



THE BARENTS WORKING GROUPS
ANNUAL REPORT 2020

Name of the Working Group:

Barents Regional Youth Council (BRYC)

The current Chair and the Chairmanship period:

Norway and the Västerbotten County (SWE), 2019-2021

1. Priorities of the Chairmanship

The priorities of the Norwegian BEAC Chairmanship 2019-2021 has a specific emphasis on youth:

“A central element of Barents youth policy should be to continue support for multilateral cooperation between young people in the region in the areas of sports, culture and education. Meetings and cross-border contacts give young people opportunities to understand other people’s lives and backgrounds. Greater mobility is strengthening the sense of community between young people and helping to build a common identity and mutual understanding in the region.”

Västerbotten County also mentions youth as a priority for their Chairmanship of the Barents Regional Council (BRC):

“Young people are the most valuable resource and have a beneficial interest in the future development of the Barents Region. They are crucial for the cooperation, the development and the sustainability of the region. An active Youth Policy in the Barents Region is required in order to secure a sustainable population in the region. Västerbotten will continue to increase youth participation in all Barents processes.”

Based on these priorities, the Barents Regional Youth Council in the accounting year had the following aims:

- Continue to strengthen the youth cooperation in the Barents Region and empower young people to be active participants of the societies in which they live.
- Discuss key youth issues in the Barents Region, and jointly develop ideas for new project initiatives that involve youth.
- Actively promote the voice and interests of Barents youth at various events – including youth events, education events, political events, BRC and JWGY (Joint Working Group on Youth) meetings, as well as other events involving regional and/or national decision-makers.
- Secure funding from the Barents Regional Council for BRYC’s activities in the upcoming years, and draft the new Barents Regional Youth Program 2021-2024.
- Strengthen the cooperation with the JWGY, as well as other BEAC working groups and stakeholders.
- Organize the BRYC Annual Meeting and the BRYC Annual Event, with a particular focus on career development.

2. Meetings (meetings held, main topics and outcomes of the meetings)

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted the work of BRYC in 2020. The sudden lockdown in the middle of March put a full stop to all cross-border movement and physical meetings in the Barents Region.

Before the lockdown, the BRYC Board took part in several Barents Cooperation events. In the middle of January, the board participated in the meetings of the BEAC Committee of Senior Officials (CSO) and the Joint Working Group on Youth (JWGY), both of which took place in Oslo and focused on the new chairmanship period in the Barents Cooperation. During the CSO meeting, the BRYC vice chair presented a report about BRYC’s activities in 2019 and plans for 2020 to the Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs. The presentation also included an overview of the general challenges and opportunities for youth in the Barents Region today, and the respective recommendations for the Norwegian BEAC Chairmanship period. On the following day, the BRYC board members attended the JWGY meeting, where they joined the discussion about the priorities for the new chairmanship period and gave suggestions concerning youth issues and possible activities. One of the outcomes of this meeting was a decision to organize a big multinational youth conference later in the fall. The topic chosen for this conference was “mental health among youth in the Barents Region”, and it was decided that BRYC would help recruit youth participants from the four Barents countries.

The BRYC Board met again at the end of January under the Arctic Frontiers week in Tromsø. The board members took part in the conference program, the BRC meeting and hosted a youth workshop titled “The force of youth in building tomorrow’s Arctic”. The workshop was organized as a part of Arctic Frontiers Young in cooperation with the Norwegian BEAC Chairmanship and was meant to build awareness and create a discussion around this topic. It was divided into two sessions, focusing on the importance of the youth perspective for the Arctic region, how the young can contribute to building strong Arctic societies, as well as challenges and opportunities for the future Arctic generations. Members of the BRYC Board and the BRYC Troms representative prepared and moderated the workshop.

In February, the BRYC vice chair participated in a panel discussion at the Kirkenes Conference. The panel raised issues like education, climate change and youth migration in the Barents Region (the full panel discussion can be found in the recorded livestream video on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDVWf2XYuUQ&t=14985s>). This was the last physical event BRYC attended in before the pandemic.

