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A renaissance in the High North

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On 11 January 1993, Thorvald Stoltenberg and the other foreign ministers in the Barents region signed the Kirkenes Declaration.

It was not long after the end of the Cold War, and the political ice was still thawing. The Kirkenes Declaration was nothing less than a new way of thinking about foreign policy, in which people-to-people cooperation would occupy a central place, and local and regional authorities were to be directly involved. Today, twenty years later, a new reality has been created in the High North.

The trust that has been built through the Barents cooperation has paved the way for major breakthroughs such as the maritime delimitation treaty between Norway and Russia, increased trade, and an ever more open border between Norway and Russia. Under the 2012 Agreement between Norway and Russia on Facilitation of Mutual Travel for Border Residents, members of the local population can cross the border without needing a visa.

The period leading up to the Russian revolution in 1917 saw a flourishing of trade links and contact between the people on both sides of the border. After the revolution, there were many years of standstill. The idea behind the Barents cooperation is therefore both one of looking to the future and one of reviving the past. The Barents cooperation can quite rightly be called a renaissance in the High North.

People-to-people cooperation

The real foundation for the Barents cooperation was laid by the counties and municipalities in the High North that entered into agreements with regions in Russia as early as the 1980s. Those who led the way back then found new avenues for cooperation. People are, and will continue to be, at the heart of the Barents cooperation and they are what gives it its strength. People-to-people cooperation has been essential for the increased economic contact between our countries. Through the Barents cooperation, indigenous peoples also gained a natural arena for cooperation. The Government considers it important that this should continue. All unnecessary obstacles should be removed; people and organisations must be able to cooperate freely over the border. We will therefore follow developments in Russia closely, and will speak out if we encounter new obstacles to interaction between our peoples and civil society groups.

The culture festival Barents Spektakel will be held for the tenth time in 2013, the anniversary year for the Kirkenes Declaration. This major cultural event shows how local, regional and national interests come together to create new alliances across borders. The level of interest from the international media shows that this festival attracts attention from far beyond the Barents region.

Health

Increasingly open borders make health a common concern. We have to cooperate in order to improve the health of the people in both our countries. Our cooperation in this field is already close. We have for example established a separate tuberculosis programme, in which expert groups are actively involved, thus ensuring its quality.

Norway and Russia are now developing a new cooperation programme in the field of health. The institutions in the High North play a key role in efforts to prevent and control diseases.

Expertise in the area of health has become an export commodity. Through the Barents cooperation, expertise and technology in the field of telemedicine, developed at the Norwegian Centre for Integrated Care and Telemedicine at the University Hospital of North Norway, has enabled the health authorities in Arkhangelsk to establish Russia's first regional telemedicine network. The expertise in telemedicine has subsequently reached areas further east in Russia, such as Yakutia and Khanty-Mansia.

The environment

Partners from Finland, Sweden, Russia and Norway are working together to reduce environmentally harmful emissions and to ensure sound management of the natural resources in the region. Together, we have started to address many of the main environmental problems in the Barents region. For example, a large quantity of toxic pesticides stored in the Russian Republic of Karelia has been safely destroyed in Finland. As Chair of the Barents Euro–Arctic Council, Norway is now leading efforts to draw up an action plan on climate change in the Barents region. However, much remains to be done in the environmental field. The emissions from nickel production in the border areas have been a cause of concern for several decades, and they are still unacceptably high. Both the owners of the production plants and the Russian authorities must give greater priority to health and the environment than they have done so far.

Transport and communications

Transport and communications in a harsh climate and across long distances clearly pose a challenge. Until now, transport needs in the Barents region have only been analysed at a sub-national and national level. Norway has therefore taken the initiative to draw up a joint transport plan for the whole of the Barents region. This plan will identify measures to be taken in the areas of maritime, air, rail and road transport. This is the first time that the authorities in the four countries are developing a joint plan of this kind. At the same time, the upgrading of the E105 road between Kirkenes and Murmansk is continuing on both sides of the border, as a result of close cooperation between the Norwegian and Russian authorities. There is also considerable interest in strengthening communications links to northern parts of Finland and Sweden.

The way forward

The Barents cooperation is good security policy. The greater trust that has developed between the people and authorities in the region has also led to closer contact and better understanding between the countries, including between their capitals. The trust has been painstakingly built through deliberate policies at the local, regional and national levels. The cooperation that was

initiated 20 years ago was not just important at the local level; in many ways it was a new kind of foreign policy.

People in the High North took the lead in establishing the Barents cooperation. Those who live and work in the region are also those who are best placed to set the course for developments in the time ahead. The close collaboration in the areas of research and education under the Barents cooperation means that we are better equipped to do so. An important task now is to make sure that we have the right expertise; i.e., expertise in the areas of value creation, innovation and the sound management of the vast resources that can be found in the Barents region.

The Barents cooperation has achieved a great deal, and we will make sure we celebrate its 20th anniversary properly. But we must also use this anniversary year to discuss how the cooperation should be developed in the time ahead.