



*Regional Council of*  
**NORTH KARELIA**

## **Regional Committee Meeting**

**May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2024**

**13:00-15:00 EEST**

**Minutes**

**Teams online meeting**



## **AGENDA**

### **Item RC 25/2024                      Opening of the meeting**

The meeting was opened and welcomed by the RC Chair Mr. Timo Leinonen.

The RC Chair presented, congratulated and welcomed Mr. Klajdi Dedej, the new Chair of the Barents Regional Youth Council (BRYC).

### **Item RC 26/2024                      Approval of the agenda**

The agenda was approved.

### **Item RC 27/2024                      Future of the Barents cooperation**

The RC Chair reported that the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Finland, Ms. Elina Valtonen has outlined that there is no longer a need for the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs to coordinate the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC). It has been stated that the regions should take a bigger role in leading the cooperation in the future. It was informed that Ms Marja Joenusva, the Finnish representative to the Committee of Senior Officials to the BEAC, is currently in the process of revealing other ministries' thoughts on the future of the BEAC. The RC Chair mentioned that the BEAC and the BRC have separate agreements made in 1993, and are independent forums for cooperation, but at the same time connected, which means that changes in the BEAC will affect the BRC.

It was informed that regional mayors of the Finnish Barents regions have highlighted the importance of both national and regional levels participating in the Barents cooperation. It was mentioned that the regions mayors are critical to take a bigger role in the cooperation, without strong national support. Furthermore, the funding of the Barents cooperation in the future was questioned because the regions in Finland have limited resources to finance the collaboration without national support.

The RC Chair informed about the upcoming meeting in Finland. The Barents cooperation background group chaired by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs will meet on May 8. to discuss the continuation of the cooperation. Representatives of Finnish ministries involved in Barents cooperation, region mayors and the Finnish members of RC have been invited to the meeting. CSO chairs, the Chair of the Barents Regional Council Markus Hirvonen, the Chair of RC and the Chair of WGIP will meet in Helsinki on 29 May in a full-day meeting devoted to a new future for Barents cooperation.

The RC Chair mentioned that the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs has a similar view on the continuation of the cooperation as the Finnish Ministry. Resources are limited. Increasingly more funding is targeted to support Ukraine in the coming years. It was also mentioned that the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs sees it as important to support what the regions want.

The RC Chair shared his understanding regarding Norway's will and readiness to continue the Barents cooperation and to update the focus areas of the cooperation and mandates of the Working Groups, mainly maintaining the current cooperation structures. It was also mentioned that Norway does not see that Barents cooperation overlaps with other Northern cooperation forums. Norway intended to work actively in updating the focus areas and structures of the Barents cooperation – by October this year.

The RC Chair opened for questions by the regions.

Mr. Håkan Wiklund agrees that the Swedish position seems similar to the Finnish. It was informed that the Swedish MFA has written a paper describing the situation and asked for comments. The Swedish MFA



suggest that the regional level should be supported by the County Administrative Boards and Regional Councils of the Swedish regions, and Mr Håkan Wiklund believes this is a good solution.

Mr Mikael Bergström stated that there have been several meetings between the Regional Administration and the MFA of Sweden. It has been discussed whether the Ministry of Infrastructure could take over the coordination of the BEAC, but the ministry refused and responded that the Swedish MFA should continue the work. The region states that it is important to have national involvement in the collaboration. The regional levels mean that the best ministry for continuing the collaboration is the MFA of Sweden, as this ministry knows the history, and has the knowledge and experience regarding the BEAC. It was further mentioned that all Working Groups are highly committed to continue the collaboration at the regional and national levels.

Ms. Eilen Bruun Zakariassen stated that the Finnish and Swedish sides were very unclear only a few months ago. From the Norwegian side, there has never been a discussion involving Statsforvalteren, which is a Norwegian organization similar to the Swedish Länsstyrelsen.

Ms. Hanna Honkamäkilä, mentioned that the Council of Oulu region has expressed that they would like to continue the collaboration. It was mentioned that there will be changes, but they see the value of the collaboration. Furthermore, it was stated that the Oulu region regrets that the MFA of Finland will withdraw, as there is an increasing need for cross-border collaboration in the region. As Finland and Sweden has joined NATO, it would be natural to only collaborate even closer. There is a wish to keep the structure of the Barents cooperation, as the focus on the northern areas has increased.

Ms. Henna Honkamäkilä informed about a planned meeting in Oulu on the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> of September, the topic is circular economy, and all are encouraged to save the date and are welcome. The Committee of Regions from the EU Commission will also be present, and there will be a joint dinner.

RC Chair mentioned that what will happen in October (after the end of the trio presidency) is still unclear, maybe after the end of May, there will be more information regarding the future.

The Chair of BRYC is concerned that the Swedish MFA will not continue to coordinate the BEAC. It is mentioned that the Ministry of Rural Affairs could take over.

Ms Eilen Brunn Zakariassen questioned if there is anything the regional level could do to secure the best outcome of the Barents collaboration for the future.

Ms. Hanna Honkamäkilä proposes to submit a joint letter from the regions on their thoughts on the future of the collaboration. A paper should state the reasons to continue the collaboration on both the regional and national levels, and that this is a strong wish from all regions.