After that, all of the planned activities were cancelled or put on hold until further notice. Within BRYC, there was a long period of little or no communication due to the uncertainty around postponed activities. For a while, there was hope that borders would eventually open and things would go back to normal. However, all activities from the middle of March until the end of the year were held online, including the BRYC Annual Meeting, the board meetings, as well as meetings with the Barents Regional Committee and other partners.

The BRYC Board had four meetings in 2020 – one in January during the Arctic Frontiers week in Tromsø, two in June and one at the beginning of October. An additional board meeting was planned at the end of October, but was cancelled due to limited capacity within the board. During these meetings, the board exchanged information on how the COVID-19 situation is developing in their respective countries and how this impacts the youth sector. Other issues discussed included the annual meeting and annual event, the “Glitter” project, cooperation with external partners and networks, as well as measures to organize BRYC’s work in a more inclusive and transparent way. One outcome of the latter is that the all BRYC members are now invited to attend the board meetings and give their comments on the issues discussed.

The BRYC Annual Meeting was initially planned to be held in March, in Bodø. When the pandemic broke out, it was rescheduled to August, back-to-back with a digital workshop in modern presentation technique. Unfortunately, most of the BRYC members were eventually not able to attend the annual meeting or the workshop at that time, which meant that the meeting had to be postponed again. According to the BRYC statutes, there must be a minimum of 10 participants/regions present at the annual meeting in order for it to be approved. The digital workshop was already paid for in advance and could therefore not be cancelled, so a small group of BRYC members attended. The BRYC Annual Meeting was then finally held on November 13th, where BRYC elected a new Board, chair and deputy chair. The council members also discussed the current COVID-19 situation and plans for 2021.

In October, representatives of the BRYC Board held a presentation at the Joint National and Regional High-Level Meeting hosted by the BEAC and the BRC Chairs. The purpose of the meeting was to exchange views and best practices on strengthening and further development of the Barents cooperation during and after the pandemic. The online conference featured national and regional representatives from the BEAC member states as well as the European Union. Barents youth and indigenous peoples representatives are also taking part in the meeting.

Throughout 2020, BRYC participated in four BRC meetings, two CSO meetings and two JWGY meetings.

3. Other activities (projects, events, programmes etc.)

Building on the success of last year's project "Glitter: Summer camp on female empowerment", BRYC was prepared to continue this work by organizing a new summer camp in the accounting year. The work behind "Glitter 2020" started out in the spring. The project team, consisting of two board members and one council member, developed the project content, found an event location and established contact with partners and relevant networks. The main event was supposed to be implemented in November, but due to the pandemic the project committee has decided to postpone the project implementation to 2021, or to a time when the participants will be able to meet physically. The project committee has made a conclusion that the digital format will not be suitable for this project, and is currently working on finding a new date.

During the board's work with the project "Glitter", we have gotten in contact with many interesting partners. Some of our board members recently had a meeting with a research group from Iceland, and are also in contact with a network of researchers in the Arctic.

The the BRYC Annual Event 2020 was supposed to be organized in the Arkhangelsk region. Planning began in the first quarter of 2020 in collaboration with the Arkhangelsk regional administration. The team chosen for this year's event was career development and the event was planned to be held in the fall. The outbreak of the pandemic called for a change of plans. A physical event was no longer realistic due to closed borders. The planning committee (which consisted of the BRYC Board, BRYC's youth representative in Arkhangelsk, BRYC's youth coordinator and a representative from the Arkhangelsk regional administration) made several attempts to digitalize the event. However, as mentioned earlier in this report, due to limited capacity and uncertainty concerning some aspects of the event, the BRYC Annual Event could not be implemented this year and was ultimately postponed to 2021.

In August, the BRYC Board organized an online workshop in "modern presentation technique" for the other members of the youth council. The workshop was meant to create more interaction and learning in times of the pandemic. BRYC invited rhetoric coach from the company "Snacka Snyggt", founded by the Swedish rhetoric guru Elaine Eksvärd. The workshop combined theoretical insights and practical exercises, based on improving the participant's presentation skills.

