



Indigenous rights, social media and protest movements in Sápmi

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Abstract

Following the rush to minerals that would enable the shift towards green economies, the Sámi homeland is quickly becoming a crucible for the rising tensions surrounding the potential for new mining projects and large-scale infrastructure projects. The roots of these conflicts date back to the colonization of the north and continue in the present with the ongoing fight to maintain the Sámi heritage, language and culture, and increasingly to gain ownership of their lands. What initially began as activism within the legal system has, on occasions, transformed into outright protests. Social media increasingly plays a key role in disseminating the message of Indigenous protest among the protesters themselves and feeding into the national and international mainstream media. This shift occurs simultaneously with the construction of a dual narrative, constituted of both land-use protest and intensified demands for Indigenous rights, including, first and foremost, the right to self-determination. Drawing from Social media theory literature and the concepts of political opportunity structures (POS) and legal opportunity structures (LOS), this study argues that social media is one of the most essential tools used by Sámi activists to raise awareness about issue-based protests as well as to communicate demands for the right to self-determination when legal and political opportunity structures are not enough to support the cause. The power of social media lies in its accessibility, immediacy and visuality, which is illustrated in the article via specific examples of mining and railway construction protests in Finland and Sweden. Social media does not replace older tools, such as international human rights litigation, but their use can complement existing strategies for defending and advancing Indigenous rights.

Keywords Social media · Sámi · Land-use · Self-determination · Protest movements

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Introduction

For thousands of years, the northern parts of Norway, Sweden and Finland, as well as the Kola peninsula on the Russian side of the border, have been home to the Indigenous Sámi people (Hansen and Olsen 2014; Ojala 2009; Durfee and Johnstone 2019; p. 33). Today, many Sámi live in the big cities of the countries which govern their homeland (Melhus et al. 2020), while the connection between Indigenous communities and the Sámi homeland remains an inseparable part of the culture and heritage.

The traditional ways of using the land increasingly compete with non-traditional modes, especially those associated with the extractives industry. The roots of the conflict date back to the colonization of the Sámi peoples (Ojala and Nordin 2015; Lehtola 2015; Durfee and Johnstone 2019; p. 42 et seq.) and continue in the present with the ongoing fight to maintain their heritage, language, culture and increasingly to gain ownership of their lands and the right to self-determination. Nowhere is this more apparent than

in their activism against mining and large-scale infrastructure projects. Activism is not necessarily synonymous with protests; however, when it comes to mining in northern Finland and Sweden, as well as to the planned construction of the Arctic Railway, activism that initially used established political processes, such as public consultation hearings and petition drives has, in the last several years, morphed into protests. This development mirrors the increasing need to acknowledge that protests, which at first glance could be considered primarily as land-use or environmental conflicts, also entail political grievances for Indigenous rights, including, first and foremost, the right to self-determination (see Persson et al. 2017; Lawrence and Kløcker Larsen 2017).

The reason for this development can partly be explained by social movement theory and the concepts of political opportunity structures (POS) and legal opportunity structures (LOS) embedded within that theory (e.g. Eisinger 1973; McAdam 1996, 1999; Tarrow 2011; Andersen 2005). While this explains the connection between access to the political and legal processes and movement formation, it does not explain how social movements change over time, how they propagate their message or why they may change their narrative. This study argues that social media serves as one of the key tools used by Sámi activists because it bridges activist and protest movements while simultaneously enabling an issue-based activist narrative to morph into a global Indigenous rights and self-determination protest narrative. Though not asserting that social media is more powerful than political and legal opportunity structures or other factors in influencing social movements, it is a transformative force to be reckoned with because it has the advantage of speed and visibility that aids in raising awareness and politicizing issues.

This study delves into the use of social media within Indigenous protest movements, with particular attention on Finland and Sweden. While the roots of contemporary Indigenous protests in Sápmi can be traced back to the influential Áltá dam protests in Norwegian Sápmi during the 1970s and 1980s, and the movement for Indigenous rights continues actively in Norwegian Sápmi to this day, our focus lies on the Finnish and Swedish Sápmi. This choice is motivated by their partly similar approach toward international law in the context of Indigenous rights. Notably, neither of the two countries has ratified ILO Convention 169. Thus, exploring protest movements in these two countries offers a more insightful perspective on the role of social media within protest movements examined through the lens of political and legal opportunity structures. Because the emergence of activist and protest movements is partly a result of the lack of access to the political process, the legal structures of Finland and Sweden will first be addressed. The article will then discuss social movement theory and the concepts of

political and legal opportunity structures and examine why the Sámi are choosing protest against mining and industry projects as a primary mode of activism to assert self-determination. Following the theory section, four explanatory case examples will be presented: Gállok and Rönnbäck in Swedish Sápmi, as well as Käsivarsi and Arctic Railroad in Finnish Sápmi.

