



International Barents Secretariat

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The Barents Cooperation in 2015

2015 was the final year of the Finnish chairmanship of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) and the Archangelsk chairmanship of the Barents Regional Council (BRC). In October, the national chairmanship was handed over to Russia and the regional to Kainuu region in Finland during the ministerial meeting in Oulu.

The BEAC Committee of Senior Officials (CSO) met six times in 2015. The meetings were held in Helsinki (18-19/3 and 28/9), Kuusamo (26-28/8), Oulu (15/10), Tornio/Haparanda (8-9/6) and Moscow (16-17/12). The most important administrative decisions taken by the CSO were the appointment of Maria Dianova from Russia as the new Environmental and Hot spot adviser and the securement of the funds for another two years for the above mentioned position. External financing was also received for a communication project, aiming to improve the communication among the working groups. The project started in January 2016 and will report after six months. Chairmen from the Barents working groups were invited to most of the CSO meeting to present the activities of their respective working group. The Chair of the WGIP is a regular member of the CSO.

The Barents Regional Council held two meetings chaired by the County of Archangelsk: on March 23rd in Umeå and on October 13th in Oulu. The Barents Regional Committee (RC) met back-to-back with the BRC. The main focus of the BRC and RC was the development of transport connections and tourism.

The Barents working groups

Most of the Barents working groups have been very active during the review period. Altogether 25 working group meetings were held. The Working Group on Customs Cooperation (WGCC) has been latent since 2014, but will have a new start in 2016 during the Russian chairmanship. After the Barents Forest Sector Task Force (BFSTF) was renamed Barents Forest Sector Network (BFSN), their cooperation has also been revived and they got a new mandate from CSO in December 2015. The JWGE had no meetings during 2015, but activities will continue in 2016.

The Joint Working Group on Health and related Social Issues (JWGHS) had two meetings in 2015, in Murmansk on April 3rd and in Umeå on December 10-11th. The cooperation on health and social issues is today an important part of the Barents Cooperation. Representatives from the national and regional health authorities in the Barents countries meet twice a year to discuss relevant issues. Sweden held the chairmanship of the JWGHS together with Murmansk during 2015. The JWGHS also works closely with the Northern Dimension Partnership in Public Health and Social Well-being as well as the World Health Organization. Three specialized sub-programs have been developed by specialists under the Barents Health Programme. The Barents Tuberculosis Program, The Barents Children and Youth at Risk Programme and the Barents HIV/AIDS Programme have been very effective, largely due to the good contact that has been established between professional networks in the region during the last 20 years.

The Working Group on Economic Cooperation (WGEC) held two working group meetings in Helsinki on May 12th September 11th. Under the Finnish chairmanship they also organized a

clean tech seminar in Helsinki on September 10th, focusing on innovation in mineral production. The Barents Industrial Partnership meeting was also held during the ministerial meeting in Oulu on October 14-15th.

During 2014, a new mandate for the Barents Forest Sector Network was confirmed. The cooperation in the forest sector is an administrative part of the WGEC. The first meeting was held in Joensuu, 17-18th September. The working group invited representatives from the working groups on environment, tourism and transport to give presentations at the WGEC meeting. Synergies were found as economic cooperation interlinks with several cooperation sectors in the Barents region.

The Working Group on Environment (WGE) held two meetings in Naryan-Mar (June 15-16th) and in Syktyvkar (November 2-3rd). These events were arranged back-to-back with **the Regional Working Group on Environment (RWGE)** meetings. The WGE meetings were hosted by the regional ministries on nature resources and environment in the Russian part of the Barents region, which encouraged an active involvement of the Russian participants. In addition, the Subgroups and projects under the Barents cooperation umbrella have organized own separate meetings.

The Russian Chairmanship of the WGE was concluded by the Meeting of the Ministers of the Environment, which was held in Sortavala (November 25th). As a result, the Ministers assented to the exclusion of three Barents environmental Hot Spots, one totally and two partially. The chairmanship for 2016-2017 was taken over by Norway.

The Barents Regional Working Group on Transport and Logistics (BRWGTL) had a **joint meeting with the BEATA Steering Group** in Helsinki (June 4th) and in Rovaniemi (September 29th). The close cooperation of the BRWGTL and the BEATA Steering Committee has proved to be a strength in the field of transport and logistics. To a certain extent the participants are almost the same and as a rule the meetings are organized back-to-back. The aim of the Working Group was to utilize the intelligent transport systems and services in creating new transport solutions in 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 national level. The most significant achievement was the Update of the Cross-Border Road Corridors in the Barents Region report, which was prepared by an expert group with members from all the four Barents countries. The Joint Barents Transport Plan (JBTP) and the Kolarctic ENPI CBC project Barents Freeway served as the basis for the report.

