First published in "A Fractured North – Maintaining Connections," edited by Erich Kasten, Igor Krupnik, Gail Fondahl 2025: 125 – 143. Fürstenberg/Havel: Kulturstiftung Sibirien. — *Electronic edition for* dh-north.org

7 FROM THE FIELD TO A MONITOR: METHODOLOGICAL SHIFTS IN A TIME OF CLOSURE

Mirkka Ollila

March 2022. I lay on the top bed of a night train, watching the carriage pass peacefully through the dim winter landscape. The train stations of Olenegorsk, Imandra, and Apatity, located on the Russian side of *Saam' jiemm'n'e,*[1] the ancestral homeland of the Saami people, receded behind me as I traveled back to St. Petersburg through the night. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine had started about a week earlier, prompting my return from preliminary fieldwork that had barely begun.[2] Confused and worried, I journeyed back to the south. At the time I was working on my Master's thesis about the bureaucratic and concrete obstacles that the Kola Saami face when trying to exercise their rights for self-determination, self-governance, and the pursuit of traditional livelihoods. My objective was to acquaint myself with the landscapes, fjells, waters, and potentially the local people before conducting actual fieldwork; however, a pervasive uncertainty overshadowed my time in the North.

International students were restless with the unpredictability of the situation in February-March 2022. Many were asked urgently to return to their home universities; some left overnight. Friends and family members sent worried messages from home, making me question my safety and blurring my sense of reality. As a Finn without a Saami background, I was an outsider in every way in the Kola Peninsula, despite having Russian language skills, which is the main language spoken in the region, including among the Saami. The timing and my position felt entirely untenable for continuing even preliminary fieldwork, as I struggled to comprehend the unfolding events and their myriad implications.

Before leaving Russia, I observed for a week how authorities in St. Petersburg increasingly prepared to swiftly suppress any anti-war demonstrations on the downtown Nevsky Prospect, to create a façade as if both the war and its backlash were non-existent. Rumors circulated at the university about students reporting teachers who used the word "war" (*voina,* in Russian) in the context of Ukraine, and one of

1 *Saam' jiemm'n'e* ("the land of the Saami" in the Kildin Saami language) covers a large part of Norway and Sweden, northern Finland, and the Kola Peninsula in Russia (more commonly known as Sápmi in the Northern Sámi language). I use Kildin Saami term here to stress the region discussed in this text, the Russian side of the Saami's land. (See https://samicultures.com/OurSapmi) [accessed 25.02.2025]

2 I planned to carry out the fieldwork during an academic exchange, allowing for a longer stay in Russia. The fieldwork was not, so to speak, part of the exchange.

the teachers from whom I received mentoring left the country on the first days of the war. Around the same time, the *Barents Observer* published an article about a Russian Kildin Saami activist seeking political asylum from Norway (Nilsen 2022). Later that year two other Russian Saami politicians were in the same situation. The events of February 2022 acted as a catalyst, intensifying the already extensive persecution and threats against human rights defenders, public opinion leaders, and activists in Russia (Tannagasheva 2023).

Simultaneously, politicians in Finland were discussing the freeze on any cooperation with the Russian higher education and research community. As the days passed, Russia introduced new layers of internal and external isolation to control the situation within its borders, and beyond, with regulations targetting the countries condemning Putin's violence in Ukraine. From my research perspective, Russia was rapidly becoming more closed, just as I began a PhD journey examining Northwestern Russia, which was to be based on extensive field-based ethnographic research.

In a special section of Britain's Royal Geographical Society's journal *Area*, on "Field Methods in Closed Contexts," guest editor Natalie Koch discussed working in the so-called "closed contexts" – places which, according to her, might be referred to as "illiberal," "authoritarian," "non-democratic," "forced," or even (non) "exceptions" within prevailing "liberal" system (Koch 2013: 390). I find this term useful for discussing the limitations and restrictions of working in/on Russia's newly "Fractured North," including what kind of spaces it enables for continuing the work, drawing on my experiences in 2022.

Layers of isolation

It is essential to consider the layers of isolation *of* Russia and *within* Russia. These layers have significantly shaped the nature of the spaces of closure (Koch 2013) in the academic realm. Koch's conceptualization of "closed contexts" underscores the profound impact of governmental control and limited freedoms on external engagement and information access, further complicating research. Post-February 2022, "isolation" in Russia has manifested in various contexts: in strategic economic power (EU sanctions policy), in the re-isolation of physical mobility, including the suppression of international cooperation of the cross-border Indigenous peoples such as the Saami, and in Putin's regime's efforts to stifle activism and academic freedom. These forms of isolation have also restricted collaborative spaces between Russia and the "West," including among Indigenous peoples, significantly affecting research efforts.

The impact of Western sanctions on research collaborations

Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine precipitated its isolation by Western countries through sanctions, reduced diplomatic relations, and suspended cultural and civil society exchanges. These implementations impacted ties between Finnish and Russian research communities (Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture 2022) (see also Allemann 2024 – *eds.*). The University of Helsinki's guidelines for collaborative projects with Russia list the institution's restrictive measures, which align with the recommendations of the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (University of Helsinki 2023). Measures include suspending institutional cooperation projects and halting recruitment, expert activities, and joint publications with persons affiliated with a Russian university. Aalto University, based in Helsinki in a similar announcement, recommended that academic community members respect the University's commitment even in areas where the principle of academic freedom applies. The announcement also stated that "academic freedom does not justify breaches of sanction regulations or non-compliance with the university's rules or policies" (Aalto University 2022).

