



Updated 22 February 2024

## **Annual report 2023 by the International Barents Secretariat**

### **General affairs**

Following the Joint Statement of Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the European Union regarding the Barents Euro-Arctic cooperation published on 8 March 2022, condemning in the strongest possible terms Russia's unprecedented military aggression against Ukraine, all activities with Russia within the Barents cooperation were suspended. However, the cooperation was continued both on national and regional levels in the Friends of the Presidency format during the Finnish Barents Euro-Arctic Presidency period.

Within the Barents International Secretariat, the year 2023 started with intensive work for the preparations of the Barents Euro-Arctic Indigenous Sámi People, held in the European Parliament in Brussels in March. During the year, the Secretariat supported the Finnish Presidency, the Barents Regional Council, and the Regional Committee, as well as the Barents Working Groups and the Barents Regional Youth Council in preparations of numerous events and meetings (in total over 50 meetings and events in 2023).

After September 18, following the withdrawal of Russia from the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, the Barents structures continued to cooperate between the remaining member states and the European Union. A Trio Presidency of Finland, Norway and Sweden was launched in Joensuu on 24 October in the concluding event of the Finnish Presidency 2021-2023 for a one-year period, unless otherwise decided.

### **Support to the Finnish Presidency of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council 2021-2023 and to the Trio Chair of the Committee of the Senior Officials**

The International Barents Secretariat provided support to the Chair of the Committee of Senior Officials by providing activity overviews and preparing meeting documents for the Friends of the Presidency Committee of Senior Officials meetings in Kemi on 16 February and in Inari on 6 - 7 June. In Kemi, in addition to Committee of Senior Officials meeting, a Barents Green Transition High Level Meeting was organized on 14-15 February by the Finnish Presidency and supported by the International Barents Secretariat.

The International Barents Secretariat provided support to the Finnish Presidency of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council 2021-2023 in organising one of the main events of the Finnish Presidency period, Summit of Barents Euro-Arctic Indigenous Sámi People on 22 – 24 March in the European Parliament, Brussels. The Summit was organized under the patronage of the European Parliament, in collaboration with the

Finnish Barents Euro-Arctic Council Presidency and the Sámi Parliament in Finland. In addition, Sámi Parliaments in Norway and Sweden participated actively in the Summit.

The Summit gathered Sámi and European parliamentarians, and representatives of the European Institutions to a dialogue, convening altogether 250 onsite participants and reaching 290 viewers by web streaming. For the first time, Northern Sámi language was used and simultaneously interpreted to the audience in the European Parliament.

The Summit included a Sámi art exhibition and cultural program, presenting both modern and traditional Sámi culture. In addition, side events on the Barents Region Green Transition Concept Paper, Barents Indigenous Youth side event, and meeting of the Friends of the Presidency Working Group on Culture took place in the framework of the Summit.

Further, after Russia's withdrawal from the Barents Euro-Arctic Council on 18 September, the Secretariat provided activity reports and support in preparations of the Committee of Senior Officials meeting held in Helsinki on 2 – 3 October.

The Secretariat participated in the concluding event of the Finnish Presidency of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council 2021-2023 and welcomed the launch of the Trio Presidency of Finland, Norway and Sweden in Joensuu, Finland on 24 October. Further, the Secretariat provided support for the preparations of the first meeting of the Committee of Senior Officials chaired by the Trio Presidency in online format on 14 December.

### **Support to the Barents Regional Council and Regional Committee**

The International Barents Secretariat provided activity reports in the meetings of the Barents Regional Council held in Joensuu on 24 May and on 24 October, and in online meetings of the Barents Regional Committee on 12 May, 13 June, 29 August, 2 and 6 October and 10 November.

The International Barents Secretariat provided support for the preparations of the Generation Barents Youth event on 23 October, co-organized by the Regional Council of North Karelia, the Barents Regional Youth Council, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, the Nordland County Council, and the Norwegian Barents Secretariat.

### **Support to Working Groups**

During the year, the International Barents Secretariat provided assistance for the Working Groups with meeting arrangements, contributed to information exchange among the Working Groups, enhanced their visibility by maintaining the calendar of events on the Barents Euro-Arctic Council's website and by publishing news and articles about the Working Groups' activities.

