

THE SÁMI WORLD



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CHAPTER NINETEEN

TOXIC SPEECH, POLITICAL SELF- INDIGENIZATION AND THE ETHICS AND POLITICS OF CRITIQUE

Notes from Finland



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Laura Junka-Aikio

The internet and social media provide new opportunities for active citizenship, but they have also facilitated various forms of hate speech, especially towards ethnic and racial minorities and women. In addition to negatively affecting the targeted people's sense of security and well-being, hate speech is associated with efforts to influence political decision making by silencing certain voices from public debate, and with the overall harshening of contemporary political culture and rhetoric, and therefore, it is considered a growing threat for democratic and multicultural societies, freedom of expression and human rights at large (Knuutila *et al.* 2019). Accordingly, finding ways to address its causes and consequences is a central concern for various national and transnational agencies, including the UN and the European Commission (ECRI 2016; Gagliardone *et al.* 2015).

Hate speech against the Indigenous Sámi people has also proliferated, and in each Nordic country, it is now considered a problem requiring counter-measures and further study (Helleland *et al.* 2021; Korhonen *et al.* 2016; Saami Council 2020; Sámiid Riikkasearvi/SSR 2020). In the narrow sense, used mainly in legal contexts, hate speech refers to speech which directly incites harm towards certain social or demographic groups. However, in general parlance, it is considered more broadly as speech which fosters a climate of prejudice and intolerance or fuels discrimination, hostility or violence (Gagliardone *et al.* 2015, 11). For example, European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) defines hate speech as 'the advocacy, promotion or incitement, in any form, of the denigration, hatred or vilification of a person or group of persons, as well as any harassment, insult, negative stereotyping, stigmatization or threat' (2016).

The broader understanding has prompted scholars to develop alternative notions which bring attention to the fact that speech does not need to be 'hateful' to incite

harm, hostility or discrimination or highlight the social dimensions of hate speech. A good example is Lynne Tirrell's (2017) *toxic speech*, which builds an analogy between hate speech and the medical terms of toxicity and epidemiology, mainly to move beyond the conception of hate speech as an isolatable act which can be traced down to individual 'hate' and to facilitate its analysis as an epidemic, which damages the whole social body. Drawing on examples from Rwanda, Nazi Germany and Donald Trump's rhetoric, Tirrell also argues that speech acts that are devoid of deeply derogatory terms can be damaging and, over the long term, inflict serious harm on the targeted groups and individuals. Instead of delivering an 'instant blow,' the constant repetition of such 'milder' messages hurts the society and the targets gradually, by transforming the boundaries of what is considered normal and acceptable speech (Tirrell 2017, 147).

As with chemical toxins which do most harm on bodies that are particularly vulnerable, toxic speech is particularly damaging for minority peoples and groups whose positioning within the society is less stable and secure, such as Indigenous Peoples, refugees, women and ethnic and racial minorities (149). To understand the social impact of toxic speech, one therefore has to pay attention not only to the content, narrative patterns and strategies of particular speech acts but also to 'epistemic position, access and authority,' i.e. who speaks, from which position, at what volume, with what authority and to whom. As a critical approach, an epidemiology of toxic speech moves attention beyond individual speech acts that may or may not cross the threshold of hate speech or criminality and reframes hate speech as a community problem that has to do with structural power relations and requires social solutions (Tirrell 2017, 140).

In this study, I build on the theory and notion of toxic speech to examine anti-Sámi hate speech that is specific to the political terrain in Finland. There, such speech is particularly common in debates which relate to the Sámi Parliament, especially to the ongoing political conflict over the Sámi Parliament's electoral register (see Mörkenstam *et al.* in this volume; Kortelainen and Länsman 2015). The roots of the conflict date back to the 1990s when local groups that were opposed to Sámi cultural autonomy came together to oppose its establishment (Pääkkönen 2008; Lehtola 2015; Valkonen 2017). Later, the opposition centred on criticism of the Sámi Parliament, voiced mainly by popular movements which promote *political self-Indigenization* to gain access to the Sámi Parliament's electoral register (Junka-Aikio 2021). Although these movements today are involved in, and make explicit use of, academic knowledge production and discourses which highlight the ideas of Sámi cultural revitalization and recovery (Valkonen 2017, 209–2012; Junka-Aikio 2016; 2021), the study shows how, at the level of popular rhetoric and in social media, the same discourses are operationalized to purposefully undermine Sámi peoplehood and rights, to denigrate those who are seen to defend such rights and to disseminate pejorative representations of the Sámi and the institutions which represent them.

I begin with an overview of anti-Sámi hate speech in the Nordic context. The overview is followed by a short look at the main discursive and narrative strategies that were used to delegitimize Sámi peoplehood and self-government in Finland in the 1990s, when the legislation leading to Sámi cultural autonomy was being drafted. The second part explores how these discourses and narratives are reproduced and reshaped in contemporary social media discussions that I retrieved from

the Facebook group Inari Citizen Channel (*Inarin kansalaiskanava*) between 2012 and 2020.

Despite their prevalence, the toxic narratives and discourses that I examine have not received much critical attention within the Finnish majority society, which generally remains both unaware and unsympathetic. Likewise, Sámi scholars and public figures have also been rather reluctant to confront such speech publicly. The chapter ends with a short list of possible reasons which might explain why this kind of toxic speech has been particularly impervious to criticism and public exposure.