While traveling to Russia is not entirely prohibited (for individuals) despite the Finnish-Russian border being entirely closed (as of the writing of this paper), universities in Finland, such as my home institute, the University of Helsinki, do not support it (University of Helsinki 2023). In what ways and with what feelings individual scholars have adapted to these restrictions depends, *inter alia*, on the subject of their research, the relationships they had previously built, and former cooperation experiences. Researchers engaged in fieldwork in Russia have had to reassess or change the direction of their work due to new restrictions and shifts in the academic landscape, largely driven by the political climate following Russia's aggression. These challenges have touched all Finnish scholars working on Russia-related topics. Although the limitations of studying Russia are understandable, they have triggered both ethical and practical dilemmas for individual researchers.

The debate over academic boycotts reflects diverse viewpoints: some view them as essential despite their complexity, while others are skeptical about their true efficiency (Nielsen and Kaisto 2024). This divergence underscores the broader tension between the moral stance of boycotts and their impact on academic collaboration and knowledge production. My inexperience in the Russian North and disrupted collaboration opportunities placed me at the intersection of these standpoints – the restrictions have an impact on my study, but I seek to continue my PhD research anyway, in the light of what is possible. Navigating the chaos in St. Petersburg, I witnessed the last vestiges of Finnish-Russian educational cooperation in spring 2022. The abrupt cessation of European flights filled buses and trains, and unreliable foreign bank cards further contributed to the prevailing uncertainty. The suspension of my academic exchange, during which I planned to carry out my fieldwork, and more generally the travel

restrictions, reshaped my research trajectory. In practice, many doors closed at the very moment I entered the field of research on the Russian North and its complexities.

The re-isolation of Indigenous peoples of Russia

In the prologue to this series, Pavel Sulyandziga, an Indigenous rights activist from Russia, addressed the fracturing of the North experienced by the Indigenous peoples of Russia (Sulyandziga 2024). Despite the isolation of Indigenous peoples within Russia beginning long before February 2022 (cf. Sulyandziga and Sulyandziga 2021), international support helped amplify their voices, compelling the Russian government to address their issues. Sulyandziga's prologue outlines how Arctic processes, including scientific research, facilitated negotiations with the Russian government regarding Indigenous rights. Russia's aggression and isolation practices have, however, intensified challenges for Indigenous peoples, as exemplified by the Saami's plight.

During the Soviet period, the Saami in Russia were isolated from their Nordic counterparts. This ended in 1992 when the Association of Kola Saami (AKS) joined the Saami Council[3] (Berg-Nordlie 2011). In addition to the artificial state borders dividing the Saami home region into the territories of four states, the isolation of the Saami people caused by state actions is once again being realized for the second time within a relatively short period. While there are parallels between Russia's current isolation and that of the Soviet era, Sulyandziga (2024) points out that the present situation is not entirely comparable. Different digital spaces still enable communication and information exchange. These digital spaces also enable research to continue, which I will discuss below.

In March 2022, Russia's participation in the Barents Region cooperation was suspended, and by September 2023, the country officially withdrew from the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC). This development significantly impacted Indigenous communities from Russia's Barents region, including the Saami, Nenets, and the Veps, as they saw a decline in their involvement in international activities traditionally facilitated by the BEAC. One of the Council's primary objectives is to protect the rights of Indigenous people while promoting cooperation in trade, society, culture, and language. Highlighting the critical role of the Barents cooperation, the Norwegian Saami Parliament emphasized its importance in fortifying the Saami communities in the Kola Peninsula (Sámediggi n.d.). In response to the changed geopolitical climate, the Saami Council also suspended cooperation with its Russian member organizations in April 2022 due to opposing stances on the war in Ukraine (Edvardsen 2023; Sámiráddi 2022; Allemann 2024; Vladimirova 2024b). This decision made clear that the Council deemed the war and its support intolerable.

3 The Kola Saami were isolated from the rest of the Saami homeland for almost 70 years until connections slowly began to be found again in the 1980s.

Additionally, national legal repercussions in Russia, as detailed by Ekaterina Zmyvalova (2022), further restricted freedoms, particularly for those opposing the war, leading many Indigenous individuals to silence themselves or flee. Despite the suspension of formal collaboration, the Saami Council continues its effort to support the Kola Saami, especially in areas like language revitalization. However, the introduction of sanctions and legislative changes have complicated financial transfers from the Council, intensifying the isolation of the Kola Saami (Zmyvalova 2023).

As Russia continues its war in Ukraine, the opportunities for the Kola Saami to defend their rights have become considerably more difficult. This can be seen both in national socio-political activities and in the increased harassment of activists (Tannagasheva 2023; Vladimirova 2024a). As the possibilities to defend the rights of the Saami people (and other Indigenous people of the Russian North, Siberia, and the Far East) weaken, the efforts to expand the capacities of industrial companies on the ancestral lands of the Indigenous peoples form yet another layer to the local struggle regarding land protection and preservation. At this moment, "behind the walls of isolation," several mining projects are being developed in the Kola Peninsula, which is predicted to negatively affect the lives of the Saami, both environmentally and socioculturally (Anon 2023). My doctoral research aims to examine these projects and the power relations intertwined in them. Pavel Sulyandziga believes that Russia's aggression in Ukraine has had the greatest impact on the cross-border Saami and Inuit/Yupik people from a moral point of view, as international cooperation with their counterparts has almost completely broken off (Berezhkov and Sulyandziga 2023). These layers of isolation have had moral implications for my research, affecting potential contact-building and discussion topics. The Saami Council's stance against cooperating with war supporters has guided my pursuit of Kola Saami connections since 2022. As an early-career scholar without pre-war fieldwork experience, establishing connections with the Kola Saami inside Russia has, however, been challenging.

Academic freedom and censorship

In addition to Indigenous activism, internal isolation within Russia is notably reflected in the academic field, which has faced increasing restrictions under the Putin rule over the past decade(s). Although Western and Russian scholars have now experienced the harsh reality of isolation measures affecting research, self-censorship has been a part of their reality even before Russia's aggression in Ukraine.

