

Contesting the Arctic Railway

The Arctic Railway would encroach upon reindeer habitats, endanger the livelihoods of indigenous people, and attract large-scale industrialisation.

By [Clemence Waller](#)

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The Arctic railway would have opened up the Arctic trade routes and allowed Finland to have a direct connection to central Europe for transport of raw materials. However, a [recent report](#) has brought the project's commercial and ethical viability into question.

The report concluded that:

“A railway project this size is so complex and involves so many stakeholders and factors that in the time and resources given it has not been possible to properly assess all of the issues regarding the Arctic railway project.”

The report argues that more planning is needed regarding funding and respecting the rights of the Indigenous people (the Sami) whose land the railway would have to traverse across.

Environmental impact

The projected railway was planned to cross from Rovaniemi, Finland to Kirkenes Norway. This railway would open up the Arctic circle to Europe and secure a more direct trade route for Baltic Nations, Russia, Japan and China to transport raw materials to Central Europe.

The project was initially announced in October 2015 by former Prime Minister of Finland **Paavo Lipponen**, in a memorandum to Former European Commission President **Jean-Claude Juncker**.

This project has since been met with vehement criticism from the Sami People, environmental activists and artists supporting the Sami people and ordinary Finnish citizens.

Johanna Kronqvist, a student at Abo Akademy in Finland, said:

“At first, I thought [the railway project] sounded quite exciting, but as soon as I realised the effects on the Sami people, the reindeer husbandry and the environment in general, I got upset”.

Indeed, though the Norwegian and Finnish governments explored five different route options, all would have had to cross Sami Lapland, and thus cause damage to the habitat of the reindeer and the fishing traditions of the Sami people.

Final frontier

The construction of the line was projected by **Minister Anna Berner** to cost €2.9 billion, with Norway paying €0.9 and Finland paying the rest. The Rovaniemi-Kirkenes line would cut through lake Inari and a large portion of forest and herding territories.

Dr Humrich from the University of Groningen describes the Arctic as “the final frontier”. The Arctic region is a goldmine for those seeking to exploit its natural resources, with its untapped liquid oil and gas reserves, and the Arctic ocean serving as an expedient sea route that helps transport raw goods.

Dr Humrich said:

“Concerning the transport of raw materials, the railway would be transferring copper, iron ore, phosphate or raw wood. They are not transportable by plane. The goods are currently being transported by boat but that is a very slow process.

“Finally, the goods could be transferred by street but they have less capacity than trains, who are in the eyes of the Finnish government, the most economically feasible option.”

As it stands, goods from Russia enter the northernmost part of Norway and still have to be transferred to other modes of transportations. The Rovaniemi-Kirkenes line would have effectively cut out the middle man and set up a direct line connecting Europe to the Arctic sea and create new transport hubs and ports.

In Dr Humrich’s opinion, despite looking at all five proposal routes for this line, there was no way for construction to avoid Sami Lapland. However, he did agree that the Rovaniemi-Kirkenes was the option, though most direct, that would cause the greatest amount of damage to the Lapland flora and fauna.

Indigenous livelihoods

The Sami people are the only Indigenous peoples living within the European Union. They are present in Norway, Sweden, Russia and Finland.

Part of their heritage is Reindeer Husbandry and Fishing. The projected railway line would cut through one third of Lapland forest region and would cause significant damage to an already fragile Arctic Environment.

As Dr. Cepinskyte of the Finnish Institute of International Affairs, specialist on the protection of national minorities and indigenous peoples and Arctic Security explained:

“The Sami people fear the railway would disrupt reindeer pastures and migration patterns, while trains could also kill a lot of reindeers.

“In addition, the railway would likely attract large scale industrial activities, such as mining, which would pose a threat to the environment and nature.

“Reindeer herding and the traditional use of lands is fundamental for the survival of the Sami culture and languages, thus any harm to the environment

and nature would put the preservation of the Sami identity at risk.”

Activist interventions

This view is further supported by Former head of YLE Sami-language news, Pirita Näkkäljärvi, who wrote [an article](#) citing that the projected line would plough through Sami remains, thus disrespecting culturally significant traditions and bring about significant damage to Sami culture.

Näkkäljärvi wrote:

“The grazing lands for the reindeer have already been cut by competing land use such as logging, roads and construction. Building a railway through the reindeer herding cooperatives would further fragment, narrow and decrease the land needed by the reindeer.”

Activist groups such as Suohpanterror and Greenpeace joined the Sami people in September 2018 as the Sami formed a ‘red line’ along the projected railway route to protest the construction that was planned without the ‘Free, Prior, Informed Consent’ right given to the Indigenous people to protect their rights.

Furthermore, Sami Parliament have issued a statement claiming that the Sami were not consulted adequately by Norwegian and Finnish governments to discuss the implications this project would have for the Sami.

This is not the first time Nordic governments have ignored indigenous people’s rights, but the cancellation of the project is a step closer to protecting the environment and indigenous rights.

Viable solutions

The Sami and the environment can breathe a little easier as the controversy seems to be settled peacefully, unlike those affected by the Dakota Access Pipeline in the United States.

The future of this project remains unclear. What is clear however, is that if Norwegian and Finnish authorities wish to continue with this railway, they must include the Indigenous peoples on their territories in all stages of planning and discussion, in order to come up with a viable solution for all parties.

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Clemence Waller is a journalism Masters student at the University of Groningen. Growing up in the Middle East, she has always been interested in international reporting and politics. She is currently a freelance journalist.

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