First published in "A Fractured North – Journeys on Hold," edited by Erich Kasten, Igor Krupnik, Gail Fondahl 2024: 235 – 248. Fürstenberg/Havel: Kulturstiftung Sibirien. — *Electronic edition for* dh-north.org

12 FIELD RELATIONS WITH INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IN AN ERA OF A NEW IRON CURTAIN

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Introduction

Since the Russian invasion to Ukraine, researchers dealing with Russia and based in Western institutions have to face a new plethora of restrictions, regulations and practical hurdles. Even more challenging are the ethical dilemmas as well as social pressures, which I will analyze in this paper from the point of view of being a researcher based in Finland trying to maintain his long-term field relations with the Saami people in the Russian part of Lapland. The risk of inflicting harm is connected to laws and restrictions imposed by the Russian government and should be looked at from an ethical point of view. However, the main focus of this chapter is on the discursive pressures coming from both Russia and the West. Discussions among scholars about continuing or discontinuing fieldwork in Russia are broad and diverse. In Finland, I repeatedly encountered admonitions by colleagues to be strict about not working with anyone who supports the Russian regime – implying that one should inquiring first into the political views of any potential research partner before starting any conversation on the actual research topic.

Not only the dominant media discourse but also views among researchers are increasingly drifting towards "groupism" – the tendency to group people together and to reify them as entities with supposedly homogeneous interests and agency. This is against the background of widespread constructivist stances in social sciences, but it seems that in practice currently many scholars are tempted by groupism when discussing Russia. Instead, I will propose to leave a door open to see declarations of regime support by partners in the field in more multi-layered ways. This should include seeing not only resistance but also forms of accommodation as agency. As I will show in the case of the Saami ethnic minority, this may well mean front-stage collusion for the sake of keeping a level of back-stage freedom of movement.

From practical to subliminal obstacles to doing fieldwork in Russia

A new Iron Curtain has divided researchers based in Western institutions from research partners in Russia. At stake are the ties with locals, which among anthropologists have been in many cases built up over many years of collaboration and long

stays in the field. I will begin by exploring the different aspects of what it means from the point of view of a researcher based in Finnish Lapland not to be able to visit "his" field site in the Russian part of Sápmi anymore.

Starting with the practical obstacles, we can name the almost total absence of public transport connections from Europe to Russia, and the impossibility to use international cashless payment methods or cash withdrawals in Russia. Being based as a researcher in Rovaniemi, Finland, one of the major practical obstacles, the absence of direct flight and train connections to Russia from Europe, is not relevant. Private cars from Europe in general can cross into Russia, there are bus connections, and in this region ground transport was the most practicable method to move across the border before the war began.

Official restrictions imposed by Finnish higher education institutions partially follow government recommendations and restrictions and partially come from the universities themselves. Thus, the current guidelines by the University of Lapland concerning travelling to Russia stipulate that funds used during the trip shall not support Russian institutions, organizations and networks (University of Lapland, n.d.). As more detailed specifications were not forthcoming, this seemingly includes not only state but any institutionalized actors. This is less of an issue in anthropological research, as in our discipline we tend to work a lot with private individuals. Cooperation with them has not been banned.

In the same set of guidelines, the University's administration shifts the responsibility to the heads of units (faculties) on whether to approve employees' travel plans to Russia. According to these guidelines, travelling to Russia is not forbidden, but the general travel recommendations of the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs must be considered. These, at the time of writing, recommended avoiding travelling to Russia but did not put the whole of Russia into the highest travel risk category and thus under a general travel ban. The highest risk category, "leave country immediately," applied only to the regions adjacent to Ukraine (Belgorod, Voronezh, and Rostov regions) and to Ukraine itself (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland 2023).