Since 2019, Russian authorities have intensified efforts to prevent researchers and students from publishing works or taking public stances against government policies (Zavadskaya and Gerber 2023). The "higher education" law passed in 2021 required Russian scholars to obtain approval for collaborations with foreign colleagues and prohibited public educational activities that supposedly violate "the Russian Constitution." These actions signaled that criticism from university affiliates would not be

tolerated, leading many Russian social scientists to self-censor their research to avoid political repression. The government's restrictions in the academy, not only apply to research critical of the government, but also to climate science, ecology, and other non-military science (Koralova 2024). Indeed, Zavadskaya and Gerber (2023) describe Russia's aggression in Ukraine and the subsequent crackdown as possibly symbolizing the end of academic freedom and the destruction of social sciences in Russia.

During my master's thesis research on the rights of the Kola Saami in 2020–2022, it became evident that the voices and rights of Indigenous peoples in Russia had been increasingly suppressed, a trend that had started in the late 2000s and early 2010s. The exodus of a handful of Indigenous environmental and human rights activists throughout the 2010s further exemplified the escalating repressive climate in the country, compounded by the erosion of academic freedom in universities.

The oppressive atmosphere has also led to self-censorship among Western scholars researching Russia's Indigenous peoples. While self-censorship may have been a practical approach to ensure the continuation of work in the region, it is also driven by ethical concerns about the potential impact on Indigenous communities and fears that critical research on the government could jeopardize one's collaborators. Both domestic and foreign researchers must weigh the decision to withhold certain information or research findings to avoid potential harm or backlash. In this way, self-censorship can serve to protect the safety and well-being of local contacts and research participants.

The restrictions on academic freedom catalyzed by Russia's violence in Ukraine began very quickly. Students were suspended, and faculty members were dismissed for expressing anti-war sentiments, whether on social media or by participating in protests (see Zdor 2024). The tense political climate became tangible while I was still in Russia in early 2022, as I witnessed anti-war demonstrations near my residence in St. Petersburg. Fear of repercussions also suppressed critical discussions among students. When academic freedom discussion groups formed in response to the deteriorating situation, the experience felt surreal for a Finnish master's student. During my brief time in Russia, I constantly questioned the ethics and safety of continuing my research amid the chaos, yet found it difficult to leave.

Russia's internal restriction measures also soon extended to digital spaces. According to the University of Toronto's Citizen Lab, Russian government officials sent 30 times more censorship requests to VKontakte, Russia's domestic equivalent of Facebook, in the first eight months following February 2022 (Radauskas 2023) than in the same period of the previous year. The accounts of several individuals, activists, and communities critical of government actions and the invasion of Ukraine were blocked. While online censorship in Russia is not new, its frequency on social media has grown significantly over the past two years. In 2022, the Russian government blocked access to Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter), restricting their use without a VPN. This move significantly hampered communication and information

dissemination. The government justified its ban on Facebook and Instagram by the claims of purported "Russophobia," classifying Meta, the owner of these platforms, as a "terrorist and extremist organization." The restriction on X was part of the government's strategy to curb the free flow of information and to bolster the dissemination of state-run propaganda, particularly concerning the invasion of Ukraine.

Closed (academic) contexts in Russia and their reflection in the Finnish field of Russian studies

Over the last two years, navigating Russia-related research has become increasingly difficult as the opportunities for conducting studies have narrowed, directly and indirectly. As an early-career scholar of the Russian North in Finland, I feel it is important to discuss the factors that have influenced and continue to influence my (and many others') PhD journey. This discussion can evoke a sense of shared experience and generate thoughts and ideas for navigating the situation.

Closed contexts inherently carry a negative connotation. Koch (2013) defines "closed contexts" as restrictive and controlled environments where external actors, such as researchers from international organizations, face significant barriers to engagement and data collection. These contexts are characterized by limited access to information, restricted freedom of speech, and strict control by administrative authorities that hinders information dissemination and cooperation. I note that closed contexts create realities of limitations for domestic actors as well as for external ones.

Russia exemplifies such a closed context, particularly following February 2022. Since then, political repression has intensified, with severe restrictions on freedom of speech and increased government suppression of dissent, extending to academia (Delardas et al. 2022; Matthews 2023). A striking example is the implementation of laws allowing the government to label foreign-funded organizations and individuals as "foreign agents," significantly curbing independent research and open dialogue. Additionally, the repression of Indigenous voices, regionally and internationally, reached a new level in July 2024, when 55 Russian Indigenous groups were branded as extremists. Those collaborating with such "extremists" now can face lengthy prison sentences (Nilsen 2024). Matthews (2023) further characterizes the situation for Russian academics (in Russia) as a "witch hunt," targeting those who maintain connections with the West. These developments expose a pervasive atmosphere of fear within Russia's academic institutions, where the threat of retribution has resulted in anonymous interviews, hesitance to speak openly, and the silencing of political commentary, stressing the growing repression affecting academic freedom. Against this backdrop, Alexander Libman (2024) notes that the growing lack of trust between Russia and the West makes dialogue nearly impossible, especially as restrictions on academic freedom continue to tighten.

The closed contexts of Russia have led Finnish scholars pursuing Russian studies to adapt by focusing on new research methodologies, shifting priorities, and leveraging remote (personal) collaboration to continue their scholarly pursuits despite access limitations. Due to the ongoing security concerns, the Finnish government has issued an advisory against any travel to Russia. In line with this guidance, the University of Helsinki extended its recommendation, advising to refrain from participating even in remote events organized by Russian institutions or organizations. This policy highlights the severity and abnormality of the current situation (University of Helsinki 2023). These decisions underscore the broader impacts of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, where even *virtual* academic engagement with Russia has become fraught with risk, reinforcing the deepening divide in international cooperation. Security measures, if understandable, restrict fieldwork and limit empirical data collection. Without fieldwork and primary sources, researchers rely heavily on secondary data and online sources, which can lead to less nuanced understandings of socio-political and socio-ecological realities in the Russian North.