Indigenous rights

International law

International law has long played an important role in protecting the rights of Indigenous peoples. In the 16th century, one of the founding figures of what today is understood as international law, *Francisco de Vitoria*, argued in favor of recognizing the sovereignty of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas (Hernández 1991, 1046 et seq.). His pleas went unheard, and Indigenous peoples around the world, including in Sápmi, have become victims of colonialist expansions, which have led to numerous human rights violations (McGhee 2007; p. 247 et seq.), the effects of which are still felt by many Indigenous persons (Kirchner and Koivurova 2021; p. 100). International law took significant steps forward with the emergence of international human rights law as a field of international law in the wake of World War II. As part of the so-called “international bill of rights” (Rodley 2018; p. 778), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966) was adopted in 1966. Article 27 of ICCPR protects the cultural rights of minorities, including Indigenous peoples. Indigenous litigants, including many from Sápmi, have long used Article 27 ICCPR to defend Indigenous rights (cf. Kugelmann 2007; p. 245 et seq.; Kirchner 2015a, 2015b). The case law concerning Article 27 of ICCPR also includes cases that concern the extractive industries in Sápmi and the rights of the Sámi people¹. Because neither Sweden nor Finland, the two countries we are looking at in this study, has ratified International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 169, the key international treaty explicitly dedicated to the protection of the rights of Indigenous peoples, the focus here will be on rights as codified in the ICCPR and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples (UNDRIP). Among the key challenges in such cases, which are cases by a group or an individual against the State, usually for permitting extractive and industry activities (in the broadest

¹ i.e. Human Rights Committee (1994) *Länsman et al. v. Finland*, Communication No. 511/1992, UN GAOR, 52nd Session, UN Doc. CCPR/C/52D/511/1992, 8 November 1994. See also Hossain 2009; Amatulli 2015.

sense of the term) on land or in waters which are traditionally used by Indigenous persons or groups.

Despite similar (and often identical) international legal bases for Indigenous rights, the practical implementation of Indigenous rights varies significantly between the different countries which govern Sápmi (see Sillanpää 1997; Heinämäki et al. 2017; p. 308 et seq.). However, thanks to a fundamental respect for international law in Norway, Sweden and Finland, the rights of Indigenous peoples slowly receive more respect in domestic courts. For the time being, though, the road ahead towards a more complete realization of Indigenous rights in domestic law remains long and uncertain. In the context of mining, the lack of more explicit rules which provide better participatory models which are truly in line with contemporary free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) standards means that mining and large infrastructure projects on Indigenous lands remain a threat to the livelihoods of Indigenous communities across Sápmi (see, e.g. Rombouts 2014).

Domestic implementation of Indigenous rights in Finland and Sweden

Today, the cultural rights of the Sámi people in Finland are protected in a small part of the country, regions far north of the Arctic Circle, which are legally recognized as the Sámi home area. This legal recognition of the geographical extent of their home area is the critical factor in the limitation of Indigenous rights under the Finnish domestic law (Constitution of Finland, 121§, 4th subsection). In the context of discussions concerning the potential ratification of the ILO Convention 169, experts and politicians in Finland have debated the consequences of potential ratification for decades (see in detail Heinämäki et al. 2017; p. 308 et seq.). However, ratification is still a distant possibility despite continued discrimination against the Sámi people (United Nations Human Rights Committee 2021; CCPR/C/FIN/CO/7).

The Sámi are in possession of traditional local and inherited usufructuary rights to the land and water areas that existed long before the Finnish State (Lassila 2018). The approximately 10,000 Sámi living in Finland, not only in Sámi homeland comprising the northernmost areas of Finland, Enontekiö, Inari, Utsjoki and the northern parts of Sodankylä, but also those living elsewhere in bigger cities, have constitutional rights as an Indigenous peoples protected by the Finnish Constitution (see Sámi Parliament 2024). In addition to the use of traditional lands and waters, they also have rights to language, culture and traditional livelihoods, including reindeer herding, fishing and hunting (Constitution of Finland, 17§ 3rd subsection). These rights are not, however, synonymous with the right to self-govern

and given that 90% of Sámi lands are governed by the State (see, e.g. Metsähallitus 2022) and 100% owned by the State (Lassila 2018), it is not surprising that both the Council of Europe (2012, CM/ResCMN(2012)3) and the United Nations Human Rights Committee (2021; CCPR/C/FIN/CO/7) have urged Finland to provide a path for self-determination (Lassila 2018).

The Finnish part of Sápmi has long been relatively unaffected by mining. In recent years, though, interest in extractive industries has also grown in Finland. The Finnish Mining Act (2011) provides the Sámi Parliament a role in the administrative process concerning mining activities (The Finnish Mining Act 2011; Sect. 38). As noted earlier (Kirchner 2018, Raitio et al. 2020), this involvement is very limited and does not really give the Sámi people an actual chance to halt extractive industry projects which would affect them.

In Sweden, international standards for the rights of Indigenous peoples and minorities have relatively little influence on Swedish law regarding Sámi rights. Because of the dualistic approach to the application of international law, the Swedish government maintains a degree of sovereignty. Therefore, international regulations are not implemented directly into national law but are adapted to control the impact domestically (Schaffer 2020). The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR 1950) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989) are the only international conventions directly incorporated into Swedish law, but Sámi have gained little legal standing from either convention (Koivurova 2011). Sweden remains outside the ILO Convention 169 and has not incorporated the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights into national law, with the Convention's Article 27 as an important piece regarding the protection of minority cultures. Sweden, too, receives criticism from the UN monitoring bodies for not increasing recognition of Sámi rights and interests (Raitio et al. 2020; Lawrence and Åhren 2016). In Sweden, the Parliament has legislative power over the Sámi, but authority over issues relating to the Sámi and other 'national minorities' is split between several Government Ministries, with the Ministry of Culture holding the primary responsibility for Sámi languages and culture (SFS 1992:1433). The passage of the Sámi Parliament Act in 1992 and the establishment of the Swedish Sámi Parliament in 1993 were critical to begin the institutionalization of Sámi self-determination in Sweden. However, the Parliament's ability to function as a representative body for the Sámi is restricted by its role as a Swedish Government agency and not an independent parliament; thus, it has no lawmaking functions.