Another issue has to do with insurance. At the moment of writing, Finnish car liability insurance does not cover Russia anymore. However, the general business travel insurance that the University of Lapland carries for its employees does continue to cover Russia, although it does not cover Ukraine. The reasoning behind this is that no insurance coverage is provided for so-called war risk areas, and Russia is not included in that list. Limited coverage is provided for so-called dangerous areas: the list of such areas includes currently "Russia, within 200km of the land border with Ukraine." (If P&C Insurance Ltd, n.d.). In the rest of Russia clients enjoy full insurance coverage. To recap, there is no formal ban on travelling to Russia, nor are there unsurmountable logistic obstacles.

However, a plethora of "softer" factors deter the majority of researchers who were previously involved with Russia from currently travelling there. Perhaps fore-

most among these are ethical concerns about possible risks to research partners or researchers themselves, which generate a sentiment among Western researchers against travelling to Russia. Moreover, currently in Finland (and elsewhere in what the mainstream discourse usually calls "the West") social pressure is high to boycott everything Russian and thus also to refrain from travelling to Russia.

The risk of inflicting harm to research partners or oneself as a researcher is connected to laws and restrictions imposed by the Russian government, such as the foreign-agent law. These can put at risk both foreign researchers and locals working (or simply talking) with them ("*Kak budet rabotat"*… 2022). These risks should be evaluated carefully from an ethical point of view. However, while being of crucial importance, these considerations are not at the focus of this chapter. This chapter focuses rather on the pressures coming from the West.

Such pressures are manifold. The above-mentioned guidelines at the University of Lapland open a vast space for arbitrary decision-making based not on actual clear interdictions but on fear by superiors or administrative workers to take responsibility. Additionally, moralizing discourse can lead to self-limiting behavior among researchers, even if from an ethical point of view, they would deem it justifiable to visit their field site in Russia. Thus, one colleague (who prefers to remain anonymous), was confronted with the following reasoning by another colleague (who's research never involved Russia): "By the mere journey needed to reach your field site, you will support Putin's regime because you have to take a domestic flight and the fuel consumed by the plane fills the pockets of the elites." While somewhat simplistic, this reasoning is not completely incorrect. Using a Russian airline theoretically also goes against the above-mentioned principle of not using university funds to pay any Russian organization. However, each researcher has to solve particular obstacles depending on their individual situation. Thus, in this case, the anonymous colleague did not use university funding for travel, but a fieldwork grant by a private Finnish foundation, which did not object to their grantee travelling to Russia.

Another example of such pressure "from the West" is a strict admonition that I received from a colleague, saying: "My advice: […] No contacts with those Russians who are in favor of the war / back Putin." I regard this as an erroneous approach for two reasons. I disagree that persons should be asked about their political views. This goes against ethically sound behavior according to general standards of equity in interpersonal relationships, as well as against general etiquette. Most people – including most of us researchers – perceive it as intrusive to ask about political views, especially when people have not known each other for long. To break away from this common-sense behavior and probe a person's political views before initiating any further interactions may be perceived as top-down behavior. If followed by a refusal to interact depending on those views, it amounts to self-elevation by the researcher to being a moral judge on others' political views. Such views may be seen by the interlocutor as private and totally unrelated to the research topic.

When statisticians call for ethnographic fieldwork

If we are supposed not to talk to Russian citizens in Russia, a tool researchers as well as journalists may want to resort to are surveys. They usually suggest broad support by "the Russians" in favor of the actions of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine (for example, Levada-Tsentr 2022). Thus, surveys will only reinforce the decision not to talk to Russians. ("We do not talk to Russians because surveys tell us that their vast majority support the war. Because we cannot talk to Russians, we need to resort to surveys.") The caveat here is that in the current context surveying tends to yield only clues to complex questions and heavily distorted results (Libman 2023; Gel'man 2023; Chapkovski and Schaub 2022). In survey responses, self-censorship and false statements may or may not be the case (Shen and Truex 2021); it is plausible to assume that their likelihood increases under a governance system with strong political pressures on the population. Surveys tend to be superficial in their results and are often inadequate tools to reveal the dynamics of front-stage and back-stage opinion-sharing, or to reveal multiple positionings of being "for" and "against" at the same time, depending on factors such as different aspects of the same phenomenon or different audiences: "Polling frames narrowly questions that are very complex and a reality that 'opinions' are never fixed or coherent" (Morris 2022).