Henrik Nielsen and Virpii Kaisto (2024) emphasize that current academic cooperation and research on Russia entered a "grey zone," where uncertainty prevails. They point to the importance of finding pathways out of this ambiguity to avoid creating knowledge gaps that could have significant consequences for areas such as geopolitical relations, climate change, and other fields where the humanities and social sciences play a vital role. Lin Mortensgaard (2023) additionally discusses the serious consequences of "frozen science" in Russia's Arctic region, politically and scientifically. The freezing of scientific cooperation affects information processing, sharing, and publication of the results. The war's impact on the cross-border Saami people highlights the need for greater focus on the challenges faced by the Kola Saami, stemming from Russia's current isolationist stance. This isolation affects their cultural landscape (increased extractivist land use), as well as their rights, including to self-determination and self-governance. Russia's military invasion of Ukraine in other words necessitates methodological adaption to sustain crucial scholarship benefiting societies across borders. I hope that research related to Russia will maintain its multidisciplinary nature even in the current closed contexts. Otherwise, the nature of closure succeeds in its efforts to suppress critical voices, in Finland and elsewhere.

Navigating research challenges in a post-2022 landscape

In 2022, navigating the research terrain proved challenging to me, as opportunities for research related to Indigenous experiences in the Russian North changed. Continuing to highlight the obstacles to realizing Saami rights seemed vital, as the legal field for Indigenous peoples in Russia was deteriorating (Zmyvalova 2023). Abandoning

initial fieldwork plans, I adapted to the situation by combining different qualitative data sources – online material and online interviews – practicing a specific form of "triangulation." Contacting people evoked mixed feelings. Drafting emails proved challenging due to the sense of "facelessness" online while trying to discuss the complexities of Indigenous rights in Russia.

Although digital communication has allowed my research to continue, the absence of personal interaction has caused me significant stress regarding a perceived "lack of presence." Nevertheless, I was fortunate to establish contact with a handful of individuals, with whom I ultimately was able to conduct online discussions on the rights of the Saami in the Kola Peninsula. I built my research around those interviews, supplemented by news articles and a *Novaia Gazeta* podcast interview. While learning to navigate research largely based on digital spaces, I developed the methodological foundation for my doctoral research for continuing navigation in the closed contexts of Russia's Fractured North.

The case of the Kolmozerskoe deposit

Originally, my goal for doctoral research was to examine the impact of "green transition" activities on the Indigenous population, focusing on power dynamics, through a field study of one or more cases. As for my master's research (Ollila 2022), for my dissertation I wanted to work with the Kola Saami in their home region. I planned to use interviews and participant observation to understand the spatial relationship of mining projects (and their "social biography") to the Saami cultural landscape and traditional ways of life. I also intended to further examine how the self-governance of the Saami is realized in connection with the projects. I would have looked at the power dynamics reflected in the extractive projects on-site. Investigating the perspectives of the Kola Saami regarding extractive projects in their traditional home region would have provided first-hand insights into their scale and impact. This approach would have also yielded a more thorough and reliable understanding of Kola Saami´s views and experiences with extractivist industries. As Pirjo Virtanen and others (2021) note, holistic approaches are at the heart of Indigenous research methodologies, emphasizing dialogue, connections, collaboration, and relativity: my research methods would have been designed to honor such practices.

Since 2022, despite the constraints of the current "closed context," I have endeavored to maintain online connections with individuals from the Russian side of *Saam' jiemm'ńe*, with whom I was able to create contact while working earlier on my master's research. In doing so, I've attempted to follow a postcolonial Indigenous research framework that emphasizes the value of networks and relationships for effective information sharing (Paksi and Kivinen 2021). This approach aligns with Indigenous methodologies that prioritize relational accountability and ongoing dialogue, even in challenging political climates.

Thanks to these connections, the topic of my doctoral dissertation evolved through a discussion with a Kola Saami who is active in Indigenous self-governance and rights. In a conversation at the beginning of 2023, we discussed potential research needs related to the Russian side of the *Saam' jiemm'n'e*. This person advised me to explore Indigenous land issues, specifically the issue of "metalization" of the lands of Indigenous peoples (*problemy metallizatsii zemel' korennykh narodov*). "Metalization" refers to the process of extracting raw minerals (ores) from the soil, which leads to environmental problems and infringes upon the rights of Indigenous peoples. This advice led me to choose the case study which my dissertation examines, one of lithium mining.

Isolation measures, particularly economic sanctions imposed by the West in response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine, disrupted the import of lithium carbonate from South America to Russia. The Kolmozerskoe lithium deposit, located in the eastern Murmansk region near Lake Kolmiavr on Saami lands, is the largest in Russia. It was discovered in 1947; geological explorations continued until 1960, but no mining operations were established (Konstantinov 2023). In the aftermath of the war, the need to prevent a lithium shortage and, in my view, to maintain its standing in the global power dynamics of the "green transition," prompted Russia to focus on developing Kolmozerskoe.

The Soviet-era industrialization of the Kola Peninsula had a profoundly detrimental impact on the Kola Saami (e.g., Allemann 2020). State-run industrial enterprises largely ignored the Saami, sidelining them and disrupting the preservation of their culture in Russia. Under Putin's government, the situation has seen little improvement post-2000, with Indigenous land rights and resource claims still largely unmet (Fondahl et al. 2021; Sulyandziga and Sulyandziga 2021). However, since 2022, Norilsk Nickel, a major Russian mining company involved in the Kolmozerskoye deposit project, has engaged in dialogue with the Kola Saami and local reindeer herders. Given Norilsk Nickel's history of Indigenous rights controversies and the ongoing tensions between the company and the Saami, I am intrigued by the power dynamics at play between these parties.

