



BARENTS YOUTH PROGRAM

2025-2027

WWW.BARENTSYOUTH.ORG

FOREWORD

In a world often divided, the Barents Region stands as a testament to the strength of cooperation, built through generations and across borders. Here, unity is not just an aspiration but a living bond that shapes our shared landscapes, our shared futures. It is in this spirit that we look to our youth, not simply as tomorrow's leaders, but as essential voices today—voices that have helped shape this very program through their vision, energy, and commitment to a thriving Barents.

The Barents Youth Program 2025-2027 is a blend of ideas, drawn directly from the hearts and minds of our young people. At the Annual Event, Generation Barents 2024, they gathered from across the region, bringing forward their insights, their dreams, and their dedication to building a brighter future. Their hands and hearts have crafted a plan that transcends borders, ensuring that youth engagement is not only encouraged but is at the very centre of our regional development.

Through this program, we celebrate the diversity and resilience of our communities. Here, in the openness of our shared North, young people build bridges in culture, sports, health, education, environment, entrepreneurship, human rights, equality, Indigenous advocacy, and international relations. Together, they develop skills, foster respect, and enrich the fabric of our societies, strengthening them for generations to come.

In these pages lies a promise—to honour and amplify the voices of our youth, to cherish their contributions, and to walk forward in unity. Together, we light the path forward, forging a legacy of unity and resilience that echoes across generations.

Klajdi Dedej

Chair of the Barents Regional Youth Council (BRYC)

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

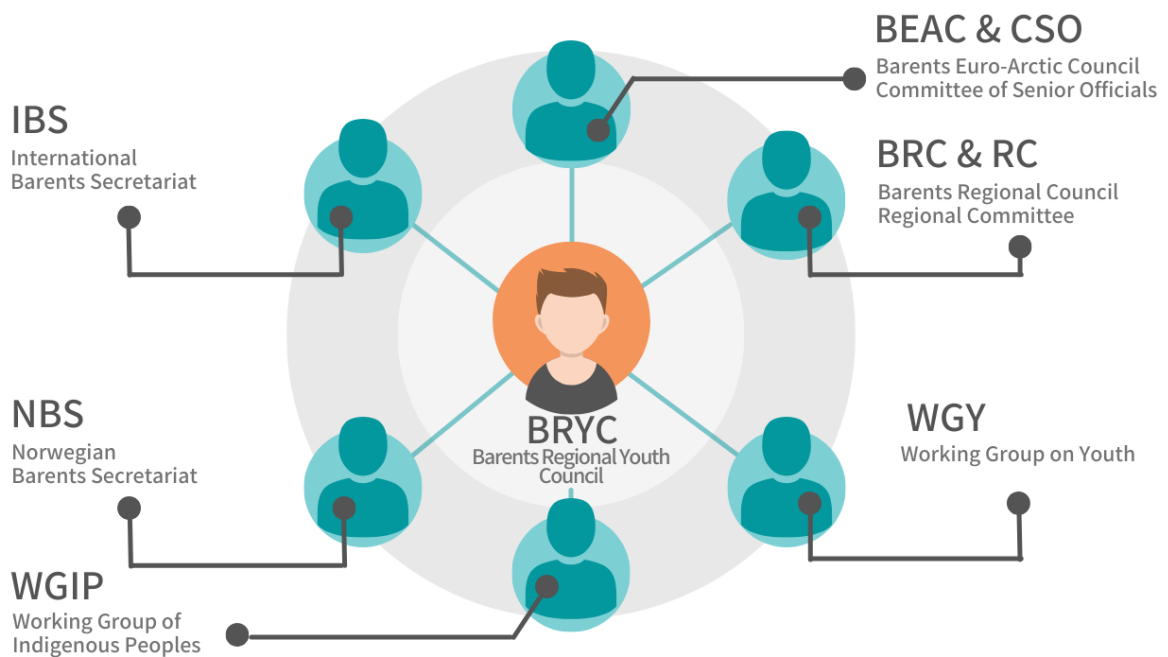
At its meeting on September 5, 2001, the Barents Regional Council decided to establish a youth program for the Barents Region, which resulted in the adoption of the first Barents Regional Youth Program in 2002. The Norwegian Ministry for Children and Family Affairs subsequently allocated funds for multilateral youth projects as part of this initiative. Originally set for a three-year duration, the program's success has led to its continued operation.