Chapkovski and Schaub (2022) found clear evidence for preference falsification in a list experiment conducted among 3000 respondents. They also discovered that people who indicated TV as their main source of information had a stronger tendency for preference falsification, suggesting that TV has a strong impact on beliefs about what majority thinks but less impact on privately-held beliefs. Referring to previous theoretical work done on the topic, Chapkovski and Schaub conclude that support for the Russian military invasion was substantial but lower than commonly suggested by polls. As heightened levels of suppression of political opponents often accompany wars, reported high levels of support do not necessarily reflect genuine opinions: those responding tend to mask their true sentiments. People may prefer to falsify their publicly stated preferences to be in line with what they believe the majority thinks or their political leadership wants them to think.

Only private opinion sharing in a context of high cultural intimacy can yield reliable responses (Herzfeld 1997). Expecting the free stating of large-scale, genuine opinions in a public or semi-public setting is both a naïve and a condescending moralist attitude. It is precisely ethnographic research that has the potential to free us from the cognitive trap of statistics. As Morris (2023: 97) posits:

> "The attention to polls indicating high levels of support leads to Western coverage of 'bad and compliant Russians.' […] War and autocracy […] only intensify the need for the ethnographic study of [Russia's] politics to avoid the simplistic condensation of polling artefacts we see translated into dangerous public discourse in

the West about what Russians think about the war, Putin, and Russia's place in the world."

Calls for ethnographic methods come now also from some sociologists and political scientists, such as Alexander Libman (2023: 65), who states: "It becomes even more important to think about the advantages the Russian case offers for non-experimentalist research – in particular, studies of Russian regions with observational data."

According to Morris (2022), people used to dealing with public opinion surveys tend to thinking in terms of "majorities." But the question is on the table: Is there a "public" opinion at all on the question of support for the war? Is there a clearly definable majority that unambigously supports the war? As Morris (2022) says, "lumping people into 'war camp', or 'opposition' is very problematic as these are not static, demarcated categories." An example is provided by a Saami woman with whom I spoke during my last visit to Lovozero (Russia) in September 2022. She was supportive of the widely propagated idea of the need to fight against "anti-Russian nationalists" in Ukraine. At the same time she fiercely opposed her son's wish to voluntarily enroll as a soldier to fight in Ukraine and in general was against the fact that young men are sent there to die. How could my interlocutor possibly answer a simple "yes" or "no" if I were to ask her whether she supported Russia's belligerent actions in Ukraine or not, as suggested, at least implicitly, by my colleague?

"Don't work with the Russian Saami"

That the current situation without in-depth ethnographic data leads to sweeping generalizations from outside becomes evident also in the case of the Russian Saami. The absence of ethnographic data means a lack of evidence regarding the diversity and multiplicity of opinions and of hidden mechanisms of opinion disguise, such as doublespeak. Without in-depth conversation and observation, only the surface can be scratched. The surface is comparable to the front-of-stage, with what is going on behind the curtain remaining invisible. An example is provided by the actions taken by the Saami Council against previous cooperation with the Russian Saami. These actions revealed a no-compromise attitude – at least on the front stage. As I described above, this attitude is predominant among Western media and researchers. Under the given circumstances of limited or no access to the field, to move beyond survey-based guessing and front-stage positioning required communication with Kola Saami émigrés to the West.