HATE SPEECH IN THE NORDIC SÁMI CONTEXT

Hate speech builds on, and amplifies, conflicts that already exist in the society (Gagliardone *et al.* 2015, 11–12). In the Nordic Sámi context, its roots go back to the colonial and hierarchic discourses and attitudes that have defined the majority societies' relationship with the Sámi during the modern period. In the colonial discourse of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Sámi were considered primitive and even racially inferior people who, according to the standards set by the majority society, were unable to develop themselves. As in other colonial contexts, such discourses were used to justify colonial government and tutelage of Sámi lives, lands and societies.

Since the 1970s, the rise of the Sámi ethno-political movement and various measures to develop Sámi and Indigenous rights have challenged the earlier asymmetries and improved the social standing of the Sámi. However, the change has also given rise to new political opposition and counter-movements, especially on the local level and among those segments of the majority society that have felt that Sámi rights might undermine their own rights and access to land and resources. Hence, in each Nordic country, the process of developing Sámi Indigenous rights has been paralleled by the proliferation of a qualitatively new discourse which perceives the Sámi as a *threat* to the existing order and majority rights. As expressed by a Sámi participant in Juuso (2018, 231), 'Before, the majority population's anti-Sámi attitudes were expressed through mockery of the Sámi's inferiority. Today, it comes across as pure hate.' Paying attention to the particular socio-political context of Indigenous rights is therefore central to efforts to understand the nature and sources of contemporary hate speech against the Sámi and the ways in which such speech interconnects with the history of Nordic colonialism.

In Norway, a number of surveys in the 2000s have shown that the Sámi are significantly more likely to experience discrimination and hate speech than non-Sámi Norwegians (see Hansen in this volume). While much of it takes place in everyday situations, online hate speech is a growing problem (Eira 2018; Hansen and Skaar 2017). Often, such speech is propagated systematically by members of political parties or by local organizations and groups which oppose the recognition of 'special' Sámi rights, such as the *Etnisk Demokratisk Likeverd* (EDL, Ethnic Democratic Equality), which was originally established to oppose Sámi land rights as enshrined in the Finnmark Act (Balto 2020; Björklund 2020, 24). The various materials collected and shared by the Sámi *Jurddabeassi* collective through the Twitter account *Samehets* ('Sámi hate') and the fact that North Norway's leading newspaper *Nordlys* has actually had to temporarily close the online comments

section for *Nordnorsk Debatt* due to hate speech targeting the Sámi attest to the pertinence of the problem.

In Sweden, hate speech against the Sámi gained broad public attention in 2020, in the aftermath of the Swedish Supreme Court's decision regarding the *Girjas* court case. The decision saw the *Girjas sameby*, a Sámi reindeer-herding community in the Gällivare region, win the legal dispute concerning who has the right to control hunting and fishing rights in its land management area, the *sameby* or the state. The case presented a significant milestone for Sámi land rights in Sweden and beyond (Ravna 2020), but it was followed by a severe backlash of online and offline hate against the Sámi reindeer-herding community, leading to actual violence in the form of unlawful reindeer killings (Raitio and Löf 2020). This was not new as such, as anti-Sámi hate speech and actions which target especially Sámi reindeer herders have been constant in Sweden. After the rise of social media, such speech has, however, become increasingly pervasive (Sámiid Riikkasearvi/SSR 2020).

These examples indicate that hate speech towards the Sámi is prevalent, especially around conflicts which relate to land rights and natural resource management. The same can be said of Finland, where such speech has intensified since the early 1990s, originally triggered by the legislative process to establish Sámi cultural autonomy. As in Norway and Sweden, the process met strong resistance among local non-Sámi communities that feared that their own rights and access to land would be infringed (Lehtola 2015; Pääkkönen 2008; Valkonen 2017).

At this early stage, the opposition was articulated especially through efforts to delegitimize the Sámi as a people, to vilify the persons who represented them and to raise fear of the prospect of Sámi cultural autonomy. A good example of toxic speech from this period is *Kiisa*, a 25-page leaflet that was issued in 1995 by *Lappalaiskultuuri- ja perinneyhdistys* ('Association for Lapp culture and heritage'), a popular organization that was established in Enontekiö earlier in the same year to oppose the legislative process (see also Valkonen 2017, 194–199). The leaflet mimicked the yellow press, starting with a catchy front-page headline: 'A Law Scandal of All Times – This is what others are quiet about!' Following this, the various texts that were gathered in *Kiisa* warned against the threat of Sámi cultural autonomy, building on a number of narrative strategies. For instance, the new 'Sámi law' that was under preparation at the time was described as a 'treacherous snake' being advanced by Sámi and Finnish politicians based on dubious motivations and personal greed (p. 7). If passed, the Sámi Parliament Act would be 'Finland's first racist law' (p. 3) or a 'trash law' (p. 12), which, in the end, would reproduce an 'Indian caste system' (p. 13), discriminating against the rest of the local population who would find themselves at the bottom of the social ladder. Once the law was passed, the locals, according to *Kiisa*, would 'wake up as tourists in their own home region, stripped off those rights that one had learned to take for granted' (p. 3).

