



## **JOINT STATEMENT OF THE BARENTS REGIONAL COUNCIL**

The Barents Regional Council (BRC) convened on May 24 2018, in Rovaniemi, Lapland (Finland) under the chair of the Finnmark County.

The Barents member regions share a significant number of similarities that impose both challenges and opportunities for local and regional development and cooperation. Within the circumpolar Arctic, the Barents region is significantly different as it is highly developed and inhabited. However, it is a sparsely populated region with long distances. Maintaining livable, sustainable, developed communities and economic activities in the Barents region has an utmost importance.

The Council endorses the work being done by the Swedish chairmanship in prioritized areas of sustainable development and youth. During the Barents Youth Conference in Luleå, the youth representatives underlined labor mobility, transport, work availability, exchange programs, life quality and attractiveness of communities as the most important factors for young people to stay in the Barents region.

The Barents cooperation has remained an open forum despite international political tensions. In addition to hundreds of cultural, people-to-people and youth projects, the Barents cooperation is also an important arena for addressing common challenges and finding common solutions on such issues as rescue, preparedness, transport, health, education, ongoing climate change and business development. Such broad spectrum of cooperation requires close collaboration and contacts across the borders of the Russian Federation, Sweden, Norway and Finland.

The Council therefore believes that there is a need to make the Barents region a visa-free area for residents of this region. The visa free regime in the Barents region will also strengthen the Barents Identity, affiliation and commitment among the Barents population. It will facilitate the labor, education mobility and all kinds of contacts between people living in the Barents region.

As 2018 marks the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary for the establishment of this unique national and regional co-operation, the establishment of a visa free regime in the Barents region would provide a further boost to people-to-people co-operation, across our common borders. Further, it would provide a good example for other parts of the world on how powerful and effective the inter-regional cooperation can be in strengthening regional development and prosperity in sparsely populated areas.

The Council therefore encourages relevant authorities to continue exploring solutions for a visa free regime in the Barents region. One start could be the further introduction of a 72 hours visa free travel within the whole Barents region. This could be combined with important events such as the Barents Games, gathering 1000 youth from the whole Barents region, high level events such as the suggestion to organize Barents Davos, a high level event promoting the Barents Co-operation or the 100 year anniversary of the Republic of Karelia in 2020.

Rovaniemi, May 24, 2018