The Barents Encyclopedia Project

A Brief Overview

Objective

The Barents Encyclopedia Project was initiated during the International Polar Year 2007–2008 and work in the project is intended, as the name suggests, to result in the publication of an encyclopedia dealing with pertinent issues in the Barents Region. According to current plans the encyclopedia is going to be published in 2011 in the form of a printed volume as well as in electronic format (a website available on the Internet).

Background

More than fifteen years have now passed since the signing, in January 1993, of the Kirkenes Declaration that successfully established an organization for international cooperation between the northernmost counties of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia.

Through the Kirkenes Declaration an entirely new kind of interregional cooperation was created that reached across national boundaries. Two formal organizations were established, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) operating at the central governmental level, and the Regional Council, engaging officials working in regional administrations and other organizations at the regional level. This was an innovative organizational solution that made it easier to promote interregional activities and engage the local population in new kinds of transboundary collaborative projects.

Over the years the interregional cooperation that was a stated goal in the Kirkenes Declaration has made significant progress. As a result of the agreement many new activities have been initiated, activities that have been especially valuable for local and regional socio-economic development. Before long the territory designated by the 1993 Kirkenes agreement became popularly known as The Barents Region. In fact, today the Barents Region concept rather refers to the total geographical space – a transboundary macro-region encompassing the member counties in the four nations – than to the cooperation agreement itself and the organizations working with its implementation.

This is a significant development indicating that people in the area not only identify with the region and nation of their residence, but also increasingly identify with the population of the larger Barents Region. Fostering such a regional identity among the inhabitants of the Barents Region is an important factor for the promotion of a sustainable socio-economic development in the area.

The territory that is now called the Barents Region has a long and unique history of ethnic, cultural and commercial contacts between the people who live in the Bothnic Gulf and the White Sea area and along the shores of the northern Atlantic Ocean to the Ural Mountains. These historical contacts offered a natural foundation for the creative diplomatic process that was a decisive factor behind the decisions to establish the Barents Region as an innovative transboundary regional construction.

However, history also produced significant differences in socio-economic development, not only between the various subregions constituting the Barents Region, but also between the four nation states to which these subregions belong. The current globalization process
excerts similar influence in all parts of the Barents Region, but capacities for adapting to, or counteracting, the effects of globalization differ between various subregions. The long-existing historical relations between people living in these northern territories have been largely neglected in official nation-state oriented historical narratives. Thus, one of the objectives with the Barents Encyclopedia is to connect the past with the present dynamic development in the region, thus filling a gap in European history and, hopefully, in the process promoting the world’s interest in the “Northern Dimension”.

Challenges

The Barents Region largely belongs to the Arctic. The last twenty years or so have brought an increasing international attention to Arctic issues, mainly because of the huge natural resources (such as oil, gas, and fish) available in the area, but also because of the problematic consequences of global warming that are expected to dramatically change the natural prerequisites for all life forms on our planet. Since the Barents Region probably is the area of the Arctic that is most influenced by human industrial activity, and since this activity is likely to have the greatest impact on global warming and regional environmental degradation, it is essential to learn as much as possible about the interdependencies determining developments in the regional socio-economic system in order to acquire the knowledge necessary to modify or adapt the functioning of this system so that long-term sustainability can be attained.

Mitigating the environmental threats is not the only difficult challenge facing the Barents Region cooperation project. Various parts of the region have developed differing governance traditions that may present obstacles for the kind of joint collaborative action between the member counties that is required in order to cope with the challenges ahead. To succeed in such action, the different governance traditions in the member counties will have to be made flexible enough to allow common decision-making, something that may require joint efforts to develop new forms of democracy. Since the region is characterized by cultural diversity born out, for instance, by various ethnic minorities, meeting these challenges is likely to require the development of a new kind of multi-cultural and inter-cultural citizenship. Strengthening the underpinning of national minorities and indigenous peoples in international legislation is an important feature of modern policy-making and represents a serious challenge for future collaboration in the Barents Region as well.

Meeting the Challenges

The transboundary interregional cooperation initiated through the 1993 Kirkenes agreement strives to promote a sustainable economic, cultural and social development in all of the Barents Region through initiating projects aiming at strengthening the east-west infrastructure and stimulating direct contacts between people with the aim of improving conditions for interregional exchange in a number of fields. The legitimacy of this process is greatly enhanced and collaboration is much facilitated and stimulated if people identify with the objectives of the project.

One way of contributing to this goal is to compile and disseminate existing information about the situation in the various counties belonging to the Barents Region. Increased knowledge about the history of the region, its geospheric, biological, and socio-economic development and future prospects is essential in this respect. Such knowledge will increase society’s capacity to cope with the challenges raised by current sinister trends of global warming.

Since more than four years a network of professional historians affiliated with higher educational and research institutions in the Barents Region have been discussing principles of historical research and narrative focusing on the modernization process in
the Barents Region. After an initial series of conferences this network has set as its new goal to produce a textbook of the history of the Barents Region. In this context there also emerged an initiative to compile an encyclopedia of the Barents Region in order to supplement the history textbook.

Contents Profile

It is the ambition of the *Barents Encyclopedia* to outline the cultural values of the many peoples that inhabit the region, to describe their ethnic traditions and beliefs, their varying living conditions, and the prerequisites for their further socio-economic and cultural development.

