



Priorities of North Karelia's Presidency 2023–2025

*Barents Regional Council and
Regional Committee*

THE BARENTS
EURO-ARCTIC REGION

NORTH KARELIA
Presidency
2023–2025



Photo: Jarno Artika



Greetings from the Region Mayor

The 30th anniversary of regional Barents cooperation was celebrated in early 2023 in a situation where, due to Russia's unjustified and unacceptable war of aggression against Ukraine, all cooperation with Russia had been frozen. On 18.9.2023, Russia announced its resignation from the Barents Euro-Arctic Council. It was decided to continue Barents cooperation between the northern regions of Finland, Sweden and Norway, in working groups in different fields and at the national level, all of which considered it necessary and useful to continue cooperation.

It has now been agreed that North Karelia will hold the Presidency of the Barents Regional Council in 2023–2025. Our goal is to create a new kind of model for a new kind of situation.

Russia's war of aggression has had multiple impacts on the economy of the Barents region, transport and logistics connections, the energy sector, cross-border cooperation between people and cultural exchange. The effects of these changes will continue in the coming years. In this situation, we need a shared vision of where the world is and what our role in it is. Only then can we address common challenges together.

In this changing situation, it has been an excellent opportunity to consider what are the themes and measures of regional cooperation with which we can best support and promote the stable and sustainable

development of the northern regions. I want to thank the representatives of the Barents Committee of Senior Officials, the Regional Council and Committee, working groups and stakeholders for their valuable suggestions and views in preparing the program for North Karelia's Presidency 2023–2025.

The Presidency Program has also considered, among other things, the guidelines of the EU's Joint Arctic Policy Communication 2021, the European Green Deal Strategy, and the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region 2009 and its updated 2021 Action Plan. In addition, the policies of the Barents Program 2019–2023, which steers Barents regional cooperation, and the Barents Youth Program 2021–2024 have been utilised.

The four priorities of our Presidency are the green transition, transport and logistics, people-to-people cooperation (culture, sport, health) and economic cooperation. The cross-cutting themes of all activities are youth, the Sámi people, and the environment and climate.

Let's work together to make the northern regions of the Barents an even better and more attractive place to live, study, work, and do business. Through cooperation, we build a common future!

Markus Hirvonen

Chair of the Barents Regional Council
Region Mayor of North Karelia

Presidency Priorities

1 *The Green Transition in the Barents Region will be implemented in an economically, socially and ecologically sustainable manner*

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is accelerating the green transition also in northern regions. The aim is to phase out fossil-fuel-based activities, use natural resources sustainably and protect biodiversity. In addition, the aim is to ensure the economic vitality of the northern regions and to invest in developing sectors, such as green energy, hydrogen, the service sector and the circular economy.

During Finland's Presidency of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council in 2021–2023, an action plan for the green transition in the northern region was completed, which identified bottlenecks in green transition investments in the northern region and proposed concrete measures to eliminate them. The proposed solutions require action at the national, regional, and municipal levels, as well as action by companies, educational institutions, and other organisations. The planned investments must consider the opinions of the local population, especially in the Sámi areas so that the operating conditions of the traditional

livelihoods, lifestyles and cultural practices of the Sámi are not jeopardised. In addition, the unique and vulnerable northern nature must be taken into account.

During North Karelia's Presidency, cooperation between regions, working groups and actors will monitor and learn from the green transition measures in different regions. Organising events and implementing actions such as solutions to the green transition, availability of skilled labour and related training issues, joint marketing of northern regions as comfortable and safe living, studying, and working environments, regional land use planning and smooth cross-border transport connections. On the other hand, actions will be taken to promote the socio-ecological and cultural sustainability and the protection of biodiversity of the green transition action plan. In addition, the implementation of green transition projects by regional actors will be supported through regional authorities' financial instruments.