The Joint Working Group on Education and Research (JWGER) held one meeting in Bodø on June 4th. 15 delegates, 8 Russian universities and 2 Norwegian attended the meeting, which was organized back-to-back with the international conference Barents Region and Beyond: Internationalising Higher Education. The second planned meeting was postponed to April 2016. The group consists of 14 universities and research organizations. The working group's primary seek to contribute to the implementation of the chairmanship programmes at national and regional levels, to participate actively in realizing the Action Plan on Climate Change and the Joint Barents Transport Plan, to network with other thematic working groups, to seek synergies with other platforms for international cooperation in the North and to initiate concrete projects with businesses and authorities. In addition to participating as a

partner in Communication Project currently run by the IBS, they also participated in several other projects.

The Working Group of Indigenous Peoples (WGIP), held three meetings in Inari (March 13th), Oulu (October 13th) and Tromsø (February 7-9th, at the **Barents Indigenous Peoples Congress**). They are permanent members of the CSO and participated in all their meetings. The Chair and the Norwegian Barents Secretariat have organised numerous meetings by Skype, phone and in Kirkenes. The WGIP is represented in the RC and BRC as well as the Barents Regional Youth Council (BRYC), the JWGHs, the WGE and the Steering Committee on Children and Youth at risk and participated at their meetings as well. In 2015, WGIP celebrated the 20th anniversary of the Barents indigenous cooperation at the Congress in Tromsø. The main focus for this year has been the Congress, as discussion platform for the tree indigenous people in the Barents region, and following up the Action Plan. The work also to draft a new action plan for 2016-2017 has also begun.

The Joint Working Group on Youth (JWGY) organized two meetings in Helsinki, on March 18th and October 5-6th. JWGY is the steering group for Barents Youth Cooperation Office (BYCO), which organized and participated in nine large-scale projects (with more than 40 participants) during the year. Among the biggest events were the Barents Reunion in Tornio/Haparanda and Barents Spektakel in Kirkenes. The problem with financing the BYCO office in Murmansk, which was mentioned in last year's annual report, is still not resolved. Russia has still not fulfilled their promises and the Swedish position is that they will not pay until Russia has. Finland and Norway continued their financial contribution last year.

The Joint Working Group on Culture (JWGC) held two meetings: in Rovaniemi (May 21-22th) and in Arkhangelsk (October). The working group continued to work with the mandate for 2014-18 and the Strategy on Cultural Cooperation for the same period. A decision was made concerning the Barents Culture Cooperation Scholarship/ Barents Culture Award. The scholarship will be 10 000 Euro – equal for each country. The sum should cover the expenses for the recipient to take part in the common event. Art forms awarded with the scholarship should include a diversity of categories. The recipients of the scholarship should be individuals, artist groups or NGOs, but not institutions. Moreover, the focus on cooperation in the Barents region is desirable, but there is no strict requirement that the candidate should reside in the region.

The Joint Working Group on Tourism (JWGT) held two meetings in Oslo during 2015 (March 17th and November 16th). A Communication Plan of the JWGT, based on key statistics from each region and member state, was compiled and presented along the lines of a "fact sheet". Tourism quality programmes and export criteria in each country was discussed. The group urged for deeper cooperation with other working groups, in the first hand with the culture, transport and indigenous people groups. There was a discussion on whether all five goals and the Action Plan should be included. The group discussed possible activities for 2016, the current status for strategic development of tourism in each country/region and the issue of co-chairmanship rotation. No Russian members participated in the meetings.

The Joint Committee on Rescue Cooperation (JCRC) organized the biennial Barents Rescue Exercise was organized in the Kittilä in Finland at the end of September 2015. The event involved about one thousand participants, both official and voluntary, from regional and national search and rescue organizations. The JCRC held one meeting in St. Petersburg (December 2015) during the Russian chairmanship. The meeting focused mainly on the

experiences from the Barents Rescue Exercise and on the initial planning of the next exercise in Karelia in 2017. Sweden will be chairing the JCRC in 2016.

Ad Hoc Working Group on Financial Mechanism Study was established by the decision of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) in Tromsø, on October 19th, 2013. The working group was tasked with conducting an extensive study on the possibilities to establish a financing mechanism for the Barents Cooperation. The working group held four meetings in Helsinki during the spring 2015. The group submitted its final report to the CSO in September 2015. The report was printed and is available on request at IBS office. As the final conclusion the report says: “In the light of the gathered information and the conducted study, there do not, at this stage, seem to exist a common interest or justifiable reasons for establishing a new financial mechanism for the Barents Region.”

Action Plan on Climate Change

The *Action Plan on Climate Change for the Barents Cooperation* was adopted in 2013 and in 2015, the Working Group on Environment (along with other BEAC Working Groups) continued activities for its implementation. It was one of the priorities for the Russian Chairmanship of the WGE. In order to facilitate development of the regional climate change strategy, Arkhangelsk region produced an activity plan and arranged a thematic workshop. Sweden started the preparations of organization a Barents-focused conference on permafrost, which is to be held in June 2016 in Potsdam, Germany.