In practice, most Indigenous land rights in Sweden are tied to reindeer herding. As a consequence of the Swedish State's Sámi policy, two categories of Sámi exist. One, for

Sámi codified into Swedish legislation: members of Sámi reindeer herding communities (*samebyar*), who enjoy exclusive Sámi rights to herd reindeer (which includes hunting and fishing) in specific areas and, two, Sámi not codified into Swedish legislation: non-members, who do not retain these rights under Swedish law (Lawrence and Åhren 2016). However, in Sweden, traditional Sámi reindeer herding is viewed as a public interest or ‘weak’ property right, which diminishes their legal rights in permitting decisions (Raitio et al. 2020).

In early 2022, the Swedish government passed legislation stating that on issues affecting Sámi livelihoods, consultation with the Sámi Parliament and Sámi representatives is required (SFS 2022:66). However, these consultations do not require consensus, and the government retains the right to the final decision. For mining, affected *samebyar* are ‘consulted’ (meaning that they are heard but do not have decision-making power, similar to the situation of the Sámi Parliament in Finland), especially in the environmental impact assessment (EIA), both for the mining concession and environmental permit. Because Sámi rights in Sweden are essentially considered as rights to practice reindeer herding, nearly all rights are regulated by the Reindeer Husbandry Act (SFS 1971:437), where the right to herd reindeer is recognized as a property right (based on custom) – and backed up by with the two recent Supreme Court cases, *Girjas* (Supreme Court of Sweden 2021) and *Nordmaling* (NJA 2011), as well as *Skattefjäll* (NJA 1981) (Allard and Brännstrom 2021). Sámi outside the *samebyar* lack specific land and resource rights, a remnant from the 1800s when the State started to regulate Sámi traditions where all other Sámi apart from reindeer herders were to be assimilated into the mainstream Swedish society (Lundmark 1998). There are several gaps between different layers of laws. For instance, international human rights standards regarding Indigenous peoples have not been incorporated into domestic laws to the degree Sami Parliament wants, particularly since the reindeer herding right as a property right is not embedded into ordinary statutes (Raitio et al. 2020). Because of this, *samebyar* have turned to human rights institutions to support the rights of its members, which is demonstrated, for example, in the case of *Handölsdalen Sámi Village and others v. Sweden* (Appl. no. 39,013/04), which was decided by the European Court of Human Rights in 2010 (Koivurova 2011).

Social movement theory and social media

Social movement theory

Social movement research can provide insight into how social movements, including Indigenous movements, emerge and grow. There are different facets of social movement theory that either focus on the movements themselves (internal factors) or else on influences that affect movement formation and continuity (external factors) (Meyer 2004). Internal factors include, for example, the form of movement organization, framing of the issue and interaction with external forces such as the media (Tarrow 2011; Wahlström and Peterson 2006; Mena and Waeger 2014). External factors, among them political opportunity structures (POS), include tangibles such as grievances, as well as intangibles, such as the support from influential individuals or politicians, that have the power to influence policy-making.

The relationship between land-use-related governance institutions and protest movements can be addressed through the concept of POS, introduced by Eisinger (1973) and then developed with essential contributions from McAdam (1996, 1999) and Tarrow (2011). It is hypothesized that if policy formulation and implementation processes are open, social movements are likely to use existing institutional processes, but if they are closed, the movements are more likely to use confrontational strategies such as civil disobedience and protest events (Meyer and Minkoff 2004; Zachrisson and Beland Lindahl 2019). Although often included under the umbrellas of POS, legal processes and structures that influence social movements are now considered a distinct subset referred to as legal opportunity structures (LOS) (Andersen 2005). LOS include not only the court system and the ability to use litigation but also how the judiciary itself views a social movement (Hilson 2002; De Fazio 2012). LOS are particularly relevant for large-scale projects that engender opposition, and therefore potentially, social movements.

Social movement research until of late has focused primarily on the effects of participation on policy rather than on how policy is actually implemented in localities. Recent studies in Sweden shows implementation is, however, very relevant when studying land-use issues and social movements (Zachrisson and Beland Lindahl 2023). This in turn is important for understanding movements involving Indigenous communities as their issues of concern revolve largely around rights to land and water. Thus, social movements are not monolithic entities interested in only one aspect of a policy process but reveal internal diversity such that part of a movement may focus on participation versus implementation. Depending on what aspect is in focus also suggests that different parts of a movement operate according to slightly

different rationales, which helps explain the complexity of these movements (Zachrisson and Beland Lindahl 2019, 10.)