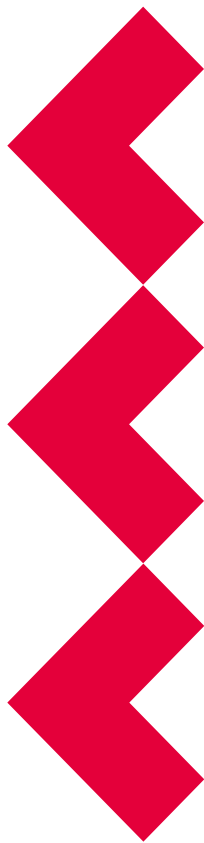


Photo: VisitKarelia



North Karelia

13

MUNICIPALITIES,
OF WHICH 5 ARE TOWNS

5

JOENSUU

REGIONAL CAPITAL

HELSINKI



FLIGHT TIME 1 h



BY TRAIN 4,5 h



DISTANCE 438 km



2 *The rapidly developing North needs smooth transport and logistics connections*

A permanent challenge for the Barents region is the long distances both within the region and to the main markets, as well as undeveloped transport connections, especially in the east-west direction. In North Karelia, up to a third of the population feels that poor transport connections hinder mobility, and the situation is likely to be similar in many other Barents regions.

The tense geopolitical situation creates a need to analyse and plan the transport and logistics of goods and raw materials and to prepare new alternative transport routes also for emergency conditions. Ensuring the security of supply, safe and effortless movement of people during working and leisure time, and the need to reduce transport emissions require smooth rail, road, and air connections both within and between countries. International accessibility is important from the perspective of both foreign trade and tourism.

It has been estimated that, as a result of climate change, tourism to the north will attract more tourists and functional rail connections will be needed for this. Growing tourism cannot be built on air traffic alone. Environmentally conscious tourists prefer emission-free rail transport.

Especially in Finland, the challenge is the already high maintenance backlog of the railway and road network, insufficient funding for the transport system and the increasing effects of climate change on the condition of the road network.

The need for smoother transport, telecommunications and logistics connections has grown, as the north attracts a record amount of investment. According to a report commissioned by the Lapland Chamber of Commerce, the

investment potential of the regions of Northern Finland, Northern Sweden and Northern Norway has grown tremendously and amounts to as much as €187 billion by 2035. Of this, investments in the green transition amount to €128 billion.

Railways: North Karelia aims to advocate for enhancing railway capacity and coverage, as outlined in the action plan for the green transition in the northern region. This is important not only from the perspective of industrial transport but also from the perspective of tourism. For North Karelia, it is particularly crucial to invest in the planning and implementation of the railway corridor Imatra–Joensuu–Kontiomäki (Kajaani)–Oulu–Tornio–Haparanda–Narvik (Norway).

Roads: The condition of roads and transport connections have a major impact on the vitality of areas and the everyday functioning of residents. North Karelia considers it important to improve the condition of roads, including the lower road network and cross-border roads. This requires continuous joint representation of interests and cooperation between national and regional transport authorities.

Air connections: Together with other regions and their operators, North Karelia wants to secure the continuation of existing air connections. At the same time, the need for and opportunities for new flight connections in the form of electric flying, for example, must also be investigated.

A concrete tool for achieving the objectives of the priority is the Interreg Aurora project “New North” (9/2023–8/2026), which prepares concrete studies, analyses and recommendations for different modes of transport. All Barents regions are involved in the project.

3 *Cooperation between people focuses on cultural exchange and young people*

People-to-people cooperation has always been central to Barents cooperation. During the Presidency of North Karelia, we want to promote cultural exchanges, sports exchanges among young people and the mental and physical health of young people.

North Karelia considers it important to expand cultural exchange, as well as the networking and mobility of actors. To achieve this, coordination between cultural operators in the northern regions can be increased, and synergies with residency actors and networks can be sought. There is a particular need for cultural exchange and the mobility of actors now that the isolation caused by the coronavirus is over. Additionally, with Russia's withdrawal from Barents cooperation, cultural cooperation between the northern regions of Finland, Sweden and Norway will intensify.

Increasing youth sports exchanges is seen as an important goal to enhance contacts and well-being among young people in the regions. Pioneering work in this area has been carried out by the joint project "Barents Sports" of all four previous

Barents countries. Its mission is to organise and promote international sports exchanges for young people aged 15 and 25, to support their growth and development, and to create opportunities to get to know peers and cultures from neighbouring countries. The core activities are the Barents Summer and Winter Games, held in alternate years, which bring together up to a thousand young people to compete in about 30 different sports. North Karelia supports the continuation of this great event tradition. We want to explore whether North Karelia could join Barents Sports, which includes all other Barents regions except North Karelia.

