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Lynette McGuire

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Article abstract

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# The Fragmentation of Sápmi: a Nordic Model of Settler Colonialism

LYNETTE MCGUIRE

**ABSTRACT:** While the Nordic countries are frequently renowned as some of the most peaceful societies in the world, such a conception of peace cannot fully encapsulate the experiences of the Sámi. Likewise, the global movement toward settler-Indigenous reconciliation since the 1960s has set the Nordic response apart from the rest of the world. Building upon existing understandings of internal colonialism and structural violence, this paper analyzes how pragmatic attempts by Finland, Norway, and Sweden to reconcile with the Sámi have constituted a unified Nordic model of continued settler colonialism, as well as how differences between the National Sámi parliaments contribute to that model. In addition, this paper examines the impact that the Nordic model of settler colonialism has had on pan-Sámi politics, particularly concerning problems of Sámi reunification since the fall of the Soviet Union.

**RÉSUMÉ:** Bien que les pays nordiques aient la réputation de faire partie des sociétés les plus paisibles du monde, cette vision de paix n'intègre pas totalement les expériences des Samis. De la même façon, la tendance internationale vers la réconciliation entre colons et peuples autochtones depuis les années 1960 a mis la réponse nordique à part du reste du monde. En se basant sur la compréhension actuelle du colonialisme interne et de la violence structurelle, cet article analyse comment les tentatives pragmatiques de la Finlande, la Norvège et la Suède pour se réconcilier avec le Sámi ont établi un modèle nordique uniforme continuant le colonialisme de peuplement, et comment la disparité des parlements nationaux Sami contribuent à ce modèle. Enfin, cet article examine l'impact que le modèle colonial nordique a eu sur les politiques pan-samies, particulièrement en ce qui concerne les problèmes de la réunification samie depuis la chute de l'URSS.

Lynette McGuire received her BA Honours in Political Studies from Bishop's University in 2022, where she cultivated research interests and research experience in political violence, settler colonialism, and public policy. Lynette will be pursuing her Master's at Queen's University this fall, working towards an MA in Political Studies with a concentration in nationalism, ethnicity, and peace and conflict.

## Introduction

Postcolonial movements emerging since the latter half of the twentieth century have contributed to considerable changes in the relationships between colonial powers and colonized populations across the globe. Reconciliation movements, often centred around the formation of national Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs), have proven increasingly popular in settler-colonial contexts, with Finland, Norway, and Sweden being among the most recent states to form TRCs in pursuit of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. Many settler-colonial states have pursued reconciliatory initiatives with Indigenous populations, some of which have included formal institutions for integrating the interests of Indigenous people into state structures. Among these, the Nordic countries have developed a unique response with the creation of the national Sámi parliaments. The Nordic Sámi parliaments are formal representative bodies elected by the Sámi people residing within each country, with whom the national parliaments regularly and deliberately consult. While the Nordic Sámi parliaments vary in structure, their common goal is to better integrate Sámi interests into the national decision-making frameworks.

While there is a popular perception that formal state institutions of Indigenous representation are a step in the right direction, this integration inherently reinforces the legitimacy of state paternalism over Indigenous self-determination. Incorporation into the structures of the state indicates a commitment to the positive rights of the Sámi to participate in the state's political system, but denies them the right to refuse, as doing so would imply that the state is an illegitimate authority over their political domain (Short 2005). While such a problem does not negate the positive impacts that greater representation in state institutions has had on the Sámi living conditions, it remains that integration into the state structure does not fundamentally deconstruct the colonial relationship. Instead, the fragmentation of Sápmi<sup>1</sup> across four settler states—Finland, Norway, Russia, and Sweden—has created asymmetric expressions of Sámi self-determination, which is expressed in the Nordic countries through the integration approach. This common Nordic model has also strongly contributed to an East-West dimension of pan-Sámi politics developing since the Cold War, which further constrains Sámi self-determination.

## Pragmatic Reconciliation and the Consensual Paradox

A pragmatic approach to reconciliation is deeply embedded in the very foundation of the Sámi parliaments. The first Sámi Parliament was created in

