Virtual Ethnic Communities as Political Actors –
the Case of Sami People

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ABSTRACT

The role of virtual communities in the sphere of politics is constantly growing. One of the most influential on the decision making process are Internet groups based on shared ethnic identity that in their perception is under threat. The article analyses how Sami being an indigenous divided between four different countries people use Internet in order to preserve their ethnic and cultural heritage, to save and distribute their languages and to form a joint basis for lobbing political authorities in Nordic countries and Russia. By combining online and offline political activity Sami managed to find their own unique place in modern world serving as an inspirational example for other indigenous people.

Keywords: virtual ethnic community, indigenous people, Sami, Internet, websites, social network

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1. INTRODUCTION

At the very beginning of the Internet era Howard Rheingold gave the following description of what virtual community is and should be in future: "A virtual community is a group of people who may or may not meet one another face-to-face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer . bulletin boards and network cyberspace, we chat and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, perform acts of commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games and wake games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk. We do everything people do when people get together, but we do it with words on computer screens, leaving our bodies behind. Millions of us have already built communities where our identities commingle and interact electronically, independent of local time or location. The way a few of us live now might be the way a large population will live decades hence" [1]

Nowadays virtual communities are spread all over the spectrum of societal life playing an important role in politics directly influencing public opinion and thus having a growing impact on political decision making processes. Creation of new public spaces and communities has already given birth to a vast number of virtual "ethnic communities" that in a number of cases can be seen as a sort of a compensation for the so-called 'lost community' in modern society [2]. Virtual ethnic communities are communities which are not tied to a particular place or time, but which still serve common interests of a certain social group united by a common sense of shared ethnicity forming political, social and cultural reality ranging from general to special interests or activities.

In general we can distinguish the following types of virtual ethnic communities

1. Virtual community of a territorially defined ethnic group. In ethnic federations or ethnic local government units ethnic political elites use internet communications to expand their influence on different social groups united by the same ethnic and cultural identity. Examples: Tartar, Komi and Bashkir communities in Russia, French community in Belgium, etc.

2. Migrant virtual community as a technology of ethnic identity preservation. In many cases it is supported by the home country – governmental authorities or NCO. The home country is interested in preserving links with compatriots in order to use them as agents of influence in a host country and an additional source of income in case of labour migrants. Usually these communities have already existed prior to the emergence of the on-line communication but virtual reality has intensified the political, social and cultural ties within them. Examples: Turkish community in Germany, Armenian community in France, "Russian World" , Chinese communities all over the world (Huaqiao), etc.

3. Virtual community of a territorially dispersed ethnic group in one country which is used as an instrument of constructing and promoting the idea of a national cultural autonomy. Examples: German and Lezgin communities in Russia.

4. Ethnic nations divided by state borders. Examples: Kurds in the Middle East, Serbians in post-Yugoslavian space.

The last type of virtual ethnic communities is the most important from the world politics and international relations perspective. But the situation with divided nations can be different – some of them are highly proactive in politics declaring even their right for usage of violence, others are more interested in preservation of their national and cultural identity relying totally on negotiations and peaceful compromises.

2. SAMI AS AN INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

The existing area of Sami settlement is known to the Sami as Samiland or Sapmi. Today, Samiland extends over the entire Fennoscandia Arctic region, encompassing Russia's Kola peninsula and the northern parts of Norway, Sweden and Finland; and stretches southward along both sides of the Klen mountain range dividing Sweden and Norway to the northernmost part of the Swedish province of Dalarna.

The most often cited estimate of the present Sami population is that of 60,000 people, of whom approximately 35,000 reside in Norway, 17,000 in Sweden, 5,000 in Finland, and 2,000 in the Soviet Union [3].

The Sami were, from the beginning, a seasonally nomadic people; their livelihood based upon hunting, fishing and gathering. The disintegration of the Sami traditional society was caused by the state intervention in the Sami's social mode of production, obviating the need to develop new social relationships based on new modes of production.

The Sami's response to these changing conditions was not a uniform one; rather, it is possible to identify at least three main responses to these changing conditions [4]. One such response was the emergence of a coast-Sami culture based mainly on off-shore fishing and supplemented by agriculture; a second response was the emergence of an inland-Sami culture in which agriculture was supplemented by hunting, fishing and some reindeer herding; while a third response saw the emergence of a nomadic Sami culture drawn originally from both the coastal and inland groups, and mainly occupied with taming, tending and herding reindeer. The transformation of the coast and inland-Sami variants from hunters and gatherers to farmers and fishermen led to the replacement of earlier seasonal migrations to a life-style based on permanent settlement.