In addition to the physical health of young people, more should be invested in promoting their mental health. In particular, action is needed to improve access to mental health services for young people and to prevent social exclusion and discrimination. North Karelia wants to support the concrete measures that are planned based on the 7th Framework Programme for Cooperation on Health and Related Social Issues in the Barents Region 2024–2027.



Photo: Juha Kauppinen



Photo: Jarno Artika

ARIROCK

ILU
SAARI
ROCK

North Karelia

162 000

INHABITANTS



26 700

STUDENTS



Photo: Jarno Artika

Photo: Annika Sorjonen

North Karelia

23 000

AREA km²

89



FOREST %

4 900



LAKES

24 500



SUMMER COTTAGES

4 *Economic cooperation in the Northern Regions deepens*

Deepening economic cooperation between the Barents regions and companies operating there as part of Barents cooperation will be an important priority during North Karelia's Presidency.

According to the SWOT analysis of the Barents Program 2019–2023, the strengths of the region's economy include rich natural resources and renewable energy sources, high-quality research and education, sustainable basic industries, and a shared commitment to reduce the impacts of climate change. Strengths are further enhanced by the strong increase in green transition investments in hydrogen technology, carbon-neutral steel production, wind power, battery industry and mining industry in recent years. The opportunities are further increased by the growing interest in the Arctic region.

According to the Green Transition Action Plan for the Northern Regions (2023), bottlenecks to investments and business in the

green transition include a lack of labour, the unpredictability of the regulatory environment, the slow and complex planning and permitting processes, and conflicts between different interest groups, including local residents and industry.

Good and comprehensive studies have been carried out on the opportunities, challenges and proposed solutions for cooperation in the Barents region, including economic cooperation. **Now is the time to start implementing their recommendations.** The northern regions have long experience of regional cooperation. **Now these networks and cooperation structures must be activated for more productive cooperation.** For example, the Chambers of Commerce of the Barents region can play a key role in increasing trade in goods and services between regions. Within the framework of the Barents structures, its actors can organise **joint events and webinars** where regional actors can discuss and agree directly on concrete projects.



Cross-cutting themes

Three themes cut across all the activities of the Presidency.

Youth: The Barents region's most valuable resource is young people with a natural interest in developing the region. It is important to support the "rooting" of young people in the northern regions – the desire to stay or move back to the region. Involving young people and integrating their perspectives into all regional cooperation is vital for the development and sustainability of the Barents region. It is particularly important to support young people's networking, capacity building and opportunities to influence issues that are important to them in cooperation with the Barents Regional Youth Council (BRYC). North Karelia also wants to support the preparation of a new Barents Youth Program for 2025–2028.

Sámi people: The Sámi in Finland, Sweden and Norway are active actors that enliven the Barents region in many ways. Their Sámi culture, Sámi language and livelihood bring a unique stamp to the area. The Sámi community enriches the social, cultural and linguistic landscape of the entire region. Strengthening the vitality of the Sámi languages, Sámi culture and way of life, as well as safeguarding the rights of Sámi livelihoods, is a joint task for all Barents actors. In North Karelia, we consider it important that the Sámi participate in the planning and implementation of the Presidency programme.

Nature and climate: The unique and vulnerable nature of the North, along with climate change and biodiversity loss, must be considered in all Barents cooperation activities. Climate change is a challenge for regions from social, economic and ecological perspectives. Without a healthy, diverse nature and effective measures to mitigate and adapt to climate change, we cannot ensure a safe and comfortable residential and living environment or sustainable business activities. In particular, livelihoods characterised by the exploitation of natural resources will face direct impacts as seasons and typical weather conditions change. These impacts will affect agriculture, forestry, reindeer husbandry and tourism, which are vital for the northern regions. Climate change also threatens the survival of the Sámi culture. To implement effective adaptation measures, it is crucial to recognise the special characteristics of the vast Barents region and to direct actions at the appropriate time and to the correct targets.





