

**Statement by Sergey Lavrov
at the Fifteenth Ministerial Session
of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council**

Oulu, 14 October 2015

Dear Minister Soini,
Dear colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank our Finnish hosts, Foreign Minister Timo Soini, the City Council and all citizens of Oulu for their hospitality.

This meeting is another milestone on BEAC's way. In its more than twenty years of existence, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council has become an effective and relevant regional cooperation mechanism. BEAC's activities is, without an exaggeration, a history of success. We have managed to create a zone of confidence and stability in the Northern Europe, which is based on the principles of indivisible and comprehensive security and is not affected by fluctuations of political environment. The Council is a true idea generator and can take credit for many effective projects in all spheres of the region's life.

Needless to say, facilitating sustainable socio-economic development and improving the life quality of people living here remain BEAC's most important goal. This can only be achieved by joining efforts, sharing experience, knowledge and advanced technologies. In this regard, we believe that broad international cooperation at high latitudes has no alternative.

I would like to convey my gratitude to Finland for its efficient Chairmanship of the Council and for the active promotion of the Barents cooperation in a number of areas. Those cover economic and business cooperation, the forest sector, clean technologies, including clean mining technologies, and energy efficiency. Finnish Chairmanship has been quite successful in coordinating the development of the region's transport and logistics infrastructure and the work in the framework of the environmental and climate agenda. Youth exchange programs have been further developed. Cooperation in the fields of culture and tourism, public health and emergency response has also gathered momentum. Due attention has been paid to the interests of indigenous peoples, including in carrying out economic activities.

I would like to specially commend the activities of the BEAC Ad Hoc Working Group under Finnish Chairmanship to investigate the possibility of establishing a financing mechanism in the Barents region to support project activities. This initiative was proposed by Russia and approved at the BEAC Anniversary Summit in Kirkenes in 2013. It was duly formalized at the 14th BEAC Ministerial Session in Tromsø. A really extensive work to assess sources of financing cooperation in the region has been done. As a result, a detailed

report was published lately which can be classified as some sort of an encyclopedia of financial mechanisms of the Northern Europe. Although the experts have concluded that financial resources for funding project activities available in the region are sufficient, we believe that the issue of establishing our own mechanism to support projects in the Barents Region should remain on the agenda.

Taking over the Chairmanship of the Council from Finland Russia will strive to ensure continuity in the BEAC's work. Indeed, many tasks, for instance, in the field of transport and environment, are of a long-term nature and require systematic and consistent efforts.

During our Chairmanship we will attach priority to sustainable social and economic development of the Barents Region, establishing modern infrastructure, and enhancing the region's competitiveness and investment attractiveness while making a rational use of its scientific, innovative and resource capabilities, complying with environmental standards and taking into account the interests of indigenous peoples.

Thematic priorities of Russia's Chairmanship in the BEAC will include development of the Barents Region transport system, environmental protection and climate change mitigation, as well as culture and tourism. Each of these priorities will be further reinforced through relevant ministerial activities. In particular, a meeting of environment ministers of the BEAC member countries will take place in Sortavala (Karelia) this November, and Arkhangelsk will host meetings of transport ministers and culture ministers in summer 2016. We believe that this approach will ensure an applied and result-oriented nature of the Russian Chairmanship of the Council.

When identifying the transport issue as one of the priorities, we assumed that the modern transport infrastructure and the construction of new highways in the North are essential for boosting business activity and creating new business opportunities in the region. Improved accessibility of remote areas, effective logistics, good internal communication and established links with global markets will contribute to economic cooperation and a higher trade turnover between the countries of the region. The commercial use of the advantages of the Northern Sea Route, which is the shortest route linking northern Europe and the Asia-Pacific Region, seems promising.

We consider that the adoption of the Joint Barents Transport Plan aimed at establishing robust and safe transport corridors involving the use of rail, road and sea traffic, will ensure the sustainable social and economic development of this part of Europe. We also attach great importance to the development of the East-West air traffic and ferry connections.

The conservation of the fragile Arctic ecosystem is becoming increasingly important due to the improved availability of deposits and intensified exploitation of the resource potential of the region. For this reason, the environmental protection will constitute another major thrust of the Russian

Chairmanship in the BEAC. In this regard, we believe it necessary to ensure a balance between effective economic activity and economic growth while respecting the natural environment.