But first let us take a chronological look at the front-stage actions and reactions by the Saami representative bodies in Russia and in the West, which led to a full stop of all official cooperation and thus to a leap backward by 30 years, in both cultural and environmental cooperation projects (cf. Konstantinov 2023: 166–70). The first event

with a causal connection to the imminent rift was a letter to the president of Russia written by the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON) in support of the "Special Operation" in Ukraine (RAIPON 2022). The letter was published on 1 March 2022, about one week after the invasion started. It was signed by most of the member organizations of RAIPON (regional Indigenous associations across Russia), including the Association of the Kola Saami (AKS). AKS is one of the two organizations representing the Russian Saami, the other one being the Saami of the Murmansk Region Public Organization (OOSMO). OOSMO is not a member of RAIPON and did not publish any official declarations in relation to the invasion of Ukraine at that time.

In the following days and weeks, two now-famous pictures circulated first in the Russian social media, then were picked up by the Nordic official media (e.g. Larsen 2022a; Holgersson 2022). In one picture we can see three people holding a Russian and a Saami flag, with two reindeer decorated with the 'Z' symbol, a widely used symbol of support of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the hashtag "*SvoikhNeBrosaem*" ("We don't abandon our own"), which is widely used in Russian social media. The Saami flag is held by Anna Igontova, a well-known Saami craftswoman and activist. The other two people are Komi (Larsen 2022a). In the other picture, the well-known Russian Saami activist Ivan Matrekhin (member of OOSMO and then vice president of the Saami Council) can be seen singing with a guitar that has a 'Z' sign on its body (Larsen 2022b; Holgersson 2022). For the Saami Council, the letter and these pictures proved that the Russian Saami's support for the Russian government was too much. On 10 April 2022 the Saami Council declared the interruption of all cooperation with the Russian Saami (Larsen 2022b; Saami Council 2022), which remains in force to this day. One day later, Aleksandr Slupachik, then president of OOSMO, declared on a Norwegian broadcast "on behalf of OOSMO that we are against the war in Ukraine," adding that "the temporary exclusion of Saami organizations in Russia from the Saami Council is sad" and "unfortunately, my opinion as head of OOSMO was not taken into account" (Larsen 2022c). Slupachik also stated that Matrehkin in this case must be considered a private person. Indeed, while singing at a private event in Karelia with that guitar, Matrekhin was not officially acting on behalf of OOSMO nor as the vice president of the Saami Council (Larsen 2022c).

Towards a symbolic understanding of block-building and exclusion

The decision by the Saami Council to interrupt all official contacts with the Saami in Russia, taken six weeks after the invasion and still in force, was based on highly symbolic and singular representations of support of Russia's invasion to Ukraine. Quite abruptly, the transnational brother- and sisterhood, cultivated over the course of three decades of pan-Saamihood, was revoked by one side based on a stance that further

cooperation with the Russian Saami is not tenable from an ethical and moral point of view.

This decision mirrored the generally heightened political and social pressures towards binary thinking and macro-grouping of people into "good ones" and "bad ones." Underlying the interruption of cooperation, the Russian Saami were moved from one macro-group (members of the transnational people of the Saami) to another one (members of the Russian nation). In the following paragraphs I will look with more scrutiny at the reasons triggering that shift.

Several longstanding theoretical-analytical concepts prove their worth here. One of them is Rogers Brubaker's concept of groupism (Brubaker 2002; 2004), which takes a critical look at the tendency to group people together and to reify these constructed groups as fixed entities with homogeneous interests and agency. The other concept is that of Roman Jakobson's (1960) speech categories, namely those of poetic and of substantial speech, which represent the opposition between symbolic and literal meanings conveyed by statements.

Taking groups for granted (e.g. "the Blacks," "the Russian Saami," or "the Russians" who support the war) is widespread and dangerous – and unfortunately occurs also among scholars. History has proven groupism to be especially dangerous when it comes to questions of ethnicity, nationalism and race. Groupism should not be ignored by scholars. Seeing and discussing how and by whom groups are constructed is important work – and quite different from taking groups simply for granted. The reification of groups is a social process, which is mostly crafted by media and politics. So, as such, it is legitimate to accept this social process of categorization and, as scholars, to analyze it. Categories are concepts used by people "to make sense of the social world" (Brubaker 2002:170). But categories invariably simplify the world, and scholars should refrain from reinforcing groups as simplifying concepts.