Although these cultural transformations were responses to intensified contact and conflict with the Scandinavian and Russian cultures , they did little to curtail the impact of increasingly dominant and disruptive forces on Sami culture. The missionary-led crusade to Christianize the Sami and the Sami's obligation to pay tribute to the colonizing nation-states became a tactic used by the nation-states to justify and promote their territorial demands amongst one another, particularly in areas of the far north. Around the turn of the 20th century Nordic states and Russia employed new tactics to fracture Sami society further and to assimilate the Sami culturally. Sami peoples throughout Samiland were generally underrepresented in local government and alienated from the political process. School and church became powerful instruments of assimilation.

The situation began to change only in the 1960s when indigenous people step by step managed to change the political agenda so that it gradually became more and more favourable for preserving their collective rights for their political and cultural self-determination. And nowadays Sami people serve as an encouraging example to other indigenous people of the world. Compared to other indigenous groups, they have come very far in their struggle for rights and recognition. Nevertheless, Sami identity is under pressure in many ways and one of the most efficient way to reduce these pressures is online political and cultural activity aiming at creating a sustainable virtual community through Internet.

3. VIRTUAL SAMI COMMUNITY

Ole Henrik Magga, former Chair of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (2002-2004), states that ICTs, and the Internet in particular, can politically empower indigenous peoples as well as aid cultural revitalization. He notes that, as does mainstream media representation of Sámi, outside aid focuses on indigenous preservation rather than development, ignoring the long indigenous history of adapting to 'new' technologies in order to survive. The Sámi Chair has faith especially in the Internet as a technology that can aid indigenous people in both development *and* in cultural preservation [5]. Indeed, the main problems of Sami are now reflected in their on-line activity which helps them to develop joint transborder solutions.

Politically the Sami today are one people living in four nations, and hence are subject to the laws and institutions of the particular country in which they reside. The principal effect of the states' concerted attempts to assimilate the Sami has been to create subcultural cleavages along

occupational lines within pan-Sami society. For the vast majority of the Sami population this has meant being denied the basic right to enjoy, develop and disseminate its own culture and language. The Sami people have been relegated to a minority status in which Samishness has become synonomous with reindeer herding while other forms of cultural expression have been repressed or simply not tolerated. This minority status has given rise over the past 50 years to a Samish Movement, the primary goal of which has been to achieve Sami cultural autonomy within Nordic society.

The Samish Movement is comprised of a number of Sami interest organizations each promoting the social, cultural and economic interests of Sami populations in all three Nordic countries, and it has been augmented in 1990s by the formation of a Sami organization in Russia. The Movement's overall guiding principle is that of pan-Sami society being a cultural, linguistic, economic and political unit which transcends the boundaries of four nation-states [6].

'The Sami, one people' is the motto of the Nordic Sami Council, an umbrella organization established in 1956 by national Sami organizations from all three Nordic countries to foster co-operation and unity among the Sami peoples. The aim of the Council is to promote the economic, social and cultural interests of the Sami in a manner compatible with the wishes and constraints of the Sami minority in each country. Representation on the Council is evenly divided along lines of national affiliation, and is expected to represent the pluralistic nature of the pan-Sami society from an economic and cultural standpoint. Its official website (Fig.1) has 6 language (Saami, English, Finnish, Russian, Norwegian and Swedish) versions and presents the most important data on Sami people and organizations, basic documents and opportunities to get cultural grants.
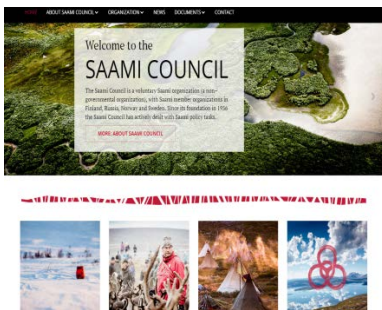

Fig.1. The Saami Council official website.
http://saamicouncil.net

In addition to this site the Sami parliaments in Sweden, Norway, Finland and Russia have their own official websites containing all necessary information about their members, activities (Fig. 2).
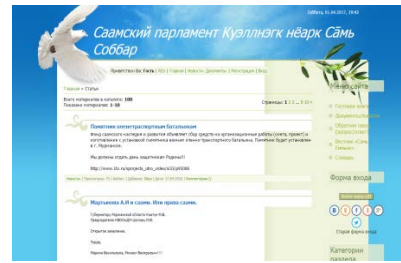

Fig.2. Official website for the Sami parliament in Russia. http://saamisups.ucoz.ru/

ICT also contributed to the development of the Nordic Sami Institute, founded jointly by the Nordic Sami Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers in 1974 as a modern attempt to create a cultural Sami institution outside of the central administrative organs of the state. Through its website (Fig.3) it can now much more effectively give aid to pan-Sami society in adapting to change; that is, from the starting point of extending and incorporating a Sami world view through which Sami values and knowledge form the core. Administratively, the Institute is organized in three sections: (1) languages and culture; (2) livelihood, environment and rights; and (3) education and information.