While external isolation measures have affected Russia's need for lithium and thereby the development of its production, the country via its internal isolation measures (such as Russia's withdrawal from BEAC), has made it difficult for Kola Saami to defend Indigenous land rights on the threshold of lithium production. Isolation measures, coupled with the country's increasingly restrictive controls – such as heightened government oversight and severe limitations on freedom of speech – along with the current inability to conduct fieldwork, prevented me from completing the dissertation as originally planned. These barriers fundamentally reshaped the research process, forcing a reconsideration of the methodology. Yet despite these difficulties, I want to try to give back to the community that facilitated my master's thesis during difficult times and to do so by focusing on the topic identified by one of their respected mem-

bers. My research aims to ensure that mining activities affecting Indigenous peoples in the context of Russia's 'green transition' are critically discussed. I also hope that this critical lens will inform considerations of similar extractive activities in Finland, and elsewhere in the Saami homeland regions.

The use of netnography in closed contexts

Studying online cultures and communities through online-mediated communication is referred to as *netnography* (Addeo et al. 2019). Over the past decade, netnography has been increasingly applied in social studies such as sociology, anthropology, and media research. As a method derived from ethnography, it involves participant-observation research based on online interactions, including "hanging out," downloading, reflection, and connection (Kozinets and Nocker 2018). Netnography, like ethnography, employs a combination of methods, is methodologically flexible, and adapts to challenges (Addeo et al. 2019). Since it is based on online observation, it minimizes risks connected to fieldwork, facilitates data archiving, allows real-time observation, and can reduce research fatigue of Indigenous participants. It is a versatile and interdisciplinary research method that can be used alone or in combination with other methods, depending on the research's nature (Addeo et al. 2019: 24). Consequently, netnography offers significant benefits, particularly in situations where fieldwork is currently limited and restricted. On the other hand, the secondary nature of the information shared in digital spaces and the control of their contents by the Russian state apparatus must be recognized as they bring serious weaknesses to the method. Yet, with the inserted layers of isolation, netnography has become a more appropriate research method in closed contexts, such as in research related to Russia.

Initially, I was skeptical about finding necessary information online. My doubts, as noted earlier, stemmed from the fact that the oppressive political climate of today's Russia extends to digital spaces as well. Considering the challenges of field research, examining digital spaces seemed nevertheless possible based on thorough background research. Despite online censorship, platforms such as VKontakte and Telegram still facilitate critical discussions about extractive projects on Indigenous lands. Even with crackdowns on anonymous Telegram channels and the government surveillance of VKontakte, these platforms, to my surprise, sustain a strong community of voices expressing criticism of broader issues and local struggles (Buziashvili et al. 2024).

In my study of power dynamics reflected from the Kolmozerskoye deposit to the Kola Saami, I examine digital spaces to reveal patterns of dominance and subordination, the emergence of influential figures, and strategies used by the project developers to exercise power and by the Kola Saami to resist control. By analyzing content shared in online communities and by individuals, such as forum posts, videos, social media updates, and comments, I can identify discources and narratives that shape

power dynamics. My analysis aims to reveal how power is built, maintained, and challenged in digital spaces. In this sense, my prior knowledge of the research field and certain key figures defending Indigenous land and rights has been advantageous, as it has introduced me to the most active participants and relevant websites and groups.

Attila Paksi and Ilona Kivinen (2021) highlight the necessity of flexibility in Indigenous studies, stressing the importance of alternative data collection methods and the multi-layered relationships between researchers and community members. Despite exploring active Kola Saami online communities, establishing personal contacts as an outsider is challenging, particularly when relying solely on the Internet. The trust-building process is hindered by the uncertain political atmosphere in Russia, surely making it difficult for Saami individuals to trust a Finnish researcher they've never met in person. I have primarily relied on connections established during my master's thesis and in communicating my research to the Saami Council. Although I aim to engage more extensively with the Russian side of *Saam' jiemm'n'e*, forming new connections has proven challenging. The difficulty in establishing trust operates on both sides. Moreover, the unpredictability of Russia's political climate requires careful consideration of how and where to reach out, balancing the need for safety with the desire to connect. Despite these obstacles, I remain committed to finding opportunities to broaden my contacts.

The discources on Kolmozerskoe's official website, social media, and in the news portray the lithium mining project as sustainable, highlighting lithium's role in the green transition. The official website of the project together with the social media platforms of the project developers – Norilsk Nickel and Rosatom – emphasize a reciprocal approach to dialogue with the Saami and other reindeer herders in the area. Kola Saami,[4] on the other hand, as detailed in an article on the Indigenous Russia website (Anon. 2023), have voiced their discontent with the Kolmozerskoe project on social media platforms, such as VKontakte and Facebook, as the current political climate in Russia has made it hard for concerned individuals to protest in live demonstrations and compelled them to express their critical collective views mainly online. In addition to questioning the true meaning of the dialogues held by Norilsk Nickel, several Saami feel that the project is harmful to the environment and reindeer herding practices in the region. From the material collected, including videos, social media posts, their comment fields, and documents provided by the project website, I examine the contradictions of the narratives of Norilsk Nickel and Rosatom and the comments/responses of Kola Saami who are critical of the project, to analyze the power dynamics that emerge from them. However, since netnography depends on finding secondary online data and the Russian power apparatus restricts the expression of opinion, I acknowledge that the information cannot be blithely taken at face value: its veracity must be questioned.

4 I acknowledge that the opinions of the Kola Saami about the Kolmozerskoe project are not unanimous.

In the last two years, many scholars studying Russia have experienced blocked access to Russian websites or faced the removal of online data. Although this issue has predominantly affected government web pages, I also have concerns about the longevity of social media content. For this reason, I have taken screenshots of all online discources I have found and immediately transcribed video footage (such as YouTube videos), in fear of these being removed from the web. So far I have been able to find research material in a time of potentially scarce data opportunities; yet I am aware of the precariousness of a study dependent on what I can obtain from online discourses. This reality creates enormous pressure. After all, if people are not addressing a particular topic online, then it cannot be studied using netnography. Thus, while netnography offers valuable opportunities for current research on Russia-related topics involving Indigenous peoples, it also has its significant limitations.

