



# ***INTERNATIONAL BARENTS SECRETARIAT***

The International Barents Secretariat

**Annual report 2024**

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## Introduction

The International Barents Secretariat has continued to support the collaborative structures of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, including the Trio Presidency of Norway, Finland, and Sweden, the Barents Regional Council, the Regional Committee, the eleven Barents Working Groups, and the Barents Regional Youth Council. Throughout the year, the Secretariat has played a key role in facilitating numerous events and meetings, ensuring the smooth operation of these cooperation frameworks.

However, 2024 has been marked by growing uncertainty regarding Finland's membership in the Barents Euro-Arctic Council. In November, the Secretariat was informed that Finland has decided to withdraw from the Council as of December 31, 2025. Additionally, Finland has initiated legal proceedings to exit the Agreement on the Establishment of the International Barents Secretariat for Cooperation in the Barents Euro-Arctic Region. These developments have had significant implications for the Barents Regional Council, leading to the resignations of the Regional Council of Lapland, North Karelia, and Kainuu. As a result, the North Ostrobothnia Region remains the only Finnish member of the Barents Regional Council.

These changes have directly affected both the Barents Regional Youth Council and the Working Groups. In 2025, three out of four Finnish regions will no longer provide annual funding to the Youth Council, impacting its structure, operations, and activity levels. Additionally, youth members from Lapland, North Karelia, and Kainuu will no longer be able to participate due to the cessation of financial contributions from their respective regions. While the Working Groups have continued to function throughout the year, concerns have been raised about the long-term impact of these resignations on their composition and sustainability. Moving forward, the absence of representatives from Lapland, North Karelia, and Kainuu will reshape the dynamics of the Working Groups.

The evolving geopolitical landscape in Europe in recent years has had profound effects on the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, the Barents Regional Council, and the Barents Regional Youth Council. The decisions made in 2024 will shape the future of

international relations and cross-border cooperation in the Euro-Arctic Region, bringing both challenges and opportunities in the years ahead.

## The International Barents Secretariat

### Human Resources

From 2023 to 2024, the Secretariat has experienced a 50% reduction in employees, from six to three, without adjustments to the terms, responsibilities, or workload. The Secretariat now consists of two full-time positions: Head of Secretariat and Office and Accounting Manager. In addition, the Secretariat has one Youth and Indigenous Adviser. This position has been financed by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and had funding secured only until the end of July 2024.

After applying for new funding for three years from the Arctic 2030 grant mechanism, the Secretariat was informed that financial support could only be given for 1.5 years and that the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs could provide 50% to cover the costs of the position. The remaining 50% had to be provided by other sources. This led to additional pressure, since the required efforts to search and apply for external funding are resource-demanding for an organization with limited resources. Finland and Sweden were asked if they could contribute 25% each to finance the position, but there was no positive response.

In June, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs allocated extended funding for the position until February 1, 2025. However, to ensure the continuity of support for the Barents Regional Youth Council and the Working Group on Indigenous People, the Secretariat applied in November for extended funding until the end of 2025, which was accepted by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This has enabled the Secretariat to provide stable and continued support for the valuable youth cooperation and the Working Group on Indigenous People.

The Secretariat has continued its internship program, as it is of high value for the Secretariat to give a young professional student an opportunity to work with international cooperation in the Euro-Arctic Region and contribute to the organization. In 2024, the Secretariat provided three internships.

## Administrative obligations

Despite the limited resources and challenges caused by the uncertain future of the Youth and Indigenous Adviser position, the Secretariat has made its best effort to support all levels of cooperation. The Secretariat has amended and proposed a revised version of the Rules and Procedures document for the Barents Financial Mechanism. The document was handed over to the Norwegian Chair during the Norwegian Chairship. The [www.barents.council.org](http://www.barents.council.org) homepage has been edited and updated; however, it is still in need of improvements, and due to reduced capacity, it has not been prioritized.

The Secretariat has been present at all CSO meetings, assisted in organizing the meetings and their side events, and provided minutes afterward. The Secretariat has also attended all meetings of the Barents Regional Committee, the Barents Regional Council, and the Barents Regional Youth Council during 2024. Furthermore, the Secretariat has participated in as many Working Group meetings as possible, though unfortunately not all.

