

Bridging Divides

BRIDGING DIVIDES
*Ethno-political Leadership among the
Russian Sámi*

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and
Mikkel Berg-Nordlie



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MAPS



Figure 0.1. Map of Sápmi

Sápmi, the traditional territory of the Sámi, extends over four countries, as shown on the map on the previous page. The black areas indicate districts in which the majority language and a Sámi language are formally of equal status. The black and dark grey areas of Norway include the Sámi Parliament electoral constituencies down to and including the South Sámi Constituency. Norway south of Sápmi constitutes an electoral constituency of its own: the South Norway Constituency. The dark grey part of Russia represents the four districts (*rayons*) currently considered official ‘traditional Sámi areas’ by the provincial (*oblast*) authorities. Light grey areas in Sweden, Finland and Russia are other regions often included as part of Sápmi on maps.

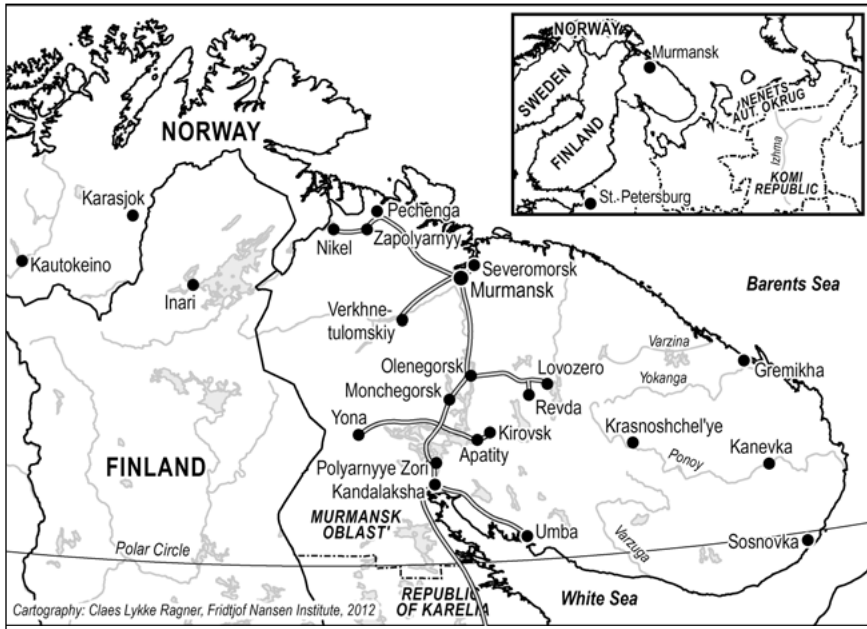


Figure 0.2. Map of the Kola Peninsula

TRANSCRIPTION

The first time the text mentions a place that has more than one official name – that is, both a Sámi language name and a majority-language name – it is referred to as Sámi toponym/majority-language toponym. Thereafter, we refer to the place by its Sámi name only. If the area in question does not have Sámi as a co-official language, only the majority-language toponym is used in the text. Hence, since the district which is home to Norway’s Sámi University College has Sámi and Norwegian as official languages, it is referred to as ‘Guovdageaidnu/Kautokeino’ the first time it is mentioned, but thereafter only ‘Guovdageaidnu’. However, the district known in Sámi as ‘Luyavvr’ or ‘Lujávri’ is referred to only by its Russian name ‘Lovozero’ as that district is not officially bilingual. Exceptions are made when quoting interviewees in order to reproduce their usage of toponyms accurately.