1.2 About the region

The Barents Region offers unique advantages, including clean water, a close connection to nature, vast forests, and opportunities for outdoor activities such as hunting and fishing. Many small communities boast diverse cultural and sports offerings, along with short distances between homes, workplaces, schools, and kindergartens, contributing to high quality of life and more leisure time for families. Children and young people represent a valuable resource and have an interest in the future development of the Barents Region. Their lives and experiences are as varied as those of youth across Europe.

Local cultures and perspectives of youth often remain overlooked, leading to misconceptions about their living conditions and the adequacy of services available to them. To ensure a sustainable population and foster regional democracy, an active youth policy in the Barents Region is essential. This policy aims to increase youth participation in decision-making processes, the labour market, and the economy. Core goals include enhancing the attractiveness of the region for young people, improving their living conditions, promoting social inclusion, and developing sustainable cooperative structures among youth (based on the report "I am fire, but my environment is the lighter" by Tomi Kiilakoski, 2016).

1.3 Important structures for youth cooperation in the Barents Region



The Barents Regional Youth Council (BRYC) was established in January 2004 to facilitate active youth participation in decision making processes within the Barents Cooperation. It includes two youth representatives (main and deputy) from each member county of the Barents Cooperation, along with a representative for indigenous peoples. BRYC is financed by the member counties and reports to **the Barents Regional Committee (RC)**.

The Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) serves as the forum for intergovernmental cooperation concerning the region. BEAC, chaired by Norway, Finland, and Sweden, meets at the Foreign Ministers' level, with **the Committee of Senior Officials (CSO)** organising its work between the ministerial meetings.

The Barents Regional Council (BRC) comprises 9 member counties and a representative of indigenous peoples, with Nordland County chairing the council for the period 2025-2026. Established alongside BEAC in 1993, BRC supports cooperation and development in the Barents Region.

The Working Group on Youth (WGY) formed in 2011, combines the Working Group on Youth Policy and the Regional Working Group on Youth Issues, consisting of representatives from ministries responsible for youth policy in each member country, as well as BRYC and the Norwegian Barents Secretariat.

The International Barents Secretariat (IBS) serves as BRYC's secretariat through a dedicated adviser and supports multilateral activities within BEAC and BRC. IBS aims to enhance coherence in the Barents Cooperation, providing administrative support to BRYC and ensuring its standing alongside other working groups.

The Norwegian Barents Secretariat (NBS) was until 2021 BRYC's secretariat and continues today to administer Norwegian grants for regional development and cross-border cooperation, including multilateral youth initiatives in the Barents Region.

The Working Group of Indigenous Peoples (WGIP), established in 1995, works to secure the rights and cultural foundations of indigenous peoples in the Barents Region, including youth cooperation. The WGIP appoints the indigenous youth representative to BRYC, who participates in both BRYC and WGIP meetings.

2. AIMS AND PERSPECTIVES

2.1 The purpose of the program

The purpose of the program is to provide a framework for a more attractive Barents Region to young people by:

- Improving living conditions for youth in the region.
- Increasing youth participation in general activities of the BEAC networks.
- Having more focus on the youth dimension in all priority areas within the cooperation.
- Ensuring youth involvement in strategic thinking and policy making within the Barents Cooperation.
- Strengthening Barents identity among youth in the Barents Region by establishing contact across cultural and geographical borders.

2.2 Target group

The program targets young people residing in Barents Cooperation regions, including youth organisations, leaders, workers, project managers, NGOs, and youth-focused structures. The program also welcomes young people from neighbouring regions and international youth networks, building bridges that extend the Barents influence globally. The program offers opportunities for youth to:

- Realise project ideas.
- Engage in Barents Cooperation.
- Contribute to regional and global development.
- Ensure youth voices shape Barents policies.
- Build international relations and collaborate beyond the region.

2.3 Yearly Priorities 2025-2027

Within the framework of the general objectives and priorities, the Barents Youth Program will focus on specific yearly priorities. These priorities are selected based on the goals of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, the Barents Regional Council, and BRYC.

In **2025**, priority will be given to projects and initiatives focusing on:

- Sustainable forestry and environmental protection.
- Climate change awareness and youth action.
- Indigenous perspectives on natural resource management.
- International relations and the future of the Barents Cooperation.