The Sámi, in turn, were depicted not as an Indigenous People, but as an ideological association invented by a handful of greedy individuals simply to displace and take over the rights of other, Finnish-speaking locals. Conversely, these other locals, now named and organized as 'Lapps,'¹ were presented as the descendants of the region's most 'original' inhabitants and, hence, as more Indigenous than the Sámi. (This claim is made on nearly all pages.) On the other hand, several texts in *Kiisa* also suggested that there was no real difference between the Lapps and the Sámi.

One contributor argued that the word ‘Sámi’ was based on a linguistic confusion and actually refers to Finns (p. 12). Another explains that in Enontekiö, 90% of the population descends from the Lapps and that the Sámi are just a ‘linguistic minority’ within this larger Finnish-speaking group (p. 10).

Accordingly, *Kiisa* constructed the Sámi primarily as a threat to other local people, whose rights would be violated if the Sámi were to ‘have their way.’ The individuals who represent the Sámi ethnopolitical movement, in turn, are portrayed as greedy and power-hungry crooks who act out of personal interest. Such portrayals are complemented by mutually contradicting discourses which seek to undermine Sámi peoplehood and Indigeneity. On the one hand, the Sámi were portrayed as the same as the rest of the local population. According to this narrative, there is no significant difference between them and the Finnish-speaking ‘Lapps’; hence, they should not be given any ‘special rights.’ On the other hand, Sámi Indigeneity is called into question through their difference from the ‘Lapps,’ the latter of which are portrayed as the region’s oldest, original inhabitants and thus more Indigenous than the Sámi.

The same narratives still play a central role in popular discussions over Sámi rights in Finland. However, over time, the rhetoric has become more complex as, in addition to opposing Sámi claims to Indigenous peoplehood, a new discourse of ‘we, too, are Sámi’ has developed alongside the older ones. Whereas *Kiisa* was produced in a strategic context in which the main objective was to oppose the establishment of Sámi cultural autonomy, once the law was passed and the Sámi Parliament founded, the focus turned to a demand that the Finnish-speaking locals, who had deep roots in the region, should also be granted access to the electoral register, either under a competing ‘Indigenous Lapp’ identity or because, upon careful examination, they, too, could produce records of Sámi ancestry. In addition to granting a chance to influence the Sámi Parliament from within, membership in its electoral register became seen as a ticket to ‘special rights’ that the Sámi might receive, especially in case the state also recognized Sámi land rights. Hence, outright opposition to Sámi cultural autonomy was joined by demands to access the electoral register and by the emergence of new popular organizations which seek to promote the agenda under various overlapping identities and group names (Junka-Aikio 2021; Lehtola 2015, 2021; Pääkkönen 2008; Valkonen 2017).

POLITICAL SELF-INDIGENIZATION

These developments correspond closely with the self-defined ‘Indigenous’ organizations that have recently emerged in various other settler colonial locations, especially North America. Of particular relevance are examples from Canada, where the recognition of Métis rights in the early 2000s was followed by the establishment of various new organizations which now demand formal recognition as Métis and Indigenous. Their political genealogies have been studied in detail by the Canadian sociologist Darryl Leroux, who shows how some of Canada’s largest self-defined ‘Métis’ organizations were originally established by groups which came together to *oppose* Indigenous land, hunting and fishing rights locally (Leroux 2019a). As in Finland, in Canada, the discourses on Indigeneity and Indigenous cultural revitalization were thus ‘weaponized’ in the service of inherently anti-Indigenous forces and

to distract from the development of Indigenous rights – unless those rights were extended to more people (*ibid.*).

Such political organizations represent just one aspect of the broader phenomenon, whereby people who previously have identified as white develop a new identity as Indigenous, often based on highly distant or even entirely fabricated ancestry claims or narratives of family lore. Given the sharp increase of such identity claims, the phenomenon has provoked growing attention among Indigenous and non-Indigenous critical scholars who discuss it using various terms, such as ‘race shifting,’ ‘self-Indigenization’ and ‘Indigenous identity appropriation’ (e.g. Leroux 2019a; Sturm 2011; Gaudry 2018). Although not all individuals who self-Indigenize act out of material interest or to consciously oppose Indigenous rights (see Sturm 2011), such considerations seem more prevalent when the new identity claims are promoted by popular organizations and accompanied by demands for formal recognition, as is the case in both Canada and Finland (Junka-Aikio 2021). In this study, I use the term *political self-Indigenization* to highlight specifically this aspect of the phenomenon.

In Canada, political self-Indigenization has been facilitated by academic knowledge production and scholars who actively promote the identity and history claims of the self-identified ‘Indigenous’ organizations (Leroux 2019b). The same can be said of Finland, where research has had a central role in shaping and sharpening the popular movement’s discourse and rhetoric. In the past, research associated with or used by the movement focused especially on legal history, and it was drawn upon mainly to counter Sámi arguments for cultural and ethnic difference and land ownership (Lehtola 2021; Alakorva *et al.* in this volume). However, in more recent times, the research has been complemented by new humanities-based studies on Sáminess and Sámi identity. Also, the new research centers on the demand that the Sámi Parliament’s electoral register needs to be expanded so that more people can join, but now the argument is articulated in tune with what I have called elsewhere as ‘deconstructive research ethos’, the discourses of individual self-identification and cultural and linguistic revitalization and employing the theoretical and conceptual resources of postcolonial and Indigenous studies (Junka-Aikio 2016).

