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Subject:

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Report to the 2016 Session of the Nordic Council on the Nordic Council of Ministers' co-operation with Russia

Summary

Co-operation with North-West Russia continues. In addition to maintaining the three existing programmes, a number of new ones have been set up to develop the co-operation. As the Council of Ministers' offices¹ are no longer able to undertake external activities, all activities in Russia must now be carried out by other Nordic bodies acting on behalf of the Nordic Council of Ministers.

The Nordic Council of Ministers' offices in North-West Russia, which formally have the status of Russian NGOs, continue to be registered as "foreign agents" in accordance with Russian legislation. The Council of Ministers has challenged this legally and the cases are pending in the Russian courts. The work of the offices has been scaled down considerably, with the Kaliningrad site maintaining a physical presence only. Since this change in status, the offices have only provided internal support to the Council of Ministers, particularly providing advice, carrying out evaluations and making practical arrangements.

In the current political situation, no imminent breakthrough is expected in the efforts to have the official status of the offices changed.

General

Since the Council of Ministers' last report to the Session of the Nordic Council in Reykjavik in 2015, there have been no major changes in the general relationship between Russia and the Nordic countries. Bilateral meetings have been held at political level, but otherwise, the situation is still characterised by reciprocal sanctions and the frosty political climate between Russia and the West. Unfortunately, there are no indications that this situation will change significantly in the short term.

The ongoing co-operation with North-West Russia

The Nordic Council of Ministers considers cross-border co-operation between Nordic and Russian partners to be of great mutual value, as it helps keep lines of communication open and leads to positive exchanges of experiences in a wide range of professions and social fields. For these reasons, it was

¹ From an organisational perspective, the Nordic Council of Ministers' offices in Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg are a single entity, but from a legal point of view each of the offices has its own formal agreement with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

decided in 2015 that it would be desirable to continue the co-operation programme and to find other practical means of achieving this, now that the offices can no longer support the work directly.

In January 2016, a working group consisting of representatives of all the Nordic foreign ministries submitted a report outlining the framework for continued co-operation. The Presidium of the Nordic Council's observer for work with Russia was involved in the working group's final phase and provided positive and constructive input.

In February, the ministers for Nordic co-operation decided on a broad outline for the Council of Ministers' continued programme of co-operation with North-West Russia based on the working group's recommendations. The main change is that, from now on, responsibility for the implementation of all activities will be delegated to various institutions in the Nordic countries, which will run them within parameters set by the Council of Ministers and will keep in regular contact with the Council of Ministers. The institutions will be responsible for all practical and organisational matters and will have direct contact with relevant Russian partners.

The programme in brief:

The following programmes will continue with their activities:

- Higher education and research, which will continue to be managed by NordForsk and the Norwegian Centre for International Co-operation in Education (SIU)
- Exchange visits by Nordic and Russian parliamentarians, which will continue to be managed by the Nordic Council Secretariat
- Journalist co-operation, which will continue to be managed by the Nordic Journalist Centre (NJC).

Activities designed to increase the visibility of the Nordic countries and Nordic co-operation, which were co-ordinated by the Council of Ministers' office in recent years, will also continue:

- "Nordic Weeks in North-West Russia", managed by diplomatic representation from the rotating Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers (2015 Denmark, 2016 Finland, 2017 Norway, etc.).

In 2016, the following new programmes will be set up so that they are operational as of 2017:

- Environment and climate, which is expected to be managed by the Nordic Environment Finance Corporation (NEFCO)
- Health and health promotion, which is expected to be managed by the Finnish National Institute for Health and Welfare (THL)
- An open funding programme for all types of Nordic and North-West Russian partners, which will be managed by the Nordic Council of Ministers' Secretariat.

The Nordic ministers have also decided to launch a programme to support co-operation on civil society and human rights. However, for financial reasons implementation of this has been postponed until 2017, with activities due to commence in 2018. Please note in this context that the Council of Ministers' well-known NGO programme for the Baltic Sea Region, which is open to Russian, Baltic, Belarusian and Nordic NGOs, is also being continued.

Information about the opportunities available to them under these new programmes has been provided to various partners in the Nordic Region and in North-West Russia.

On 20 September 2016, the Council of Ministers and its Russian partners held a large information meeting in St. Petersburg about the new opportunities offered by the co-operation programme. Representatives from all over North-

West Russia took part, including from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, regional authorities, institutions, business organisations, NGOs and others. The Nordic countries' diplomatic representatives in Russia attended too, along with regional international organisations. The Danish Cultural Institute in St Petersburg was responsible for the practical arrangements.

A Russian-English language section has also been published on the website (www.norden.org/russia), with information about the Council of Ministers' work in Russia, including guidelines and application forms for the open funding programme.

The application process for the new open funding programme has already started. The deadline for applications is 31 October 2016, after which the project proposals will be assessed and prioritised for funding with the help of an advisory group consisting of representatives of the Nordic foreign ministries.

Provision has been made to conduct an evaluation in 2017 of the new forms of co-operation.

The Nordic Council of Ministers' Offices in North-West Russia

In early 2015, the Nordic Council of Ministers' offices in North-West Russia, which for historical reasons formally have the status of Russian NGOs, were registered by the Russian authorities as "foreign agents" in accordance with Russian legislation. The Council of Ministers has considerably downscaled both its premises and staff, and the office in Kaliningrad is now managed by the remaining employees in St. Petersburg. As a result of the imposed status as "foreign agents", the Council of Ministers decided that the offices would no longer carry out external activities, and would be maintained in accordance with the agreements reached between the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Nordic Council of Ministers. From an organisational perspective, the Council of Ministers' offices in Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg are a single entity but from a legal point of view each of the offices has its own formal agreement with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In accordance with legislation, the offices have important duties in relation to reporting to the Russian authorities. The Council of Ministers also requires substantial support services for its work – e.g. collating information, providing advice on Russian matters, contact with Nordic diplomatic representatives, practical administrative work, etc.

The Nordic Council of Ministers did not agree with the imposed change in status and has challenged the Ministry of Justice's decision in the Russian courts, where cases are still pending. The Council of Ministers has also decided not to pay the fine imposed upon the office in Kaliningrad for failing to register voluntarily, which is a requirement under Russian law.

In 2016, the Council of Ministers has held several meetings at official level with various representatives of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to explore the possibility of changing the legal status of the offices in North-West Russia to reflect better their link to the inter-governmental co-operation represented by the Council of Ministers. This would allow the offices to resume external activities and project administration. The starting point for these discussions was political initiatives taken by ministers from the Nordic countries in autumn 2015.

A certain degree of understanding has been expressed by the Russian side about possible legal arguments for changing the status of the offices, but in the current political climate, there is no basis for entering into further detailed discussions.

Despite this, both central and regional levels in the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs have expressed positive interest in continuing co-operation between Nordic and North-West Russian partners.