Dramatic events can serve to crystallize a group, meaning to "group" people together. Such events, for example violent actions, are often used as an instrument by elites for group-making. The group-making of "the Russians" – the people of Russia as one party of a conflict – is currently being attempted by political elites and mainstream media both in Russia and in the West. Rather than supporting this group-making with its disturbing spectrum of extremes ranging from nationalistic consolidation to 'canceling' Russia, researchers should try to un-group, by uncovering generalizations as well as the pressures behind them.

The protagonists of most conflicts between "ethnic groups" are various kinds of institutions or individuals, and not the ethnic "groups." It is wise to make the distinctions "between such organizations and the putatively homogeneous and bounded groups in whose name they claim to act" (Brubaker 2002:172). In a situation of confrontation between two antagonizing blocks, there are many ways to underpin these claims by pointing what seems to be public support, as we can see from the examples discussed above about the 'Z' symbols on the reindeer and the guitar pictures, and the

letter of support by the Kola Saami Association. These powerful visual and ideological tools suggest public support, but in fact they are signed by or depicting individuals, and it is the receiving audience that makes the cognitive connection that these instances are supposedly evidence of considerable support by a larger group. Thus, it is especially in times of conflict that entire population categories are grouped into putative groups by players who might for various reasons have an interest in doing so.

A consciously anti-groupist approach can help to hone the gaze for intra-societal mechanisms that shape interethnic relations – such as rifts, internal "policing" and silencing, sanctioning processes, and calculated instigation of conflict with outsiders and insiders. When pursuing this goal, ethnographic inquiry becomes of central importance. In our case in point, this type of inquiry might deliver answers to the following questions: Why did the president of AKS support the war by signing RAIPON's letter? Why did the president of OOSMO not support it? How can these acts be called representative or not representative of "the Russian Saami" as a homogenous group with unitary interests? What does the wider population of Saami think about these events, behind the stage of public declarations and news media articles? Due to the constraints mentioned above, beside a two-day visit to Lovozero in September 2022, I did not do any fieldwork in Russian Sápmi since the beginning of the war. I will therefore not try to answer the last question. I did, however, speak extensively with two long-term field partners from Russian Sápmi who emigrated to the Nordic countries after the war began: Aleksandr Slupachik, who now resides in Norway, and Andrei Zhvavy, who settled in Finland. Both were members of OOSMO (Slupachik was its president). They left Russia, fearing that, being ethnopolitical activists, there was a higher chance for them to be targeted by the partial mobilization in order to put them out of the way. As of this writing, their asylum applications are being processed.

In our conversations we discussed aspects that do not appear in the media coverage cited above. One was that it was evident that there was a strong pressure on the president of AKS to sign the letter by RAIPON. This pressure could not be explicit in order for it to serve its purpose. Yet the AKS president's social and material standing could have been affected if she would have refused to sign the support letter. Slupachik therefore does not judge her for having signed the letter. Nor does he make any inferences from her signing it about the representativeness of this declaration of support in terms of the Russian Saami – he refrains from grouping the Russian Saami into one set of people with whom one should not work anymore. Navigating the reality of ethnopolitics in any given political and social environment requires compliance in certain areas of highest-level state priority. This "echoes Gramsci's understanding of the negotiations of hegemony: the dominated participate in their own subordination through rituals and practices that inculcate values of allegiance to the system" (Schubert 2017: 8), as seen in the cases described above. But what is the main driver for demonstrating these forms of subordination? The *realpolitik* calculation and social contract is that doing so will yield certain levels of autonomy in issues of more local

relevance. Conversely, failing to demonstrate compliance regarding certain questions of high national importance may well mean having to face serious setbacks in matters of high local relevance (cf. Konstantinov 2023).