Table 0.1. Cyrillic–Latin Transcription

A, a	A, a
Б, б	B, b
В, в	V, v
Г, г	G, g
Д, д	D, d
Е, е	E, e or Ye, ye – the latter will be applied at the beginning of words, after vowels and after ‘hard’ or ‘soft’ signs (even in cases where these signs are not transcribed; see below).
Ё, ё	Yo, yo
Ж, ж	Zh, zh
З, з	Z, z
И, и	I, i
Й, й	Y, y
К, к	K, k
Л, л	L, l

М, м	M, m
Н, н	N, n
О, о	O, o
П, п	P, p
Р, р	R, r
С, с	S, s
Т, т	T, t
У, у	U, u
Ф, ф	F, f
Х, х	Kh, kh
Ц, ц	Ts, ts
Ч, ч	Ch, ch
Ш, ш	Sh, sh
Щ, щ	Shch, shch
Ъ, ъ	‘Hard’ sign, not included in transcription; except when we refer to authors’ names and the titles of books. In these cases, hard signs are rendered as ” (double apostrophe). The reasoning for this is included under ‘Ь, ь’.
Ы, ы	Y, y
Ь, ь	‘Soft’ sign, not included in transcription except when we refer to authors’ names and the titles of books. In these cases, soft signs are rendered as ’ (single apostrophe). This has been done in order to make it easier for the reader to identify the Russian-language literature listed in the bibliography. It would make it difficult for readers to find the source literature if they have an erroneous impression of how authors’ names and titles are spelled in Cyrillic. When individuals occur as both actors in the events described in the book and as authors of referenced literature, their names are written without apostrophes when mentioned in the text, but transcribed more faithfully into Cyrillic orthography in the references. Hence, if we refer to a document written by a politician whose name in Russian is written ‘Ельцин’, we would refer to him as ‘Yel’tsin’. However, if discussing the life and actions of this politician, we would refer to him simply as ‘Yeltsin’ for the sake of readability.
Э, э	E, e
Ю, ю	Yu, yu
Я, я	Ya, ya

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Sámi are an indigenous Northern European people whose homeland, Sápmi, extends across the territories of four states: Finland, Norway, Russia and Sweden. For the Sámi of the Nordic countries, a long period of cultural repression gave way to a renaissance of sorts during the last half of the twentieth century. During the last decades of the century, their indigenous rights were recognized, they experienced a cultural and linguistic revival, and popularly elected Sámi parliaments were established in each of the three Nordic states. In contrast, the Soviet Sámi had little opportunity to develop independent ethno-political organizations and were largely isolated from their ethnic kin across the Norwegian border. The Soviet–Norwegian frontier was one of only two short stretches where the USSR and NATO shared a direct land border (the other being between Turkey and the USSR), and it remained tightly sealed until 1989.

After the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia's borders opened. In the decades that followed, the Russian Sámi attempted a linguistic revival; they began mending the Cold War scars across Sápmi and established their own independent ethno-political organizations. This period saw numerous struggles over the right to define the interests of the Russian Sámi and represent them, laying the foundations for current Russian Sámi politics.

This book tells the story of what happened once the Soviet borders opened up. In this volume, we follow the development of an ethno-political movement on the periphery of the Russian Federation: the tensions that arise when a small people attempts to organize itself, reconstitute its culture and identity and reach out across the old Iron Curtain to ethnic kin in the West. As this border has been one of the most important dividing lines in modern history, the tale of the Sámi people and their efforts to mend their divisions is a case study of not only an indigenous movement, but indeed a microcosm of Russian–Western relations, replete with idealism, opportunism, misunderstandings, cultural exchange and intended and unintended consequences.

The Russian Sámi revival has been a multifaceted one. We are particularly preoccupied with two aspects: firstly, the formation of the first post-Soviet group of Sámi leaders, whose origins are found in the Soviet Sámi intelligentsia; secondly, the consequences of the increasing contact between the Russian Sámi and their more numerous, wealthy and rights-endowed kin in the West – namely, the Nordic Sámi. These are in themselves broad fields of study, so we have narrowed our narrative down to three main themes. First, we concentrate on the initial post-Soviet attempts at linguistic revival and the close connection between this process and the emergence of a Russian Sámi ethno-political elite. We then look at the educational re-orientation of the Russian Sámi away from St. Petersburg's Herzen University and towards Sámi educational institutions in the Nordic states. Finally, we examine the founding of the first Sámi political organizations in Russia. Throughout this work, we focus on disagreements among various factions, the popular legitimacy of leaders and organizations, and problems involving the relationship between the urbanized and educated part of the Russian Sámi community and its more rural part.

