, 14 December - IBS to hold general presentation of news and recent activities in the Barents cooperation

WGEC

Online, 9 February

WGBFS

Online, 21 May

Online, 7 September

Online, 16 December

WGE

Action Plan on Climate Change Kick-Off Meeting, 19 January (online)

WGE#58 meeting, 2-3 February 2021, online

A Climate Smart Barents Region Webinar, 27 April 2021

WGE#59 meeting, 27 May 2021, online

Webinar on Barents Environmental Cooperation for the Nefco Board, 9 June 2021

WGE#60 meeting, 16 September 2021, online

WGE SHE Series of webinars on Contaminated Sites, through 2021

WGE SHE Combined webinars on Waste Management in Komi and Karelia, Ko6 and K8, through 2021

WGE SHE Combined webinars on Environmental Hot Spot M5 Kovdorsky GOK, Mining and Concentration Combined Enterprise, June/September 2021

WGE SNW Webinar on Finland's Barents Biodiversity Initiative, 8 November 2021

WGE SNW-WGBFS Webinar on Streamlining Biodiversity into Forestry, 9 December 2021

BEATA

BEATA Webinar on Zero and Low Emission Aviation, 4 February (online)

Steering Committee of BEATA, 9 March (online)

BEATA Webinar on Railway and Logistics, 29 April (online)

Joint BEATA and RWGTL Meeting, 30 October (online)



BEATA Webinar on Sustainable Arctic Shipping, 14 October (online)

JWGHS

Online, 5-6 May

Online, 12 November

JWGT

Online, 26 January

Online, 1 September

Online, 25 November

JWGY

Online, 25 March

Online, 28 October

Attachment two: Chairmanship and other events with the participation of the Secretariat

- BEAR vs. Coronavirus webinar, hosted by Mumansk region, 31 March (online)
- Climate Smart Barents Region Conference, 27 April (online)
- 10th Barents Parliamentary Conference, 22 June (online)
- International forum “Russian Chairmanship in the Arctic Council – Environmental agenda for Russia and the world”, 25 June (online)
- Pomor festival” in Vardo, 28 July
- Barents Youth Conference, 1 September (online)
- Summing-up Webinar for Working Groups, 16 September (online)
- Stoltenberg Seminar in Kirkenes, 22-23 September
- Equal Barents Project’s Webinar, 23 September (online)
- Barents Health Co-operation after Covid-19, 28 September (online)
- Seminar on the Study on Children’s Health, 12 October (online)
- Cooperation for a Knowledge-based Cooperation, 18 October (online)
- Barents Forest Forum, 20-21 October (online)
- Barents Youth Summit in Tromsø, 26 October
- Webinar on UN Biodiversity Initiative, 8 November (online)
- Arctic Spirit Conference in Rovaniemi, 16-17 November
- International Session Cooperation in the Arctic, 24 November (online)
- Future of Europe/Barents Youth Event in Oulu, 30 November (hybrid)
- Four Councils in the North Meeting in Copenhagen, 10 December (hybrid)



Attachment 3: Events organized by the Secretariat

- Study visit for IBS to Karasjok and Kautokeino, 16-17 June
- BRYC Annual Event, 4 December (hybrid with the assistance of the Norwegian Barents Secretariat)
- Barents lunch in Kirkenes, hosted by the IBS, 7 December