Norway in 1989 following the 1980 Alta Dam Conflict with the goal of better integrating Sámi rights into national political structures, particularly with regards to land and natural resource rights (Kuokkanen 100-103). While Nordic pragmatism is often rightfully identified as a source of high levels of public trust and working parliamentary norms in each state's national parliaments, the state's agenda can be seen as a frequent source of conflict given the variation between the priorities of the state and of the Sámi people. Within this misalignment lies the subordination of Sámi parliaments to national parliaments, where Nordic state pragmatism presupposes the colonial supremacy of the settler state over Sámi self-determination, further perpetuating the colonial relationship. While Sámi interests are formally and symbolically privileged as a group through the national Sámi parliaments, in practice these interests are not necessarily held above the interests of other consulted groups. By requiring consensus in national parliaments among a wide variety of perspectives, the centrality of national parliaments in decision-making processes paradoxically denies the Sámi their right to self-determination. The authoritative subsidiarity of the Sámi parliaments is especially perpetuated by the non-binding nature of their resolutions, as without centrality in decision-making the Sámi parliaments are subject to scrutiny from actors more closely aligned with the protection of the colonial state than the deconstruction of the colonial relationship. If the principles of self-determination are to be fully realized, the Sámi people must be able to access group rights through not only symbolic representation, as is currently offered by the Sámi parliaments, but practical decision-making power as well.

Damien Short's conception of internal colonialism contains significant explanatory power for the current expression of Sámi self-determination through the national Sámi parliaments. 'Thick' reconciliation requires the redistribution of political power and resources in such a way that terminates the colonial relationship and the economic and social subordination underlying it. As such, Short argues that the positioning of Indigenous claims against the state as minority complaints in need of recognition demonstrates that "by supposing the legitimacy of the liberal settler state's jurisdiction over Indigenous nations, such an approach presupposes exactly what is in question" (272). The rights granted by settler states are therefore a part of colonialism rather than an element of its deconstruction, as those rights are invariably under the control and regulation of the state. This control suppresses Indigenous self-determination, which requires that Indigenous peoples are recognized as an entity politically distinct from and equal in nationhood to the settler state. The integration approach instead preserves the colonial relationship through the subsidiarity of Sámi parliaments, which denies the Sámi people equal agency as the settler population in decision-making capacities.

While the Nordic countries are frequently heralded as some of the most peaceful societies in the world, the notion of a peaceful Nordic political landscape assumes an exclusive relationship between violence and non-violence which cannot fully encapsulate the Sámi experience. It then becomes necessary to employ a broader definition of violence such as Galtung's conception of peace as the absence of violence, and violence as the "cause of the difference between the potential and the actual" (168-9). In essence, when the actual condition is avoidable, violence is the mechanism that produces a poorer outcome. While other definitions would limit violence to actions of somatic harm between actors, Galtung expands to include structural violence, where the disparity between the potential and actual is not meaningfully and concretely derived from persons as actors, but instead from the system itself. While structural violence is a particularly useful term to describe the experience of the Sámi, it does not distinguish between violence perpetrated by one structure or many structures. This is particularly important given the fragmentation of Sápmi across the colonial borders of four states—Finland, Norway, Russia, and Sweden—where exposure to different structures of settler violence has resulted in varied expressions of Sámi self-determination. In examining the intersections of these structures, it becomes increasingly clear that the Nordic model of integrating Sámi politics into state structures itself perpetuates the violence of the colonial relationship insofar as it does not actively deconstruct that relationship. Rather, Sámi national politics remain trapped in the consensual paradox of Nordic state institutions, and the application of Nordic pragmatism to reconciliation likewise prioritizes the interests of the state in the pursuit of reconciliation.

## Fragmentation of Sápmi and the National Dimension

The colonization of Sápmi was undertaken through both structural and somatic violence. Natural resource extraction was introduced to Sápmi in 1635, resulting in a repressive wave of northward migration by Swedish settlers and the displacement of many Sámi from their lands. Continued northern migration was encouraged by the Swedish state through the promise of tax deductions and free land, which often involved the destruction of sacred sites and burning their *noaidi*<sup>2</sup> at the stake. While the Sámi resisted the land grabs that became common by the 18th century, many had their reindeer killed and property destroyed by settlers, who increasingly profited from the exploitation of natural resources in the Sámi homeland (Kuhn 30-34). While there exists an important and growing body of literature documenting these harms, it should also be recognized that the similarities in the structural harms experienced by the Sámi were and are somewhat similar across state contexts. All four states, for example, instituted

assimilation programs through the education system, and all created policies (at different times and with different scopes) forbidding the use of the Sámi language. While the integration approach constitutes a common Nordic model of continued colonial supremacy, the fragmentation of Sápmi across four national contexts has produced unique circumstances for the Sámi living in each side of Sápmi.