The Secretariat has collected activity overviews for 2023 from all active Friends of the Presidency (FoP) Working Groups listed above. The reports can be obtained by contacting the Secretariat.

### ***Joint Committee on Rescue Cooperation***

No report on activities during Russia's chairmanship of the Joint Committee in 2023 has been received. Sweden will take over the chairmanship in 2024.

### ***Working Group on Barents Forest Sector***

The main event of the Working Group on Barents Forest Sector during Finland's Presidency has been the Barents Forest Forum, financed by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland and organized 4-5 October in Rovaniemi, under the auspices of the Working Group on Barents Forest Sector (Friends of the Finnish Presidency) by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry of Finland, the Natural Resources Institute Finland (Luke) and the Finnish Forest Centre. The working group meetings organized in 2023 – 23 January, 28 March, 10 June, 21 June, 13 September (online) plus 3 October in Rovaniemi – were in general focused on the planning and preparations for the Forest Forum.

In connection with the Barents Forest Forum, a Youth Hackathon event was organized by the Arctic Network for Climate Adaptation and Food Security (ACAF), inviting young people from Barents to engage in discussions and debates on solutions for the future of forests.

The future form of the Working Group on Barents Forest Sector cooperation is under consideration and will most likely continue under regional chairship of North Karelia.

### ***Working Group on Culture***

Working Group on Culture had meetings on 24 March in Brussels and on 24 October in Joensuu. The working group discussed current activities in the cultural sector in different regions, Barents culture report, transfer of the presidency of the working group and the strategy of the Working Group on Culture. In 2024 Sweden will be chairing the working group on the national level. The regional co-chair is to be confirmed later. The strategy of the working group is valid until the end of 2023, and it will be renewed during the next chairmanship period. The next working group meeting will be held in Sweden during the spring 2024. The Barents culture report was published in November.

The Barents Cultural Scholarships were awarded in the Joensuu meeting on 24 October. The recipients of the Barents Cultural Scholarships 2023 are Koli Art Residence from Finland, Ekaterina Bepalova from Norway and Marit Shirin Carolasdotter from Sweden.

### ***Working Group on Environment***

During 2023, the Working Group on Environment arranged one physical meeting in Friends of the Presidency format on 28-30 March in Oulu and Kainuu region (Puolanka). Two Subgroups: Friends of Nature and Water (FONAW) and Friends of Sustainable Production and Consumption (FOSPAC) continued their activities. Ministry of the Environment of Finland chaired the WGE from March 2020 till October 2023. Concluding the March meeting, the Chair Henna Haapala encouraged the group to focus on project work. The final meeting of 2023 was arranged on 1 December to summarize the results of the Finnish Presidency and discuss the next steps. In addition, on 10-12 October, a seminar on [Green Transition and Sustainable Regional Development](#) was arranged in Luleå by the County Administrative Board of Norrbotten. The event continued traditions of the bi-annual [Habitat Contact Forum](#) (1999-2019), initiated and supported by the WGE Subgroup on Nature and Water.

Several projects were initiated by the Working Group on Environment in 2023, including Climate work in municipalities (led by Motiva Oy, IBA funding) and [Sustainable Green Transition in the](#)

[Barents Region](#) (led by Finnish Environment Institute, IBA funding). A number of project applications were submitted to the [Interreg Aurora Programme](#) by the Working Group member-regions.

In addition to the Working Group's activities on biodiversity, the Finnish Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and the Natural Resources Center (Luke) received support from the IBA funding to implement a project aimed at [raising awareness of harmful alien species](#) (2022-2024).

The next meeting of the Working Group on Environment is planned to be held in Luleå, Norrbotten on 19-20 March 2024.

#### ***Working Group on Economic Cooperation***

Working Group on Economic Cooperation had an online meeting on 16 May. A webinar about the journey of plastics in the Barents region was organized on 12 June. Working Group on Economic Cooperation organized in collaboration with the Working Group on Tourism a Seminar on Sustainable Tourism and the Circular Economy in Kajaani on 27-28 September. A meeting of the Working Group on Economic Cooperation was held in connection with the seminar on 27 September. New guidelines for the working group were approved in the meeting.