In September, the Secretariat hosted a seminar in Kirkenes to welcome the new Barents Ambassador from Sweden, Mr. Jan Lundin. At the seminar, key stakeholders shared insights on cross-border cooperation and the impacts it has on civil societies in the northernmost regions of Norway, Finland, and Sweden.

In October, the Secretariat launched the first edition of its newsletter. The aim of the newsletter was to provide updated information about activities within the Barents Euro-Arctic Council to its stakeholders. The newsletter included articles from seminars, conferences, panel debates, and meetings organized by the Working Groups and the Barents Regional Youth Council. These articles are available on the Secretariat's website.

## Administrative support to BRYC

The Youth and Indigenous Adviser at the International Barents Secretariat has continued to support the Barents Regional Youth Council during 2024 and has provided the following services:

### Legal and Administrative Support:

- BRYC is not a registered legal entity. Instead, the Secretariat serves as its legal entity, enabling BRYC to apply for project funding using the Secretariat's organizational number.
- The Adviser provides administrative support to BRYC, securing continuity and knowledge transfer among BRYC Board and Council members. Note that these members serve on a volunteer basis, balancing their responsibilities alongside education and work. Many are new to international cooperation and require guidance and support to ensure smooth transitions and sustained operations.

### Event and Meeting Coordination:

- Planning and organizing meetings, including attending all meetings and events as coordinator.
- Managing and coordinating travel arrangements for youth representatives, including booking flights and accommodations. Notably, youth representatives often lack the financial means to cover travel costs upfront and must await reimbursement.
- Preparing guidelines, plans, project proposals, and reports, and ensuring proper archiving.
- Managing and maintaining BRYC's homepage and licenses.

### Secretarial Services, Advisory, and General Support:

- Preparing meeting invitations, documents, and plans, and drafting minutes.
- Offering daily guidance and support to youth representatives.
- Assisting in the recruitment of new members when needed.

### Financial Management:

- Providing annual budgets.
- Managing BRYC's daily financial operations.
- Conducting monthly accounting and preparing the annual financial report.

- Coordinating external auditing by preparing necessary financial documentation.

#### Importance of the Youth and Indigenous Adviser Position:

In 2022, the former Chair of BRYC calculated the number of volunteer hours contributed, which corresponded to a 75% full-time position. The current Chair, who began in 2023, has reduced personal studies to 25% part-time to fulfill the responsibilities as Chair. This demonstrates the extraordinary commitment and engagement of the youth. However, the workload is too substantial for volunteers to manage independently, particularly given the lack of expertise and experience in financial management and administration. Therefore, continuing the Youth and Indigenous Adviser position is essential for the sustainability of BRYC and its initiatives for the future.

### Administrative support to WGIP

The secretariat has during 2024 provided similar services to the Working Group of Indigenous Peoples, as to the Barents Regional Youth Council.

### Office premises

For several years, the Secretariat has rented office space to the Center for High North Logistics. The rental agreement expired at the end of March, and the Secretariat has had vacant offices due to the expired agreement and the reduction of staff members. From August, the Secretariat entered into new rental agreements with the Norwegian Ski Federation and the Norwegian Office for Children, Youth, and Family Affairs (Bufetat). In December, a rental agreement with the Sami Parliament of Norway was signed for the rental of one office.

### Financial situation

The financial situation for the International Barents Secretariat has been stable during 2024. The preliminary accounts for 2024 show a net surplus of NOK 241 729. In order to balance the expected costs for 2024, the budget initially included a transfer from the accumulated working capital funds of NOK 513 000. Due to lower total costs than budgeted, in particular personnel costs, the transfer was not necessary. The Secretariat proposes to add the surplus to the working capital funds, which after the transfer will add up to NOK 1 788 000, equal to 48% of the 2025 budget.

The accounts for the three seconded positions as *Climate Hot Spot and Environmental Adviser*, *Youth Education and Culture Adviser*, and *Financial Instrument Adviser* have all been ended during 2024, and total remaining funds have been returned to the respective grantors. The position as Indigenous and Youth Advisor, has been funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2024, and the Secretary has been informed that the position will continue to receive funding until the end of 2025.

The final accounts for 2024 will be presented in a separate Financial Report.

