

(12.10.2015)

Minister Timo Soini - The XV Session of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, 15 October 2015 in Oulu

Dear Colleagues, representatives of the members of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, the Regional Council and the Indigenous Peoples, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Barents cooperation provides an exceptional framework for cooperation. It connects authorities at governmental, regional and local level and engages indigenous peoples, non-governmental organizations and citizens at large. This is self-evident for us in this meeting, but we need to make sure that the wider public fully appreciates the added value of this forum.

During the past years the international situation has not been very conducive for cooperation. To say the least. But cooperation in the Arctic regions has continued without major disturbances. This has not come automatically. It has required calm and long-term reasoning from all regional players. We should make our ever best that this understanding of our common interests continues to guide our thinking as well as our actions. We need to see the big picture also in the future.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As chairman of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, Finland has kept in mind the fundamental objectives of the Barents cooperation: that is: to enhance stability and sustainable development in the region. Our motto has been dynamic, inclusive and sustainable regional development. During our chairmanship the spirit in the Barents cooperation has been constructive and tangible results have been reached. Finland has enhanced contacts at sectoral level with the other regional forums, such as the Northern Dimension.

Barents cooperation stands for exchange of information and best practices as well as people-to-people contacts. It means concrete projects. The EU-Russia cross-border cooperation programmes, such as Kolarctic and Karelia, have made it possible to implement important cooperation projects for example in economic, environment and culture sectors. This has taken the cooperation to a new level. We look forward to the prompt start of the next programme period.

Also national funding continues to be necessary. Finland has supported a number of Barents events during the past two years. The biggest was the Barents Rescue Exercise in Kittilä just two weeks ago. The recent report on the Financing of Barents Cooperation is a valuable tool for enabling project cooperation in the region.

I would like to stress the importance of cooperation with indigenous peoples at the Barents Euro-Arctic Council. The traditional knowledge and culture of indigenous peoples benefits greatly the Barents cooperation. I am pleased that a common solution was found to the financing of the Indigenous Peoples' participation in the Barents work. I hope this will encourage them to take a more active role in the cooperation also at sectoral level.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Barents region possesses considerable untapped economic potential. There are plans for investments in energy, mining, transport and logistics, shipbuilding and infrastructure. Also forests and forest industries can foster sustainable development.

Economic cooperation has been one of the priorities of our chairmanship. We have concentrated on the promotion of clean technology, sustainable mining and forest based bio-economy. By this we underline the importance of taking environmental aspects into consideration in all economic activities.

Effective cross-border transport connections are essential for economic progress. I applaud the initiative of Oulu and the Regions of Troms and Norrbotten for starting the flight connection between Oulu, Luleå and Tromsö. This connection is of major importance in the development of economic and human contacts in the region.

Barents Euro-Arctic Council has worked for a common vision of the development of an efficient transport system in the Barents region. This includes air, rail and road connections. I am proud to note that we were able to conduct the survey on the Barents cross-border Road Corridors. It identifies the development needs of the road corridors. The transport sector cooperation is among the most concrete activities of the Barents cooperation and this work should continue. I urge the authorities to study this survey carefully as guidance in the development of the transport system in the region.

Fragile Arctic and Barents environment is under increasing pressure by human economic activities. Climate change is a major concern. Barents cooperation has rightly made climate aspects part of all Barents activities and focused on the development of regional climate strategies. This work needs to continue. Also further efforts on the environmental hot spots and on the protection of the forest ecosystems of the region are necessary.

Youth needs to be our central priority. Finland has worked for the promotion of the young people's social inclusion and cross-border mobility. Promoting people-to-people contacts remains a key priority in the Barents region. In this context, the role of the NGO cooperation is crucial. We need to speed up in all possible ways the free expression of grass-root initiatives.

The Barents cooperation has made progress also in many other sectors, such as tourism, culture, health and rescue cooperation. It is important that cooperation can be maintained and taken further in sectors where the work brings concrete added-value. I welcome the priorities of the incoming Russian chairmanship presented yesterday by Minister Lavrov and his commitment to continue the work of the previous chairmanships.

\*\*\*

In conclusion, I would like to thank the members of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, the chair of the Barents Regional Council, Arkhangelsk, the International Barents Secretariat and the Working Group of Indigenous Peoples for the good cooperation during the Finnish chairmanship. I wish best success for the incoming Chair of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, Russia and the chair of the Barents Regional Council, Kainuu.