



Ministry for Foreign Affairs

Report from *25 Years of Barents Cooperation: Youth Perspective for the Future* in Luleå, 17–18 April 2018

The report is presented by the Swedish Chairmanship of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council 2017–2019 and is based on the discussions and suggestions made at the conference *25 Years of Barents Cooperation: Youth Perspective for the Future*.

Summary

- Member states remain committed to promoting peace, stability and regional development in the Barents region.
- Young people are the future of the region and their needs and motivations for remaining in the Barents region must be addressed for the region to prosper.
- Key areas that affect young people are work opportunities, education, the environment and infrastructure (traditional and digital).
- Universities and the business sector must work together to provide young people with relevant education and experiences.
- West-east transport corridors are needed to create a coherent Barents region and strengthen cooperation.
- New technology can bridge geographical distances and allow for new ways to meet, work and study.
- Development must be sustainable and take into account the impact on the environment, biodiversity and indigenous peoples.
- The Working Groups of Barents cooperation will have a key role in addressing the various issues discussed and in the development of core topics into recommendations.

- The Joint Working Group on Youth will coordinate the process.
- Based on these recommendations, the Swedish Chairmanship will define future strategic priorities to be presented at the ministerial meeting in the second half of 2019, in conjunction with the handover of the Chairmanship to Norway.

On 17–18 April, 150 officials, stakeholders, experts and young people met in Luleå, Sweden to discuss the future, possibilities and challenges of the Barents region from a youth perspective. The conference, which celebrated 25 years of Barents cooperation, was hosted by the Swedish Minister for Upper Secondary School and Adult Education and Training, Anna Ekström, and arranged by the Swedish Chairmanship of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council in cooperation with the County of Norrbotten.

The youth perspective is an important priority for the Swedish Chairmanship, and it also permeates the entire Chairmanship programme. The conference gathered 60 young people from Finland, Norway, Russia, and Sweden in Luleå, and was followed by additional young people through the live streaming of the event on social media. Young people were given the opportunity to ask questions and voice their concerns during a panel debate, as well as actively take part in lunch bag discussions on environmental, economic and social issues. During the conference, Minister Anna Ekström also unveiled two regional youth projects that Sweden will be supporting during its Chairmanship: *Robota 18 The Next Generation*, which will be a survey about what issues young people in the Barents region consider most important, and *Applying Best Practices and Building Capacity in Arctic Indigenous Education*, an initiative to support cooperation and knowledge-sharing between indigenous peoples in the Barents region.

In their opening addresses, Minister Ekström, State Secretary Samuli Virtanen from Finland, State Secretary Tom Erlend Skaug from Norway, and the Russian representative all emphasised their respective governments' strong commitment to the founding principles of Barents cooperation of promoting peace, stability and regional development through cross-border cooperation and people-to-people contacts. They also highlighted the unique structure of Barents cooperation, involving

national, regional and local levels, and how it serves as a role model for successful regional cooperation.

Talking about the young people of the Barents region, the speakers established that they must be given the same opportunities as other young people in the member countries, despite the specific challenges of the region.

This requires that they are invited to play an active role in policy-making and the shaping of their own future. The need for indigenous participation was also stressed.

One of the biggest problems the region is dealing with is urbanisation. People are leaving rural areas as well as large regional cities to settle in capital areas and other parts of the member countries. Youth representative Katarina Lindmark described a young generation eager to leave home and explore the world. At the same time, many foster a deep love for their home region and would consider returning to it in the future. This requires the Barents to remain an attractive region through different stages of life, providing good education and work opportunities and accessible transportation.

Work and education

During the panel debate, it was pointed out that the business sector of the region is having trouble filling available positions. At the same time, young people experience a lack of opportunities, feeling that the labour market is closed to them due to insufficient skills and lack of work experience. This discrepancy shows that it is necessary to closer integrate education and the labour market to ensure that the needs and expectations of employers are met. A concrete solution suggested from the audience was to encourage more business internship positions and professional training, enabling employers to be matched with potential employees and young people to acquire experience. Another proposal voiced during both the panel debate and the later group discussions was the establishment of a platform for young entrepreneurs, where they could share experiences and receive advice, support and mentoring from successful regional business owners.

Initiatives such as internships and entrepreneurial platforms could be designed as cross-border projects, presenting participants with valuable

international experience. Increased cross-border cooperation was also brought up during discussions about education. More exchange programmes would give young people the possibility to learn about the history, culture and living conditions of neighbouring countries and thus further strengthen cooperation on a people-to-people level.

It was also proposed that this could take the form of increased academic exchange, for example providing opportunities for international collaboration among graduates and post-graduates. This led to further discussion about differences in educational systems and the need for credits from each member state to be valid and easily translatable in the others.

Infrastructure

While most were positive to increasing and strengthening cross-border cooperation, as well as labour and academic mobility, it was also acknowledged that this presented some obvious practical issues. The lack of sufficient intraregional infrastructure and difficulties travelling between countries were the two main problems. Visa-free travel within the region or a unique Barents passport were proposed by the audience as solutions to the latter. Regarding the former, several planned infrastructure projects were mentioned, such as the Arctic railway, that would further integrate the Barents region with national capitals and the continent. However, it was suggested that such projects did in fact not solve the real infrastructural issues of the region. National transport corridors are already, to a large extent, in place. What is needed instead is cross-border west-east transportation, which would allow for the closer integration of the Barents and its establishment as a coherent region. In the long term, this would also facilitate the development and strengthening of Barents cooperation, as accessible travel opportunities would allow for closer people-to-people contacts. It was also suggested that it would have a positive effect on intraregional business and trade.

Considering the infrastructure of the region, it is however important to not focus exclusively on traditional infrastructure, but to also keep in mind its digital infrastructure. The internet has changed and continues to change the way people work and study, making it possible to live in one place while working for a company or studying at a university located somewhere else. However, to fully benefit from this technological

development, increased flexibility was requested from employers, both in the public and the business sector. It was also pointed out that social media have further helped bridge the vast geographical distances of the region, allowing for closer and more enduring people-to-people contacts.

Environment

Having one of the most vulnerable ecosystems in the world, environmental issues – along with the abovementioned economic and social issues – are among the greatest challenges facing the Barents region. Participants in the group discussion on the environment agreed that real action is needed on regionally important adaptation aspects and mitigation. New technology was also discussed as an instrument in raising awareness about environmental issues. A common database with open and accessible environmental data from the entire Barents region was proposed. The group also came up with their own vision of user-friendly and sustainable waste management, where recycling would be accessible locally, even in remote areas.

Illustrating how the challenges facing the region are interconnected and how solving one issue might result in further problems down the road, it was pointed out that the development of new infrastructure, new sources of energy, tourism or industry must be approached in a sustainable and responsible way so that no damage is done to the environment, biodiversity or indigenous peoples and their traditional livelihoods.

Follow-up

The input and suggestions from the conference will be taken forward and discussed in the Barents Euro-Arctic Working Groups and further developed into recommendations. The Joint Working Group on Youth will coordinate the process. Based on these recommendations, the Swedish Chairmanship will define future strategic priorities to be presented at the ministerial meeting in the second half of 2019, in conjunction with the handover of the Chairmanship to Norway.