

Regional Synthesis

Summary

Based on consolidated regional inputs and the current context, it is recommended that the regions pursue a coordinated withdrawal from the Barents Regional Council (BRC), while actively shaping new and more relevant forms of cross-border cooperation.

Purpose and Background

In November 2025, the Barents Regional Council (BRC) asked the Regional Committee (RC) to assess the possible future of the regional level of Barents cooperation and prepare a structured basis for political decision in May/June 2026.

The Regional Committee subsequently established a Task Force consisting of one representative from each participating member region: Nordland, Finnmark and Troms County Councils, the County Administrative Boards of Västerbotten and Norrbotten, and the Regional Council of North Ostrobothnia. The Task Force was mandated to review regional input and prepare this Regional Synthesis.

This request comes in a context marked by prolonged geopolitical uncertainty since 2022, reduced participation at the regional level following Finland's withdrawal from BEAC and the withdrawal of most Finnish regions, as well as general pressure on administrative capacity and resources across the remaining regions.

This document consolidates the inputs from the six Barents regions into a shared analytical basis for decision-making. The analysis is based on regional submissions developed through internal processes, where regions were encouraged to gather relevant input, including input from working groups representatives, when feasible.

The regions were asked to assess three possible scenarios for the future of the Barents Regional Council: continuation with redesign, a dormant council, or dissolution.

The purpose of this synthesis is to present a structured overview of regional assessments, identify areas of convergence and divergence, and support the BRC in preparing a well-informed and actionable decision about the future of the Barents regional Council, and participation in underlying working groups.

Key Findings Across Regions

Across all regional inputs, the following key findings emerge:

- There is broad agreement that the current model is no longer functioning as intended.
- Reduced geographical participation, particularly by Finnish regions, undermines long-term viability.
- Significant overlap with other cooperation frameworks raises questions about added value.
- There is strong support for safeguarding youth (BRYC) and Indigenous (WGIP) participation.
- There is shared recognition that future cooperation should be more focused, prioritising added value over structure.
- There is a common need for a cross-border, multilevel arena for political dialogue.

Implications for Working Groups and Cross-Cutting Structures

Input related to the working groups has been uneven, as regions have consulted individually with their representatives rather than through collective working group processes. The observations below are therefore based on individual reflections and regional dialogues, which nonetheless indicate broad agreement on the need to safeguard key elements of cooperation.

Regional inputs show clear differentiation in both relevance and level of activity across the working groups:

- Barents Regional Youth Council (BRYC) is consistently highlighted as a key asset and a unique arena for youth participation. BRYC activities have largely been financed by the regions. Maintaining youth engagement is widely seen as essential, although future hosting arrangements and organisational models may differ.
- The Working Group of Indigenous Peoples (WGIP) is anchored at the national level, as is the Joint Committee on Rescue Cooperation. Both are important structures within the broader Barents cooperation but fall outside the mandate of the regional level and are therefore not subject to regional decision-making.
- The working groups on Environment, Health, Culture, and Transport/Logistics are generally viewed as relevant and active.
- Education, Economic Cooperation and several sectoral groups are widely considered inactive or of limited value.
- Some groups remain valuable professional networks, while others have seen little or no activity. Several groups are considered non-functional and unlikely to continue in their current form.

There is a recognised need for a continued meeting place linking regional and national levels. While the Barents framework has aimed to provide such a multilevel arena, it has not consistently delivered in practice. There is therefore a shared expectation that new, more effective formats for dialogue and cooperation will need to be established across several sectors, regardless of the chosen scenario.

Recommendation and recommended way forward

While regional inputs reflect some differences in emphasis and perspective, there is sufficient convergence to support a coordinated and common way forward. Based on the consolidated regional inputs, it is recommended that the regions collectively pursue a **coordinated withdrawal from the Barents Regional Council (BRC)**.

The participating regions should submit individual withdrawal notifications to the International Barents Secretariat within an agreed common timeframe

Legal and procedural basis

The recommendation is grounded in the **Terms of Reference of the Barents Regional Council (2012)**, which provide a framework for regional participation and withdrawal, but not for formal dissolution. Given that key decisions require consensus, an **individual but coordinated withdrawal by the participating regions** emerges as the most realistic and orderly way to conclude participation under the current circumstances.

Recommended way forward

Withdrawal should be coordinated and strategically managed, not fragmented. The regions should:

- Align on a common timeline and approach for withdrawal
- Coordinate external communication and messaging
- Jointly safeguard key cooperation elements, including:
 - Youth cooperation
 - Indigenous participation
 - Relevant thematic networks

At the same time, the regions should actively shape cooperation beyond the Barents framework. Withdrawal should be understood as a **transition towards more flexible and effective cooperation formats**, not as an end to regional collaboration. Future cooperation should therefore:

- Focus on clear thematic priorities and added value
- Build on existing and emerging platforms, avoiding duplication
- Enable flexible, project based and network driven collaboration
- Preserve opportunities for multilevel dialogue

Conclusion

A coordinated withdrawal from the BRC represents a **pragmatic and forward-looking decision**, enabling clearer governance, more strategic use of limited resources, and the development of more relevant and effective forms of regional cooperation. The ambition is not to step away from cooperation, but to **strengthen it by moving beyond a structure that no longer serves its intended purpose**.

*Prepared by the Task Force established by the Barents Regional Committee (2025-2026), coordinated by Eilen W. B. Zakariassen, Chair of the Barents Regional Committee.
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