#### ***Working Group on Education and Research***

No report on activities were received during 2023.

#### ***Working Group of Indigenous Peoples***

The main event of the Working Group of Indigenous Peoples in 2023 was the Summit of Barents Euro-Arctic Indigenous Sámi People held in Brussels in March 2023. For the practical Summit arrangements, a Summit Task Force was established in May 2022. The Task Force included representatives of the Finnish Barents Euro-Arctic Council Presidency Team, representatives of the Sámi Parliaments in Finland, Norway and Sweden, and staff members of the International Barents Secretariat, and it was convened altogether 12 times.

The Summit included an opening session and three plenary sessions with high level speakers. The themes discussed in the Summit were:

1. Climate Change and the Arctic
2. EU's Arctic & Northern policies and Indigenous Peoples; rights, privileges, and obligations in community
3. Traditional knowledge and cultural heritage in Sámi communities.

The purpose of the Summit was to contribute to a closer dialogue between the Sámi community and the European Union, and to exchange knowledge and experience that can lead to more sustainable development among indigenous peoples in the European part of the Arctic. The Summit aimed to raise awareness among decision-makers about the need to include the Sámi people in the European Union decision – and policymaking. The Sámi are the only recognised indigenous people in the European Union. During the Summit, a petition signed by the three presidents of the Sámi Parliaments was handed over to the Prime Minister of Finland, Ms. Sanna Marin.

During the preparations of the Sámi Summit, the Summit Task Force met with Minister for Foreign Affairs of Finland Pekka Haavisto in Helsinki on 10 January. Issues such as the legislation concerning the Sámi Parliament in Finland, the Sámi Truth and Reconciliation process in Finland, energy questions and protection of the Sámi culture, Sámi Summit in Brussels and questions concerning border and customs issues affecting Sámi people on the Nordic level were discussed. The Task Force also visited

the Ministry of Justice of Finland and met Director General, Johanna Suurpää. Issues such as the role of the Ministry in coordinating and advising other ministries on indigenous issues, challenges with regard to data collection concerning information on ethnicity, different legislation concerning border issues in the three Nordic countries, process of the Sámi Parliament Act and linguistic rights were discussed. The Task Force had also a lunch meeting with Satu Hassi, Vice-chair of the Finnish Delegation to the Conference of the Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region and Sari Wessman, Specialist in International Affairs, Finnish Parliament.

A report of the Summit was prepared by an outsourced expert. The report is available on website: <https://barents-council.org/working-groups/working-group-of-indigenous-peoples/summit-of-barents-euro-arctic-indigenous-sami-people-2023>

Upon request by the Finnish Barents Euro-Arctic Council Presidency and the Summit Task Force, the International Barents Secretariat prepared follow-up activities of the Summit. A questionnaire for feedback from the Summit participants was sent out to all registered participants. Outcomes and key messages delivered by the speakers of the Summit from the Sámi and European Union decision makers were disseminated further by organising follow-up events in the capitals of European countries: in Budapest on 17 – 18 May, in London on 26 September and in Brussels on 28 September in collaboration with Finnish Embassies and Cultural Institutes.

During the follow-up events, the delegation of the Chair of the Working Group of Indigenous Peoples participated e.g., in a round table discussion in the Egmont Institute with Belgian and European experts on Arctic and Antarctic issues, met with members of the Chamber of Representatives of Belgium, and the House of Lords in United Kingdom, among other decision-makers and researchers. The delegation shared information about the impact of climate change on Sámi livelihoods, the traditional knowledge and cultural practices of the Sámi community.

As part of the follow-up events, the Finnish Institute UK+Ireland, and the Finnish Cultural Institute for the Benelux screened a documentary film by Sámi director Suvi West, Eatnameamet – Our Silent Struggle, both in London and in Brussels. The film was introduced to the audience by representatives of the Sámi community.

#### ***Working Group on Health and Related Social issues***

On 12 January, the Secretariat facilitated and participated in a planning meeting organized by the Children and Youth at Risk steering committee (subgroup of Working Group on Health and Social related Issues), in connection with the planning of a thematic workshop in Rovaniemi 17-18 January (in which the Secretariat was present).