Contact was also carried out with the Nordic Youth Council (UNR), which is a forum for the youth wings of political organisations in the Nordic Region. BRYC has been in dialogue with the UNR since 2018, and plans to cooperate on several youth projects in the future.

In September, a few of the BRYC members took part in the webinar "Baltic Meets Arctic – Young People in the heart of sustainable future", organized by Oulu 2026.

A youth panel was appointed in the spring of 2020 to provide advice and insight to the Norwegian Government in connection with the work on the new whitepaper on the Arctic. BRYC's representative from Troms took part in this youth panel and contributed with valuable input about the importance of the Barents Cooperation, and particularly the people-to-people cooperation.

For a full overview of BRYC's meetings and events in 2020, see the attached activity report.

4. Results of the year (decisions, new initiatives, improvements)

New council members

Throughout 2020, part of BRYC's members were replaced with new youth representatives. Some of these replacements were due to ended terms, others due to the members' own decisions. A total of five youth representatives resigned from BRYC in 2020, while a total of nine new ones were recruited. By the end of the year, only two BRYC membership positions were open (Vasterbotten and Indigenous). Youth representatives for these positions will be recruited as soon as possible. One issue that should be brought to attention is that some of the regions have two regional youth representatives in BRYC, where one acts as the deputy representative for the other, while other regions only have one regional youth representative. It is highly recommended that every region has two BRYC representatives, as it will make it much easier to schedule meetings and joint events.

In 2020, the annual funding agreement with Nordland County was revised and updated. The youth council members are happy that the county continues to support BRYC's work. Nordland also changed its procedure of recruiting new BRYC representatives. Before 2020, BRYC representatives were elected by the Nordland Youth County Council (UFR). This year, the UFR expressed that they no longer wish to have this responsibility for two main reasons: 1) the elected youth representatives were under 18 and therefore unable to travel without parental consent; 2) youth representatives were only elected for one year, which gave them too little timeframe to get properly involved and engaged in BRYC's work. From now on, the Nordland county administration will be responsible for recruiting new youth representatives for BRYC.

In November 2020, at the BRYC Annual Meeting, the youth council successfully elected a new board and chair for the upcoming year (2021).

Increased transparency

It has been pointed out before that BRYC should be more open about the information on current events, and issues discussed in the council's meetings throughout the year. Based on this recommendation, BRYC tried to put a special emphasis on meeting transparency this year. The BRYC board gave all members the opportunity to observe and/or participate in the board meetings in order to ensure transparency and give the other members a chance to be more involved in the board's work discussions. The meetings were also open for participation from representatives at the county administration level as well as the IBS and other stakeholders.

New BarentsYouth website

BRYC launched its new website in late spring. The old website, which was created around ten years ago, was no longer up to date. Two years ago, BRYC decided that the website needed an upgrade to make it look more modern and informative. The council used a website provider called CustomPublish to build the new website. This is the same provider that BRYC used previously. After a long period of content preparation, the BarentsYouth website was finally launched. Link to website: www.barentsyouth.org.

Policy contribution

This spring, BRYC's member from Troms participated in a Norwegian youth panel dedicated to advise the government on its preparation of a new Arctic whitepaper. This resulted in the transfer of valuable input about the importance of the Barents Cooperation, and particularly the people-to-people cooperation among youth to the policy-makers.

Valuable input on youth issues was also given by the BRYC board members to other decision makers in the meetings of CSO, BRC and JWGY.

Cross-border knowledge and experiences exchanged

Here are some of the key Barents youth topics discussed by the BRYC members in 2020:

1. COVID-19: How the pandemic is affecting youth in the Barents Region and how to stay connected when the borders are closed.
2. Education – In the context of the pandemic and social distancing. Exchanged information on how youth is adapting to virtual classes and a limited social life.
3. Mental Health: Initially discussed in the context of JWGY's planned youth conference which was postponed to 2021, but also in the context of the pandemic.
4. Ecology – How can we make the Barents youth more environmentally focused.
5. Female empowerment and gender equality (mainly discussed in the context of the "Glitter" project).
6. Career development – Mainly discussed in the context of the BRYC Annual Event 2020.
7. Merging of Troms and Finnmark: How BRYC will adapt to the new merged region with regard to funding and the number of representatives.