Sweden's approach to the Sámi took the form of segregation and isolation through a policy now termed "the category split." Reindeer herding Sámi were given special rights and legally defined as Sámi, though they were heavily stereotyped by Swedish society and their rights nonetheless impeded. The rest of the Sámi population were considered non-Sámi and assimilated into mainstream Swedish society (Josefsen & Skogerbø 202). Sweden and Norway both formed their approaches to the Sámi heavily on the basis of race biology, with the State Institute for Racial Biology established in 1922 serving as a structural reinforcement to such policies. Norway, by contrast, took an approach of deliberate Norwegianization. Beginning in the mid-19th century and intensifying between 1870-1914, policies partially based on Social Darwinism were enacted to enforce the Norwegian hold on Sápmi. Notably, this included a law in 1898 which forbade the use of the Sámi language in schools and the 1895 proclamation that only Norwegian citizens had free access to land (Lehtola 2004, 44). A number of additional legal measures were enacted to establish Norwegian dominance over Sápmi and eradicate the Sámi language, and the 1898 Norwegian language statute was not repealed until 1959 (Lehtola 2004, 45). Sámi boarding schools were present in each of the four states for the purpose of nation-building, and in each state they enforced the perception that Sámi language, traditions, and culture were a hindrance to an individual's life prospects. Nordic settlers benefitted greatly from the degradation of Sámi culture, as by imposing their dominance over Sápmi the states gained a strategic northern military position and advanced their nation-building agendas.

Finns spent much of their history under the rule of foreign powers, first by Sweden and then by Russia, before gaining independence in 1917. Under the influence of foreign rule one strategy of defending Finnish unity was expressed through the subjugation of the Sámi, which especially from the 1890s onward often took the form of land dispossession. Unlike in Sweden and Norway, the Sámi on the Finnish side were assimilated through a policy of individual equality without group rights, which resulted in lowering participation in Sámi traditions and gradual loss of culture. New traffic networks were built to connect Sápmi to southern Finland, which increased the efficiency of resource extraction and colonial administrative infrastructure. Finland had a different relationship to theories of racial biology than Norway or Sweden, as Finns were construed in these theories as a lower race than their western neighbours

(Lehtola 2015, 28-29). As such, the structural violence perpetrated by Finland tended to take a course of ignoring differences and assimilating the Sámi through the rights of citizenship and pursued fewer policies directly restricting access to culture. This form of assimilation was self-perpetuating, as many Sámi abandoned their identities and became colonists themselves.

Under Stalin, the Sámi on the Russian side were suspected of being spies owing to their cross-border reindeer migration patterns and relationship with the Sámi on the Finnish side. Sixty-eight Sámi on the Russian side were disappeared and executed in 1937 for this reason (Kuhn 46-47), and the community quickly became cut off from the rest of the Sámi behind the Iron Curtain. During this period the traditional *siida* system<sup>3</sup> collapsed as all natural resources came under Soviet state control, and the Sámi were forcibly relocated a number of times in order to accommodate natural resource extraction (Lehtola 2004, 68). The Perestroika era produced modest changes for the Russian Sámi, including the founding of the Organization of the Sámi of the Kola Peninsula in 1989, which aimed to advocate for Sámi interests in local politics and re-establish connections with the Sámi of Fennoscandia (Allemann 122). This became much easier with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, and in 1992 the Organization of the Sámi of the Kola Peninsula (AKS) became a member of the Sámi Council. Today the Sámi are a minority in Murmansk Oblast;<sup>4</sup> most other residents are descendants of Soviet-era migrants who came to extract natural resources, which the Sámi generally have an uneasy relationship with. The use of the local Kildin Sámi language is limited and is mostly spoken as a second language, which creates challenges for the Sámi on the Russian side in communicating with Sámi in other areas. It also accompanies a general breakdown in Sámi culture and familial ties on the Russian side of the border, which has led to problems related to poverty, mental health, and substance abuse (Berg-Nordlie 104).

## **The Integration Approach: A Nordic Model of Continued Colonization**

Norway, Sweden, and Finland have each augmented their government structures to include Sámi parliaments as formal advisory bodies. These bodies, formed in 1989, 1993, and 1995 respectively, represent an integration-based approach to Sámi interests. The Nordic integration approach is characterized by three main common features, beginning with pragmatic policy-learning following large scale resistance movements like the Alta Dam conflict. Second, the Sámi parliaments all lack co-determination in decision-making, indicating an ongoing state paternalism over issues of interest to the Sámi parliaments. Third, the Sámi parliaments demonstrate a positive right for the Sámi to

participate but no right to decline participation in state structures, which suggests that the method of incorporating these bodies into the state system serves to legitimize the colonial relationship rather than to deconstruct it. The common and differentiated features of the Sámi parliaments point to an overall preservative function that the Sámi parliaments perform for the states, which indicates that the Nordic approach of integrating Sámi issues into formal state institutions constitutes a unique Nordic model of continued colonization.