The Working Group on Health and related Social issues organized 3 meetings in 2023: 29-30 March in Luosto, 20-21 September in Rovaniemi and 14-15 December in Oulu. The main focus has been the preparation of the 7<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme for Cooperation on Health and related Social Issues in the Western Barents Region 2024-2027, which was approved at the meeting in Oulu in December.

The Secretariat has been present in the meetings in March and September and has been involved in the initial discussions on facilitating possible secondments provided by the Working Group.

#### ***Working Group on Tourism***

Working Group on Tourism co-organized a Seminar on Sustainable Tourism and the Circular Economy in Kajaani on 27-28 September together with the Working Group on Economic Cooperation. Working Group on Tourism had online meetings on 14 March, 16 November and 12 December.

The chairship of the working group will rotate between Finland, Sweden and Norway; the next meeting will be organized by Norrbotten.

#### ***Working Group on Transport and Logistics***

The Working Group on Transport and Logistics has organized one physical meeting 8 May in Helsinki and one online meeting 6 November. The main topics have been the working group's involvement in the Interreg Aurora *New North* project related to transport, logistics and security of supply in the Barents region, in which all the Barents regions are cooperating partners. The working group is also involved in expert studies on markets, infrastructure and distribution for alternative transport fuels in the Western Barents region, conducted by the Lapland Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment.

The Secretariat has attended both meetings, provided secretarial services, and also provided updates from the overall work in the Barents cooperation.

#### ***Working Group on Youth***

Working Group on Youth organized an online meeting on 14 June and 1 November. Recent and upcoming youth events in the Barents region, regional youth projects, BRYC activities and latest developments in the youth sector in different regions were discussed in the meetings. Future priorities for the working group include updates of the mandate and to strengthen the role of youth work and youth research in all Barents youth cooperation.

#### ***Barents Regional Youth Council***

The Barents Regional Youth Council (BRYC) has had one of its busiest years in terms of activity in its 20-year history. BRYC has gone through a "generation shift" in terms of their representatives, with many new faces from the different regions joining the work throughout the year. BRYC has during the year increased its representation in other Barents Working Groups and received several invitations to participate in external conferences and meeting. This comes in addition to BRYC's Annual Event held in Rovaniemi in February, and two Generation Barents-events held in April and October, in Bodø and Joensuu.

During the Summit of Barents-Euro Arctic Indigenous Sámi People, BRYC went together with EU-Sámi Youth Idea Lab to make a side event to the Summit, economically supported by the Norwegian Barents Secretariat. The event including its panel debate, highlighted many important aspects of youth Sámi lives in the Barents region. Key takeaways were that there needs to be a good balance between protection and extraction of resources, and also the importance of meeting arenas for young people throughout both the overall Barents region and Sápmi.

It has been a challenge for BRYC to adapt to a new model where the Russian representation at first decreased (with Russian expats still being present in BRYC until April 2023) and later fully expired. Nevertheless, with recent appointments from Norwegian, Swedish and Finnish regions, BRYC has by the end of the year representation from all of the remaining member regions in the three countries.

A special Task Force has during the autumn of 2023 been doing a significant work related to revision of BRYC's statutes. BRYC planned for an Annual Meeting where these changes could be adopted in December 2023, but as there is not a sufficient number of representatives that will be able to attend (as the current BRYC Statutes demands a representation of at least 10 out of 15 representatives), it was not possible to conduct an Annual Meeting for 2023. When Finnmark re-appears as a region after 1<sup>st</sup> January 2024, it will technically be possible for BRYC to have an Annual Meeting with 10 attending representatives, even without Russian representation. In the light of the described circumstances, it was therefore decided to conduct the planned Annual Meeting in December 2023 as a "BRYC Council Meeting". In such meeting it's a tradition that BRYC Chair can inform BRYC Council about activity in BRYC Board over the last period/year. It is also planned that BRYC Council can consider the proposed statutes' changes, and give their recommendation prior to BRYC's planned Annual Meeting in 2024, and provide updates from the overall work in the Barents cooperation.