We plan to continue our work towards eliminating environmental hot spots in the Russian part of the Barents Region. This is one of the most pressing issues which requires combined efforts of all the players including the international financial institutions. I would like to highlight the contribution made by the Nordic Environmental Finance Corporation (NEFCO) to this work. To date, six hot spots out of forty two have been eliminated. We hope that during our Chairmanship we will make progress on this track.

As part of other specific measures, we plan to implement the second phase of the Barents Protected Areas Network project. We will also focus on cooperation for the protection of water resources, cleaner production, environmentally sustainable consumption, environmental education and sharing the best environmental practices.

Another urgent problem in the Barents Region is the climate change and its direct impact on the traditional way of life and occupations of indigenous peoples of the North. In this context, it is very important to implement in practice the Action Plan on Climate Change for the Barents cooperation adopted at the meeting of environment ministers of the BEAC Member States held in Inari (Finland) in December 2013.

Another topic on which we intend to focus is cultural cooperation. It is culture that plays a key role in understanding national peculiarities and mentality of all peoples in today's world. It is some sort of a bridge for mutual rapprochement and establishment of people-to-people contacts. We believe that the development of cultural exchanges will contribute to strengthening the concept of the Barents identity and will help the countries of the region better realize that they share a common history and belong to a single social and cultural space.

We intend to continue work to establish an award for the contribution to multilateral cultural cooperation within BEAC. In particular, it is necessary to determine the format and procedure for Barents Culture Scholarship nominations.

We consider tourism an important and very promising area of cooperation. The unique northern nature and a rich cultural heritage are genuine factors contributing to the development of this sector of economy. Besides, the creation of modern tourism infrastructure will help ensure better additional investment inflow to the region. A project to extend a ferry line Bergen-Kirkenes operated by the Norwegian company Hurtigruten to include Murmansk, Arkhangelsk and the Solovetsky Islands may give a major boost to the increase of tourist flows in the Barents Region. As far as we know, negotiations are already underway.

The list of areas of cooperation on the agenda of the Russian Chairmanship in BEAC is by no means limited to the topics mentioned above. We will do our best to encourage cooperation along such tracks as economy, energy, and forestry. We consider it essential to increase interaction in healthcare, including in the prevention and treatment of tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. We will promote cooperation in the field of emergency prevention and response. We intend to revitalize contacts between customs services.

It remains vital to support the indigenous peoples and provide favourable conditions for their existence and economic activity including their traditional occupations. In this context, the idea to hold the first Barents Indigenous Peoples' Summit during the Russian Chairmanship is worthy of attention. We are ready to discuss this initiative with our BEAC partners in collaboration with the Working Group on Indigenous Peoples.

We consider further strengthening of synergies of different formats of cooperation in the North of Europe to be a prerequisite for a successful work as the Chairman of the Council. We view the Council of the Baltic Sea States, the Arctic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers as our main partners. We look forward to strengthening the interaction between the BEAC Working Groups and Northern Dimension Partnerships.

We are willing to promote parliamentary cooperation as well as dialogue with civil society. It might be worthwhile to take a look at the experience of other structures, in particular the CBSS, where every Chairmanship program includes not only the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference but also the regional NGO Forum.

The Barents process is unique because of its two-storeyed construction. Cooperation is maintained not only among the participating governments, but also at the level of administrative and territorial units within the Barents Regional Council (BRC). It allows to determine really relevant projects and to combine in the optimal way the strategic priorities of States with specific interests and needs of separate regions. We are confident that the Finnish region of Kainuu will be a worthy successor of the Arkhangelsk Region as the BRC Chair.

As the Finnish proverb says: "Good neighbour is half of prosperity". The experience of cooperation within the BEAC fully supports this truth. Over the last years, we have managed to do a great deal, to ensure that the Barents Region becomes a more comfortable and secure place meeting the needs of its residents. This is exactly our main objective, as we see it.

During our Chairmanship, we look forward to working closely with all the participants in the Barents cooperation, as well as with the Council Secretariat.

I wish all the participants of BEAC Ministerial Session every success in their work.

Thank you for your attention.