Norway's Sámi parliament independently determines what matters are relevant to consult with the Norwegian state or parliament on. Some Norwegian Sámi parties correspond with national political parties, which can provide connective networks into Norwegian decision-making systems. There also exists a cooperative relationship between the national and Sámi parliaments in Norway in matters of codifying Sámi rights, as exemplified by the Education Act (1998) and Finnmark Act (2005). The Norwegian Sámi parliament is afforded more autonomy than the Swedish Sámi parliament, but its limited economic resources and lack of binding influence over government decisions leave it very little practical power for pursuing Sámi interests and preventing land exploitation (Josefsen and Skogerbø 203). Alili Keskitalo, president of the Norwegian Sámi Parliament, emphasized the growth of wind farms in Sápmi as green colonization. While environmental sustainability is a high priority for the Sámi people, wind farms in particular cut across large swaths of reindeer grazing lands and renders them unusable (Greaves 11). The development of wind farms thus represents a Gramscian paternalism on the part of the state, wherein the Sámi parliament is used to legitimize the state's authority over Sápmi.

Of the three Sámi parliaments incorporated as government bodies, the Sámi parliament in Sweden has the lowest constitutional standing. It is organized partly as a representative body and partly as a government agency dedicated to Sámi issues. This dual purpose limits its ability to be regarded as equal and autonomous by the Swedish parliament due to its role as an agency making it subordinate to the state (Josefsen and Skogerbø 202). Its mandate emphasizes its role as an authority with special knowledge of reindeer husbandry in particular and as an objective government agency, which likewise limits its ability to accurately represent the political position of the Sámi on relevant issues (Pikkarainen and Brodin 23). As a result, the Sámi on the Swedish side rely more on the court system to contest issues relating to land and cultural rights than their Finnish and Norwegian counterparts. The category split between the reindeer herding and non-reindeer herding Sámi has politicized Sámi identity politics, which serves as the main cleavage between Sweden's Sámi parties. Its parties are independent of Swedish national parties, which leaves little room for informal political influence through party networks (Josefsen and Skogerbø 203). Without co-determination in legislative decision



making or a veto in administrative matters, the actual political power of the Swedish Sámi Parliament is incredibly limited (Pikkarainen and Brodin 23). Perhaps predictably, Sámi voters in Sweden express a lower degree of trust in their government and their Sámi political and media institutions than the Sámi on the Norwegian side (Josefsen and Skogerbo 204).

Finland's Sámi Parliament mandate is "to look after the Sámi language and culture, as well as to take care of matters relating to their status as an Indigenous people," (Act 974/1995, Ch.5, Art. 1, as quoted in Mörkenstam, Josefsen, and Nilsson 14) which while being statutorily strong has not been institutionalized in political practice. While it is afforded a mandatory consulting role in decisions having a direct and specific impact on Sámi interests, these consultations are not binding. The Finnish Sámi parliament receives the least funding of the three, with a budget of US\$3.6 million in 2007, whereas the Norwegian and Swedish Sámi parliaments received US\$44.1 million and US\$19.6 million, respectively (Henriksen 32). The Finnish Sámi parliament also does not have political parties, but rather members of the electoral roll vote for individual candidates, reflecting the historical policy of assimilation through individualism. Today, one of the great debates within Finnish Sámi politics pertains to who can be considered Sámi. Finland has the narrowest rules governing who is eligible to vote in Sámi elections, which is made all the more contentious with Finland being the only country to claim the electoral roll as an exact registry of all Sámi adults in the country. As such, there have been years of negotiations related to the Sámi parliament's desire to redefine the terms of who can be considered Sámi (Mörkenstam, Josefsen, and Nilsson 38). Voting rights in the Finnish Sámi parliament can therefore be considered a continuation of the old policy of assimilation through individual rights, as its impact severely limits the ability of the Sámi to determine who can gain access to their group rights.

The integration approach in Finland, Norway, and Sweden ultimately accomplishes two preservative functions for the settler structures. First, it serves to legitimize the settler structures' suppression of Sámi self-determination by integrating them through a democratic process. This is especially valuable in preserving the generally positive perception of the Nordic model of social democracy, as presupposing the legitimacy of state structures as the basis for integration supports the colonial relationship rather than deconstructing it. Second, it indicates a shift in the mechanisms of colonization. The incorporation of a non-binding advisory body acts as a mechanism of dictating the terms of consultation while preserving the dominance and subordination that characterizes settler colonialism. This shift illustrates clearly the problems outlined by Short with regard to internal colonialism, wherein the state exercises its authority by the design of its reconciliation process. Nordic pragmatism can therefore be seen as a considerable hindrance

to the reconciliation process, as the consensual paradox ultimately juxtaposes Sámi interests with interests supporting state power when the outcome of reconciliation would ideally be a situation in which these interests are non-competitive.