## **Communication**

Updates of the website [www.barents-council.org](http://www.barents-council.org) were halted until Russia resigned from the Barents Euro-Arctic Council. Since then the International Barents Secretariat continued to update the website and Facebook and Twitter (X) accounts.

The Friends of the Presidency documents are archived in the International Barents Secretariat cloud server and can be delivered by e-mail on request. The archiving of the Committee of Senior Officials and working group documents since Russia resigned from the Barents cooperation will be discussed.

The Finnish Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment organized the Discover Barents Photo contest 2023 under the theme Circular Economy in the Barents Region. The competition was organized as a part of a project called 'Journey of Plastic in the Barents Region' funded by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland. The International Barents Secretariat distributed information of the photo contest and participated to the jury. The winners were awarded, and a photo exhibition arranged in the concluding meeting of the Finnish Presidency in Joensuu in October 2023.

Prisoners of Ice – a historical comic book about the explorer Willem Barents was published by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland and is available on the Barents Euro-Arctic Council's website ([www.barents-council.org](http://www.barents-council.org)). In October, The comic was unveiled in the concluding event of the Finnish presidency in Joensuu.

The International Barents Secretariat provided assistance to the Barents Culture Report participating to the workshop and giving input to the report which was published also online at the Working Group on Culture webpage <https://barents-council.org/working-groups/culture>

## **External meetings and events**

In the framework of the Kirkenes Conference on 1–2 March, the International Barents Secretariat welcomed a visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Norway, Ms. Anniken Huitfeldt. During her visit in the Barents House, the Minister met with all Secretariat's staff members.

On 25–27 April, the International Barents Secretariat had a meeting with the Kolarctic Cross-Border Cooperation Programme's Managing Authority and Branch Offices' representatives in Vadsø to change experiences about the impacts of suspension of Russia from the Barents cooperation activities and from the financing programmes, co-financed by the European Union, Finland, Norway and Sweden.

On 3–4 May the Norwegian representative of the Committee of Senior Officials, Ms. Inger Holten visited Kirkenes and had meetings with the International Barents Secretariat's staff members.

The Secretariat organized a study trip to Øvre Pasvik on 22 August. During the study trip the Secretariat visited and had briefings at the Pasvik Border Station, at NIBIO Svanhovd environmental research centre and the national park centre, and at the Nyrud Police station. The excursion was also organized as a farewell event for the Head of the Secretariat Markus Karlsen, to thank him for excellent work and leading the Secretariat during the previous turbulent years.

International Barents Secretariat representative participated in the Barents Parliamentary Conference in Rovaniemi on 25-27 September 2023. The event gathered Members of Parliaments from Finland, Sweden and Norway, and representatives from the Sámi Parliaments, the European Parliament and regional cooperation organizations to discuss the future of the Barents cooperation, the green transition, and young people in the North.

International Barents Secretariat representatives participated in the Arctic Spirit Conference held in Rovaniemi on 13-15 November. The Acting Head of the Secretariat took part in a round table discussion on strengthening region-building through multilevel governance and interregional cooperation.

### **Administrative issues**

Following the decision of the Head of the International Barents Secretariat Markus Karlsen to resign as of 30 September 2023, Financial Mechanism Adviser Katja Sukuvaara was appointed as the Acting Head of the International Barents Secretariat as of 1 October 2023, until 31 December. From 23 August until 1 October, during Markus Karlsen's leave of absence, Katja Sukuvaara deputized the Head and guided the Secretariat's work.

Assignment contract of the seconded Youth, Education and Culture Adviser ended on 30 November 2023, and assignment contracts of the seconded Climate, Environment and Hot Spot Adviser and the Acting Head of the International Barents Secretariat ended on 31 December. Thus, from January 2024 the personnel of the International Barents Secretariat temporarily consisted of two employees: the Office Manager and the seconded Indigenous and Youth Adviser.

In order to better facilitate tasks expected to be provided by the International Barents Secretariat, a three-month vacancy of an intern was opened starting from second half of January 2024. Further, an announcement on open vacancy of the Interim Head of the International Barents Secretariat was published in December.