Fig.3. The Nordic Sami Institute website.
http://nsi.no/

Special attention is paid to the explanation of the Sami's position in the EU. The authors of the Swedish Sami website "SAPMI. All tom Sveriges ursprungsfolk samerna och deras land Sapmi" (Fig.4) stresses the fact that the Sami protocol, which has been attached to the agreement on Swedish membership of the European Union, recognizes the obligations and undertakings that Sweden has in relation to the Sami people in accordance with national and international law. The Sami successes in the EU are summarized in the following way[7]:

- Sápmi has been designated as a region in Europe, and the Sami people's international work has been broadened as a result of the Sami's special conditions and circumstances being viewed from new perspectives.
- A form of Sami business fund was created nationally in Sweden (Target 1), as well as an 'all-Sami' fund (Interreg III) where Norway, Finland, Sweden and Russia are working jointly for

the development and reinforcement of Sami business and cultural life.

- With the support of the EU's subsidiarity principle, an improved form of self-determination has been achieved as a result of the Sami Parliament in Sweden and the other publicly elected bodies being responsible for and taking decisions regarding the use of the funds, as well as prioritizing the work that is to be undertaken.
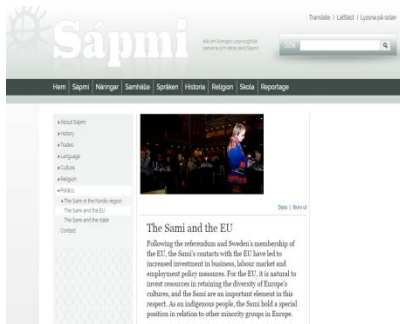

Fig.4. Sapmi. http://www.samer.se/english

As for other indigenous people it is extremely important for Sami activists to help their people to acquire the full knowledge of their rights and opportunities opened to them. One of them, Maria Hernes, argues that globalization provides the Sami people with political power as well as valuable networks with indigenous people worldwide: "Globalization has been really positive for the Sami political struggle"[8]. A number of Internet resources help Sami to realize that. One of them is the official website of the Galdu Resource Centre for the Rights of Indigenous People (Fig. 5) that recently has been fully integrated with Norwegian Centre for Human Rights.
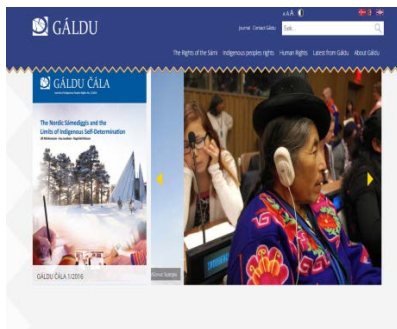

Fig. 5. Gáldu Resource Centre for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples http://www.galdu.no/

Great attention is paid to the preservation of Sami language and traditional culture. There is a wide variety of the Sámi websites administrated by educational and cultural agencies, museums, and the Sámi media. One of the most interesting projects in this sphere aimed at the

strengthening of the Sami virtual community is the "Network for Saami Documentation and Revitalization". The network will:
- build a collaborative network of specialists and speech community members
- develop efficient, coordinated Saami language projects
- establish new methods, tools and protocols for these languages
- encourage the development of and cooperation among young researchers [9]

Print and broadcast communications, a wide repertoire of traditional forms of expression including that of yoiking - the custom that symbolizes today to the Sami the renaissance of Sami cultural values - being transferred to Internet represent one of the most powerful instruments of the Sami's cultural community preservation in this modern era. A quest for tradition is in negotiation with the heterogeneity of Sami identities and it is reinforced and enacted by globalization processes.

The best example of Sami language promotion can be found on UR Scola website (Fig.6). The programme *Gulahalan* (i.e., "I make myself understood") is produced by the Sámi Educational Centre in Jokkmokk and the Swedish Broadcasting Company, and designed as a textbook, but includes ten recorded narratives that can be used to practice listening comprehension. Website visitors are primarily beginners of the Sámi language and the majority are Sámi.
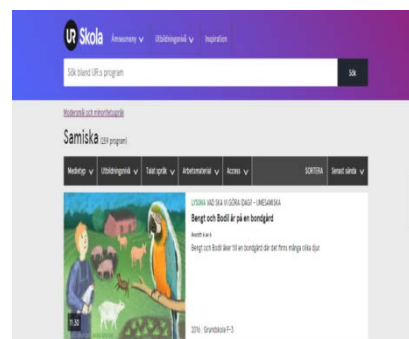