As in the case examples examined in this research, contemporary Indigenous protest movements often ally with environmental movements. While Sámi organizations are motivated by their struggle for self-determination and viable reindeer husbandry, environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOS) primarily focus on the environmental impacts (ibid.). ENGOS have a broad mandate, with the main objective being environmental preservation, whether at the local, regional, national or global levels. While environmental topics overlap with the concerns of the Sámi, the agendas of the two groups are different. Yet, there are also issues of commonality. As awareness of our dependence on nature and mutual understanding of different needs grows, activists who approach a problem from different angles find ways to work together. While large-scale mining and industry projects are generally seen to pose a threat to traditional livelihoods and cultural practices (Beland Lindahl et al. 2018), the Sámi policies generally considered oppressive and restricting may also be challenged through the platforms emerging from these issue-specific protests (Löf 2015). However, while relatively stable political opportunity structures play a significant role, the concept cannot entirely explain the mobilization of protest movements in Sápmi. Another critical factor is the land-use activities themselves and the emergence of contested local projects with unwanted outcomes (Zachrisson and Beland Lindahl 2019; p. 10).

Although the four conflicts presented as case examples in this study all began as issue-specific protests, it can be argued that longstanding land-use, self-determination and political participation grievances are deeply intertwined with the current protest movements. Political and legal opportunity structures help explain why, over time, the Sámi people have changed strategies, initially using existing political processes (Kirchner and Koivurova 2021; p. 112), but with little to no apparent influence on permitting processes themselves², more confrontational strategies have been adopted. POS and LOS, however, are only one part of the picture as they explain external influences on movement formation. Internal factors are also essential, and traditional media, and increasingly social media, influence movement function and the framing of narratives. For example, Persson et al. (2017) use the resistance to a mine in Gállok – one of the conflicts that will also be examined in this study – to illustrate the Sámi narratives underlying protest. Although the conflict may be perceived as concerning access to natural resources,

the authors argue that the perceived environmental conflict can be viewed as part of a larger struggle over social status and recognition. It illustrates the everyday struggle of the Sámi population to claim justice through their historical rights and culture, and the Sámi struggles for recognition against the State. Only recently has the media deemed these struggles to be newsworthy.

Social media as a protest tool

In recent years, the collaboration between Indigenous communities worldwide has been enhanced through social media. Media, whether traditional or social, has considerable power to render certain groups invisible, thus subordinating them in relation to other social actors (Fraser 2000). Persson et al. (2017, 26), who have studied the G?llok protests and the media's role in reinforcing existing power relations, argue that the media 'creates institutionalized cultural norms by giving privilege to specific topics and making certain groups in society more visible'. In the context of the G?llok protest, activists felt that despite their relentless and long-standing efforts to raise awareness of the resistance, the issue failed to capture enough interest from the mainstream media to make headlines, indicating a lack of interest in the issue when it was mainly about indigenous struggles for recognition (ibid.). The protest movement only began to receive media attention after different stakeholders came together, first, via social media and soon via on-site activism by setting up a camp to block the company from accessing the site (see Case study nr. 1: G?llok). Especially in the Indigenous context, local resistance movements are increasingly becoming nationwide and even internationalized movements.

The Áltá dam protests in Norwegian Sápmi in the late 1970s and early 1980s successfully gained international media coverage by combining visual arts, music, speeches, and hunger strikes as forms of resistance (García-Antón et al. 2020; Cocq and DuBois 2020, 49–58). Indigenous protest movements in Norwegian Sápmi and elsewhere in the 2010s continued the tradition of increasing visibility through art and activism. Today, these methods of activism are complemented with an additional manner to use the freedom of speech: the added component of online activism allows protesters' messages to spread effectively to Indigenous as well as national and international audiences (Cocq and DuBois 2020, 191–272). Sámi social media influencers, as well as others representing younger generations of social media users, use Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter as platforms for raising awareness about Indigenous issues and connecting with one another and allies (for networking on different social media platforms in the context of Indigenous protests, see e.g. ibid., 203–208, 218–219, 234–237,

² e.g. European Commission of Human Rights (1983). G. and E. v. Norway, Applications No. 9278/81 and 9415/81, decision of 3 October 1983.

251–257). However, these platforms do not always reach less tech-affine users. This could explain why protest movements still often choose to, at least partly, operate through more conventional social media platforms such as Facebook, which still in both Finland and Sweden remains one of the most popular platforms for all ages apart from the very youngest generation (Svenskarna och Internet 2023; Statistics Finland 2020).

Cocq and DuBois (2020) argue that Indigenous activists use social media as a device of decolonization to communicate Indigenous values and cultures that are underrepresented in mainstream media. With its ability to quickly pressure political structures, social media bridges the gap between the external and internal factors of protest movements, influencing politicians and changing policy, as well as acting as a cohesive force within the Sámi movement itself by allowing activists to reframe issue-specific debates into questions of self-determination – a core concept of international law that is vital for the understanding of Indigenous rights (ibid. 203–298; Byers 2013; p. 218 et seq.). Unlike traditional media, social media provides an immediate and fluid means for communicating with the public and building support. While the formation of, for example, mining-sceptical movements can be explained by the concept of political opportunity structures, in the case studies of this article, it is social media that is a significant factor in reframing the debate and garnering national and international support for Indigenous rights.