## Secretarial support

### Support to the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and the Trio Chair of the Committee of Senior Officials

Based on the Joensuu, Finland, statement from 2023, an interim Trio Presidency of Finland, Sweden, and Norway was implemented for 2024. The Chairship of the Council rotated between the three states, with two-month chairing periods. Furthermore, it was decided to conduct a trio reflection period to consider the future of the Council's work. The Secretariat has supported and facilitated the work of this process.

January and February were chaired by Sweden. During the Swedish Chairship, a new Head of Secretariat, Ms. Jenny Spring, was appointed. On March 1st, a Committee of Senior Officials meeting was arranged by the Swedish Chairship in Umeå, Sweden. In this meeting, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council decision from the Joensuu statement—to uphold the Presidency in a trio format for a one-year period unless otherwise decided and, during the reflection period, reach an agreement on the future of the cooperation—was recalled by Sweden. It was stated that there would be no return to cooperation with the Russian Federation as long as Russia continues to flagrantly violate the rule-based international order. The Head of Secretariat gave a report at this meeting, focusing on the status and activities in the Working Groups.

In March and April, the Chairship of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council was led by Norway. During the Chairship, an informal meeting with key stakeholders from the Barents cooperation was arranged at Kjerringøy in Nordland. The purpose of the retreat was to have an informal discussion on the future of the Barents cooperation and



gather insights for the reflection period. On April 18th and 19th, Norway hosted the 2nd Committee of Senior Officials meeting in Tromsø, Norway, where the Secretariat assisted in organizing it. At this meeting, Norway stated the urgency of defining the future of the Barents cooperation after the end of the Trio Presidency on October 24, 2024. It was agreed to organize digital meetings between the eleven Working Groups, the Barents Regional Youth Council, and the Trio Presidency, to gather information about the views on the future of the collaboration. The Secretariat has prepared these meetings on behalf of the Trio Presidency. In connection with the meeting, a Barents seminar was arranged in Tromsø. At the seminar, topics such as cross-border cooperation, green transition, and resilient societies were discussed. The Secretariat assisted the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in organizing the seminar, together with Troms County.

In May and June, Finland took over the Chairship. During the Finnish Chairship, meetings with all Working Groups and the Barents Regional Youth Council were held. These meetings were informal, and the purpose was to gather information on the status and views on the future for each group as inputs for the reflection period.

In July and August, the Chairship was led by Sweden. There were no activities during these months due to vacations.

In September and October, Norway chaired the final two months of the interim Trio reflection period. An online Committee of Senior Officials meeting was arranged on October 16th, where the new member from Sweden, Mr. Jan Lundin, was welcomed. Mr. Lundin replaced Ms. Eva Ekmehag. At this meeting, the budget for the International Barents Secretariat for 2025 was presented and approved, including the annual contribution from Finland, Sweden, and Norway to the Working Group on Indigenous People. It was further decided to prolong the Norwegian Chairship until the end of October 2024. It was not decided how to proceed with the Chairship after the end of October. The Chairship remained unappointed throughout the rest of the year.

There were no further official meetings in 2024; however, there was dialogue regarding the continuation of the Interim Head position at the International Barents Secretariat, where it was decided to prolong the position until the end of 2025.

## Support to the Barents Regional Council

North Karelia has continued to chair the Barents Regional Council in 2024. During the year, there was one online meeting of the Barents Regional Council in April.

In May, the Regional Council submitted a letter to the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Finland, Sweden, and Norway, requesting clarification on the continuation of the Barents cooperation. In the letter, the regions highlighted the importance of the cooperation and noted that the framework for the cooperation would be difficult to replicate or replace. The coordination provided by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and the International Barents Secretariat was mentioned as pivotal for the collective efforts. Furthermore, the Finnish regions stated that without national coordination, the Finnish regions would not be capable of continuing the cooperation. The letter was signed by the Regional Mayors of the nine member regions.

In June, the Secretariat was informed that no Regional Council meetings would be held until the Trio Chairship had made preliminary decisions regarding the future of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, as decisions made at the state level impact regional priorities.

On November 22nd, Finland informed that a decision had been made to withdraw its membership from the Barents Euro-Arctic Council as of December 31, 2025. Accordingly, Finland announced that it would take the necessary legal actions to withdraw from the Agreement on the Establishment of an International Barents Secretariat for Cooperation in the Barents Euro-Arctic Region. Following the decision of the Finnish government, North Karelia, Lapland, and Kainuu withdrew from the Barents Regional Council, leaving Oulu as the sole remaining member region from Finland.