Fig. 6 UR Scola website http://urskola.se/Produkter?ur_subject_tree=modersm%C3%A5l+och+minoritetsspr%C3%A5k%2Fsamiska

Another website (Fig. 7) that mentions storytelling as something "in our genes", suggesting that it is a natural way to convey traditional knowledge, is a website of a tourism organization operating in Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Russia, which is created and owned by the Swedish Reindeer Herders Association (SSR) in order to develop tourism based on ethical criteria that counter commercial exploitation. Owners of the organization are reindeer herding communities and Sámi NGOs operating together with the South Sápmi Information Centre,

Gaaltije. The SSR and *Gaaltije* are also the institutions that run the website.
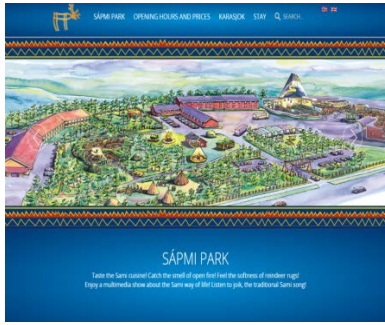

Fig. 7. Visit Sapmi
http://www.visitsapmi.com/

Cujaju is a website (Fig. 8) where short YouTube films are embedded. The website is about *yoik* and is—as is made clear on the site's information page—an effort to make this traditional form of singing and storytelling accessible and understandable for young children. It is directed by Rachel Andersen, produced by Sonar Film and the Senter for Nordlige Folk ("Center for Northern Peoples") in Norway, and financed by the Sami parliament.
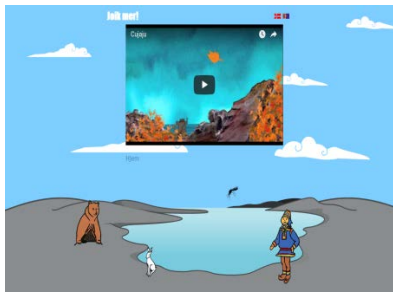

Fig. 8. Cujaju
http://www.cujaju.no/

The analyses of the Sami presence in Internet shows that the absolute majority of Sami websites are about historical culture, traditional joik. There is nearly no attempts to represent themselves as also dynamic, urban and techno-savvy, yet retaining Sámi identity and cultural values people. Very rarely we can find activist Sami sites trying to turn international audiences into actors. One of the best well-known example dates back to 1997 and is provocatively called "Protest Against Exploitation of Sami Culture" (Fig.9). The Finnish Sami youth organization (SSN) documented various exploitations of Sami culture and people for commercial tourism purposes at the local Santa Claus Village located on the Arctic Circle a few kilometers north of Rovaniemi, home to SSN.

Fig.9. Protest Against Exploitation of Sami Culture
http://boreale.konto.itv.se/rovaniemi.htm

Another example is information sharing, network building and support on Twitter in relation to a series of Sami anti-mining protests in 2013 [10].

Jeff Taylor argues that "activism, cyber or otherwise, is not part of the national character in any of the three countries" [11]. At the same time Sami in Russian Internet are much more active and critical in their attitude to regional and local authorities. The analyses of the main Sami forum (Fig. 10) - 300 -700 visitors a day (a good result bearing in mind that there are only about 2,000 Sami in Russia) - and several blogs (Fig.11) show a number of political issues that worry Russian Sami. Now they are planning to found a new social net that will help to lobby their collective interests in the federal, regional and local governmental bodies [12].

Fig. 10. Russian Sami maim forum
http://saami.forum24.ru

Fig. 11. One of Sami youth blogs
http://samiyouth.blogspot.ru/p/about-us.html

4. CONCLUSION

Virtual ethnic communities are mainly based on the necessity of preserving ethnic identity in the situation of danger. Indigenous people being on the verge of disappearance in many parts of the world were among early adopters of modern information and communication technologies not only in order to be connected in space and time but also to make their voices heard in age of globalization. The case of Sami people seemed to us especially interesting for several reasons. Firstly, they are considered by many observers as an inspirational example for other indigenous people. Secondly, they represent a divided nation living in four different countries. Thirdly, Sami political environment, traditional political culture in Nordic countries and in Russia differs greatly but it doesn't prevent their collaboration both offline and online. Fourthly, positioning themselves as one nation Sami effectively use Internet for strengthening transborder ties and cooperation sending a clear message to states' political authorities. Online communication doesn't replace offline politics but it gives additional instruments to former disadvantaged social groups, including ethnic communities.

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