



**PERMANENT DELEGATION
OF NORWAY TO THE OSCE**

Towards a Strategy of Reconciliation in the OSCE Area,
Hofburg, 18 December 2012

Statement by Ambassador Robert Kvile, Permanent Representative of Norway to the
OSCE and Mr. Rune Rafaelsen, Secretary General of the Norwegian Barents Secretariat

Ambassador Robert Kvile:

Thank you, Mr. Moderator,

I am joined today by the Secretary General of the Norwegian Barents Secretariat, Mr. Rune Rafaelsen. The main task of this Secretariat is to promote cross-border cooperation with the Russian Federation in the High North. The Secretariat is situated in Kirkenes, a town close to the Norwegian – Russian border. It is owned by the three northernmost Norwegian counties, but financed by the Norwegian government. – With your permission, Mr. Moderator, I would now like to give the floor to Mr. Rafaelsen.

Secretary General Rune Rafaelsen:

Thank you.

Mr. Moderator,

During the Cold War the borders between the Russian Federation and Finland and Norway were frozen. The area was characterized by mistrust. Today the situation has completely changed. Trust has been reestablished, a complex web of relations developed, economic cooperation is flourishing and job opportunities have been created. This year more than 300.000 people will cross the Norwegian-Russian border.

The relationship between the Nordic countries and Russia in the North cannot be compared to the conflict areas in the OSCE region. But I am confident that the lessons we have learned during the last 20 years are useful to other regions.

Mr. Moderator,

Border regions are among the least developed areas in Europe. This is partly a legacy of the Cold War when the primary role of these regions was to provide a “buffer zone”. They suffer from weak transportation infrastructure, underdeveloped industry and high unemployment. This, combined with

ethnic and religious diversity, has created a fertile basis for conflicts. This was also the situation in the border areas in the North.

Mr. Moderator,

In January 1993 the Foreign Ministers of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, the Russian Federation, Sweden and Norway signed the Kirkenes Declaration and thereby established the Barents Euro-Arctic Region. This was among the first institutionalized cross-border cooperation arrangements between East and West after the Cold War.

Two parallel cooperation structures were established. The foreign ministers of the member countries and the European Commission meet biannually in the Barents Euro-Arctic Council. This ensures political backing from the government level.

On the regional level, governors meet three times every year. This ensures continuity and local engagement.

In addition, working groups on health, trade and industry, environment, transport, search and rescue, culture, youth and indigenous peoples meet regularly.

The two councils form a platform for political contact and interaction between representatives of Finland, the Russian Federation, Sweden and Norway and of their northern regions. The Barents Cooperation today includes 13 regions, of which five are located along the Schengen border.

The regional dimension of the Barents Cooperation is unique. In an unprecedented way, Russian regions take part in an institutionalized political cooperation with foreign counterparts.

The role of the regional level in the Barents Cooperation has been key to the success.

Mr. Moderator,

In 1993 the Norwegian Barents Secretariat was established to provide institutional support to the regional level. Thousands of projects have brought people together across borders. So far Norway has spent more than 100 million Euros under the umbrella of the Barents Cooperation.

This year an agreement on non-visa local border traffic between Norway and the Russian Federation entered into force. This is the first agreement of this kind between a Schengen country and Russia. The agreement will further promote people to people contacts – the bedrock of the Barents Cooperation.

Another important task of the Barents Secretariat is to provide information about cross-border activities. Information is crucial for promoting cooperation, trust and confidence. Our web site, the *Barentsobserver.com*, is quoted daily in regional as well as international media.

Mr. Moderator,

The Barents Cooperation has attracted interest from other parts of Europe. The Barents Secretariat is now a Donor Program Partner in cross-border projects between Slovakia and Ukraine and between Bulgaria

and Turkey. We have also been asked to assist Slovakia, Poland, Ukraine, Hungary and Romania in their efforts to establish a trans-regional cooperation body in the Carpathian area.

Mr. Moderator,

Next year, in June, the Prime Ministers of Finland, the Russian Federation, Sweden and Norway will meet to sign a Kirkenes II Declaration and to reaffirm their commitment to the objectives of the Barents Cooperation and give guidance to its further development.

The Barents Cooperation is basically a peace project. It underpins the objectives of the OSCE. Therefore I hope that the OSCE could be present at the Prime Ministers' Meeting in Kirkenes next June.

Mr. Moderator,

By way of conclusion I would like to quote the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who at the OSCE Ministerial Council Meeting in Madrid in 2007 said: "The Barents Euro-Arctic Council continues to be firmly established in the role of a major instrument for building in the North of Europe an area of stability, trust and sustainable development".

Thank you, Mr. Moderator