On December 17th, North Karelia informed that the region would resign from the Barents Regional Council effective December 31, 2025. During 2025, representatives

of the North Karelia Regional Council would only participate in Barents events and meetings in exceptional cases. As of 2025, North Karelia remains a member and wished to continue receiving information regarding the Barents cooperation and the development of collaboration in the northern Nordic regions. North Karelia also informed that it would end its Chairship of the Barents Regional Council by the end of 2024.

On December 19th, Lapland informed the Secretariat that the region would withdraw from and resign from all activities effective January 1, 2025. However, it was stated that Lapland would remain open and willing to collaborate with the regions in Finland, Norway, and Sweden to find the best possible ways for future cooperation.

On December 20th, the Board of the Regional Council of Kainuu decided that the region would resign from all activities effective January 1, 2025, and end its membership in the Barents Regional Council. However, Kainuu is willing to continue cooperation in the North at the regional, national, and EU levels through other forums and joint projects.

According to the rotation scheme for the Chairship of the Barents Regional Council, Nordland County has been invited to lead the Chairship from 2025.

## Support to the Barents Regional Committee

The Barents Regional Committee held its first online meeting in January. During the meeting, it was informed that the Regional Committee would continue the preparations for the North Karelian Chairship Program for 2023 to 2025 (note that North Karelia later informed that the region would resign from its obligations as Chair effective December 31st, 2024). Furthermore, information about the upcoming business seminar scheduled for May was mentioned in the meeting.

The Barents Business Seminar was held in Joensuu, Finland, on May 28th. The seminar provided a platform for promoting trade and business between companies in the northern regions of Finland, Sweden, and Norway. Strongly developing industries like mineral processing, mining, and forest bioeconomy were on the agenda, including a debate on hindrances and solutions to increase business activities across borders.

The program offered excursions to leading companies within the technology sector in the Joensuu region and ended with a common networking dinner. The seminar was organized by the Regional Council of North Karelia, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland, business development organizations from North Karelia, and member regions of the Barents Regional Council in cooperation with the Barents Working Group on Economic Cooperation. The Secretariat assisted in preparing, administering, and organizing the event. Furthermore, the Secretariat applied for funding to cover travel costs and accommodation for Norwegian participants and speakers. The application was approved, and the costs related to the Norwegian delegation were covered by the Norwegian Barents Secretariat. After the seminar, the Secretariat submitted the final report and accounting for the project application. The Head of Secretariat moderated both the seminar and the panel debate on the mineral industry and forestry bioeconomy.

Throughout the year, the Regional Committee held eleven online meetings.

During the autumn, the Chair of the Regional Committee conducted a qualitative survey on behalf of the Regional Council of North Karelia. The aim of the survey was to understand how the member regions perceive the importance of the Barents cooperation and whether there are alternative ways to continue the cooperation. In December, the report was released, revealing that all regions, including the Finnish ones that have decided to withdraw, recommended continuing the established structures of the Barents cooperation. The regions also emphasized the need for adjustments to better align the cooperation forum with the current and future situation.

Quotations from the report:

*“The multilateral structure of Barents cooperation is irreplaceable, offering unique opportunities for cross-border development and integration of the international workforce, which are essential for the future growth and sustainability of these northern regions”.*

*From Finnish regions.*

*“If Barents cooperation were to end, the regions of Finnmark, Troms, and Nordland would face significant negative consequences. The loss of this cooperation would disrupt established cross-border collaboration, weaken the status and priorities of regional initiatives, and likely lead to the dissolution of effective working groups. This would hinder the regions' ability to maintain accumulated experiences, ties, and ongoing projects.”*

*From Norwegian regions.*

*“What makes this cooperation unique is the close ties between national and regional levels, with most of the work being carried out at the regional level but with a clear national mandate. A well-functioning secretariat manages the administration, and the cooperation includes working groups in several key sectors and an extensive network of contacts across Norway, Sweden, and Finland.”*

*From Swedish regions.*

## Support to the Working Groups

Despite the uncertainties regarding the future of the Barents Cooperation, most of the working groups have continued their work during 2024.