Our field of study is thus Russian Sámi politics, which we define as actions linked by discourse or consequence to the situation of the Sámi people in Russia. For the purposes of this book, we also limit ourselves to the formalized Sámi ethno-political organizations on the Kola Peninsula. We try to cover both informal and formal aspects of these organizations, but we do not aim to carry out a comprehensive review of the myriad informal practices at other levels of the Russian Sámi community. As described by Yurchak (2006), such practices pervade post-Soviet society; and it would be overly ambitious to cover them all in such a volume, even for a small community like the Russian Sámi.

Our book spans the formative decades of post-Soviet Russian Sámi politics, a period that had its roots in the first signs of cultural-linguistic revitalization during the 1970s and particularly the 1980s, continued with a flurry of political activity in the 1990s, and culminated in the years around the turn of the millennium. This period is roughly analogous to the period of Russian Sámi history that Kalstad (2009: 50–55) dubbed 'the time of cultural rebirth'. According to Kalstad, this period began in approximately 1985 and ended in about 2002–03. Perestroika heralded its beginning, and its most defining event was the establishment of the Russian Sámi organization AKS in 1989, which became the hub of Russia's Sámi political life and was accepted into the cross-border Sámi Council in 1992. Kalstad considered the phase of cultural rebirth to have ended in 2002–03, asserting that a new phase had been entered – 'the return of our lands and reindeer herding' – during which time the Russian Sámi would have their last chance to return to family-based reindeer herding

(and other traditional ways of life) through the *obshchinas*, which will be discussed later on in this book (Kalstad 2009: 55–72).

Kalstad passed away in 2008 (his book was published posthumously), and we therefore cannot know how he would have viewed developments in Russian Sámi politics today. For our part, we have chosen to consider the foundation of the *obshchinas* as just one (albeit important) phenomenon in a ‘multipolar phase’ of Russian Sámi politics which began just before the year 2000. This period is different from the preceding one in that while Russian Sámi civil society had previously been dominated by the AKS, the 1998 establishment of a second organization, OOSMO, which also aimed at organizing all the Sámi in Russia and was accepted into the Sámi Council in 2000, heralded a new era in which the landscape of Russian Sámi civil society became increasingly complex.

Following the foundation of OOSMO, several important events occurred, such as the opening of a new building for the Lovozero National Cultural Centre in 2003 (the centre had originally been established in 1994), the launching of the Kola Sámi Radio, and the establishment of the first Sámi *obshchinas*: kin- and family-based organizations aimed at ensuring the rebirth of traditional economic activities (Kalstad 2009: 54). Later in this ‘multipolar’ period of Russian Sámi politics, several significant institutions were created, including an official government organ at the provincial level to deal with Sámi affairs (the Murmansk Provincial Centre for Indigenous Minorities of the North), *natsional’nye kul’turnye avtonomii* (local ‘national cultural autonomies’ for preserving culture and language), and a Sámi youth organization (*Sam’ nurash*). In later years, the Kola Sámi Assembly, an NGO-based attempt at creating a Nordic-style Sámi Parliament, was also launched; a move that was subsequently answered by the provincial authorities with the creation of the *obshchchina*-based Council of Indigenous Minorities of the North (Berg-Nordlie 2011b: 62–71). At the time of writing, there are nineteen registered *obshchinas* and nine public organizations (*obshchestvennye obyedineniya*), including three national cultural autonomies (CIMN 2011a) and two structures aimed at uniting and coordinating the Russian Sámi.

Hence, from a meagre beginning in the 1980s, when no Russian Sámi political organizations existed at all, the organizational landscape passed through a phase in the 1990s in which one dominant entity existed, and ended up branching out in the 2000s into a much more diverse conglomerate of organizations and bodies, rivalling or cooperating in varying constellations.

This division of Russian Sámi political history into a pre-organizational phase, a unipolar phase (1989–1998) and a multipolar phase (1998–on-going) is a periodization based on (and, hence, mainly relevant for) developments in civil society, official agencies and international activities.