

Statement by Mrs Anna Lindh, Foreign Minister of Sweden, at the 8th Session of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council in Murmansk on 15 March, 2001, in her capacity as incoming Chair of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council

Mr. Chairman,

First of all, I would like to thank you – and your colleagues – for a good and efficient Chairmanship. In particular I would like to highlight two crucial areas where you have achieved substantial progress: youth cooperation, which is the foundation for the future, and customs cooperation, which is of great importance for the economic development of the region.

I look forward to the Chairmanship for the coming year with both respect and enthusiasm. Respect, because I know that there are challenges to address and difficulties to overcome. Enthusiasm, because I know that this Region has an enormous potential. First and foremost its peoples.

Mr. Chairman,

I have noticed when I have been speaking about this, that the Barents Region is still a relatively unknown part of the world. There is a need to put this region more clearly on the European map. Arranging high-level meetings here in the region is one way of attracting the attention of the outside world. But we can – and should – do much more. Promotion of the Barents Region will be one of the challenges for the Swedish Chairmanship.

That is closely linked to the need for better and easier access to factual information on the region and information on ongoing activities here. Through the use of modern information technology, it should be possible to make quite a lot of high-quality information available to a wide audience without having to spend too much extra time or money.

More important, though, is that the regional cooperation, people-to-people contacts and cooperation between local actors and NGO's will expand rapidly in the Barents Region: through the work of the Regional Council, through twinning arrangements and different forms of closer contacts between counties, cities and other actors, through the very active cooperation of our indigenous peoples and their Action Plan for the Indigenous Peoples 2000 – 2003, through universities and research institutions, through youth interchange and youth mobility. I noticed one example in the field of sports in Luleå, where a regional basketball tournament attracted more than 2 000 young persons from the region.

It was once written in "Sagat", a Sami newspaper: "Barents cooperation is more than words and paper. It is singing, dancing, humour, joik and flirt."

Mr. Chairman,

In August last year, we were all shocked by the tragedy of the "Kursk" submarine catastrophe. In order to improve our preparedness for such incidents, a large scale international rescue exercise, Barents Rescue 2001, will be conducted in northern Sweden in September this year. The scenario will be a nuclear accident in the Barents Region. Rescue services from around 15 countries are scheduled to participate in the exercise. The Swedish Chairmanship of the Barents Council is looking into the possibilities to develop a follow-up activity in order to establish regular contact between the rescue services in the Barents Region.

We are also considering how to proceed to best promote further work on forest sector issues. Forestry is an important economic activity in the Barents Region.

This was a brief outline of our thinking so far.

Next time when we meet, I will have the pleasure to invite all of you to the 9th Session of the Barents Council somewhere in northern Sweden. As you have heard, the Deputy Governor of Västerbotten, in his statement earlier today, offered to welcome us to the city of Umeå. I welcome that proposal.

To conclude, Mr. Chairman, I very much look forward to taking on the Chairmanship of this Council. Sweden will do her best to follow up on the very good work done by the Russian Chairmanship.

I thank you Mr. Chairman.