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Overview on the Finnish Chairmanship of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council 2013-2015

Finland's two-year Chairmanship of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) 2013–2015 started at the BEAC Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Tromsø in October 2013. Finland followed Norway as the BEAC Chairman and continued to work on several of the themes that had been started during the Norwegian Chairmanship, especially on environmental, climate and transport questions. The crisis in Ukraine cast its shadows on cooperation in different international fora, but the impact on Barents cooperation was limited. The BEAC Committee of Senior Officials and the Barents working groups continued their work in a constructive atmosphere.

The Finnish BEAC chairmanship was successfully concluded at the BEAC Foreign Ministers' Meeting which was held on 14-15 October 2015 in Oulu. At the meeting the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Finland Timo Soini handed over the chairmanship gavel to the next chairman, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. At the same time, the Chairmanship of the Barents Regional Council was passed from Arkhangelsk to Kainuu.

Priorities and achievements of the Finnish chairmanship

As BEAC Chair, Finland worked for *dynamic, inclusive and sustainable development* of the Barents region. While promoting economic cooperation, Finland stressed the need to take into account the social and environmental welfare in the region.

The Finnish BEAC Chairmanship had three priority sectors: economic cooperation, including transport and logistics, environment and climate change and youth cooperation. Finland paid attention also to other sectors such as cultural cooperation, tourism, health and social well-being, as well as emergency and rescue cooperation.

Concrete achievements during the Finnish term included, among other things, a review of the financing of Barents cooperation, ensuring the financing for the Working Group of Indigenous Peoples, a survey of the development needs in the Barents road network and the implementation of the Barents Rescue Exercise in Kittilä. Moreover, Finland responded to the challenges of climate change by starting implementation of the Barents Action Plan on Climate Change. Additionally, Finland promoted cleantech solutions and bioenergy as significant drivers of sustainable economic cooperation.

Finland promoted the coherence of regional cooperation between the BEAC, the Arctic Council, the Council of Baltic Sea States, the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Northern Dimension with the aim of increasing synergy and efficiency. Special attention was paid to synergies on the working group level. For example, a cultural forum was held in Kotka in May 2014, which brought together cultural players representing the Barents cooperation, the Northern Dimension and the Council of the Baltic Sea States. Additionally, a high level transport seminar on the role of the ITS in logistics in the Northern Dimension, Barents and Arctic Area was organised in Helsinki in June 2014.

Based on the assignment of the Tromsø Foreign Ministers' Meeting, an *Ad Hoc Working Group on Financial Mechanism Study* (AHWG) was set up to conduct an extensive study on the possibility of establishing a financial mechanism in the Barents region. The work of the AHWG promoted

knowledge of project financing sources and synergy of regional cooperation. The final report published in September 2015 covers all the relevant financing sources for Barents cooperation projects, such as the funding instruments of the Northern regional councils, the Northern Dimension Partnerships and the Cross-Border Cooperation Programmes in the Barents region. The BEAC member states did not find a common ground for establishing a new financial mechanism. The final report recommends that the possibility of adjusting the existing financial instruments should be examined as well as information dissemination and capacity building should be improved among the Barents actors.

(Final report: http://live.grano.fi/ejulkaisu/Ulkoministerio/UM_Barents_eJulkaisu/index.html)

The Finnish chairmanship cooperated closely with the *Barents Working Group of Indigenous Peoples* (WGIP) i.a. by supporting the Barents indigenous peoples' Congress held in Tromsø in February 2015. The WGIP chairman and/or the members of the WGIP secretariat participated in all BEAC CSO meetings. Finland continued the Norwegian initiative to invite all the members of the WGIP to one or two BEAC CSO meetings. One of the most significant concrete achievements during the Finnish BEAC term was ensuring the support from all four Barents region countries to the financing of the Working Group of Indigenous Peoples.

The accomplishments of the Finnish BEAC Chairmanship

- *A study on the financing of Barents cooperation*
- *Ensuring the financing for the Working Group of Indigenous Peoples*
- *Strengthening the coherence of regional cooperation*
- *A survey of the development needs in the Barents road network*
- *Implementation of the Barents Action Plan on Climate Change*
- *Reorganisation of forest-sector cooperation*
- *Implementation of the Barents Rescue Exercise*
- *Recruitment of the new Head of the International Barents Secretariat*
- *A wide range of seminars and conferences (see below)*

Barents Sectoral Working Groups

The practical work is carried out in the Barents working groups. Finland chaired or co-chaired most of the BEAC and Joint working groups excluding the Working Group on Environment, the Working Group on Health and Related Social Issues, the Working Group on Energy and the Joint Committee on Rescue Cooperation. To increase synergy and the impact of Barents projects, Finland encouraged the Barents working groups to engage in closer cooperation with each other and corresponding bodies in other regional cooperation fora. Finland supported Barents projects during 2013–2015 with 1,2 million euros from national funds.