## **Pan-Sámi Politics and the East-West Dimension**

In 1908, a Sámi woman from the Swedish side named Elsa Laula organized the first Sámi organization, Brurskankens Lapforening, and later the first Sámi Congress in 1917. While some early Sámi organizations incorporated pan-Sámi elements, pan-Sámi politics have mostly been pursued from 1953 onward (Minde 226). Nordic Sámi Conferences started being held regularly in 1953, and the Sámi Council was established in 1956. From 1971 the stated goals of the Sámi Council included

to be recognized as an ethnic group, to receive support in and gain influence over Sámi affairs, for this is necessary if we are to be able to preserve our people and to enjoy a vigorous cultural life. We strive for a Sámi democracy. The basic right to self-government must be granted to us, to be recognized by us and by the majority population. (Minde 237)

While early on the Sámi Council found some success influencing the Nordic Council, the international sphere became the central focus of Sámi Council initiatives in the 1970s and 1980s as country-wide Sámi organizations began to emerge.

The Sámi Parliamentary Council was founded in 2000 as a union of the Sámi parliaments, with both the Association of Sámi in Murmansk Oblast (OOSMO) and the Organization of the Sámi of the Kola Peninsula (AKS) joining as observers in 2000 and permanent observers in 2003 (Berg-Nordlie 78). Without a governmental Sámi parliament, however, the Sámi on the Russian side are awarded no voting rights. As a result, pan-Sámi organizations have a distinctly Nordic slant apparent in the East-West dimension of pan-Sámi politics. Russian Sámi organizations were only able to re-establish communications across the border after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, and even then the international politics of Russia and the Nordic countries have been a significant hindrance to Russian Sámi seeking greater representation. Some attempts of Russian Sámi organizations to participate in pan-Sámi politics have placed them in a position of skepticism by Russian authorities, where they are sometimes seen as a “fifth column” because of their Western support (Berg-Nordlie 108). Even if the Russian Sámi were to be represented by a state institution, it is very unlikely

that such an organization would fulfill Nordic Sámi ideas about democratic legitimacy owing to Russian administrative frameworks, which would likely preclude such an organization from being recognized by the Sámi parliaments as an actor of equal status. In this way, the East-West dimension of pan-Sámi politics can be seen as its own limiting factor in the realization of Sámi self-determination.

## Conclusion

The creation of national Sámi parliaments serves as a unique response from the Nordic countries to the pressures placed on colonial powers by postcolonial movements, particularly as colonial powers with a global reputation for their peaceful political culture. These formal representative bodies, both consultative and advisory in nature, serve as a way to better integrate Sámi interests into national decision-making frameworks; in practice, however, they in fact reinforce the legitimacy of state paternalism over Sámi self-determination, as integration into the settler state structure does not fundamentally deconstruct the colonial relationship. Instead, the fragmentation of Sápmi across four settler states has resulted in a distinct Nordic model of continued colonization through the integration approach, as well as contributed to the development of an East-West dimension of pan-Sámi politics since the Cold War.

There are several academic avenues to pursue in order to better understand the relationship between the Sámi and the governments of the Nordic countries. A particularly under-researched area is the impact of Nordic normativity in pan-Sámi organizations, and how this has limited the representation of the Russian Sámi in pan-Sámi politics. A better understanding of the East-West dimension of Sámi self-determination is necessary to give greater clarity to the level of influence that Nordic states have had on the development of pan-Sámi political movements. Additionally, a more comprehensive methodology for the studying of Sámi issues is needed. This is true in research involving all Indigenous communities but is particularly prevalent in Sámi research. The multiplicity of languages in which research and primary source materials on the Sámi are published (including but not limited to North Sámi, South Sámi, English, Finnish, Norwegian, Russian, and Swedish) holds deep cultural value, though it also produces substantial research barriers which must be comprehensively addressed in order for researchers to better compare the national dimensions of Sápmi. Finally, it would be useful to place further research within the lens of other trends in reconciliation, particularly when a variety of policy trends are concurrently diffused. Although Sámi self-

determination is a unique discussion, the conversation would only benefit from perspectives and experiences of other reconciliatory efforts around the globe.

#### NOTES

1. Sápmi refers to the traditional territory of the Sámi people.
2. A traditional healer in Sámi communities.
3. A traditional Sámi community structure, the term is still used in Norway to refer to associations of reindeer herders.
4. Murmansk Oblast is a federal subject of Russia located on the Kola Peninsula.

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