Such research might not come across as politically anti-Sámi – quite the opposite. However, on the level of popular politics and rhetoric, it has been taken up and operationalized largely by the same groups and actors that have been the most vociferous opponents of Sámi cultural autonomy and rights since the 1990s. In practice, this has resulted in a perplexing convergence, around a shared political agenda, of two seemingly disparate discourses and narrative strategies, one of which highlights care and appreciation for Sámi language and identity while the other continues to oppose Sámi self-determination and to construct the Sámi and Sámi rights in derogatory terms. Irrespective of their differences and mutual contradictions, both are now pieced together and employed actively by various actors (including a number of Sámi parliament members whom Hirvasvuopio (2020) identifies as the ‘opposition bloc’ within the Sámi cultural autonomy) to explicitly undermine Sámi peoplehood and rights and to denigrate individuals and institutions who are seen to defend such rights.

Whereas in the early 1990s the dissemination of such speech demanded print press, today it is done effectively through social media. Especially Facebook has been identified as an online space where hate speech targeting the Sámi is actively

produced and circulated (Korhonen *et al.* 2016; Näkkäljärvi 2017). In addition to the individual Facebook pages of certain politically active actors, such speech is common at larger, locally based Facebook groups. One of them is Inari Citizen Channel (*Inarin kansalaiskanava*), which centers on community issues and exchanges relating to the Inari municipality. Next, I move on to explore how the Sámi, the Sámi Parliament and the issue of Sámi identity are discussed in contemporary discussions found in this Facebook group.

INARI CITIZEN CHANNEL

Inari is one of the four municipalities which comprise the Sámi homeland region in Finland and home to three recognized Sámi groups: Inari Sámi, Skolt Sámi and North Sámi (see also Alakorva *et al.* in this volume). With a total population of 6,900, a little less than one third (c. 1,240 persons)² of Inari's inhabitants are Sámi, the rest being mostly Finns.

The Facebook group Inari Citizen Channel was created in October 2010, and it currently has around 6,000 members and five moderators. According to the public description, its aim is to be a platform where one can express one's opinion 'on issues relating to land use planning, investments, taxation and many other issues relating to the municipality of Inari that you might be concerned with.' The group is set up as a private group, which requires approved membership for access, but its large size (almost the same as the number of Inari's inhabitants) and public description indicate that in practice, the purpose is to facilitate public discussion on issues concerning the municipality. All this indicates a reasonable expectation of publicity among members who participate in the conversations.

Inari Citizen Channel has in the past been singled out as one of the platforms on which online hate speech against the Sámi regularly flares up (Näkkäljärvi 2017, 23). Although various different topics are discussed, postings which relate to the Sámi Parliament, to land or natural resource use issues involving the Sámi or to Sámi identity are frequent and usually attract a significant number of comments. When people with various different views participate in such discussions, they can be enlightening and informative. However, one-sided discussions and derogatory speech are highly common, and the moderators are frequently called on to remove messages that are considered inappropriate or which might pass the threshold of hate speech. At times, entire discussions have been removed afterwards or all the comments hidden. Accordingly, the archived content that is accessible today does not fully reflect the range of the original discussions.

To identify the research material, I searched the group's archives between 2012 and 2020 using two main keywords – 'saamelaiset' (the Sámi), and 'saamelaiskäräjät' (the Sámi Parliament). The search resulted in 68 relevant discussions, most of them between 100 and 300 comments long. Of this vast amount of material, I brought together for closer analysis those comments and exchanges that might, in accordance with Tirrel's definition, be regarded as 'toxic' in relation to the Sámi people. Next, I parsed the main narrative patterns and strategies that are used in these discussions to undermine, attack or denigrate the Sámi. Given the local counter-movement's uneven shift from direct opposition to the practice of self-Indigenization, I was particularly interested in the complex ways in which both explicitly anti-Sámi

discourses and the discourses of self-Indigenization and revitalization are woven together and employed side by side, often by the same actors.

To protect the integrity and privacy of the research subjects, all the material has been anonymized, and it is presented here without information on the date or year of publication, the immediate context that prompted the discussion, or personal background and positioning. I also do not provide direct quotes in the original language (Finnish), as those could be used for reverse identification of individual group members (see Ayers *et al.* 2018). For these reasons, the discussion proceeds on a more general level than what the rich material would otherwise warrant.

Crooks and con men

In the material I examined, toxic speech relating to the Sámi takes place especially through discourses which critique the Sámi Parliament yet also seek to undermine or denigrate individuals who represent it or to attack the very legitimacy and purpose of Sámi cultural autonomy. In *Kiisa*, the leaders of the Sámi movement and the new ‘Sámi law’ that would pave way for Sámi cultural autonomy were still constructed as the primary threat. Now, the focus is on the Sámi Parliament’s leadership and on the people around it, as well as on the nature and purpose of the institution itself, which is cast as inherently dubious and oppressive.