Economic Cooperation

The Working Group on Economic Cooperation (WGEC) convened three times during Finland's Chairmanship. The work focused on the following priorities: cleantech knowledge, sustainable mineral industry and cross-border business cooperation. The main events were 1) *The Global Cleantech Summit* in September 2015 in Helsinki with a special session on cleantech innovations in minerals production in the Arctic and the Barents region and 2) *The Barents Industrial Partnership* meeting in October 2015 in Oulu, which focused on the IT sector, tourism and the financing of Barents cooperation projects.

Economic cooperation is a cross-cutting issue in almost all Barents working groups. Thus, the Working Group on Economic Cooperation invited representatives from other working groups (namely environment, tourism, transport) to give presentations in the WGEC meetings.

Forest Sector

The Barents Forest Sector cooperation was reorganised and reactivated. The name of the Barents Forest Sector Task-force was changed into Barents Forest Sector Network (BFSN) and its mandate was revised. The network succeeded in linking the forest sector activities to other relevant BEAC activities and fostering local actors' cooperation in the Barents region. The main event was the *Barents Forest Forum* in September 2015 in Joensuu, which focused on the promotion of wood construction and forest based bioenergy. This event gathered over 120 participants from the private sector as well as educational and research institutes and public administration, with a considerable number of participants from Russia.

Customs Cooperation

The Working Group on Customs Cooperation (WGCC) has had difficulties in finding suitable topics for cooperation. A decision was made in spring 2014 of a temporary freeze of the working group. Therefore the WGCC did not arrange any meetings during the Finnish BEAC term.

Transport

The Steering Committee for the Barents Euro-Arctic Transport Area (BEATA) continued to work on the Joint Barents Transport Plan under the Chairmanship of the Finnish Ministry of Transport and Communications. The aim of the working group was to utilise the intelligent transport systems and services in creating new transport solutions to the Barents region. BEATA arranged all of its five meetings together with the Northern Dimension Partnership on Transport and Logistics and the Barents Regional Working Group on Transport and Logistics, which enhanced collaboration, synergy and exchange of information between the regional and governmental level.

The main event of BEATA during the Finnish term was the high level transport seminar "*ITS in Logistics in the Northern Dimension, Barents and Arctic Area*" organised in Helsinki in June 2014. The most significant achievement was *the Barents Cross-Border Road Corridors report*, which was prepared by an expert group with members from the four Barents region countries. The Joint Barents Transport Plan and the Kolarctic ENPI CBC project Barents Freeway served as the basis for the report. The Barents Cross-Border Road Corridors report was published at *the High-Level Meeting* in Rovaniemi in September 2015 together with a Joint Declaration, which provides guidelines and recommendations for the development of all modes of transport in the border-crossing corridors. A *Barents region Transport Forum* was organised back-to-back with the High-Level Meeting.

Environment

The Working Group on Environment (WGE) had in 2014-2015 four meetings under the chairmanship of Russian Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment. All the four Barents region countries participated actively in the environmental work. The key themes were the Barents environmental hot spots, cleaner production, nature protection, water issues and climate change. Finland was in charge of the BPAN - Barents Protected Area Network project as well as the work on the regional climate strategies of the BEAC Action Plan on Climate Change. Both projects will continue.

The 12th *meeting of the Ministers of the Environment* was organised by Russia in November 2015. In this meeting the hot spots with enough improvement were excluded from the Barents hot spots list, a decision to update the Action Plan on Climate Change for the Barents cooperation under the leadership of the BEAC CSO was made and the work on the Strategy for Protection of the Intact Forests in the Barents Region and the Strategy for the Development of the Fennoscandian Green

Belt was welcomed. The WGE was encouraged to continue its efforts in the fields of climate change, cleaner production, mitigation of environmental pollution and human health hazards, exclusion of hot spots, nature protection and water issues.

The WGE has had an important role in supporting the other Barents working groups to implement the BEAC Action Plan on Climate Change. Since 2014, this and other environmental work has been promoted by the Climate, Environment and Hot Spot Advisor at the International Barents Secretariat. The position of the Advisor has been financed by Finland, Sweden and NEFCO.

The WGE has actively cooperated with Arctic Council and Nordic Council of Ministers. The work to promote improvements in Barents hot spots has been supported by NEFCO and NDEP.