In **2026**, priority will be given to projects and initiatives focusing on:

- Culture and arts for youth empowerment.
- Youth health and well-being through sports and activities.
- Human rights and gender equality in cultural expressions.

In **2027**, priority will be given to projects and initiatives focusing on:

- Community development and social innovation.
- Youth entrepreneurship and career readiness.
- Education for sustainable regional growth.

The Barents Youth Program emphasises the importance of promoting synergies across Arctic regions. Involving diverse Arctic stakeholders and networks in these priority areas will amplify our impact and foster a stronger, unified dialogue on the challenges and opportunities facing youth across the Barents and Arctic regions.

2.4 Strategy for youth involvement

As outlined in the 11th Barents Parliamentary Conference declaration, hosted by the Finnish Parliament in Rovaniemi in 2023, investment in youth cooperation is crucial, as today's youth will shape tomorrow's world. Youth involvement and participation must be ensured at all levels, with a focus on fostering dialogue and cross-border cooperation.

Building on these commitments, the Barents Youth Program 2025-2027 aims to:

- Ensure meaningful youth involvement at all levels of Barents Cooperation, from local projects to regional decision-making.
- Strengthen youth participation in existing structures and working groups.
- Actively include youth in shaping the future of the Barents Region through collaboration with regional, national, and international partners.



Generation Barents – Bodø, Nordland, Norway – September 2024.

2.5 Factors to ensure implementation of the Barents Youth Program 2025-2027:

Cooperation between Structures

Collaboration between Barents structures, including BEAC and regional committees, is crucial for program success. The involvement of the Barents Secretariats ensures a smooth flow of information and continuity.

Youth Participation

BRYC's role remains central in involving youth across all Barents Cooperation areas. Regional support for BRYC ensures youth perspectives are integrated into decision-making processes.

Networks and Dialogue

Platforms for youth to meet, exchange ideas, and collaborate are vital for mutual understanding and the development of new projects. Promoting Barents Cooperation's common goals is key.

Information

To enhance the program's impact, clear communication on youth empowerment, project opportunities, and cooperation goals should be shared, especially through digital platforms like www.barentsyouth.org.

Funding

To ensure effective program implementation, participating regions will contribute 6,000 euros annually, with in-kind contributions covering local costs. Additional funding sources include Erasmus+ and regional funds.

Projects and Volunteer Work

Cross-border youth projects are fundamental for skill-building in leadership, project management, and international relations, empowering youth and driving regional development.

3. PRIORITY AREAS

Eight areas of priority have been chosen for this program to address the challenges faced by youth in the Barents Region: (1) Culture, sports, and health; (2) Education, career, and entrepreneurship; (3) Human rights and equality; (4) Environment; (5) Community development; (6) Transport and infrastructure; (7) Indigenous peoples; and (8) International relations and the future of Barents Cooperation.

These priority areas reflect the diverse needs and aspirations of young people in our region, as identified during our discussions and activities, particularly highlighted by the participants at BRYC's Annual Event 2024, Generation Barents. Young leaders actively contributed insights and innovative ideas that will shape our collective approach to fostering cooperation and understanding among youth across borders.

BRYC works towards:

- Organising and participating in networking events, seminars, and workshops.
- Facilitating cooperation and exchange of experiences across various sectors.
- Promoting initiatives aimed at improving mental health and well-being among youth.
- Supporting youth projects focused on culture, education, environmental awareness, and community development.
- Strengthening connections among NGOs and youth organisations to empower active citizenship.

3.1 Culture, sports and health

Culture provides an excellent platform for young people to meet, form connections, and lay the groundwork for extended cooperation across all areas of the Barents Cooperation. It is essential for young people to have knowledge of the diverse cultures within the Barents Region and to have opportunities to participate in cultural exchanges.

The traditional cultures of both minority and majority groups must be preserved, and traditional livelihoods should be supported so that young people have the chance to study, live, and work within their native regions. Furthermore, it is valuable to harness the knowledge and artistic expression of youth to address societal challenges; however, their perspectives must be actively listened to, understood, and taken into consideration.

In 2026, Oulu and Northern Ostrobothnia are designated as a European Capital of Culture, a significant achievement both regionally and internationally. This status brings an exceptional opportunity for the entire Barents Region to highlight cultural diversity, heritage, and creative innovation. Since this initiative places young people and their needs at its core, it is expected to offer youth improved opportunities to participate in cultural projects, develop their skills, and strengthen connections both regionally and internationally.