A highly prominent narrative constructs the Sámi Parliament in terms of its alleged *abuse of tax-payer’s money*. According to the narrative, one of the Sámi Parliament’s main functions is to extract and spend enormous amounts of tax money on pointless legal complaints and bureaucracy. Mostly, this is to harass and exclude from the Sámi Parliament people who are not in favor of the ‘small Sámi elite,’ to discriminate against livelihoods other than reindeer herding or to generate personal profit. Alternatively, the Sámi Parliament is accused of inventing new work positions and projects simply to extract state funding for the benefit of the ‘small group of insiders’ who are then employed.

For instance, in a discussion which revolves around the Sámi Parliament’s objection to mechanical gold panning in the Sámi homeland region, the focus is almost entirely on funding. One asks: ‘Whose money does the Sámi Parliament use to fabricate these complaints [against gold panning]?’ Others follow up: ‘Tax-payers’ money. Our money.’ The conversation carries on:

The Sámi Parliament can keep complaining and tying up judges and the whole legal roulette endlessly because they don’t need to participate in the costs.

This has cost hundreds of thousands of euros to the Finnish society. . . . [I]t’s a matter of bullying.

Eventually, the real motivation behind the Sámi Parliament’s objection is revealed to be economic self-interest:

Don’t you fools understand what a scam this is. Millions [of euros] are directed to lawyers’ and jurists’ pockets. Opposition to gold mining is just a tool to fill the belly of [X, a lawyer working for the Sámi Parliament] with easy money!

After this, the commentator describes the Sámi Parliament as a ‘legalized thief’ and urges also others to go and check out the names of the individual lawyers who work for the Sámi Parliament and their yearly salaries.

In conversations such as this one, the Sámi Parliament and the individuals associated with it are represented primarily as *crooks and con men* who are driven by personal greed. Often, the narrative on the abuse of taxpayers’ money is joined by a broader one which focuses on Sámi greed for land and power. Echoing *Kiisa*, this narrative suggests that the ultimate objective of the Sámi Parliament or its ‘group of insiders’ or ‘Sámi elites’ is to take over lands and natural resources in Northern Finland. Although it is acknowledged that currently, the Sámi Parliament’s mandate is limited to cultural autonomy, the threat of Sámi land rights looms large:

That [land rights] is what they have been all the time driving for. That would give them a much stronger chance to have their say on everything – on land use, water and everything else, too. . . .

[T]he biggest reason for all this cruelty [the actions of the Sámi Parliament] is to keep the share of state money to as small group as possible, and to secure rule over land use.

The speech about ‘insiders’ coincides with a claim that the Sámi Parliament is dominated by North Sámi reindeer herders who have come to Finland from Sweden or Norway, taking over the lands which belong to communities that were there before them. The narrative of *immigrants and colonists* builds on the fact that following the 19th-century border demarcations between Sweden, Norway and Russia, the Sámi reindeer nomads whose pastures extended across the region were forced to settle in just one side of the new borders, which cut Sápmi in four pieces. Their forced relocation did cause new pressure on land and natural resource use in the regions to which they were subsequently confined. However, the consequences were particularly devastating for the reindeer-herding Sámi themselves, as in practice, the border closures and subsequent loss of land spelled an end to the reindeer nomadism that had sustained their society and culture until then (Aikio 2011).

This notwithstanding, in popular discourse, the history, which is intimately entangled with the colonization of Sápmi, is operationalized as fodder for toxic or hate speech. In the conversations that I examined, the North Sámi were portrayed not only as power-hungry ‘Sámi elites’ who control the Sámi Parliament, but also as ‘illegal immigrants,’ ‘sledge refugees,’ ‘tax refugees’ or ‘colonists’ who use Indigenous rights and reindeer to ‘continue the robbery.’ ‘Soon no-one else is allowed to live here except for reindeer herders and their families.’

The narrative of immigrants and colonists relies heavily on the construction a conflict between the North Sámi and other groups which, unlike the North Sámi, are represented as the region’s real Indigenous People. In Inari Citizen Channel, the claim is often made in the name of the Inari Sámi, which is an existing, formally recognized Sámi group but which – much like the Métis in Canada – has been subjected to active appropriation and instrumentalization by groups which promote political self-Indigenization or which simply seek to critique the Sámi Parliament.

They [the North Sámi] are abusing tax money to smoke out the local Indigenous people, Inari Sámi.

It looks like the reindeer, an alien species in Lapland, has been turned [by the North Sámi] into a holy cow which is used to take over the real indigenous people's rights to their lands and their ways of life, to suppress all their traditions, and to drive the inhabitants away from their lands.

Other terms are also used. For instance, in one comment, the North Sámi are portrayed as perpetrators of genocide. Another one likens them to an authoritarian dictatorship:

One can find out what precisely happened to the original inhabitants of Kemi Lapland after the arrival of North Sámi, by reading from [legal scholar] Juha Joonas's book.³ What happens today, could be called a genocide.

The North Sámi have learned from the democracy in North Korea. 'If you don't agree with us, a bullet in the neck will teach you the lesson.'

'They don't accept us'

In these comments, it is the North Sámi who are portrayed as the true colonists and oppressors in Lapland. Conversely, Finns and the Finnish state are relieved of guilt. Often, this is done explicitly: 'Colonial pressure [in Inari] didn't come from the south, it came from the north'; 'The relationship between the Finns and the Sámi is ok. The Sámi are oppressed by other Sámi.'