New youth strategy

In the fall of 2020, BRYC prepared the first draft of the Barents Regional Youth Program 2021-2024. The final program will be further discussed in a task force from the BRC and approved hopefully by the end of the first quarter of 2021.

The Barents Regional Youth Program is BRYC's long-term strategy document. The program gives an overview of BRYC's visions and priorities over a period of four years, which serves as a foundation for the funding agreement with the BRC member regions. The current Barents Regional Youth Program expires at the end of 2020, and must be renewed in 2021.

BRYC is responsible for preparing the Barents Regional Youth Program, although input from relevant stakeholders (e.g. BRC, BEAC Chairmanship and JWGY) is usually taken into account.

5. Youth involvement (how has the working group included young people or worked with youth issues during the year)

The working group has involved youths in all parts of its work and activities.

6. Evaluation of the work (What went well, what needs improvement)

It is hard to evaluate the work in 2020 without addressing the COVID-19 situation. The lack of physical meetings made it challenging to maintain a stable flow of communication between the council members throughout the year. Youth activities and projects were cancelled, which means that the cultural exchange and networking that normally happens at BRYC's events could not take place this year. Organizing digital events and webinars turned out to be more challenging than estimated. However, despite these challenges, BRYC managed to successfully hold four board meetings and the annual meeting, keeping the cross-border youth dialogue alive despite the ongoing pandemic. Some improvements can definitely be made with regard to organizing online meetings and digital activities for youth, and BRYC is prepared to look further into this in 2021.

Cooperation with the BRC, CSO, IBS and JWGY has been going well. BRYC has stayed in frequent communication with the BEAC Chairmanship and the BRC throughout 2020, starting with the meetings in January, and ending with the High Level and BRC meetings at the end of the year. This cooperation is expected to be carried out in 2021.

The work of the BRYC board has also been going well throughout 2020. The board members stayed connected through e-mail, social media and video meetings. However, the BRYC Chair did not have the capacity to work with BRYC this year. Therefore, all of the chairperson's responsibilities were taken over by the Deputy Chair and the other board members.

One issue that still needs improvement is that BRYC members outside of the board are not equally involved in the youth council's work. For example, it can be difficult to find suitable meeting dates for everyone, or to keep everyone engaged in the council's discussions, especially in times on the pandemic when all meetings are held digitally. Few of BRYC's members seem to be interested in being in the board, and taking on the respective responsibilities, something that made it difficult to elect a new board during this year's board elections at the BRYC Annual Meeting. This issue has been discussed on many occasions and the main conclusion is that the concept of BRYC is still vague to many of its members. Youth representatives do not fully understand how they can contribute and how BRYC can benefit them, which results in low engagement. Based on this, BRYC still needs to improve its internal communication, making sure that it sends a clear message of what it is and why people should care. In 2021, BRYC will be focusing more on improving its internal communication and inclusion strategy.

Another example this year has shown that BRYC needs to improve its internal communication. At the beginning of 2020, a disagreement within the BRYC board caused the resignation of the BRYC International Secretary, a position that was established a year ago. The international secretary was responsible for representing BRYC at various Barents events and report back to the board in order to alleviate the board members from some of their responsibilities. Certain members of the board were not in favor of this arrangement, believing that the international secretary position prevented other board members from attending important Barents events. Unfortunately, this concern was never addressed to the international secretary or brought up for discussion in the board. Instead, the issue was addressed directly to the senior officials of the BEAC Chairmanship, which led to an unfortunate chain of misinformation about BRYC and the ultimate resignation of the international secretary. BRYC looks back at this example as something to learn from and will take measures to improve internal (and external) communication in order to avoid similar situations in the future.

7. Other

For full overview of meetings and events in 2020, please see the attached activity report.