The *Barents Encyclopedia* is designed to attract a broad readership. By providing information about a wide range of topics related to people’s life, their history, the ecology and the social organization in the Barents Region the encyclopedia should be of interest for experts in academia and government as well as for students and the general public. It is expected to facilitate and stimulate the interaction between citizens in the region in their capacities of businessmen, administrators, professionals, and tourists.

A limited number of longer overview articles will frame the contents of the encyclopedia. Some tentative topics for such articles include:

*The “Barents Project”* containing an account of the foundation of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and the activity leading to its inception.

*The ecology and environment of the Barents Region*, which is of special importance since ecological characteristics strongly restrict all human activity in the area and since such activity has in fact made a profound impact on the regional and global environment.

*Geopolitical developments and the Barents Region*, discussing the significance of the region in the age of globalization, especially focusing on its role for international security, natural resource exploitation, and environmental degradation.

*A broad historical overview of the Barents Region* with the purpose of providing a long term perspective of important features contributing to the emergence of this transnational region formation, comparing current developments with previous regionalization endeavours.

*Culture in the Barents Region*, including cultural diversity, common features, cooperation and exchange between writers, painters, journalists, and artists.

*Demography and economic development in the Barents Region*, discussing the impact of colonization, modernization and migration on economic structure and the welfare of the population in different parts of the region, influencing the relation between different ethnic groups and nationalities in a historical perspective.

*An overview of minority issues in the Barents Region*, especially the relationship between the majority populations, national minorities and indigenous peoples within national and international legislation, focussing on the diversity of minority languages and processes of cultural revitalization, education and research, as well as political organization and collaboration.

*Education in the Barents Region* outlining the history of educational initiatives affecting the modernization process and current transboundary regionalization.

The longer overview articles will be supplemented and supported by shorter entries covering a broad range of topics, such as, important places (counties, cities, towns, villages), individuals who have made a significant impact on developments in the Barents Region, historical events of special importance, the demographic characteristics and the languages of the region, its culture, architecture, politics (incl. the Cold War legacy), the economy
and economic geography (emphasizing the development of infrastructure, economic structure, and natural resource extraction), the rich nature found in the region and environmental threats, effects of recent geopolitical developments, legal issues (e.g., regarding indigenous populations, natural resource extraction, sea borders and fishing rights), and the legacy of the Soviet era (problems related to the Russian transition to democracy and a market based economy, historical traumas, such as the political repression and its consequences for contemporary democratic and economic development).

The encyclopedia is expected to contain about 400 entries presented in a publication comprising 5–700 pages of text richly illustrated by tables, diagrams, and photographs.

**Project Organization**

In the period 2005–2007, the above mentioned network of historians initiated the work to produce a history textbook and an encyclopedia within a project called the *Modernization Process in the Barents Region*. Currently the work is conducted in two separate but related projects. The intention is to publish the textbook in late 2010 and the encyclopedia in 2011. Funding for the project is provided by several national and international sources, including the European Union.

The two projects are jointly managed by a steering group, headed by Assoc. Prof. Lars Elenius of the Department of Business Administration and Social Sciences at Luleå University of Technology, Sweden. Elenius is also the editor of *The Barents History Textbook*.

Dr. Mats-Olov Olsson of the Centre for Regional Science (Cerum), Umeå University, Sweden, serves as the editor of the Barents Encyclopedia. The editor is assisted in his work by a reference group consisting of the following people:

- **Ass. Prof. Irina A. Chernyakova**, Faculty of History, Petrozavodsk State University;
- **Dr. Alexander N. Davydov**, Institute of Ecological Problems of the North, Russian Academy of Sciences, Ural Branch, Arkhangelsk;
- **Prof. Lars-Erik Edlund**, Department of Language Studies, Umeå University;
- **Ass. Prof. Lars Elenius**, Department of Business Administration and Social Sciences, Luleå University of Technology;
- **Ass. Prof. Lassi Heininen**, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Lapland, Rovaniemi;
- **Dr. Maria B. Ilicheva**, World History, Murmansk State Pedagogical University;
- **Prof. Veli Pekka Lehtola**, Giellagas Institute for Sámi Studies, University of Oulu;
- **Ass. Prof. Lyubov A. Maksimova**, Faculty of History, Syktyvkar State University;
- **Dr. Jelena Porsanger**, Sámi University College, Sámi Research Institute, Kautokeino;
- **Ass. Prof. Lyubov A. Maksimova**, Faculty of History, Syktyvkar State University;
- **Dr. Jelena Porsanger**, Sámi University College, Sámi Research Institute, Kautokeino;
- **Dr. Helge Salvesen**, Head of the University of Tromsø Library; and
- **Dr. Urban Wråkberg**, Research Director at the Barents Institute, Kirkenes.

**Contact information:**

Mats-Olov Olsson, PhD (Editor)  
Centre for Regional Science (Cerum)  
Umeå University  
SE-901 87 Umeå, Sweden  
Website: http://www.cerum.umu.se  
Email: Mats-Olov.Olsson@cerum.umu.se  
Phone: +46 (0)90 786 69 82  
Fax: +46 (0)90 786 51 21  

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