

Introduction

When I lived in Russia — and even now — my heart has always carried one constant preoccupation: the land of my ancestors.

Like many Sámi, I ask myself: What will I leave behind? Will my people endure? These are the questions that define my life, as they do for so many of my people.

Today, I want to speak about the Northern Sea Route — and how this grand project may shape, and even threaten, the future of the Sámi.

We hear so much about the Northern Sea Route — about millions of tons of cargo, about a new “Arctic highway” that is meant to become the pride of Russia. But let us ask a simple, honest question: What does all this mean for those who have lived in the Arctic for centuries — for millennia?

I am speaking about the Sámi of the Kola Peninsula — an Indigenous people; only about fifteen hundred of us remain.

Our traditions — reindeer herding, fishing, hunting — depend entirely on the land and the sea.

For us, the Northern Sea Route is not a symbol of progress.

For us, it may become the road to extinction.

Environmental Threats

The Northern Sea Route means a sharp rise in shipping through the Barents and White Seas.

Tankers, coal barges, gas carriers — all increasing the risk of accidents.

It is no secret that Russia now relies on what is called the “*shadow fleet*” to transport oil and gas.

The environmental group Bellona warns: many of these vessels are old, worn-out, uninsured, and sometimes sail without functioning transponders.

If an accident happens, no one will take responsibility.

Now imagine what that would mean for the Sámi.

An oil spill in our coastal waters — and the fish, the foundation of our diet and our

culture, could vanish for decades.

Without fish, there is no fishing, no traditional trade, no way of life.

The coastal tundra would be poisoned, destroying the reindeer's summer pastures — and with them, reindeer herding itself.

And what is the reindeer to the Sámi?

It is our life, our spirit, our ancestors.

Without the reindeer, the Sámi people themselves will disappear.

Social Pressure

But the threat is not only environmental.

It is also social — and political.

In 2021, Elena Yakovleva, the founder of the “Sámi Shore” museum, spoke of being kidnapped and threatened. She was forced to leave the land where she had built an ethnocultural center.

As she told it:

“They took me far out to the shore of the bay. Acting on behalf of ‘Novatek,’ they threatened me and demanded that I abandon the territory. They left me outside a locked house. For two days I ate nothing and slept outdoors. Then I managed to break into a small cabin, found a half-deflated boat, and set off toward home across the bay. Luckily, sailors, rescuers, and guards found me.”

This story shows how dangerous it has become to defend culture and tradition. When a Sámi reindeer herder is threatened, it is not just one person who is under attack — it is the collective memory of an entire people.

Cultural Challenges

Sámi organizations warn that large industrial projects in the Barents Sea are often carried out without consulting Indigenous communities. This creates deep mistrust — and a painful sense of being pushed aside.

Valentina Sovkina, activist and member of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, put it this way when speaking about the proposed platinum mine in the Fedorova tundra:

“If we allow mining now, we will lose our land forever. The company promises jobs...”

Here lies the tragic choice: to preserve our land and culture — or to accept short-term promises of jobs and corporate bonuses.

Major industrial companies have merged with state authorities.

For them, profit comes first.

For them, the Sámi do not count. And the worst part: we are no longer masters of our own land — the land of our ancestors.

Cold Statistics

Even if we set emotion aside, the numbers speak for themselves:

- Only **1,363** Sámi remain in Russia (2020 census).
- Only **16%** still speak their native language — and that number keeps falling each year.
- There is no full educational program in the Sámi language.

This means that our language and culture stand on the edge of extinction. And the expansion of the Northern Sea Route only speeds up that decline.

International Perspective

Bellona’s recent Arctic report emphasizes that Sámi cultural initiatives — museums, ethnic centers — suffer from lack of support and from administrative pressure.

International organizations are sounding the alarm: the Sámi are losing not only their land but also their voice in public dialogue.

Conclusion

The Northern Sea Route is not only about tankers and ports. It is a direct threat to the survival of the Indigenous peoples of the North, of Siberia, and of the Far East — peoples who have lived here long before any geopolitical ambition was born.

For the state, this is a “project of the century.”

For the Sámi, it is a question of life and death.

If today we allow activists to be kidnapped and threatened, traditional lands to be destroyed, and Indigenous voices to be ignored — then tomorrow we risk losing not just one people.

We will lose a part of the Arctic itself — its living soul.

Let me end with a line from the film *“The Kautokeino Rebellion”*:

“There are things that are hard to talk about, but silence leads nowhere. We must speak and try to understand — even when there seems to be no hope. Hope does not die; it moves into new hearts, like the spring wind that carries the scent of summer.”

Thank you.

Andrei Danilov, Sámi