On behalf of the Regional Council of Lapland I have a great pleasure to congratulate Arctic Centre for your 20 years anniversary!

The people behind establishment of Arctic Centre were pioneers and far looking persons. They had an idea of light coming from the North. The role of Arctic and northern regions has increasing since in different agendas. Need for scientific research and information delivery has been growing significantly. Arctic Centre has been also last 20 years major visit site for tourists and venue for many important meetings and seminars.

From the point of view of northern regions growing interest to North is important and vital fact. Climate change is of cause one important political and practical reason. But at the same time natural resources play a crucial part in rise of interests too. Partly other businesses and indigenous issues form the content of agendas and discussions.

About twenty years ago started also “Regional Foreign Policy”. Regional level in the north has been involved strongly to international cooperation since beginning of 1990’s. Official mandate to regional actors towards Russian regions was given by Neighbourhood Agreement between Finland and Russian federation in year 1992. At same year the initiative of Barents Region was developed as northernmost cooperation area in Europe. On circumpolar level at the same time the Northern Forum organization with leadership of Alaska State was established. Personally being closely involved in all these processes I felt that we moved strongly from periphery towards core areas and from observer to the status of main actors.

EU-membership of Finland and Sweden lifted practical project based cooperation to whole new level after year 1995. We started cross border INTERREG –programmes in year 1997 covering geographically North Calotte Area and Barents Region on the other hand.

EU-membership also brought up the concept of Northern Dimension. First time the concept was developed by the Committee of Regions in year 1996. Following the report of two Finnish reporters the first Northern Dimension seminar was arranged in Rovaniemi march 1997 having the focus of regional development. Some months later autumn 1997 Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen launched more comprehensive political concept of Northern Dimension also here in Rovaniemi.

All these processes have had significant importance to regions. Regions themselves, like Lapland, have been keenly involved in processes. We are implementing already third round of INTERREG – programme periods. During years 2004-2007 we developed new Neighbourhood programme to external border together with Russian regions. Now we are at starting face to implement ENPI Kolarctic –programme covering the North Calotte and North-West Russia.

Through programme activities regions have taken stronger responsibility of cross border cooperation in different sectors covering infrastructure planning, business, services, public
administration, third sector, education, research and innovation policies. Arctic Centre has also been either lead partner or partner in certain development projects.

The efficient and successful regional development work requires straight and functional relations to Government and Parliament level. Today we have basically counterpart organisations on central and regional levels. This is the case anyway in Barents and Nordic cooperation. In Barents cooperation we have even some joint working groups consisting both regional and ministerial level members. North Calotte Council acts as joint regional organization in Nordic Arena enhancing business, environmental and cultural cooperation between northernmost mainland regions of Nordic Countries.

Twenty years has gone since we have started stronger “Regional Foreign Policy” activities within different international structures in the High North of Europe. It is time to look ahead for coming decades.

The future of the European High North looks from economic point of view quite positive. The region is facing the boom of big investments in coming years. Challenges will be on labour force issues, climate and demographic chance.

We can build our future cooperation pretty much into existing structures. EU’s cohesion policy, neighbourhood and partnership instrument activities and Northern Dimension policy remains in focus also from regional point of view.

The Lissabon Treaty contains the new concept of territorial cohesion. In this context northern sparsely populated areas (NSPA) are specially mentioned. We have just finalized the study of NSPA’s challenges and possibilities. The target is to use this document as a tool to secure special status in EU’s regional policy to these areas that has a legal basis already from accession treaty of Finland and Sweden to EU. We are happy that in the programme of Finnish Government this goal is also present today.

The stable, sustainable and peaceful development in North requires also continuation of ENPI programmes onwards year 2014 on EU’s external borders. Enlarging Northern Dimension policy hopefully will give new stimulus to regional development through new Partnership of Transport and Logistics. Accessibility is a key issue for success of vast and still somewhat peripheral High North.

EU Commission gave out the Communication of “European Union and Arctic Regions” in November 2008. The document in many ways fulfils from Arctic perspective the development agenda of northern regions. Communication of Arctic Regions contains many important aspects and proposals to be taken into account. The actions with climate chance, indigenous peoples and local population, research, monitoring and assessments are important in protecting and preserving the regions in unison with its population.

Some of the goals and actions on communication can be seen also interesting for Arctic Centre. Of course focus here is very much to research activities in different themes. Another interesting proposal in the commission communication is to “Explore – together with the Nordic countries – possibilities for creating a European Arctic Information Centre”. I my mind Arctic Centre is already today very much this kind of centre.
Two years ago in Barents Council meeting here in Rovaniemi accepted new structures and division of labour between different stakeholders. The Arctic Centre got the responsibility of information services together with International Barents Secretariat.

There for I propose that Finnish Government would commit itself to convey this idea further and enlarge the role of Arctic Centre to serve also as the European Arctic Information Centre!

I wish to Arctic Centre success in your important work for the coming years to create information and knowhow for the benefit to the Arctic Region and its population.

**CV - Esko Lotvonen**
Mr. Esko Lotvonen (MSc., Econ.) has led last 14 years the Regional Council of Lapland in his position as Region Mayor. He leads planning processes and implementation of both national and EU- development programmes in Lapland. Mr. Lotvonen has worked about 25 years in different vacancies to enhance development of Finland’s and EU’s northernmost county. He has long experience also in international cooperation. Mr. Lotvonen has participated actively to development and implementation of bilateral cooperation with North-West Russia and multinational cooperation within regions in Arctic, Barents, North Calotte and Baltic Sea Area.