The financial situation for the Secretariat is stable. The preliminary accounts for 2023 show a net deficit and thus a need for transfer from the working capital funds of NOK 206 962. The original 2023 budget was based on a transfer of NOK 160 000.

Following the transfer, the working capital funds will in 2024 correspond to NOK 1 546 100, equal to 37% of the IBS budget. The financial contributions from Finland, Norway and Sweden in 2024 are the same as for 2023. The final accounts for 2023 will be presented in a separate Financial Report.



## **Attachment: Overview of meetings and events in 2023**

### Committee of Senior Officials meetings

Kemi, 14-15 February, Barents Green Transition High Level Meeting  
Kemi, 16 February (Friends of the Presidency)  
Inari, 6 - 7 June (Friends of the Presidency)  
Helsinki, 2-3 October  
Online, 14 December

### Barents Regional Council (BRC) meetings

Joensuu, 24 May (Friends of the Future Presidency of North Karelia)  
Joensuu, 24 October

### Regional Committee meetings

Kemi, 16 February (Friends of the Future Presidency of North Karelia)  
Online, 12 May (Friends of the Future Presidency of North Karelia)  
Online, 13 June (Friends of the Future Presidency of North Karelia)  
Online, 29 August (Friends of the Future Presidency of North Karelia)  
Online, 2 October (Friends of the Future Presidency of North Karelia)  
Online, 6 October (Friends of the Future Presidency of North Karelia)  
Online, 10 November

### Barents Regional Youth Council

#### Board meetings

Copenhagen, 28-29 January  
Bodø, 20 April  
Online, 11 May  
Gardermoen, 20 August (combined Statutes Task Force meeting and BRYC Board meeting)  
Online, 26 August  
Oslo, 15 October (combined Statutes Task Force meeting and BRYC Board meeting)  
Oslo, 26 November

### BRYC Council meetings

Online, 28 June  
Umeå, 09-10 December

### BRYC Annual event

Rovaniemi, 25-26 February

### BRYC Annual meeting

N/A

### Other events hosted by BRYC

Annual Event, Rovaniemi, 25-26 February, international youth event  
Barents Indigenous Youth Side Event, Brussels, 22 March, side event to Summit of Barents Euro-Arctic Indigenous Sámi People  
Generation Barents, Bodø, 21 April, international youth event  
Generation Barents, Joensuu, 23 October, international youth event

Joint Committee on Rescue Cooperation

No reports on arranged meetings in 2023

Working Group on Barents Forest Sector

Online, 23 January

Online, 28 March

Online, 10 June

Online, 21 June

Online, 13 September

Rovaniemi, 3 October

Working Group on Culture

Brussels, 24 March

Joensuu, 24 October

Working Group on Environment

Oulu/Kainuu region, 28-30 March

Luleå, 10-12 September, Seminar on Green Transition and Sustainable Regional Development

Online, 1 December

Working Group on Economic Cooperation

Online, 16 May

Kajaani, 27-28 September, Seminar on Sustainable Tourism and the Circular Economy

Working Group of Indigenous Peoples

Online, 27 January, Summit Task Force meeting

Online, 28 February, Summit Task Force

Online, 15 March, Summit Task Force

Online, 31 March, Summit Task Force

Brussels, 22 – 24 March, Summit of Barents Euro-Arctic Indigenous Sámi Peoples,

Online, 19 April

Online, 8 May

Budapest, 17-18 May, Sami Summit Follow-up event

Online, 29 June

Online, 29 August

London, 26 September, Sami Summit Follow-up event

Brussels, 28 September, Sami Summit Follow-up event

Online, 9 October

Working Group on Health and Related Social issues

Luosto, 29-30 March

Rovaniemi, 20-21 September

Oulu, 14-15 December

Children and Youth at Risk Steering Committee

Online, 12 January

Working Group on Tourism

Online, 14 April

Kajaani, 27-28 September, Seminar on Sustainable Tourism and the Circular Economy

Online, 12 December

Working Group on Transport and Logistics

Helsinki, 8 May

Online, 6 November

Working Group on Youth

Online, 14 June

Online, 1 November