In the dominant media discourse in the West, the wording usually puts the responsibility for cutting the ties with the Russian side on the Russian side. This is no different in the case of the Saami Council's "interruption" with the Russian Saami. For example, Last (2022) writes: "Some leaders from the small Russian Sámi community have openly aligned with the government of Russian President Vladimir Putin, driving a schism with Sámi in Sweden, Finland, and Norway."

The president of OOSMO, by contrast, chose to speak up on this highest-tier political question, at the price of having to leave Russia and thus paralyzing the organization he led. This was his choice, and, in personal conversation with him, Slupachik also respected the other choice, made by the president of AKS – that of compliance – at least on the symbolic level. However, the Saami Council made the choice to pause all cooperation based precisely on what may be understood as instances of highly symbolic language.

It is worth asking why the Saami Council has been so strict on this issue? One interpretation, that voiced by Slupachik, is that the Council may have had to be. A picture of the Council's vice president Ivan Matrekhin with a "Z" on his guitar circulated on the internet was a potent signal. When reindeer on the Kola Peninsula apparently walked around with the 'Z' sign on their neck, this was a strong message as well. When the president of the Kola Saami Association co-signed a letter backing the invasion, the symbolic support of the war by the Russian Saami that was sent out into the world looked very convincing. The pressure on the Saami Council to react with similarly strong symbols was high.

We live under a hegemonic discourse of block formation and a push to identify with and adhere to one of the blocks. Minorities are especially vulnerable to the "if-you're-not-with-us-you're-against-us" pressure, whose agency can be significantly curbed by the powerful majority societies in which they live. If our polarized media and majority societies currently react more strongly than ever to symbols of support for one or the other party of conflict, minorities are under pressure to take a position in this polarizing discourse. This is true both for Russia and the West. Being under the pressure of the hegemonic discourse of its own majority society, the Saami Council *had* to send counter-symbols to the signs of symbolic war support made by the Russian Saami. In a setting of strong groupist tendencies, where the Russian Saami are seen by the Nordic media as a putative unitary group supporting the war, the Nordic Saami respresentatives had to draw a line of demarcation against the Russian Saami in order to avoid becoming vulnerable themselves to exogenic group-making and potential criticism for not opposing the war support of the Russian Saami. In times of war, it became clear that the expectation of being loyal to higher national weighs more than intraethnic cohesion.

Public or collective opinion can come into being only on something that is publicly or collectively discussed. The topic of Ukraine is not broadly publicly *discussed*. It is rather publicly *presented*. The climate of fear, or at least caution, around the topic prevents open discussion, and shifts such discussion and opinion-forming to private realm, embodied by "kitchen talk." What tends hastily to be labeled public opinion should be more accurately called hegemonic discourse. Behind this top-down discourse, we will find – even within one and the same person – a heterogeneity of viewpoints ranging from more readily produced front-stage judgements conditioned by or reproducing the hegemonic discourse to less visible backstage opinions beyond or behind hegemonic discourses, like the one of the mother who did not want her son to leave home to "defend" his country. A key requirement for accessing the plethora of opinions behind the hegemonic public discourse is nurturing a high level of cultural intimacy through continued commitment to long-term fieldwork.