Indigenous activists use online platforms not only to share information about events between Indigenous actors and communities but also to share similar experiences and to communicate them to a broader audience (Dahlberg-Grundberg and Örestig 2017; Cocq and DuBois 2020, 191–272). Increasingly, due to the intimate linkage of Indigenous cultures and rights to land-use, sustainability, and environmental protection, contemporary Indigenous activism collaborates with influential environmental organizations such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth to promote Indigenous sovereignty, self-determination, and social and environmental justice. Moreover, land-use disputes frequently intersect with issues of self-determination, underscoring the argument that the message resonates not only within environmental and issue-based activism but also carries a human rights dimension that bolsters the struggle for self-determination. In the 21st century, also other concerned interest groups such as fishers, tourism entrepreneurs and landowners have joined their forces in resistance movements against new industrial projects in Sápmi and elsewhere (Fjellborg et al. 2022; Lawrence and Kløcker Larsen 2017; Cocq and DuBois 2020 203–217).

Data and methods

To examine the role social media plays in modern Indigenous protest movements, we introduce four explanatory case examples, two from the Swedish Sápmi and two from the Finnish Sápmi, and analyze how social media as a particular tool helped these groups coordinate and communicate their message to a broader audience. We have chosen these two countries due to their partly shared legal bases for Indigenous rights; neither has ratified ILO Convention 169, unlike Norway. Therefore, focusing on Indigenous groups' limited access to legal and political opportunity structures in these two countries provides valuable insights into the discourse on influencing policy through modern protest movements.

In Sweden, we examined the protests against proposed mines in Gällöck and Rönnbäck. In Finland, we chose to look at the *Ei kaivoksia Suomen Käsivarteen* (No mines to the Great Mountains wilderness areas in Enontekiö) movement and protests against the recently abandoned initiative of the Arctic Railway. The cases in Sweden were studied for the period 2009–2019 using three document sources. First, reports about the cases were collected from traditional media via the media database Retriever.se. Second, public documents from permitting processes for the mining projects were collected from relevant state authorities. Third, documents, texts, and images created by actors involved in resistance to the projects were collected from relevant social media platforms —mainly Facebook and actors' custom-made web pages.³ The data for the case examples on the Finnish Sápmi was collected from various relevant social media platforms, with particular attention given to content generated by Indigenous protesters themselves as well as the allied environmental and advocacy groups. Reports from traditional media outlets, other social media observations as well as official documents regarding the permitting processes, complement the original data sources.

The analysis was conducted as a qualitative explanatory research (Yin 2014) aimed at understanding the specific ways in which social media functions as a communication tool within Indigenous protest movements. Special attention was given to examining the dynamics among different participant groups in the protests, as well as analyzing the messaging – including its dissemination, the parties involved, and its adaptation across various platforms and audiences. Importantly, the aim of the research presented here is not to research Indigenous persons or actions. Instead, the study aims to acquaint the reader with the practical relevance of Indigenous rights in contemporary settings, specifically through the lens of social media, and political and legal

³ for more detailed descriptions and data references for these two cases, see Fjellborg et al. 2022. See also Reuters 2022a; ibid. 2022b.

opportunity structures. It does so by illustrating how social media is used to communicate, endorse, and disseminate the grievances of underrepresented minority groups to external audiences supportive of their cause – be it specific land-use-related struggles over Indigenous lands or a broader quest for Indigenous rights.

Case examples

As with many social movements, when both the political and legal opportunity structures appear closed, the public arena is often sought as the means for raising public awareness. In combination with dramatic shifts in communication and networking over recent years, the public arena is no longer relegated only to physical space but now also takes on a digital form. Sámi actors and their advocates in Sweden and Finland now commonly use social media to both promote and organize around their political agenda. Here, we use two cases of place-specific resistance in Sweden to exemplify the use of social media in advocating for Sámi rights within the mining sector – Gállok and Rönnbäck. In Finland, we examine the use of social media in protests against mineral exploration in Käsivarsi area and the Indigenous resistance against the planned construction of the Arctic Railway.

Gállok (Sweden)

The iron deposit in Kallak, or Gallók, is located about 40 km west of the community of Jokkmokk (Jáhkámáhkke / Dálvvadis). Although the deposit has been known since the 1940s, only in the 2000s did interest grow significantly enough to warrant new interest. A British company, Beowulf Mining PLC, explored the area since 2006 and developed plans to extract iron in an open pit mine over a period of 20 to 30 years and potentially additional sites in the future. The mining plans affect at least three Sámi Reindeer Herding Communities that now oppose the project (Beland Lindahl et al. 2018). As concern over the project grew, several organizations and networks developed. A Facebook group, “*No Mines in Jokkmokk* (Inga gruvor i Jokkmokk)”, was established on 30 November 2011 and served as a meeting point for those interested in stopping the mine and sharing information. The group also became a space for organizing actions against the development of the mine, such as the campaign “*Budkavlen*”, which connected a number of place-specific anti-extraction movements and resulted in a public manifestation in Stockholm in November 2012 to protest the Mineral Act. This protest was followed by four other Stockholm protests between 2013 and 2019 against the Government’s Mineral Strategy and the Mineral Act (Fjellborg et al. 2022). Importantly, the Facebook group

developed networks with other actors, such as the environmental non-governmental organization Nature and Youth Sweden and the anarchist network The Colonies, who are not inherently engaged in Sámi issues but adopted them in the respective mandates. Nature and Youth wrote on their webpage that they “want to work against overconsumption, we want Indigenous rights and landowners’ rights to be respected [...] we want environmental values to be respected” (Nature and Youth 2021).