Finnmark

Troms

Vadsø

Kirkenes

Tromsø

Nordland

Bodø

Norrbotten

Lapland

Rovaniemi

Luleå

Västerbotten

Oulu Region

Oulu

Kainuu

Umeå

Kajaani

North Karelia

Joensuu

Norway

Sweden

Finland

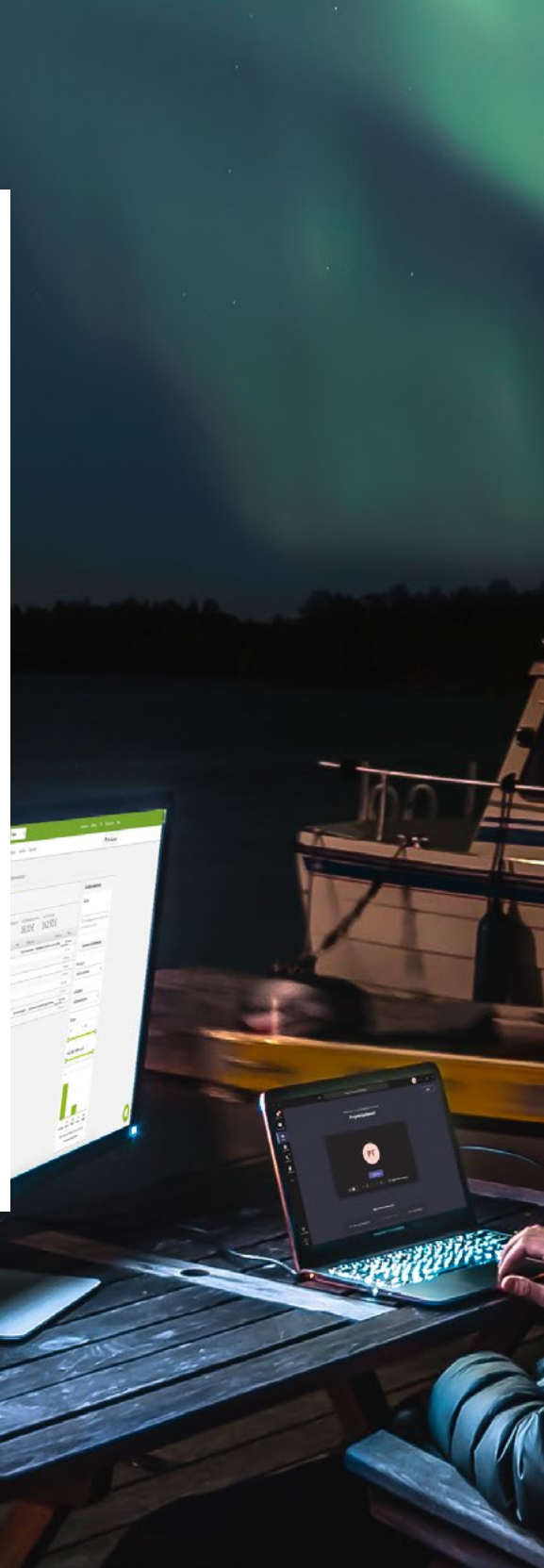
The nine northern regions of the Barents area in Finland, Sweden and Norway.

Other important topics of the Presidency

Cooperation among other northern forums: As the Barents region changes and Barents cooperation is renewed, coordinating and collaborating with other northern cooperation forums becomes crucial. These include the Network of Northern Sparsely Populated Areas (NSPA), the Nordic Council of Ministers, the Northern Dimension and the North Calotte Council.

Evaluation of the Barents Working Groups' activities: In light of recent changes, a thorough evaluation of the working groups' activities is necessary. The last assessment occurred during the Västerbotten Presidency of the Barents Regional Council in 2019-2021. After the coronavirus years and Russia's withdrawal from Barents cooperation, now is an opportune moment to reassess the functions and effectiveness of all 12 sectoral working groups, making necessary adjustments to the working group structure to better support the goals and efficacy of Barents cooperation.

Enhancing engagement of regional leaders: When planning the need to change the structures and operations of Barents cooperation, regional officials and political leaders must participate more actively in the activities of the Barents Regional Council and in directing Barents cooperation towards matters important to the regions. North Karelia aims to activate regional decision-makers to participate in reforming Barents cooperation and increasing its impact.



North Karelia





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