Rescue Cooperation

The Joint Committee on Rescue Cooperation in the Barents Region focused on updating the Barents Joint Rescue Manual and on evaluating the previous Barents Rescue Exercise held in Norway in 2013. Finland hosted *the Barents Rescue Exercise* in the end of September 2015 in Kittilä. It was the biggest single event of the Finnish BEAC Chairmanship. The exercise was preceded by three international planning conferences and several internal meetings. Approximately 1000 participants from all Barents countries took part in the Exercise. The participants and organisers considered the exercise beneficial and it also served to test the renewed EU Host Nation Support Guidelines. Post exercise discussions as well as the Joint Committee meeting were held in St Petersburg in December 2015. The following Rescue Exercise will be held in Petrozavodsk in autumn 2017 and it may be the last Exercise of this large scale.

Health and Related Social Issues

The Joint Working Group on Health and Related Social Issues (JWGHS) convened three times and was chaired by the Swedish Ministry of Health and Social Affairs together with Murmansk Region. The working group had three on-going programmes: 1) The Barents TB Programme 2) The Barents CYAR Programme and 3) The Barents HIV/AIDS Programme.

The working group prepared its health and social programme for the period 2016–2019. The priorities of the programme are prevention and control of communicable diseases (HIV, tuberculosis) and the well-being of children and youth. The new programme provides a framework for cooperation and concrete projects will be realised according to the available resources. Finland and Arkhangelsk will chair the working group in 2016–2017.

Health and social issues have traditionally been one of the key fields in Barents cooperation, but lack of long-term project financing has hindered the JWGHS's activities. The JWGHS has collaborated closely with the Northern Dimension Partnership in Public Health and Social Well-being.

Youth

The Joint Working Group on Youth (JWGY) convened four times under the chairmanship of the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture and the Arkhangelsk Region. The Terms of Reference and the Plan of Action of the JWGY were revised and the Agreement of the Financing of the Barents Youth Cooperation Office (BYCO) was adopted. The working group focused on enhancing cross-sectorial youth policy, young peoples' opportunities to participate in the society and their access to education and employment. Moreover, the working group strengthened the dialogue between young people and decision makers and promoted multilateral cooperation between youth groups and non-governmental youth organisations in the region, inter alia through a special call for applications. One of the key organisations is the Barents Regional Youth Council. The main event in the field of Barents youth cooperation was the *"Barents in my mind" seminar* held in September

2014 in Rovaniemi. As follow-up to the seminar a study on youth work in the Barents region was launched and it will be finalized in spring 2016. The financing of the Barents Youth Co-operation Office in Murmansk was a regular item on the JWGY agenda.

Culture

The Joint Working Group on Culture (JWGC) was one of the most active working groups. The JWGC convened four times under the co-chairmanship of the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture and the Arkhangelsk Region. Additionally, a joint meeting between the working groups of culture of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and the Council of the Baltic Sea States as well as the Northern Dimension Partnership on Culture was held in Kotka in May 2014. The members of the joint meeting recommended convening at least once in two years in a joint regional format to discuss and up-date strategies for cultural and creative industries in the region.

The JWGC revised its mandate and strategy in spring 2014. The new strategy outlines the following priorities for cultural cooperation in the Barents region: to promote culture as a tool for regional, social and economic development, to strengthen cultural identities and multicultural dialogue and to encourage new networks in order to develop better skills and knowledge in the field of arts and culture and people-to-people cooperation. The working group continued developing the concept of the planned Barents Culture Scholarships.

The working group finalised the Kolarctic ENPI CBC financed *New Horizons 2013–2014* project and implemented the new *Barents Cultural Initiative Incubator* project, which supported the creation of cultural events and projects.

Tourism

The Joint Working Group on Tourism (JWGT) focused on the implementation of its Mandate 2013-2017. The working group participated in the preparation of Interreg North and Kolarctic ENPI CBC programmes from the tourism point of view and promoted the role of tourism in the development of the Barents region in various Barents- related events. It began development work on sustainable tourism. Lack of resources has hindered the activities of the working group.

Education and Research

The Joint Working Group on Education and Research (JWGER) consists of institutes of higher education and research. In 2014–2015 the collaboration was led jointly by the Northern (Arctic) Federal University in Arkhangelsk and the University of Lapland. Education and research are a cross-cutting issue in the work of all Barents working groups. During the Finnish Chairmanship the JWGER focused on the Joint Barents Transport Plan and the BEAC Action Plan on Climate Change and worked closely with other regional cooperation structures and actors on the private sector (e.g. Arctic Economic Forum).

Energy

The Joint Working Group on Energy has not convened since 2011. The Chairmen of the working group (Norway and Arkhangelsk) attempted to organise a meeting in 2014, but there was not enough participation. The status of the working group was on the agenda on the BEAC Committee of Senior Officials, but a solution was not found.