In the field of sports, efforts should focus on increasing multilateral activities, creating new opportunities, and providing a broader range of sports for young people. Networking and exchange programs between different organisations are essential tools for achieving this goal. Building stronger networks between sports organisations and facilitating exchanges are key to this effort.

Among youth in the Barents Region, issues such as alcohol and drug abuse, as well as mental and physical health challenges—including sexually transmitted diseases and depression—are prevalent and must be addressed. Access to healthcare needs to be easy and sufficient for youth living in the region and should be improved so that young people can receive the support and

treatment they need. This includes raising awareness of available services, reducing barriers to access, and providing culturally sensitive care that recognises the unique challenges faced by youth in the Barents Region.

To tackle these challenges, it is crucial to offer diverse hobbies, sports and recreational opportunities that encourage young people to lead active lifestyles and provide healthy ways to spend their free time while fostering social connections.

BRYC works towards:

- Highlighting Oulu's Capital of Culture year as a model of creative economic growth, tourism and local services.
- Cooperation and exchange of experience on culture, sports and health-related issues.
- Exchange programs for health workers in the Barents Region.
- Initiatives aimed at improving mental health in the Barents Region.
- Youth projects in the field of culture, sports and health.

3.2 Education, career and entrepreneurship

Education, career, and entrepreneurship are crucial for sustainable communities and thriving demographics. Education equips people with skills for meaningful careers, while entrepreneurship drives innovation and job creation. Together, they empower individuals, reduce inequality, and support economic stability, thereby laying the foundation for resilient, self-sustaining communities.

Non-formal education is a great tool to involve young people in activities and deliver important messages to them. Non-formal education attracts not only active and social people, who are willing to stay on the stage, but also those who prefer to stay in the background. Active collaboration between formal and non-formal education, as well as the use of new creative learning methodologies, is a good way to bring some visible and fast results.

Young people emphasise that they need good study and scholarship opportunities, which will add to the diversity of education. Both are important factors in shaping a local society that attracts more youth, boosts population growth, builds regional competence and promotes regional development in general. Decentralisation of jobs in foreign policy is also a way to create attractive workplaces in the North.

In recent years, society has embraced digital technology as an important communication and education tool. As we are witnessing rapid development in this sector, we also see the need to focus on digital knowledge and digital skills as a priority area for education. Furthermore, digital solutions open new possibilities for remote education and careers which allows youth to remain in their home area/area of choice.

A fulfilling career is often a key factor in deciding where to settle. Creating forums that connect students and businesses are therefore crucial. These platforms help bridge the gap between education and the job market, offering opportunities for students to engage with potential employers, and for local companies to discover talented graduates. By fostering collaboration, such initiatives not only boost local employment but also contribute to long-term regional growth and community development.

BRYC works towards:

- Cooperation and exchange of experience within the research and education sector.
- More opportunities for young people in the Barents Region to learn foreign languages (from another Barents country).
- Cooperation between universities and schools.
- Establishing a joint trainee scheme in the Barents Region.
- Activities and training courses that promote business and innovation.
- Youth projects in the field of education and entrepreneurship.
- Creating forums and platforms that connect youth with potential local and regional employers.

3.3 Human rights and equality

Human rights and democracy are essential priorities for Barents youth cooperation. Addressing various forms of inequality and discrimination requires bringing attention to topics such as anthropology, communication, human rights, the internet, the environment, Indigenous peoples and minorities, and children's rights among today's youth.

Our goal is to support a generation that understands and embodies the values of cooperation, tolerance, reliability, fairness, and respect. This includes raising awareness of critical human rights and democracy issues in our region and formulating policy recommendations to improve the current situation. Strengthening the network of young professionals in the Barents Region will not only build capacity in the field of human rights and democracy but also inspire younger generations to contribute innovative ideas for a sustainable future.

Human rights education is crucial for fostering fairness and equality. It empowers individuals to stand against injustice, promotes empathy, and encourages active citizenship. By understanding their rights and those of others, people help build a more just and respectful society.

BRYC works towards:

- Conducting youth-led initiatives aimed at raising awareness of human rights and equality issues across the region.
- Developing programs that promote equality and inclusion, specifically targeting marginalised groups.
- Facilitating cooperation between stakeholders and organisations working on human rights and equality initiatives.