Ethical considerations in netnographic research on Indigenous peoples and power relations

Netnographic research necessitates rigorous ethical considerations, particularly when exploring sensitive topics, like Indigenous peoples and power relations. Given that netnography relies on the observation of online spaces, it involves data not necessarily provided explicitly for specific research purposes (see Ferguson, *this volume – eds.*). Consequently, I must thoroughly assess the need for informed consent, participant privacy, and the potential impacts of the research on the communities involved.

Indigenous research methodologies underscore the critical importance of Indigenous ownership and control over their data. Netnography, however, can challenge these principles due to the nature of data residing on third-party platforms. In my case, this requires better ongoing dialogue with the Kola Saami individuals I manage to engage with throughout my dissertation project. One way to foster reciprocity in closed contexts is to discuss the ownership and control of information; doing so also may enhance the applicability of netnography to research concerning Indigenous peoples.

When analyzing Kola Saami's digital responses to extractive projects in their homeland, it is essential to recognize that netnography might well exclude voices not represented online. The perspectives expressed in digital spaces likely reflect only a portion of the Saami community's views. This limitation does not diminish the significance or credibility of the active online voices, but their use as research data necessitates careful consideration. Moreover, there is a risk of misrepresenting Indigenous perspectives when the researcher relies solely on online data rather than direct methods like interviews. In my research, this underscores the importance of understanding the cultural and social contexts of the Kola Saami, particularly concerning the extractive industry of the Kola Peninsula. To improve my understanding, I look at both the impacts of Soviet-era industrialization on the Saami and the con-

temporary extractive projects in the Russian part of *Saam' jiemm'nè* and the Saami's concern about them.

Unfortunately, the foundational principles of Indigenous methodologies – dialogue, connections, and cooperation – are challenging to uphold due to travel restrictions and the ethical complexities of online communication. Netnography adds another layer of ethical challenges to these principles, especially in closed contexts. These challenges call for the carefully considered development of new practices and approaches to promote meaningful research.

Conclusion: Reflections on the opportunities and challenges for an early-career scholar interested in the [Indigenous] Russian North

In this chapter, I examined the methodological challenges I have been encountering during my early PhD journey, which coincided with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and the strategies I am employing to navigate them in the face of Russia's increasing isolation and closure. My dissertation analyzes the power dynamics between extractive companies and the Kola Saami during development processes, using the lithium mining industry in the Kola Peninsula as a case study. This research gains urgency in light of the war, as the Kola Saami – whose lands are increasingly exploited for natural resources amid the conflict – now find themselves isolated from many international collaborations that advocate for their rights.

Concurrently, Western researchers face significant obstacles in studying various topics within Russia's current restrictive climate. The most pressing challenges in my research include the inability to conduct fieldwork, the need for flexibility in my methodology, and the ethical dilemmas inherent in Indigenous studies against Russia's shifting political landscape.

Amid the democratic decline of the past two decades, the country, nonetheless, remained relatively open to foreign researchers until recently (Kokorin 2024). In the context of research related to the Kola Peninsula and the Saami people, there have been several examples of cooperation over the past 30 years (e.g., Konstantinov 1997, 2005, 2023; Vladimirova 2006, 2014, 2024a; 2024b; Allemann 2013, 2020, 2024; Zmyvalova 2024). Fieldwork in northern Russia in many cases highlights successful collaborations, memorable experiences, and a deepened understanding of the topics studied. Experienced scholars benefit from established contacts, prior cooperation, and years of on-the-ground experience, all of which give them a distinct advantage in navigating the complex socio-political dynamics of the Russian North. In contrast, early-career scholars face significant challenges, lacking these crucial networks and firsthand knowledge. It is important to acknowledge that the deep understanding gained from direct work in the region is difficult to replicate from a distance. However, through my methodological exploration, I have sought to demonstrate that

research opportunities in the Russian context are still attainable to early-career scholars like myself.

Various topics need our attention in the current geopolitical situation. Guzel Yusupova (2024) asserts, that "the promotion of local history, environmental issues, and urban and rural developments to a wider audience is an important factor for future democratization." While she emphasizes the domestic significance of these issues, I argue that it is equally important to understand them also internationally within the context of the Russian North, especially during this time of uncertainty. Research on the effects of the Soviet and imperialist legacy, as well as new trends like the "green transition" and its impacts on Indigenous peoples, remains critical despite the geopolitical tensions. As Russian scholars face increasingly severe restrictions on academic freedom inside the country – particularly in research that critiques the government or its actions – Western researchers must continue to examine socio-political and socio-ecological phenomena and power dynamics connected to issues like extractivism within the Russian context.

Early-career scholars studying the Indigenous people of the Russian North start from a different position than their more experienced counterparts – a position more like the one faced by senior scholars who started their careers during the "closed context" of the late Soviet period in the 1970s and 1980s. However, early-career scholars can contribute significantly to research by developing methodological and theoretical approaches that leverage virtual sources. One example, as discussed in this chapter, is the use of netnography. While netnography presents its own set of challenges compared to traditional fieldwork and may not be the most feasible method in Indigenous studies, it remains valuable for studying contemporary socio-political phenomena. Netnography allows research to be conducted without the need for physical presence – a necessity in the current circumstances. To advance research on the issues concerning Russia's Indigenous peoples beyond its current "grey zone," we must work with less-than-optimal methods. Documenting and reflecting on these challenges is therefore crucial in navigating the current spaces of closure.