Such statements bring us to the fourth major narrative, which centers on *internal oppression*, specifically on the conflict over the Sámi Parliament's electoral register. According to this narrative, the Sámi Parliament has purposefully and based on dubious motivations excluded a large number of Sámi or 'Indigenous Lapp' people from its electoral register. In so doing, it discriminates and violates their basic human right – the right to personal identity and collective recognition.

The narrative of internal oppression relies heavily on the discourse of self-Indigenization, which presents individual self-identification, distant ancestry and/or DNA as the basis of Indigenous identity. From the perspective of Indigenous self-determination, such claims can appear highly problematic, however, insofar as they bypass Indigenous Peoples' own understandings of Indigeneity and peoplehood, which tend to build on kinship knowledge and links to the existing, living Indigenous community and on the demand that self-identification is balanced by group acceptance (see Gaudry 2018; Alakorva 2021). In Finland, the dispute over Sámi identity has centred especially on the legal Sámi definition. The Sámi Parliament has insisted that the current definition, which considers Sámi lineage up to three generations back, cannot be extended to include persons whose claims to Sámi descent go much further, back to the 1700's and early 1800s. This view has been opposed by the self-defined 'Lapp' or 'Sámi' movements, which argue that practically all ancestry claims, as well as subjective testimonies of personal self-identification, should be considered (see Junka-Aikio 2021; Tervaniemi 2019; Mörkenstam *et al.* in this volume).

In Inari Citizen Channel, the discourse of self-Indigenization and the narrative of internal oppression that accompanies it are advanced through various overlapping identity

claims. On the one hand, it is argued that those who have been unfairly excluded from the electoral register are also Sámi, but belong to groups and families that are not in favor of, or known by, the narrow group of ‘elite Sámi’ who ‘run the Sámi Parliament.’ On the other hand, the excluded are portrayed as members of Sámi minority groups or of other groups that are ‘more Indigenous’ to the region than the North Sámi, yet are overlooked by the ‘Sámi elites,’ or the North Sámi. The group names that are used and operationalized in these contexts include, for instance, ‘Forest Lapps’ (*metsälappalaiset*), ‘Forest Sámi’ (*metsäsaamelaiset*), ‘non-status Sámi’ (*statuksettomat saamelaiset*), ‘Kemi Lapps’ (*Kemin lappalaiset*) and ‘Inari Sámi’ (*inarinsaamelaiset*), that last of which differs from the others in that it is also one of the three formally recognized Sámi groups in Finland that are represented by the Sámi Parliament.

In practice, all the group names are linked to rather recent organizations which promote political self-Indigenization and lobby for a broader legal Sámi definition (see Junka-Aikio 2021; see also Mörkenstam *et al.* in this volume). The importance of formal organization is also highlighted at Inari Citizen Channel:

We have to start promoting our own cause, the cause of the indigenous Forest Lapps, and turn it into a group that is recognized in law. . . . [O]therwise we are ran over by lantalaiset [Finns] and the Sámi. As a Lapinkylä [siida], we would get stronger rights to land and water. Let’s take up our right to be an Indigenous Forest Lapp people!

The suggestion is followed up:

We would, by the way, be a large group if we put up an organization of our own for those Sámi who have been excluded. Also in that group, we could use our Sámi roots to constitute ourselves. We could apply funding for our group, too.

Also, the narrative of internal oppressions explains Sámi Parliament’s actions and policy in reference to greed and material self-interest. Commonly, it is argued that the Sámi Parliament wants to ‘keep the number of people with voting rights as small as possible’ simply to make sure that the possible benefits that come with Indigenous rights will not need to be shared with more people. Personal self-interest intersects with, and leads to, collective discrimination and even elimination of those ‘fellow Sámi’ whose identities are not formally recognized: ‘The Sámi Parliament is undermining the Lake Lapps’ [Inari Sámi] right to exist and if we allow the situation to continue, Inari Sámi might disappear from the map.’

Although the narrative of internal oppression represents the people or groups that have been excluded as also being Sámi or Indigenous, it is frequently extended to deny Sámi peoplehood and Indigeneity:

There exists no such people as the Sámi. Those who founded the Sámi Parliament in the 1980s were lantalaisia [Finns], each of them, from Uusimaa [a region in Southern Finland]. They have put themselves in the Sámi register and they keep adding their own relatives in it!

Before there were no Sámi, those snobs just invented it at some point, I still don’t know any other people than Lapps, and that’s it!

This kind of speech, which denies Sámi peoplehood altogether, is identical to the ideas and rhetoric that were disseminated in *Kiisa* more than two decades earlier. What is different, however, is that today, such speech is joined seamlessly by a very different kind of discourse which emphasizes care and commitment for Sámi culture and identity. In the new discourse, the right to access Sámi Parliament's electoral register is framed, above all, as a question of *cultural revitalization*.

[W]e want to conserve Sáminess and awareness of it in our families. This has to do with our lineage, which is precious for us and which we are not ready to give away.

Compared to *Kiisa*, this kind of comment, which conveys 'love for Sámi roots' and commitment to Sámi culture and society, reflects a clear shift from direct opposition to the strategy of self-Indigenization. Consequently, the Sámi Parliament's refusal to accept people who 'self-identify' as Sámi is portrayed as harmful, not only because it violates the individual right to identity but also because it hampers efforts to empower and revitalize Sámi culture and society at large: 'Now that the construction of new Sáminess has begun, the Sámi themselves are destroying it by denying those who are partially Sámi their status.' Often, such comments are followed by passionate pleas to end fighting 'one another' and to promote 'peace' instead of conflict: 'Give up all that in-fighting and let Sáminess become stronger'; 'The most important task of the Sámi Parliament is to unite, not to separate.'