### Working Group on Transport and Logistics

The Working Group on Transport and Logistics has been co-chaired by the Finnish Ministry of Transport and Communications and Länsstyrelsen in Västerbotten, Sweden. The group's efforts have focused on advancing digital, clean, and efficient transport solutions. As safety and the security of supply become increasingly critical across the region, these aspects are now integral to transport system planning. A key milestone this year was the completion of a study on the use and distribution infrastructure for alternative fuels.

Under the framework of the New North Project, regional participants of the working group have convened multiple times to drive collaboration forward.

Progress of the New North Project:

The Interreg Aurora-funded New North project has been highly active throughout the year. All regional representatives from the Working Group on Transport and Logistics

are engaged in the initiative, alongside transport administrations and ministries in various capacities. The project consists of four key work packages:

- Fluent Transport Chains and ITS
- Security of Supply
- Electric Aviation
- Green Railway Corridors

Running until mid-2026, the project aims to enhance regional connectivity and cooperation by addressing shared transport challenges. It will remain a priority on the agenda for the transport working group in the coming years.

#### Launch of Platform North:

In 2024, the Platform North initiative was launched as a cross-border cooperation platform among the Nordic countries. This initiative responds to the region's ongoing industrial investments, the green transition, and the increasing focus on military mobility in northern Norway, Sweden, and Finland. Platform North seeks to foster collaboration among all infrastructure stakeholders at regional, national, and EU levels. The first Platform North Forum will take place in Luleå in February 2025, hosted by the Swedish Minister for Infrastructure and Housing.

#### Working Group on Forest Sector

The Working Group on Economic Cooperation did not have a formal Chair in 2024. However, Mr. Pasi Poikonen from the Natural Resources Institute Finland (LUKE) served as the group's focal point, ensuring representation. The group has reported low activity for several years; however, Mr. Poikonen represented the working group at the Committee of Senior Officials meeting in Tromsø in April. He also participated in the Business Seminar on the Mining Industry and Forest Sector, hosted by the Regional Council of North Karelia, Finland, in May.

Additionally, the Natural Resources Institute Finland, in collaboration with Swedish, Norwegian, and Icelandic partners, applied for EU funding from the NSPA and Aurora programs for forest sector projects. On December 11, 2024, the institute secured

funding for one forest-related project under the NSPA program, with implementation set to begin in the second half of 2025.

### Working Group on Economic Cooperation

Finland chaired the group during 2024 for an extra year, with a focus on integrating the working group's measures into the implementation of the Barents Regional Council (BRC) Chairship (2023–2025). A key initiative was the launch of a project to foster business and economic cooperation in the Barents Region, supported by IBA funding from Finland's Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

This project played a vital role in advancing the North Karelian Chairship program, where economic cooperation is one of the four strategic priorities. Additionally, it contributed to strengthening economic collaboration and promoting the green transition within the Arctic and Barents regions, particularly in the sectors identified for cooperation in 2024.

The project aimed to enhance sustainable economic cooperation between the Barents regions of Finland, Sweden, and Norway, address key challenges in economic development, particularly labor shortages, and increase the visibility of the region's products and services. Furthermore, it sought to highlight young people's perspectives on employment and explore strategies for securing a skilled workforce for the future.

A key meeting was held in Oulu in September, focusing on "Prospects for Hydrogen Development as Part of the Green Transition in the European North." This discussion underscored the region's commitment to sustainable energy solutions and cross-border economic collaboration.

### Working Group on Health and Social Issues

During the reporting period, the Working Group on Health and Social Issues launched the 7th Framework Programme for Cooperation on Health and Related Social Issues in the Barents Region 2024–2027.

The main priority areas of the program are:

- Programme on Children and Youth at Risk



- Programme on Developing Preparedness through Building Health Competences and Implementation of New Technologies and Modern Methods for Health Care
- Programme on Developing New Approaches for Prevention and Health Promotion in Collaboration Across Borders

In April, the group organized a seminar focused on health preparedness in Bodø. Topics such as resilient health emergency preparedness and sustainable health services in sparsely populated areas were discussed.