Basing such commitment in his long-term fieldwork, Konstantinov (2015: 66–83) describes the ethnopolitical interaction between actors on the Nordic side and on the Russian side during the past 30 years as a dysfunctional dialogue. He characterized the traditionalist-revivalist back-to-the-roots talk that he commonly encountered as having only seemingly similar goals. Especially in the 1990s and 2000s, the dialogue consisted of the Russian side making *symbolic* statements (e.g. "we want to dance our dances and sing our songs") that the Nordic side understood *literally.* Although the dialogue happened within a shared ethnopolitical discourse of revival and traditionalism, the goals were only ostensibly similar. Using Jakobson's (1960) speech categories, Konstantinov shows that the two sides have different language usages: The Western understanding of messages from the East about the revival of traditions were quite literal – or in Jakobson's terminology about the functions of language: "substantive." The expressed wish to return to pre-Soviet, privately-owned reindeer husbandry as the 'traditional' way was taken for granted and literal, and the help offered was often meant in a similarly literal way, "motivated by postmodern values of indigeneity, cultural survival, gender issues and environmental concerns" (Konstantinov 2015: 71), and mixed with Cold War "clichés and crudities" (72), first and foremost one of the Saami as passive victims of the state. However, for the ethno-politicians on the Eastern side, the whole back-to-the-roots talk was meant on a much more symbolic level (in Jakobson's language function terminology: "poetic"): the ethno-political demand for a return to "tradition" was meant to be understood as a poetic engagement in the Western discourse of supporting the Russian Saami – a discourse that depicted the Soviet time commonly as a huge historical faux-pas and presumed that everyone shared this view.

Konstantinov identified the historical reasons for these differing communication tactics: the contemporary ethno-political elites in Russia were recruited from the local intelligentsia; as Soviet or post-Soviet intelligentsia they were trained in Soviet-style grassroots-to-power ways of communication, which entailed a high level of mastery

of performative skills and of double-speak. Yurchak (2006), too, recognized performativity as a key factor in the relations between Soviet people and authoritative discourse during late Soviet years. He correctly stated that this performativity "did not disappear in the post-Soviet period" (Yurchak 2006: 296). When it comes to positioning oneself in the contemporary macropolitical situation, symbolic, performative talk remains an indispensable tool. Unfortunately this seems not to be recognised as such by many Western partners or observers, thus resulting in dysfunctional dialogue in which one side makes symbolic statements that the other side understands literally – taking every message as substantive and leaving no space for equivocality.

The art of poetic talk has persisted in many domains, such as in the genre of project proposals to funding agencies (Konstantinov 2015: 98). With increasing authoritarianism it is undergoing a revival. Yet, when it comes to positioning oneself in the contemporary macropolitical situation, poetic talk is an indispensable tool. It reflects a reality that requires multiple positionings in order for actors to succeed. Front-stage collusion for the sake of keeping a level of back-stage freedom of movement is a reality we need to accept. This, I would argue, is becoming increasingly understood in the West.

Conclusions

The question might be justified: did the Saami Council take the pro-invasion statements of distinct individuals as literally as it appears from their reactions? And was their harsh reaction of excluding the Russian Saami to be taken as literally as it looks? Or is there a chance that both sides were engaging in poetic talk meant for audiences outside of Saami activism? We can assume the latter. Behind the front stage of symbolic language on both sides, which suggests Russian Saami's alignment with the Russian bloc and the Western Saami's alignment with the Western bloc, there is substantive – again, in the Jakobsonian sense – back-stage talk and action between the two sides to keep cooperation alive. One example is the Jevgenij Jushkov Memorial Fund, set up in 2023 by the Saami Council in honour of the famous Russian Saami translator who passed away in 2020, with the goal to "support Sámi from the Russian side of Sápmi who want to take Sámi language education" (Saami Council 2023). However, according to Slupachik, they are still struggling with the practicalities of how to transfer funds due to Western sanctions on the Russian banking system.

All members of a society stand under pressures of the dominating majority's policymakers and the mainstream media to join the grouping tendencies currently at play. The pressures affect both "West" and Russia; they affect the Russian Saami leaders, the Nordic Saami leaders, university administrators, and researchers. In this reality, the task of a researcher should be to disentangle such grouping tendencies and the rhetoric and performativities by which these tendencies are expressed. For

this, we need to find ways to stay in touch with our field partners, within the limits of the possible. Canceling out the Russian Saami because they "support" the war, or even trying to divide them into those who support and those who don't, misses the multiple positionings on the ground and only reinforces the grouping tendencies that currently divide humanity.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Research Council of Finland under the research project WIRE (Fluid Realities Of The Wild, 2021–2025, decision no. 342462).

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