3.4 Environment

The environment is a significant concern for young people, as it is part of our heritage. The nature of the Barents Region requires special attention because it is both rich in resources and highly vulnerable. The Barents Region is the most densely populated and industrialised part of the Arctic and sub-Arctic, and it faces major environmental challenges, with the impacts of climate change being increasingly visible. The rising temperatures, the permafrost melting and the wildlife populations being endangered directly affect the Barents Sea, where warming waters and changing currents threaten marine biodiversity and traditional livelihood. Young people can make a significant contribution to this work.

Involving youth in hands-on fieldwork strengthens their deeper connection to the environment. Ensuring that teachers have up-to-date expertise and knowledge is crucial for effective environmental education and can facilitate the democratisation and dissemination of science. Addressing environmental topics at a young age helps instil sustainable practices early on. Utilising the knowledge of indigenous experts can provide valuable insights and traditional practices that benefit environmental education. Simplifying the complexity of educational issues and state regulations can make it easier to implement effective environmental education programs.

By focusing on these practices, we can ensure that the younger generation is well-equipped to contribute to sustainable development and environmental stewardship. Development in the Barents Region must be sustainable. Urban and rural development, as well as a balance of power, are crucial factors for an equitable transition to the future, especially when rural areas are left underdeveloped in favour of larger urban centres. By involving all stakeholders, particularly youth who are more attuned to sustainable practices, we can ensure that the transition to sustainable energy systems benefit all communities, bridging the gap between urban and rural areas and promoting a more balanced and just development.

BRYC works towards:

- Cooperation between environmental organisations and other relevant stakeholders.
- Building local knowledge, skills, and awareness to enable communities to independently address environmental issues.
- Youth events aimed at raising awareness of environmental issues
- Projects and initiatives focusing on environment and climate change.
- Exchange of experience on environmental topics.

3.5 Community development

Throughout history, youth around the world have demonstrated the passion and the energy to ignite social movements. Experience demonstrates that young people in general are eager to participate in activities that improve their communities and their own lives. What is often missing is not motivation and interest from young people, but rather structured opportunities that help young people to develop their skills, knowledge, and values. These are necessary for building strong communities and fostering democratic, participatory cultures. Therefore, it is important to strengthen civil society through promotion of active citizenship, volunteer work and establishment of NGOs.

The participatory aspect of membership in NGOs contributes to a deeper understanding of the forces that shape governments and societies, leading to greater transparency, accountability, and improved governance. Empowering young people to play an active role in community development allows democracy to evolve according to the needs and traditions of diverse political cultures.

Furthermore, young people need to be given the opportunity to study, live, and work in the areas where they grew up. Young people should also be consulted when local problems are being identified, and their views must be heard, understood, and taken into consideration. Youth councils are effective

initiatives that actively represent the voices of young people in community and decision-making bodies.

BRYC works towards:

- Promotion of volunteer work and civic engagement.
- Creating platforms to inform about upcoming youth activities in the Barents Region.
- Preserving youth councils and organisations that actively engage in society and community.
- Promotion of regions and settlements in both urban and rural areas.

3.6 Transport and infrastructure

Infrastructure and transport are crucial for youth in the Barents Region. By developing new and improving existing transport routes, we can enhance the well-being of young people and facilitate their participation in local life. The aim is to improve mobility by developing public transportation options, such as buses, trains, and planes, particularly for rural residents across the whole Barents Region.

Environmental sustainability is also a critical consideration, ensuring that transportation systems promote ecological well-being and meet community needs. The involvement of all stakeholders, especially youth, is vital for the success of the program, as young people are more attuned to sustainable practices, and listening to their voices will help us create a better future for the Barents Region.

Collaboration and the exchange of experiences among transport and infrastructure stakeholders are essential for finding innovative solutions to the needs of young people.

BRYC works towards:

- Better mobility to get to where you want within the Barents Region.

- Network or system for carpooling.
- Enhanced and sustainable infrastructure.
- Improved social life for youth in the community.
- Easier access to neighbouring municipalities and neighbouring countries.
- More opportunities for youth exchanges in the region.

3.7 Indigenous peoples

BRYC's aim is to foster strong self-esteem among all minority group in the area and to promote awareness of Indigenous populations among the majority. This includes establishing youth information centres dedicated to Indigenous issues and supporting initiatives that aim to eliminate prejudice and negative attitudes towards Indigenous peoples.