Protest actions reached a high point in 2013 with the “Camp Kallak” road blockade. Using social media brought both local and non-local protesters to Jokkmokk and temporarily stopped the test extractions until police removed the activists. The paired use of social media and on-site activism also facilitated an “extension of the local” (Dahlberg-Grundberg and Örestig 2017), whereby local protests connected to global Indigenous rights activism via the Internet. A webpage and Facebook page called “*What local people*” were also established to promote an art exhibit with the same name. This exhibit was used to depict the negative effects of the mining operations on locals as a direct response to comments made by a former CEO of Beowulf Mining, who made the statement that very few people would be negatively affected by the mine. The exhibition was initiated by a local Sámi actor and featured portrayals of several Sámi, both inside and outside the reindeer herding communities (P4 Västerbotten 2012). An independent producer also developed a digital, flash-based game called “Sápmi Defender” to raise awareness of the contestation over the proposed Kallak mine. It depicted a reindeer throwing Molotov cocktails at men wearing suits (Kejonen 2016). In March 2022, the Government of Sweden decided to approve the mining concession application submitted by Beowulf to the Mining Inspectorate in 2013. The approval was contingent on twelve conditions the company met, including reaching agreements with the three affected reindeer herding communities (Government of Sweden 2022). The next step for the proposed mine is applying for an Environmental Permit, and it is likely that social movements will mobilize again during this stage.

Rönnbäck (Sweden)

The Rönnbäck mine proposal was located in Storuman municipality, roughly 250 km southwest of Kallak/Gállok. The proposed site consisted of three open nickel pits, an industrial area with ore treatment facilities such as crushing plants, ore storage and a processing plant. An area would also be dedicated to stockpiling waste rock and a pond for mine tailings. The life span of the mine was thought to be over 27 years. It faced similar criticism from the local Sámi

reindeer herders and other Sámi organizations as the project in Kallak/Gállok.

One of the first actions taken was the creation of a Facebook group called “*Stop the Mine in Rönnbäck, Björkvattsdalen, Tärnaby* (Stoppa gruvan i Rönnbäck i Björkvattsdalen, Tärnaby)”, which later developed into a blog and a formal association called “*The Network to Stop the Mine in Rönnbäck* (Nätverket Stoppa Gruvan i Rönnbäck)”. As in the case of Kallak/Gállok, a mix of concerns for Indigenous rights, negative environmental impacts and long-term sustainability motivated the resistance in Rönnbäck. The network wrote in a blog posting that they “want to protect the environment, health, local residents and Indigenous rights for future generations” (Stop the Mine in Rönnbäck 2013). Also, in this case, the movement was comprised of a mix of Sámi actors and environmental and other organizations supporting claims for Indigenous rights. Sámi inside the reindeer herding communities primarily resisted the mining plans via the formal permitting processes, where the communities have legal standing, while most actions on social media were performed by Sámi outside of the reindeer herding communities and by environmental organizations (Fjellborg et al. 2022). Actors also connected to the network in Jokkmokk, and information about the resistance to mining in Rönnbäck was added to the “What local people” webpage as a point of solidarity between both groups (P4 Västerbotten 2012). Members of the Rönnbäck network also attended the “Budkavlen” and anti-Mineral Strategy protests in Stockholm (Hedman 2012).

Käsivarsi (Finland)

The “*Ei kaivoksia Suomen Käsivarteen*” protest is one of the most recent examples of Indigenous resistance movements using predominantly social media as a medium of campaigning and awareness raising in the Finnish Sápmi. The movement started in February 2020, shortly after the Finnish Safety and Chemicals Agency (Tukes) granted Akkerman Finland Oy, a Dutch Akkerman Exploration B.V. subsidiary, a permit to conduct exploration activities in Hietakero, Enontekiö. The reserved area is part of the European Union’s Natura 2000 network, and it covers 70% of the reindeer grazing area used by Erkuna reindeer-herding *siiida* (Nilsen 2020).

The movement gained publicity through a Facebook group carrying the name of the protest, “*Ei kaivoksia Suomen Käsivarteen*”⁴ (No mines to the Great Mountains wilderness areas in Enontekiö), and soon expanded to online petitions aiming to prohibit mining and exploration activities in the area. The Constitution of Finland allows for

citizens’ initiatives with 50,000 signatures to be submitted to the Parliament of Finland for consideration (Constitution of Finland, article 53). A citizen’s initiative against mining activities in Käsivarsi reached over 37,000 signatures by its deadline on 29 August 2020, on a symbolically significant Finnish Nature Day (see Adressit 2020; Näkkäläjärvi 2020). A few non-Sámi celebrities and media personalities shared the initiative on their social media accounts, encouraging their networks to join the resistance and sign it (Seipiharju 2020). The founder of the movement, citizen’s initiative and the Facebook group told the Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE) that having consulted legal experts and learned that current legislation could not prevent exploration activities in Hietakero, where their reindeer herding cooperative traditionally operates, they decided to raise awareness via social media (ibid.). The locals aimed to draw attention not only to environmental and Indigenous issues but also to legislative gaps in the Mining Act. While the initiative did not proceed to Parliament, mainstream media widely covered the topic after it gained attention via social media (Satokangas 2020).

