

Dear Friends,

I would like to say a few words about the focus areas of the Swedish Chairmanship.

Sweden highly values the Barents cooperation, both on the inter governmental and the inter regional level. Already in 2006 the Swedish Government indicated in the government policy declaration, its intention to further develop the Barents cooperation.

Sweden took over the chairmanship from Russia at a ministerial meeting in Murmansk on 15 October this year. Foreign Minister Bildt appreciated that he was given the opportunity to further acquaint himself with the Barents region during a bus trip which he made together with Foreign Minister Störe, from Kirkenes to Murmansk in order to receive the gavel from Foreign Minister Lavarov during the XII BEAC Ministerial.

The Swedish Government looks with great concern on the global climate change, which is already a fact, and on the expected effects of it, which have actually started to show, also in our own region. The Arctic ice is diminishing at a rate that we have never previously seen and the permafrost on the tundra is melting. A warmer climate severely affects not only the ecosystems and the living conditions of the indigenous peoples, but also their health. Therefore the Swedish chair has defined *an eco-efficient economy* as the overarching focus area of the Barents cooperation during our two year chair period. We must aim at strengthening cooperation to meet the interlinked challenges of economic growth, climate change and sustainable use of natural resources. Within the framework of the Barents cooperation the Swedish chair will make a point of involving and cooperating with the indigenous peoples of the region and to take their special living conditions into consideration.

The Swedish chairmanship will be performed in close cooperation with the other BEAC countries and the chair will make an effort to work in close contact with other relevant actors such as the EU, the Arctic Council, the Northern Dimension Partnership, the Council of the Baltic Sea States and the Nordic Council of Ministers and in synergy with them strive for concrete results.

The Swedish chairmanship will, of course, be based on the good results of previous chairmanships, latest the Russian, and continue to build on the precious work that they have performed.

In his speech at the XII BEAC Ministerial, Foreign Minister Lavrov stressed that the story of BEAC is a success story. Our organisation prefers concrete action for the benefit of the people living in the region. Our collaboration is composed of hundreds of small projects, each of them maximally close to the practical interests of those involved.

Among the other important areas which the Swedish chair has decided to concentrate on, health and related social issues are on the top of the list. We consider it very important to implement the programme on Health and Related Social Issues including HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and children and young people at risk and to support new initiatives.

The Swedish chairmanship wants to work for and implement the *Cooperation Programme on Health and Related Social Issues in the Barents Region 2008 – 2011*. In this context the close relationship between health and social conditions ought to be high-lighted and social and health related measures should be integrated.

The Swedish chairmanship in particular underlines the necessity to follow up the Kirkenes Declaration from 2003 in which the Prime Ministers urge the health and social authorities to gain full control of the spread of tuberculosis in the Barents Region within 10 years. Intensified work should take place in cooperation with the *Northern Dimension in Public Health and Social Well-being*, and with all relevant partners in the Barents Region.

The Chairmanship also wants to safeguard the successful work already done to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS through the *Barents HIV/AIDS Programme*.

*The Cooperation Programme on Children and Youth at Risk in the Barents Region* should contribute to strengthening the authorities support of children and young people and their families through increase of competence and through promoting cooperation between authorities. The chair considers it urgent to implement the programme, not least in view of the worsening financial situation which risks to increase the difficulties for socially exposed people.