It is essential to ensure fair representation of Indigenous communities, acknowledging the diversity among groups. Each region within the Barents area has unique characteristics and challenges, and therefore, representation must reflect this diversity. For example, the Sámi people speak nine distinct languages, and a single representative cannot adequately voice the perspectives and needs of all these groups.

A close collaboration between youth, represented by the Barents Regional Youth Council (BRYC), and Indigenous peoples, represented by the Working Group on Indigenous Peoples (WGIP), is vital for achieving these aims. Recognising and respecting the presence and role of various Indigenous communities fosters a sense of belonging and empowerment.

BRYC works towards:

- Exchange of experiences concerning challenges faced by Indigenous peoples and their unique regional contexts.
- Strengthening cooperation between Indigenous organisations, particularly among Indigenous youth.

- Projects and initiatives aimed at promoting the cultures, languages, traditional livelihoods, and educational opportunities of Indigenous communities in the Barents Region.
- Ensuring that the WGIP, together with BRYC, shall continue having representation in all Barents Working Groups as well as in the BRC and CSO.

3.8 International relations and future of the Barents Cooperation

Youth international relations are vital for building a more peaceful, inclusive, and sustainable world. When young people from diverse communities collaborate, they exchange ideas, challenge biases, and develop a shared understanding of global issues like climate change, social justice, and economic inequality. This cross-cultural dialogue fosters mutual respect and empowers young leaders to work together on solutions that benefit all. By engaging youth in international cooperation, we invest in a generation that values unity, innovation, and resilience, creating a stronger foundation for global progress and stability.

The future of the Barents Cooperation relies on the ability to foster international relations and expand networks beyond the region. For BRYC, this means to actively engage with youth and organisations in neighbouring regions and beyond, to ensure that diverse voices are included in dialogues and our shared future. BRYC aims to focus on expanding our relations to ensure a diverse range of participants in our activities, marketing job opportunities between regions and navigating educational programs. Establishing an opportunity database will serve as a valuable resource for youth, providing information about available options in the region. By creating accessible and approachable events, we can attract newcomers and those less familiar with the Barents youth landscape.

The representation of the youth in the Barents Region must reflect diverse socio-economic backgrounds, age groups, fields of work and minorities in the area. The activities of the Barents' youth should be accessible to different people regardless of previous knowledge and experience.

BRYC works towards:

- Improving the marketing and visibility of Barents opportunities and activities to youth in the area through flyers, social media, storytelling, school visits and local representation.
- Accessible and clear language in Barents material.
- Easily approachable events.
- Ensuring diverse participation in events from different geographical and socio-economic backgrounds, age groups, minorities and fields of work.



From left: Klajdi Dedej (BRYC Chair and BRYC Representative from Västerbotten County, Sweden), Viljami Rauhala (BRYC Representative from Lapland County, Finland), Liina Mäkalä (BRYC Representative from North Ostrobothnia County, Finland).

4. CONCLUSION

As we stand at the threshold of a new chapter, we offer our heartfelt gratitude to every individual who has dedicated their time, energy, and wisdom to shaping the Barents Youth Program 2025-2027. A special thank you goes to BRYC, the Committee of Senior Officials, the Barents Regional Council, the Norwegian Barents Secretariat, the International Barents Secretariat, the Working Group on Youth, and all who have guided this process with unwavering commitment.

The voices of the young people of Generation Barents have played a pivotal role in shaping this program, and their contributions will serve as the foundation — a source of hope — for the region's future. In this shared creation, we have built more than just plans and strategies; we have crafted a dream — a collective vision of what is possible when we unite in purpose and hope.

As the world faces challenges and uncertainty, the need for cooperation has never been more urgent. The difficulties may be many, yet in this fragile moment, the greatest strength lies in our unity — our shared humanity, our shared future. It is now, more than ever, that the youth of the Barents Region must be given the space to lead, to speak, and to shape the world they will inherit.

We call upon all stakeholders of the Barents Cooperation to embrace and implement this program, standing together as stewards of a future that belongs to us all. A future that is not just for us, but for generations yet to come. A future that will be written with the hands of youth, whose dreams and actions will carry us forward.

May this program be a living testament to the strength of our cooperation, the depth of our shared commitment, and the boundless potential of the young voices who will lead us into tomorrow.

Oulu, 10th November 2024.



BRYC
BARENTS REGIONAL YOUTH COUNCIL