In the subgroup Children and Youth at Risk, four digital meetings were held, and new Terms of Reference were adopted in alignment with the WGHS strategy. The overall goal was to promote access to and trust in social and health services. Key priorities included preventing discrimination and social exclusion, enhancing access to and confidence in social and mental health services, increasing and improving youth participation, and strengthening children's rights in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. CYAR functioned as a platform for experience-sharing, networking, and tracking developments in the Barents region. It focused on ongoing projects and activities related to children and youth, using flexible working methods where each meeting was structured around CYAR's priorities. Local and regional actors had the opportunity to share insights from their activities, studies, and projects.

Throughout the year, thematic lectures were held, featuring speakers from local, regional, and national levels. Topics included youth voices, presented by Klajdi Dedej from the Barents Regional Youth Council (BRYC), and regional cooperation on children's rights, discussed by Kristine Lejonklou from the County Administrative Board of Norrbotten. Mari Nupponen from the Regional Council of North Karelia spoke about youth participation in decision-making, while Johan Inge Greff from NASAK provided insights into the rights and living conditions of Sami children and youth.

### Working Group on Environment

During the reporting period, the Working Group on Environment (WGE) held two meetings, one digital and one in-person. The physical meeting took place in March in



Luleå and Kukkolaforsen. It included participant presentations, along with study visits to LKAB's ReeMap facility and the Swedish Polar Research Secretariat at Luleå University of Technology.

In June 2024, the WGE convened digitally to review its progress. The meeting highlighted significant achievements, particularly in advancing green transitions, biodiversity initiatives, and climate adaptation efforts. There was strong support for continuing this work; however, financial constraints, especially on the Finnish side, were noted as a challenge.

The Barents cooperation model continues to be highly valued for fostering regional and national collaboration, creating opportunities that would not be possible through other forums. Key accomplishments of the WGE include:

- Strengthening cross-border environmental cooperation
- Facilitating EU-funded projects
- Developing strategic initiatives such as the Barents Climate Change Action Plan and plastics-related projects

Despite financial uncertainties, regional ownership and collaboration have remained strong. Since Russia's withdrawal from the Barents cooperation, cross-sectoral partnerships among the remaining members have intensified, incorporating topics such as forestry, transport, and indigenous issues. The current WGE format, which integrates both regional and national levels, has proven highly effective—particularly in addressing environmental challenges in the Northern regions.

### Working Group on Culture

The Working Group on Culture met twice in 2024, in May (Jokkmokk) and October (Bodø). Throughout the year, the group finalized its new strategy, adapting to future cooperation in the European Arctic Region. The strategy was presented in November and is expected to be adopted at the first meeting in May 2025. Additionally, the Chairship will transition from Sweden and North Karelia to Norway and Norrbotten in 2025.

During the meetings held, the Working Group members exchanged experiences from the cultural sector, where it was reported that financial challenges continue to impact Finland's cultural sector, with further budget cuts expected. Despite this, key initiatives are progressing, including a project in Lapland to develop a creative industries strategy and the Lapland Brand Renewal Project (2024-2026) to boost intellectual property rights and industry growth. The projects are co-funded by the European Union.

North Ostrobothnia is preparing for Oulu's tenure as the 2026 European Capital of Culture, themed "Culture and Climate Change," with 2,000 events planned. The Working Group has facilitated knowledge exchange with Nordland, which held the title in 2024.

In Sweden, regional cultural collaboration remains strong, though Norrbotten faced financial cuts, impacting minority and Indigenous language initiatives. Despite this, the South Sámi Theater premiered its first Ume Sámi performance, touring with Norrbotten's theater sector. Region Norrbotten also supported Giron Sámi Teáhter's goal of becoming a Sámi national stage, while Jillat, the world's first Sámi dance center, opened in Jokkmokk.

Norway fostered cultural exchange through Artist Residency programs, particularly in Troms, which aim to strengthen international contemporary art. Additionally, Troms County Library conducted a study trip to Luleå in June to explore reading promotion strategies.

### Working Group on Tourism

The Working Group on Tourism convened for a hybrid meeting in Oulu in June, in conjunction with the Baltic Sea Tourism Forum. The primary objective of the meeting was to engage in strategic discussions on the Tourism Action Plan within the Baltic Sea Strategy. However, on the same day, the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced Finland's withdrawal from Barents cooperation, which impacted the discussions. As a result, the group has been awaiting further instructions and has paused formal initiatives, although informal interactions have continued across various platforms. Despite the uncertainty, the relationships and networks established through the

Working Group remain valuable, ensuring that members stay connected and engaged in regional cross-border tourism development.