This case example illustrates that the lack of political power and influence over industrial activities in the Sámi homeland can drive Sámi activists to turn to social media and other unconventional methods in their struggle for Indigenous rights. Furthermore, mainstream media does not accurately reflect the views and values of Indigenous communities (Pietikäinen 2008; p. 177; Pietikäinen 2000, 213–214; Pietikäinen 2003, 587–588, 603–605; Junka-Aikio 2018; p. 7; Persson et al. 2017; p. 26), which can further encourage Indigenous activists to turn to social media to increase their international visibility.

However, while this case example illustrates that social media is an integral part of modern Indigenous protest movements, it does not imply that Sámi activists and politicians do not also use conventional methods to influence decision-making. For example, in the case of Akkerman Finland Oy’s reservation in Hietakero, the Sámi Parliament in Finland, as well as the President of the Saami Council, has criticized the Finnish Mining Act for granting the Sámi rights holders and the Sámi Parliament only a symbolic role in the decision-making processes (Muotka 2020). Furthermore, according to the Mining Act, the responsible permitting authority (Tukes) is not obliged to directly inform the Sámi stakeholders or the Sámi Parliament about the reservations granted for the areas in Sápmi. In this case, the Sámi Parliament filed a complaint to the Administrative Court of Northern Finland (Sámi Parliament 2020b, VA2020:0007, Dnro:480 /D.a.9/2020), stating that the exploration activities violate Indigenous people’s constitutional rights to practice traditional livelihoods and to strengthen social and cultural institutions. In addition, communication on the matter has

⁴ See also <<https://eikaivoksille.wordpress.com/>> Accessed 14 February 2024.

been defective as Tukes has not announced the decision in any of the Sámi languages (Tammela 2020).

In this case, social media served as a tool to draw attention to the citizens' initiative to ban mining in the Käsivarsi area. The Facebook group protesting the exploration activities in the Käsivarsi area later expanded its objectives by publishing statements about the need to renew the Finnish Mining Act. It is also connected and often refers to the Facebook posts of another Finnish anti-mining Facebook group and a citizen's initiative, "Kaivostoiminnalle RAJAT (LIMITS to mining activities)", which pushes the Finnish mining legislation to allow the establishment of mining free zones based on the social and environmental significance of the area (Kansalaisaloite.fi 2021).

Arctic railway (Finland)

As an alternative transport route via the Northern Sea Route, the proposed Arctic Railway was supposed to increase the economic potential of Northern Europe by connecting the Finnish railways and Norwegian Kirkenes deep-water port. Initially financially supported by the governments of both Finland and Norway, the project was later considered economically unprofitable by a Finnish-Norwegian working group (Ministry of Transport and Communications 2019). After publishing the report, Finnish media sources reported a private entrepreneur's plans to fund the project through private investments from China and the European Union (Ruokangas and Mäntykenttä 2019).

From the beginning, Sámi communities and environmental organizations had voiced their concerns over environmental impacts as well as the severe damage the Railway would cause to traditional livelihoods and cultures in affected reindeer herding cooperatives (Sámi Parliament 2019, Dnro: 33/D.a.2/2019). Neither their resistance nor the official statement by the Sámi Parliament that the project violated the Constitution of Finland (See Constitution of Finland, Sect. 17) sufficed to terminate the project (Sámi Parliament 2020a). Instead, later in spring 2021, it was debunked by the former advocate of the project, the Regional Council of Lapland (Malinen 2021; Nilsen 2021).

In this instance, activists found their main ally in Greenpeace, which has already, since the early 2000s, collaborated with Sámi activists and reindeer herders to protest against the logging industry (see, e.g. Greenpeace Suomi 2019). In September 2019, Greenpeace, Suoma Sámi Nuorat (Finnish Sámi Youth) and an art/activist collective Suohpanterror, together with local communities, organized *The Red Line demonstrations* in which activists and concerned locals dressed in red formed a human line near Vuotso, Sodankylä to illustrate a border which may not be crossed by the

industry (Suoninen 2018)⁵. Similar demonstrations were organized in other parts of Sápmi in the following days. The messages "Ei Jäämeren rataa (no to Arctic Railway)", "Mii enâmen mii puatteevuotâ (our land, our future)", "Suodjalan (I will protect)" and "no consent, no access" written in red banderols were mainly aimed at the Finnish government to criticize the lack of free, prior and informed consent in this matter and to emphasize that the Arctic Railway would not be accepted by the Sámi communities, reindeer herders and environmental activists.

The key statements in banderols were written in Inari Sámi, Northern Sámi and Skolt Sámi, as well as in Finnish and English. Through communication with activists' social media channels and collaboration with Greenpeace's international, English-speaking networks, the movement was able to attract international visibility. Unlike in the case of mining in Käsivarsi, the protest movement against the Arctic Railway did not establish a Facebook group dedicated to the purpose. However, Greenpeace Finland can be seen as the main NGO raising awareness on the issue on Facebook as it regularly published content produced in collaboration with the Sámi resistance movement. Even though Indigenous resistance was not enough to debunk the Arctic Railway initiative, elaborate use of social media and collaboration with Greenpeace brought international media attention to the case. It can, therefore, have affected the general opinion on the project on both international and national levels. Largely due to the significant interest the Arctic Railway protests received in social media, the topic was covered by international news sources such as The Barents Observer (Suoninen 2018), The Guardian (Wall 2019) and The Ecologist (Waller 2019). The movement has also been linked to a larger conversation around Indigenous rights by the popular #noaccesswithoutconsent on Twitter and Instagram.