To raise awareness on climate change in the region, a Russian-English version of a climate change exhibition from Finnish Lapland was produced under the lead of Finland and IBS. The exhibition was presented in St. Petersburg, Petrozavodsk, Murmansk, Polyarnyi and Kirovsk (Murmansk region) in 2015 with lectures and workshops by the exhibition author, Dr. Stephanie Lefrère. The web-site devoted to the exhibition will be launched in 2016 to promote this work further.

Synergy of the four Regional Sister Councils

Synergy with the so-called Regional Sister Councils (AC, BEAC, CBSS and NCM) has been called for by the BEAC. Therefore it has become customary to organize once a year a working level meeting aimed at improving cross-cutting coordination and reducing overlap. The annual synergy meeting of the Regional Sister Councils was held in Reykjavik on November 9-11th. At this year's meeting, the IBS proposed to have a common internship programme for the four councils, allowing the intern to participate in the work of each organisation for some months during one year and then report the outcome at the yearly meeting. The IBS visited the Arctic Council (AC) Secretariat in Tromsø on April 15th and the Permanent Secretariat of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) in Stockholm on May 27th.

Communication activities

The communication and public information activities of the IBS have been carried out according to the contract between the IBS and the Arctic Centre at the University of Lapland. A major update of the beac.st website content and layout was done in 2015. The site functioned well during the year and the amount of visitors was doubled during the autumn. The Arctic Centre has edited and provided content for two edition of the Barents Saga newsletter. Social media has also been used to support the sharing of information and discussion about the Barents region. Arctic Centre's communication staff and the IBS personnel have met several times during the year, both in Kirkenes and in Rovaniemi. The Swedish Barents Press association also visited the IBS together with editors-in-chief and

journalists during a study visit in Barents region. A survey among our working groups was launched to gather feedback from the working group, who reported a need for improving communication, participation and cooperation among the working groups. Building on these findings, a communication project was initiated together with four project partners. The project was financially supported by the Norwegian Barents Secretariat and started in December 2015.

Attendance of the Head of the IBS at various conferences and meetings

Artic Frontiers, Tromsø 18-21/1
Mining Conference, Stockholm 27-28/1
Ad Hoc Finance, Helsinki 29/1
Kirkenes Conference, 4-5/2
Arctic Council meeting, Tromsø 15-16/4
Environmental project, Murmansk 17-19/4
Ad hoc Finance, Helsinki 27-28/4
JWGHS, Murmansk 22-23/4
WGEC, Helsinki 12-13/5
JWGC, Rovaniemi 20-21/5
Ad hoc Finance, Helsinki 27/5
RWGER, 3-4/6
Bodø Process meeting, Brussels 3-4/9
Arctic Conference, Arkhangelsk 15-16/9
Barents Parliamentary Conference, Helsinki 28-29/9
BEATA, Rovaniemi 30/9
Minister Conference, Oulu 13-15/10
Sister Council meeting, Reykjavik 10-12/11
JWGT, Oslo 16-17/11
Transport week, Moscow 2-5/12
Regional Council event, Kajaani 14/12
All CSO and RC meetings.

Staff of the IBS, internships

Ari Sirén left the position as Head of Secretariat as his 3-year contract ended in January 2015 and was replaced by Tomas Hallberg. Tuuli Ojala, Climate, Environment and Hot Spots Adviser, finished her almost 2-year long assignment at the IBS on November 31st. Maria Dianova was recruited as to replace her on this position and was given a week overlap together with Tuuli when she started her 2-year contract period.

The IBS pursues a policy of taking on two interns annually for a period of three months. Both 2015 candidates were very successful and active. They engaged themselves and initiated projects that prolonged their internship with some weeks.

Financial status 2015 and budget for 2016

The financial situation of the IBS is stable and the accounts for 2015 show a surplus of approximately NOK 75000. To adjust the level of the working capital funds, the IBS will use NOK 200.000 of the funds as own contribution for financial year 2016. The total IBS budget for 2016 is NOK 3.952.000. It will be possible for the member states to make their contribution to the Working Group on Indigenous Peoples in their annual payment to the IBS. The report and findings of the annual audit as well as the Financial Report for 2015 will be submitted to the CSO for review and consideration during March 2016.

Conclusions

The Barents cooperation has become firmly established in many ways. There are fields where there is active cooperation is on a high levels, but there are also areas for improvement. The continuation of the priorities, when chairmanship was handed over, tells us about the gaps to be filled. Regional stakeholders call for closer economic cooperation. Even if many roads in the region has shown significant improvements, there are still many to be upgraded. There are calls for new regional flight connections and a common platform for tourism in the Arctic area is under discussion. In addition, environmental issues are always high on the agenda.

The IBS has already assisted the chairmanships in the Barents cooperation as an auxiliary body for eight years. The office is situated in the same building as the Norwegian Barents Secretariat and the Barents Institute and together they form a cluster of institutions with good reputation and deep knowledge about Barents region. We are happy to have an expert on Environmental and Hotspot issues added to the small staff team. If member states should find the funds and need, an expert in a similar position could be placed at IBS.