

BOOK REVIEWS

Linda Overland and Mikkel Berg-Nordlie, *Bridging Divides: Ethno-Political Leadership among the Russian Sami* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012)

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The term “indigenous” refers to the ethnic minorities within a state but without a state. Generally, the indigenous groups are located across neighboring states. The Roma people in Europe are one of the significant examples of indigenous people that are located across Central and Eastern European states without a state of their own. As the indigenous groups have unique social, cultural, economic and political characteristics, they are distinct from those of the society in which they live. Their language, knowledge systems and beliefs differ from the society as well. Due to their cultural differences, the diverse indigenous peoples share common problems also related to the protection of their rights. They strive for recognition of their identities, their ways of life and their right to political representation and participation. As a result, a special set of political rights have been set to protect them by international organizations such as the United Nations. The United Nations have issued a Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to guide state policies in order to protect the collective rights of indigenous peoples, such as their culture, identity, language, and access to employment, health, education and natural resources.¹

Bridging Divides written by Linda Overland and Mikkel Berg-Nordlie is a significant contribution to the literature on indigenous people. It examines the topic of indigenous people from a political perspective as opposed to the majority of related works on Sami people, which have treated the issue as part of history, anthropology and ethnography. Thus, the authors of the book fill a gap in literature with their research by exploring not only the issue of indigenouness, but also the importance of political leadership. They question whether the collapse of the Soviet Russia and opening of the borders makes a difference in the political participation and mobilization of the Russian Sami people living in the Kola Peninsula.

¹ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Economic and Social Council, *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. (New York: United Nations, 2007), available at http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf.p4.

It is possible to divide the book into four sections based on the themes, with Chapter One is as an introduction to the book and the general topic. Chapter Two and Three can be identified as the book's first section based on the historical and cultural background of the Sami People and their presence in Russia. The second thematic section is Chapter 4 that focuses on the language revival of the Sami group in Russia. Chapter Five illustrates the educational reorientation of the Sami people whereas the Sixth Chapter primarily focuses on their political representation in Russia. The conclusion chapter offers a summary, comparison and evaluation of the research conducted.

The Sami people are the indigenous people analyzed in the *Bridging Divides*. The Sami people that are referred as also Sámi in the book, are the minority group that are located at some parts of Northern Sweden, Norway, Finland and the Kola Peninsula of Russia (p.11). The authors of the book concentrate only on with the revival of the Russian Sami in the book. Initially, they focus on the post-Soviet attempts at linguistic revival and the close connection between this process and the emergence of Russian Sami ethno-political elite. In addition, the authors examine the educational reorientation of the Russian Sami and education institutions of the Sami people in Nordic states. Finally, Overland and Berg-Nordlie specifically focus on the first political organizations of Sami population in Russia.

Overland and Berg-Nordlie are concerned with the Russian Sami living in the Kola Peninsula, and they present a "fieldwork" in the region. Throughout the book, the focus is on the popularity of the leaders and organizations and the relation between the educated members of the Sami community with the others related to the problems of the community. The methodological framework of the book deserves attention in particular. The preparation phase which took sixteen years includes fieldworks to Kola Peninsula. The data gathered for the research primarily based on the interviews with the public figures and leaders of political organizations among Sami community living in the Kola Peninsula of Russia. Thus, the interviews were conducted in Russian by both of the authors without any interpreter used which is strength of the methodology of the research.

Much of the book is devoted to making readers understand a small group of people (the Russian Sami) and their attempts to build an ethno-political organizational framework for their indigenous community and their attempt to integrate this into the existing Sami political structures abroad, and revitalize the culture of their community (p103). However, the concept of ethnicity is not defined properly. How the authors define the term "indigenous" remains as a question that requires a clear answer for the reader to better understand the issue. Relatedly, improper identification of the Sami people interviewed creates a methodological obstacle for the research. Who are identified as Sami in Kola Peninsula? Russian Sami is presented as a subset of the Sami community located across four countries;

however, the authors do not clarify how the so called public figures and organizational leaders in the book were identified as Sami. Is this a self-identification of these people or based on other sources such as the Constitution or Census data?

Another methodological shortcoming is the lack of discussion about the reason of focusing solely on the Sami community living in the Kola Peninsula. As mentioned before, the Sami population presented as a community located in Sweden, Norway, Finland and Russia in the book. Although the authors succeeded in illustrating the importance of their research, the justification of the case selection is not properly discussed in the book. Why only Koma Sami? In addition to the case selection, another methodological concern is the generalizability of the findings in the book which is directly related to the case. The strategic selection of the case is necessary for an in-depth and enriched analysis of the issue. Thus, as the justification of the case selection is not properly presented, the reader may be skeptical of the applicability of the results. Furthermore, the authors ignore the fact that the findings should also be applicable to the other Sami groups in Sweden, Norway and Finland. However, it should be noted that the conclusion section of the book have a brief discussion about relationship between Russian Sami and its Nordic counterparts although it remains as a relatively small part of the book.

Despite all these shortcomings, the *Bridging Divides: Ethno-Political Leadership among the Russian Sami* is a significant contribution to the literature on indigenous people, in particular on Sami people. As the similar pieces on Sami people in literature looks from either anthropological or ethnographical perspective, the book of Overland and Berg-Nordlie fills a gap by presenting the issue from a political perspective. Thus, the analysis illustrates how the Russian Sami developed a civil society of their own and gained confidence in their own ethnic identity. Despite the problems they have been facing similar to many indigenous people in the world, the book shows that the Russian Sami managed to set up their own ethno-political infrastructure and actively engaged in shaping their own future by this way which constitutes as a good example for the other indigenous groups.