References

Aalto University 2022. *Restrictive Measures on Account of the Russian Aggression on Ukraine.* https://www.aalto.fi/en/services/restrictive-measures-on-account-of-the-russian-aggression-on-ukraine [accessed 11.8.2024]

Addeo, Felice, Angela Delli Paoli, Maria Esposito, and Maria Y. Bolcato 2019. Doing Social Research on Online Communities: The Benefits of Netnography. *Athens Journal of Social Sciences* 7(1): 9–38. https://www.athensjournals.gr/social/2020-7-1-1-Addeo.pdf [accessed 8.07.2024]

Allemann, Lukas 2013. The Sami of the Kola Peninsula – About the Life of an Ethnic Minority in the Soviet Union. *Samisk senters skritfserie* 19: 1–157. https://doi.org/10.7557/10.2546

— 2020. *The Experience of Displacement and Social Engineering in Kola Saami Oral Histories*. University of Lapland. https://lauda.ulapland.fi/handle/10024/64443 [accessed 11.08.2024]

— 2024. Field Relations with Indigenous Communities in an Era of a New Iron Curtain. In *A Fractured North – Journeys on Hold.* E. Kasten, I. Krupnik and G. Fondahl (eds.), pp.235-248. Fürstenberg/Havel: Kulturstiftung Siberien. https://bolt-dev.dh-north.org/files/dhn-pdf/fn2allemann.pdf [accessed 8.10.2024]

Anonymous 2023. Indigenous Small People Sami and War. Indigenous Russia. https://indigenous-russia.com/archives/34794 [accessed 8.7.2024]

Berezhkov, Dmitry and Pavel Sulyandziga 2023. Indigenous Peoples of the Arctic: Protecting the Environment in Conditions of Isolation. *Indigenous Russia*. https://indigenous-russia.com/archives/34890 [accessed 8.6.2024]

Berg-Nordlie, Mikkel 2011. Striving to Unite. The Russian Sámi and the Nordic Sámi Parliament Model. *Arctic Review on Law and Politics* 2(1): 52–76. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48710127?seq=2 [accessed 9.07.2024]

Buziashvili, Eto, Valentin Châtelet, Sopo Gelava, Givi Gigitashvili, Sayyara Mammadova, Ani Mejlumyan, Victoria Olari, and Roman Osadchuk 2024. Another Battlefield: Telegram as a Digital Front in Russia's War against Ukraine. *Digital Forensic Lab.* https://dfrlab.org/2024/06/10/another-battlefield-russian-telegram/ [accessed 11.8.2024]

Delardas, Orestis, Konstantinos S. Kechagias, Konstantinos Katsikas Triantafyllidis, and Panagiotis Giannos 2022. Concerns about Academic Freedom Caused by the Russia-Ukraine War. *EMBO reports* 23: e55079. https://www.embopress.org/doi/full/10.15252/embr.202255079#body-ref-embr202255079-cit-0005 [accessed 08.10.2024]

Edvardsen, Astri 2023. Russia out of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council. "Cooperation with the Sámi on the Russian Side is Severely Affected by Russia's War." *High North News*. https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/cooperation-sami-russian-side-severely-affected-russias-war [accessed 14.6.2024]

Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture 2022. *Suomi jäädyttää korkeakoulu- ja tutkimusyhteistyön Venäjän kanssa – Suomessa olevia ukrainalaisopiskelijoita tuetaan.* https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/-/1410845/finland-freezes-higher-education-and-research-cooperation-with-russia-support-for-ukrainian-students-in-finland [accessed 18.6.2024]

Fondahl, Gail, Viktoriya Filippova, Antonina Savvinova, and Vyacheslav Shadrin 2021. Changing Indigenous Territorial Rights in the Russian North. In *Routledge Handbook of Indigenous Peoples in the Arctic*. T. Koivurova, E. G. Broderstad, D. Cambou, D. Dorough, and F. Stammler (eds.), 127–142. New York: Routledge.

Koch, Natalie 2013. Introduction – Field Methods in "Closed Contexts:" Undertaking Research in Authoritarian States and Places. *Royal Geographical Society* 45(4): 390–395.

Kokorin, Dmitry 2024. Breakdown of Social Science Research in Russia – Impact on the Capacity for Understanding Russia and the West. Institute of International Relations Prague. https://www.iir.cz/en/breakdown-of-social-science-research-in-russia-impact-on-the-capacity-for-understanding-russia-in-the-west-1 [accessed 9.7.2024]

Konstantinov, Yulian 1997. Reindeer-herding Brigades on the Kola Peninsula. *Anthropology Today* 13(3): 14–19. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2783133

— 2005. From "Traditional" to Collectivized Reindeer Herding on the Kola Peninsula: Continuity or Disruption? *Acta Borealia* 22(2): 170–188.

— 2023. *Power and the People: The State and Peripheral Communities in the Russian Far North*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Koralova, Lana 2024. Alienated From West, Russia's Scientists Grapple with Working in Isolation. *The Moscow Times*. https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/01/09/alienated-from-west-russias-scientists-grapple-with-working-in-isolation-a83483 [accessed 11.8.2024]

Kozinets, Robert V. and Manuela Nocker 2018. Netnography: Engaging with Challenges. In *Unconventional Methodology in Organization and Management Research*. David A. Buchanan (ed.), 127–146. Cambridge, UK: Oxford U. Press.

Libman, Alexander 2024. Will the Strategy of Isolating Russia Ever Work? *Russia.Post*. https://russiapost.info/global_south/isolating [accessed 11.7.2024]

Matthews, David 2023. News in Depth: Russian Researchers Disappear from Academic Conferences as Isolation Bites. *Science|Business*. https://sciencebusiness.net/news/international-news/news-depth-russian-researchers-disappear-academic-conferences-isolation [accessed 4.7.2024]

Mortensgaard, Lin A. 2023. *Arctic Climate Science is Caught in the Middle of Geopolitical Tension*. Danish Institute for International Studies. https://www.diis.dk/en/research/arctic-climate-science-is-caught-in-the-middle-of-geopolitical-tension [accessed 14.6.2024]

Nielsen, Henrik D. and Virpi Kaisto 2024. Navigating the "Grey Zone": Academic Collaboration and Research on/in Russia during Geopolitical Crisis. *Fennia – International Journal of Geography* 202(1): 1–7.