Such rhetoric can seem highly compelling, especially from the perspective of Indigenous revitalization. However, in the Facebook discussions I examined, it peacefully coexists with, and often leads to, comments that are very different in tone. For instance, in a thread which begins with testimonies of love for one's Sámi roots and laments the Sámi Parliament's rejection letters to those who applied for the electoral register, the focus soon shifts to demands to end the Sámi Parliament.

The Sámi Parliament is violating human rights. State funding for that kind of institutions should be totally cancelled.

We have seen enough of this farce. Cut off funding, organize new elections and include also those people who have been excluded from the Sámi Parliament.

The demands to cut funding are followed by broader calls to place Sámi politics back under Finnish tutelage:

What do we even need the Sámi Parliament for? . . . The state rather than the Sámi Parliament should take care of Sámi issues, now there are unnecessary middlemen.

The Sámi law [the Sámi Parliament Act] has to be revised so that from now on the one who funds it all, in other words the state, has a final say on all of the functions of the Sámi Parliament. This way we will get an end to this wild discrimination and empty quarrels.

By this point, the conversation has traveled a full circle: The main source of human rights violations, colonialism and discrimination which hampers Sámi and Indigenous

well-being in Northern Finland is the Sámi Parliament. To correct the wrong, Sámi cultural autonomy needs to be ended, and the handling of Sámi matters transferred back to Finns, who do it better.

A TOXIC EPIDEMIC: CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER REMARKS

The conversations I have examined bring attention to how elusive the line between the discourse of Indigenous revitalization and discourses that are hostile to Indigenous self-determination and autonomy can be in a social environment that is permeated by political self-Indigenization. In so doing, they also attest to why, in order to understand hate speech, one cannot focus attention only on expressions that are openly hateful, harmful or derogatory. Even though most of the comments that I have analyzed here are not necessarily ‘hateful’ or directly harmful in content, their constant repetition, as well as the ways in which they are assembled with other comments, contribute to their meaning and impact.

Also, the volume of toxic speech, the sites that are used for its dissemination and the lack of consistent counter-speech matter. The number of people who contribute to these narratives, whether on Facebook or through other platforms such as blogs, online discussion forums, traditional media, public speeches and statements, events or popular and academic publications, is not necessarily that large. However, the fact that such speech can be advanced year after year, on multiple sites, largely uncontested and with the blessing of the silent majority, implies that the space that a limited group of people is able to occupy within the public sphere simply by juggling the message between one another becomes much broader. In their study on the social media dissemination of the concept of non-status Sámi, Länsman and Kortelainen (2021, 197) poignantly call this effect the ‘echo chamber.’ As argued by Tirrel, toxicity ultimately has to do with authority, access and epistemic position.

Tirrel’s third point is that toxic speech harms the groups that are targeted not by ‘one blow’ but by slowly expanding the boundaries of acceptable speech. In the case of an epidemic of toxic speech, derogatory and dehumanizing comments which otherwise would appear obnoxious gradually become a naturalized and internalized part of public discourse. The following comment, also from Inari Citizen Channel, goes some way towards illustrate this:

Equality will be restored in Lapland once the Sámi Parliament is ended. Cut off the cancer cell that has gone rogue, and everyone will feel better!

Although the comment might be the most openly ‘hateful’ that I found, its internal logic is no different from the rest of the propositions that I have examined. When this kind of speech targets a group that is in a minority position and does not have comparable access or the volume needed to efficiently participate in the public discussion, a leap from ‘critique’ to political silencing, and from online incitement to actual offline harm, is not far.

And yet, as I read the research material, I got quite convinced that most people whose comments I have quoted here did not think they were contributing

in particularly negative terms. While this might prove the extent to which toxic speech targeting the Sámi has been normalized, it further highlights the fact that toxicity is a matter not so much of individual speech acts and the exact words that are used, but rather, of the ways in which the speech is assembled with other speech acts as part of the broader narrative or discourse. This is also why criticism of this kind of speech is certainly more demanding than when the speech is more clearly hateful, racist or degrading. To understand and explain the hurtful nature and impact of ‘milder’ forms of hate speech, one has to engage the entire narrative apparatus, its political genealogy, and its points of connection with other texts and forms of speech. In other words, toxic speech is intertextual in a very profound sense.

What other reasons might explain why such speech has so far evaded critical attention and exposure? I want to end this study by listing three observations that are based on my own experiences and discussions with colleagues, hoping that they can be studied and discussed more thoroughly in future.

The first observation relates to the quality and nature of the discourse of self-Indigenization, which is central to the toxic narratives that I have examined. Usually, such discourses rely on elaborate yet ‘wildly exaggerated’ or even fabricated stories of family lineage and ethnic affiliation (TallBear 2021; Leroux 2019a) or on affective, subjective testimonies of individual self-recovery. Even when such stories are brought out in public by the persons themselves, with an explicit aim to influence public policy, critiquing them, or exposing the possible inconsistencies or outright falsehoods they might entail, is not something most people feel comfortable doing. While this is primarily a matter of personal and research ethics, the increasingly tight rules and laws which today regulate the handling of personal data, such as the European Union’s General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), do not encourage one to do so, either.