Conclusions

Since the mining boom at the beginning of the 2000s, the focus on mining in the Northern parts of Sweden and Finland brought forth latent questions about the co-existence of mining, reindeer herding, and other land-use by the Sámi. This has produced increasing tension and conflict over mine establishments as the land-use conflicts relate closely to Indigenous rights (Fjellborg et al. 2022; Lawrence and Kløcker Larsen 2017). Although some actors succeed in working within the established political and legal structures, others find access to these avenues for influence much more restricted. Some Sámi actors find that the ability to influence policy, either in its formulation or implementation,

⁵ Vuotso is often referred to as the southernmost Sámi village in the Finnish Sápmi.

is limited by the State, which closes the political opportunity structures (Zachrisson and Beland Lindahl 2019). At the same time, a lack of integration of Sámi rights within mining legislation and environmental impact assessment restricts the legal opportunity structures available for Sámi actors (Raitio et al. 2020).

The examination of the four case examples in Swedish and Finnish Sápmi suggests that social media plays an integral role in modern Indigenous protests. In all four protests, grievances were initially addressed through political and legal opportunity structures but failed to achieve the desired outcome. These grievances were conveyed to external audiences supportive of Indigenous struggles via social media. The communicated message in each case study encompassed not only issue-based land-use protests but also conveyed a broader message concerning the Indigenous quest for the right to self-determination. Furthermore, it can be argued that the motivation for Indigenous online activism derives from the need to challenge the discourses portrayed by the traditional (national) media and present alternative narratives focusing on Indigenous self-determination, as well as environmental and social justice (see also Cocq and Dubois 2020). Using social media as a tool in protest movements is not merely a way to influence mainstream discourses but also to draw attention and feed content to traditional media, which often ignores the struggles for Indigenous rights.

The use of social media in the context of protest movements in Sápmi illustrates its pivotal role in both internal dynamics and external outreach, as posited by social movement theory scholars (Meyer 2004; Tarrow 2011; Wahlström and Peterson 2006; Mena and Waeger 2014). Firstly, the ability to share information through platforms such as Facebook is effective not only in drawing attention to an issue but also in gaining support and building networks across various actors – including some who had not previously publicly advocated for Sámi rights. As illustrated by all four case examples, protests were supported by external actors such as environmental organizations, youth networks, locals, and, in one instance in the protest against the mining and exploration activities in the Käsivarsi area, celebrities eager to endorse the message for Indigenous rights for self-determination. Social media serves as a low-cost entry point into political debates, particularly compared to traditional political and legal routes, and provides a creative platform, as exemplified by the art exhibit and game in Gállok protests and protest art in Vuotso. Integrating visual arts, music, and protest is a distinctive feature of Indigenous protests, carrying on the legacy of the Áltá protests in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. García-Antón et al. 2020; Cocq and DuBois 2020, 49–58). Mixing arts and protest facilitates the effective dissemination of the message through contemporary popular social media platforms and improves

the visibility of Indigenous topics often underrepresented by the mainstream media. Secondly, while using digital tools opens a ‘new’ public arena, it also facilitates physical action. Several protests for Sámi rights were borne out of the networking and coordination over Facebook groups and blogs, creating a new dynamic for social movements. Consequently, social media contributes to internal factors supporting social movements by bridging vast physical distances in Sápmi and facilitating coordination among Sámi communities and other more remote actors, such as other Indigenous peoples and organizations.

In the last half-century, Indigenous activists, including those from Sápmi, have played a vital role in advancing international and national legal norms that protect the rights of Indigenous peoples. For a long time, international human rights litigation and participation in international fora related to Indigenous rights have been the most visible and noteworthy forms of activism – in addition to direct protests in connection with outside uses of places such as Käsivarsi region, Gállok, Rönnbäck and Vuotso. Like societies as a whole, including Indigenous societies, forms of interaction and protest evolve. Our investigation of the four protests leads to the impression that the narrative against mining and other extractive projects, though appealing to many groups, does not seem to have the same resonance as the quest for Indigenous rights. The case examples used in this study demonstrate that issue-specific protests tend to gain attention among local communities and media outlets. However, a larger audience is attracted to the narratives of social injustice and struggle for Indigenous rights – as demonstrated, for example, by the media’s attention revolved around the #noaccesswithoutconsent hashtag to link land-use protests with a broader international movement for Indigenous rights. It is this common narrative that has the power to meld local, national and international Indigenous communities into a common cause.

Today, the use of social media is an integral part of the lives of many who live in Sápmi or who otherwise care about the natural environment of the region and about the rights of the people who live there. As a powerful tool of direct communication, social media has its place in contemporary discourses and protest movements. In Sápmi, social movements utilize social media to defend their rights and widen the scope of discourses. So far, the current use of social media can be seen as a natural continuation of tools used in the past. Social media does not replace older tools like international human rights litigation or physical protests. However, their use can complement existing strategies for the defence and advancement of Indigenous rights by those who are most directly affected and by those who want to speak out on behalf of the rights of others.

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