

**Written contribution on behalf of the Russian Chairmanship
of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) 2007-2009
by Alexander Sverchkov,
Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation**

The Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) was established in 1993 in the Norwegian city of Kirkenes by the high representatives from Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Finland, Sweden and the European Commission. Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Canada, the Netherlands, Poland, the United States, France and Japan have the status of observer states.

The creation of a new international organization was the direct result of a turn in the international politics from confrontation and dividing lines to partnership. In the BEAC's founding Declaration its participants underlined that the broad cooperation in the Barents/Euro-Arctic region is a contribution to the process of building up a new European architecture, enhanced cooperation and integration in Europe. The activities of the Council are still an integral part of the multilateral cooperation on the continent, an important factor of the international security and stability.

The Barents Sea region is one of the most dynamically developing area in Europe. It is extremely rich in natural resources, which are of vital need for well being of the European continent. Modern industrial and scientific potential is concentrated here. Indigenous peoples with their unique way of life, culture and languages are the integral part of the region.

At the same time the severe climate conditions, ecological, social and economic problems, uneven development of transport infrastructure are characteristic for the region.

All these factors have determined a special role of the BEAC as the main instrument of joint efforts of the Member States for development of their part of the world, for solving urgent issues. The unique particular feature of the cooperation in the Council's framework is its double-level character – along with the governmental bodies, ministries, institutions, 13 regions of the Member States, united in the Barents regional council, are actively participating in the Council's activities. Such structure in combination with the typical for the BEAC unpoliticised, concrete result oriented work

allows to bring its activity as much as possible close to the needs of people living in the region.

The supreme body of the Council is its Ministerial Session that is convened every second year (annually before 2001) in the chairing country. The Session evaluates results of the joint work, determines priority spheres of the forthcoming activity, adopts joint Communiqué and elects a new Chairman of the Council. Chairmanship in the BEAC has the two-year rotation scheme. All the work of the Council and its bodies is consensus based.

At the 11-th BEAC Ministerial session held on 14-15 November 2007 in Rovaniemi (Finland) Russia took over the Chairmanship in the Council. The main priority in the Program of the Russian Chairmanship is to ensure sustainable development in the Barents Region with emphasis on social and economic factors that will go hand in hand with meeting environmental requirements, and support to indigenous peoples.

In this connection the important tasks are put forward, namely to provide the population of the region with access to health care, promote healthy lifestyle, fight against socially significant diseases, facilitate educational opportunities and international exchanges in this sphere, promote youth contacts, support traditional crafts and identity of indigenous peoples, contribute to mutual acquaintance with national cultures.

Implementation of international projects aimed at eliminating so called environmental "hot spots" in the region that today number around 50, will be continued. Those are both small but really necessary projects and such large-scale initiatives as the rehabilitation of polluted territories on Franz Josef Land. Seriously should be taken the climate changes and their impact in the region. The agenda covers promotion of interregional and cross-border economic ties, preparation of large scale multilateral projects aimed at developing transport infrastructure, introduction of energy saving technologies, improvement and simplification of customs procedures, better interoperability of emergency and rescue services and their further joint training. Many other fields of cooperation might be named.

A great importance is attached to strengthening of the BEAC interaction with other regional organizations in the North in order to complement efforts of each other in a harmonious way and to avoid unnecessary duplication. First of all it relates to the

traditional ties with the Arctic Council and the Council of the Baltic Sea States and promoting joint projects with the Nordic Council of Ministers. No doubt contacts with the renewed “Northern Dimension” will be strengthened, considering its potential in terms of broadening quality level and a scope of cooperation in the region. In its turn the BEAC itself commands over the vast expert capabilities and is experienced enough in practical work to make a valuable contribution to the shaping of the “Northern Dimension”.

An important event during the BEAC Session in Rovaniemi was the decision taken by the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of Norway, Russia, Finland and Sweden to establish a permanent International Barents Secretariat with location in the town of Kirkenes (Norway), which starts functioning in January 2008. The new structure is designated to upgrade effectiveness of cooperation in the Barents region, ensure its coherence and continuity.