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SWEDEN HAS BEEN regarded as a relatively passive party in Barents cooperation compared to its Nordic neighbours. Several reasons can be found for this.

Sweden has no direct border with Russia, unlike Finland and Norway, and thus has fewer matters of common interest with the big power in the East. Foreign policy in Sweden is directed more to the south and to the southeast, that is, the EU community and the Baltic region. The Finnish and Norwegian capitals, as well as the countries' official political and administrative structures, have more of a focus on the Barents than is the case in Sweden. After a starting period, only very small financial and administrative resources have been allocated to Barents cooperation from the Swedish side. The politicians and the press are comparatively ignorant of Barents realities, and Barents issues are very rarely covered by the Swedish media, with the sole exception of Swedish radio in northern Sweden.

At the beginning of Barents cooperation, Swedish involvement was higher. Former Minister of Foreign Affairs Sten Andersson was very much influenced by his Norwegian friend Thorvald Stoltenberg, "the father of Barents cooperation". During Andersson's time in the Foreign Office (1985-1991), we saw city twinning and county cooperation started between northern Sweden and North-West Russia. Sweden channelled quite a lot of its foreign aid budget across a wide range of sectors to projects for bilateral cooperation with Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist system.

After Vladimir Putin came into power and the Russian economy improved, the support programmes were largely dismantled. They have continued, albeit on a much more modest level, within the two programmes of the Northern Dimension of the European Union, namely, the Environmental and the Social and Health Care partnerships. Very little money has been left for bilateral cooperation between the two countries to promote democracy, human rights and empowerment of civil society.

WHY HAS SWEDISH involvement in Barents cooperation gradually declined? One reason on the Russian side is the improvement of the economy, which has made the country more self-sufficient. Another reason is the Putin regime's sharply reduced interest in cooperation with the West; this has even become a more hostile attitude, seen in, among other things, the introduction of new laws that restrict civic organisations' space to act and cooperate with partners abroad.

However, interest on the part of the Swedish government has also diminished. In two of his first speeches, Göran Persson, as new prime minister in 1996, specifically mentioned Barents cooperation. That never happens when Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt or Minister of Foreign Affairs Carl Bildt is speaking. In addition, Barents cooperation is no longer cited in the annual foreign policy statements which the government presents to Parliament.

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LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

Minister of Foreign Affairs Anna Lindh – assassinated in September 2003 – was probably the last leading Swedish politician with a fairly deep interest in Barents cooperation. She played a key role when a lot of international money was collected and an agreement reached with Russia to combat nuclear waste and risks on the Kola Peninsula.

So what is left? Is there any light at the end of the tunnel?

There are still committed actors who want to develop Barents cooperation in their fields. Some of the promising examples that can provide us with new hopes are the Barents Press Network; the cooperation among indigenous peoples, young entrepreneurs, youth, schools and, to some extent, universities; the cooperation in the area of culture and sports; and the Barents Reunion Forums, which have been organised in Haparanda-Tornio for seven years now, sponsored by IKEA owner Ingvar Kamprad.

WHAT WE ARE LACKING in Sweden is a more comprehensive and programme-oriented approach that activates politicians, government, the media and a greater number of civil society actors and that encourages people-to-people contacts. The cooperation needs more visible ideological and propagandistic leaders!

I interviewed Thorvald Stoltenberg and Finland's Minister of Foreign Affairs Erkki Tuomioja in conjunction with the twentieth anniversary of Barents cooperation in January 2013. We have not achieved the economic and business objectives that were part of the dreams in the start-up years. Stoltenberg and Tuomioja regarded overcoming the dividing line with Russia as still the most burning challenge of our endeavours.

More can be done, even if realities such as the changed domestic and foreign policy of Russia create new problems and obstacles. Hopefully, the ongoing Arctic cooperation can provide new inspiration and attract new actors to join both Barents and Nordic cooperation.

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