Nilsen, Thomas 2022. War Protesting Sámi Activist from Kola Seeks Asylum in Norway. *The Barents Observer*. https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/life-and-public/2022/04/sami-activist-and-war-protester-kola-seeks-asylum-norway [accessed 14.6.2024]

— 2024. 55 Russian Indigenous, Regional and Ethno, Groups Labeled as Extremists. *The Barents Observer*. https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/life-and-public/55-russian-indigenous-regional-and-ethno-groups-labeled-as-extremists/117907

[accessed 30.9.2024],
Ollila, Mirkka 2022. *Network of Conflicts: The Obscure Legal Framework of the Sámi in the Kola Peninsula, Northwest Russia*. Masters Thesis.University of Helsinki. Available at: https://helda.helsinki.fi/items/023d9471-d4cf-4c87-9452-d528ae99e357
Paksi, Attila and Ilona Kivinen 2021. Reflections on Power Relations and Reciprocity in the Field while Conducting Research with Indigenous Peoples. In *Indigenous Research Methodologies in Sámi and Global Contexts*. P. K. Virtanen, P. Keskitalo, and T. Olsen (eds.), 201–228. Leiden: Brill.
Radauskas, Gintaras 2023. Russia Ramps up Censorship on VKontakte since Invading Ukraine. *Cybernew*s. https://cybernews.com/news/russia-censorship-vkontakte-ukraine/ [accessed 11.7.2024]
Sámediggi n.d. *Barenssamarbeidet*. https://sametinget.no/internasjonalt-arbeid/nordomradene/barentssamarbeidet/?sprak=1 [accessed 14.6.2024]
Sámiráddi 2022. Cooperation with Russian Side on Hold. https://www.saamicouncil.net/news-archive/cooperation-with-russian-side-on-hold [accessed 14.6.2024]
Sulyandziga, Liubov and Rodion Sulyandziga 2021. Indigenous Self-Determination and Disempowerment in the Russian North. In *Routledge Handbook of Indigenous Peoples in the Arctic*. T. Koivurova, E. G. Broderstad, D. Cambou, D. Dorough, and F. Stammler (eds.), 304–319. New York: Routledge.
Sulyandziga, Pavel 2024. Prologue: How our Indigenous North was Fractured. In *A Fractured North – Facing Dilemmas*. E. Kasten, I. Krupnik, and G. Fondahl (eds.), 7–10. Fürstenberg/Havel: Kulturstiftung Siberien. https://bolt-dev.dh-north.org/files/dhn-pdf/fn1sulyandziga.pdf [accessed 8.10.2024]
Tannagasheva, Yana 2023. *On the Sidelines of the Saami Festival Márkomeannu 2023: Seminar on the Situation of the Indigenous Peoples of Russia in the Times of War.* Anti-Discrimination Center Memorial. https://adcmemorial.org/en/articles/on-the-sidelines-of-the-saami-festival-markomeannu-2023/ [accessed 14.6.2024]
University of Helsinki 2023. *The War in Ukraine – University of Helsinki Guidelines*. https://www.helsinki.fi/en/news/war-ukraine [accessed 11.8.2024]
Virtanen, Pirjo K, Torjen Olsen, and Pigga Keskitalo 2021. Contemporary Indigenous Research within Sámi and Global Indigenous Studies Contexts. In *Indigenous Research Methodologies in Sámi and Global Contexts*. P. K.Virtanen, P. Keskitalo, and T. Olsen (eds.), 7–32. Leiden: Brill.
Vladimirova, Vladislava 2006. *Just Labor: Labor Ethic in a Post-Soviet Reindeer Herding Community*. Uppsala: Uppsala University.
— 2014. "It is not our Reindeer but our Politicians are Wild:" Contests over Reindeer and Categories in the Kola Peninsula, Northwestern Russia. *Arctic Anthropology* 51(1): 24–40.
— 2024a. Continuous Militarization as a Mode of Governance of Indigenous People in the Russian Arctic. *Politics and Governance* 12: 1–15.
— 2024b. Sami Women in the Context of the Russian War on Ukraine. In *A Fractured*

North – Journeys on Hold. E. Kasten, I. Krupnik, and G. Fondahl (eds.), 91–110. Fürstenberg/Havel: Kulturstiftung Siberien. https://bolt-dev.dh-north.org/files/dhn-pdf/fn2vladimirova.pdf [accessed 8.10.2024]

Yusupova, Guzel 2024. Mapping the Future of Russian Studies. *Syg.ma*. https://syg.ma/@sygma/abgTvw6gCjXcfQ [accessed 11.7.2024]

Zavadskaya, Margarita and Theodore Gerber 2023. Rise and Fall: Social Science in Russia Before and After the War. *Post-Soviet Affairs* 39(1–2): 108–120.

Zdor, Mark 2024. Indigenous Students of the Russian Arctic and the Special Military Operation. In *A Fractured North – Facing Dilemmas*, E. Kasten, I. Krupnik, and G. Fondahl (eds.), 59–73. Fürstenberg/Havel: Kulturstiftung Sibirien.

Zmyvalova, Ekaterina 2022. The Impact of the War in Ukraine on the Indigenous Small-numbered Peoples' Rights in Russia. *Arctic Review on Law and Politics* 13: 407–414.

— 2023. Nearly Two Years since the Start of the Full-scale War in Ukraine: The Rights of Russia's Indigenous Peoples Continue to Deteriorate. *Arctic Review on Law and Politics* 14: 220–227.

— 2024. *Sámi Children's Right to Learn Their Language: Indigenous Experiences and Law in the Russian School Context*. Ph.D. Thesis. Umeå: Umeå University. https://umu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1855871/FULLTEXT02.pdf [accessed 11.08.2024]