Ms. Bente S. K. Helland supports the idea of submitting a joint letter.

Mr. Mikael Bergström also supports the proposal and mentions that it will show that the regions are united, and that the collaboration is important.

RC Chair summarized that all agree on the value of such a letter and proposed to prepare the document based on inputs from all regions.

It was agreed that the joint letter should be submitted to the CSO to the BEAC before the planned meeting on the 29<sup>th</sup> of May. The deadline for submitting proposals to the letter is Friday the 14<sup>th</sup> of May. Bullet points should be delivered to the RC Chair.



### **Item RC 28/2024                      Barents Business Seminar, Joensuu, 28 May**

RC Chair informed that invitations have been sent. The draft updated program, registration, and further information [here](#). RC Chair kindly asks to share information about the event in their networks to recruit participants from the regions.

Mr. Eirik Larsen said that he, unfortunately, is not able to attend and has encouraged the Chair of the WGIP to attend. It was further proposed to include an indigenous representative in the program to secure that their interests are represented.

Ms. Hanna Honkamäkilä proposed that Ms. Pirita Näkkäläjärvi who is currently Chairing the Finnish Sami Parliament could represent the indigenous interest.

### **Item RC 29/2024                      News from IBS**

Jenny M. Spring, Head of IBS, announced that a new intern has been recruited and expressed concern about the human resource situation at the secretariat. From a total of six permanent staff members and secondments in 2023, the number is reduced to three employees in 2024, without reductions in workload. Currently, the IBS consists of two full-time positions which are the Head of Secretariat and one Office and Account Manager.

Furthermore, the secretariat has one Youth and Indigenous Adviser. The position has been seconded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and has funding secured limited to the end of July 2024. After applying for prolonged funding for another three years from the Arctic 2030 grant mechanism, the IBS was informed that financial support could only be given for 1,5 years, and that the MFA of Norway (Arctic 2030) could only provide 50% to cover the costs. The remaining 50% must be provided by other sources. MFA of Sweden and Finland has been asked to contribute 25% each, to cover the remaining 50%, but none of them were able to contribute. This puts the IBS and its staff under additional pressure, since the needed efforts to search for other external financial resources reduce the secretariat prospect for long-term planning and pose a challenge to provide quality support to the working groups and other cooperation bodies.

Furthermore, the Head informed about the collaboration with the RC Chair regarding the Business Seminar in Joensuu. The Head has secured funding for the Norwegian speakers and panellists to the program.

### **Item RC 30/2024                      Current issues from WGIP**

Mr. Eirik Larsen from WGIP informed that there will be new elections at the Finnish Sami Parliament on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July. The Chair of WGIP will participate at the EU Arctic Indigenous Peoples Forum in Brussels on the 14-15<sup>th</sup> of May.

### **Item RC 31/2024                      Current issues from BRYC**

Mr. Klajdi Dedej, Chair of BRYC, informed about the new [board](#) of BRYC, which was elected at their Annual Meeting in Tromsø on the 19<sup>th</sup> of May, and that he is in the process of collecting information and updates from BRYC's representatives in the different working groups before the next board meeting.

Several upcoming and planned events will be attended by BRYC, like the event [UNG2024](#) in Bodø on the 6-10<sup>th</sup> of August, Generation Barents in Bodø on the 19-22<sup>nd</sup> of September and the ICE Innovation camp in Kirkenes in October. The board is planning the celebration of BRYC's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, possibly in connection with the Generation Barents event, and is also looking into participating in a future sports project in the Kainuu Region and a Barents NextGen Summit.



The Chair expressed his concern about the uncertainty of the future funding of the Youth and Indigenous Adviser at IBS, especially as a representative of a newly elected board consisting of young people with less experience than the previous one. BRYC will, in cooperation with WGIP, prepare some bullet points to the previously mentioned letter about their concern for the future of the adviser.

**Item RC 32/2024                      News from the Norwegian Barents Secretariat**

Acting Director of the Norwegian Barents Secretariat, Ms. Marit E. Jacobsen, informed about the new grant program, to which many applications have already been received for projects related to culture, sports, music, and business. A concern is that the Secretariat can only provide funding for Norwegian participants in cross-border projects.

Following a meeting between the Secretariat and the Norwegian Ministry of Children and Families, the Ministry has been invited to the Generation Barents event in Bodø. Since the grants from the Secretariat cover a different area than previously, it is now also possible to apply for funding for participants from Lule Sámi (South Sámi) areas.

**Item RC 33/2024                      Recent and upcoming events and issues**

Eilen Zakariassen from Nordland presented the outlines for the upcoming events in Bodø in 2024, the [Arctic Congress](#) event on 29 May–3 June and Generation Barents on 19–22 September. The Nordland County Council is also involved in organizing UNG2024 in August, albeit in a minor role.

**Item RC 34/2024                      Any other business**

No items.

**Item RC 35/2024                      Next meeting**

The next meeting is scheduled for the 17<sup>th</sup> of June at 13.00 Finnish time.

**Item RC 36/2024                      End of the meeting**

RC Chair thanked for the participation and closed the meeting at 15:00 EEST.