As an example, while the Sámi community in Finland is relatively small (about 10,000 people), many Sámi still hold elaborate knowledge of Sámi kinship relations and of the ways in which the ethnic boundary between the Finns and the Sámi has been negotiated locally up until today. For the holders of such Indigenous knowledge, the identity claims that are made today in pursuit of political self-Indigenization might seem absurd. Yet to deconstruct such claims, one would have to engage critically the narratives of family history and the individual testimonies on which they rest, i.e. personal matters which are normally placed within the private sphere and thus beyond the reach of public critique. Even when identity is made explicitly political, on the eve of public criticism, it suddenly appears ‘too personal.’ What rules or guidelines should frame the ethics and politics of such critical public engagement is therefore an issue that urgently needs addressing. A recent Cherokee Scholars’ statement which seeks to combat misappropriation of Cherokee identity takes the issue up in direct terms, by asserting that ‘[a]ny person who publicly identifies as Cherokee has initiated a public discussion about their identity’ (Thinktsalagi 2020).

The second observation is that any person who critiques narratives which, at first sight, simply seem to advocate the cause of ‘excluded minorities’ and a broader, more inclusive understanding of Indigeneity risks being positioned, no matter how involuntarily, in the box of a ‘gatekeeper’ or an ‘essentialist,’ who refuses to recognize

Sámi ‘diversity.’ At worse, one may even be accused of reverse racism and discrimination. For aren’t the critics of the ‘Forest Sámi’ and other new movements equally involved in denying their Indigeneity and representing them as a ‘threat’? To this, my own answer is that no one can escape the politics of positioning – insofar as our understanding of the social world today is ultimately post-foundational, everyone has to work through the politics and ethics of their own engagement. In the context of a conflict that involves struggles over Sámi identity, I have chosen to stand with, and respect the experiences and knowledge of, those people who were involved in the Sámi community before Sámi identity became the focal point of political self-Indigenization (Junka-Aikio 2016).

The third observation is that the narratives that I have examined can be hard to engage critically because of their self-conscious framing as ‘critique of power.’ On the surface, the criticism is usually directed at the Sámi Parliament, at the ‘elite Sámi,’ at ‘the insiders,’ the reindeer herders or the North Sámi – almost never at the entire people. As one commentator puts it, ‘I hate the Sámi Parliament, not the Sámi as such. There’s a damn big difference.’ However, it is questionable whether speech which formally addresses only one part of the Sámi society or which is limited to the critique of an institution which represents them, should be, by that virtue, considered ethically unproblematic. The threshold for hate speech is naturally much higher in the context of criticism which is directed at institutions, groups and persons who exercise public power; the right to such critique is a cornerstone of democracy and freedom of speech. But, when such speech is used constantly to target an institution which represents an ethnic minority (the Sámi currently comprise about 0.18% of Finland’s overall population) and when those who are seen to publicly defend the rights of the minority group are systematically cast as morally compromised or as part of a self-interested ‘elite,’ the boundaries between healthy critique of power and efforts to silence a minority people seem much less secure. This issue has been studied by Pirita Näkkäljärvi, the former head of the Sámi branch in Finland’s National Broadcasting Company Yle, who argues that in Finland, anti-Sámi hate speech, which also involves public and private intimidation, personal attacks and various other methods of harassment and silencing has been highly efficient at excluding Sámi voices from the public sphere. On a fundamental level, this has resulted in a severe violation of Sámi freedom of speech (Näkkäljärvi 2017).

In a recent essay ‘What the Hell’s Wrong with You?’ Kim TallBear (2021) talks about the various patterns of delegitimization and outright intimidation that she has had to overcome to become the public Indigenous voice she is today. Subsequently, she brings this history to bear upon the current ‘onslaught’ that people who contest Indigenous identity appropriation or ‘race shifting’ face in North America. ‘Like with adolescent bullies on a white-dominated playground,’ Tallbear writes, ‘it has seemed too risky to publicly confront race shifters and their accompanying resource appropriation.’ However, the main message she seeks to convey is that ultimately, much of the internalized fear might be unnecessary: ‘I keep hearing my mother’s voice in my head: “What the hell’s wrong with you? You can take them.”’ The same words of encouragement may be needed to tackle the epidemic of toxic speech that targets the Sámi in Finland.

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NOTES

- 1 ‘Lapp’ is the term that non-Sámis used for the Sámi people, as well as for the nature-based livelihoods the Sámi practiced, until the term was challenged by the Sámi, who demanded that their own word – Sámi – be used. As a result, the term ‘Lapp’ – which is the one that is used in old church and taxation records – was emptied of contemporary meaning until the locally based counter-movement in Enontekiö appropriated it for its own use. For more on the history and political uses of the concept, see Lehtola (2015), Pääkkönen (2008), Valkonen (2017).
- 2 See Saamelaiskäräjät and Väestörekisterikeskus (2019).
- 3 The reference is to legal scholar Juha Joonas’s PhD thesis on land and water rights in Lapland (Joonas 2019; see also Alakorva *et al.* in this volume).

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