### Working Group on Indigenous People

The Working Group on Indigenous People (WGIP) during the reporting period consisted of one member from each of the participating Sámi parliaments. WGIP held their fourth and final follow-up event following *The Summit of Barents Euro-Arctic Indigenous Sámi People* in Berlin in September. The event featured cooperation between WGIP, the Nordic embassies in Berlin, and the Berlin Museum of European Culture.

WGIP held four meetings during the reporting period, with one physical meeting in Helsinki at the end of the period. In their last meeting of 2024, the Working Group amended its Terms of Reference for the first time since 2010. The new Terms of Reference specify that a youth representative shall be appointed by WGIP to represent the Working Group in the Barents Regional Youth Council (BRYC). The new Terms of Reference also include the requirement for an annual report on WGIP's activities and specify that WGIP meetings shall be held in either Sámi or English. The previous clause, which stated that WGIP would host a biannual Barents Indigenous Peoples' Congress (BIPC), has been updated to indicate that WGIP *may* host the *Summit of Barents Euro-Arctic Indigenous Sámi People*. Throughout the reporting period, WGIP has had a youth representative who has represented WGIP in BRYC.

During the reporting period, Finland announced that it will withdraw from Barents cooperation after 2025. As a result, the Sámi Parliament in Finland has decided that it cannot continue the cooperation after 2025 due to budget constraints.

### Working Group on Youth

The Working Group on Education and Research has remained inactive for several years, including during the reporting period.

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## Joint Committee on Rescue Cooperation

In 2024, Sweden chaired the Joint Committee on Rescue Cooperation, overseeing efforts to enhance cross-border emergency response. Two meetings were held during the year: a physical meeting in May and an online meeting in November. Discussions primarily focused on the future of the cooperation, with all members recognizing its importance. However, defining a long-term framework has been challenging due to the lack of political decisions. Additionally, planning for the joint rescue exercise scheduled for October 2025 in Oulu, Finland, has been a key priority throughout the year. Previously known as Rescue Barents, the exercise has now been renamed Rescue Borealis.

## Barents Regional Youth Council

The Barents Regional Youth Council (BRYC) elected a new board and created a new Barents Youth Program for the period of 2025 to 2027. Throughout the year, three digital and four physical Board Meetings were held, along with one Annual Meeting and one Council Meeting. BRYC's Annual Event in 2024 was co-hosted with Nordland County Council, the International Barents Secretariat, and the Norwegian Barents Secretariat as the third Generation Barents event.

BRYC's activities in 2024 took place across all three participating countries, with BRYC-related activity in all nine participating regions. During the reporting period, all nine regions had an active BRYC representative, alongside the Working Group on Indigenous Peoples (WGIP).

In addition to its own activities, BRYC representatives participated in meetings at the CSO, BRC, and Barents Regional Committee levels, as well as in BEAC Working Groups. They also attended external meetings and conferences such as the Children and Youth at Risk Coordination Group (CYAR), Interreg NPA Programme Meeting, Interreg Aurora Programme Meeting, Arctic Circle Assembly, Conference for Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region, and the Arctic Frontiers Conference. BRYC also worked closely with like-minded partners, such as Baltic Sea Youth, and participated in their Baltic Sea Youth Dialogue. BRYC engaged in discussions with LUKE (Natural Resources Institute Finland), met with other European youth organizations at the EU-

Arctic Youth Dialogue, and explored potential co-hosted events with the Västerbotten-based organization 'Skogsundommarna' (The Forest Youth).

## Conclusion

Despite recent challenges, the Barents Cooperation has consistently delivered significant benefits to the participating nations and regions over the past three decades. There is a strong and collective commitment to continuing international cooperation in the European Arctic Region. However, key obstacles remain, including an outdated formal framework and financial constraints. It is important to acknowledge that the framework has functioned exceptionally well for 30 years, serving its original purpose, which has since evolved significantly. With targeted actions to revise and adapt the cooperation structure to current realities and future trends, it can remain a vital and effective platform for continued collaboration among like-minded nations and allies.

Thank you for taking the time to read our report.

***Sincerely,***

A handwritten signature in grey ink, appearing to read "Jenny Spring".

Jenny Spring,  
Head of the International Barents Secretariat