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## Russia's Sami Fight for Their Lives

By Jorn Madslien

BBC News, Lovozero, Russia

Bored youths kick a football against a grey concrete wall. A husky dog languishes in the quiet street. In this town, where many would struggle to pay for a bus ticket, there are hardly any cars.

### Young people in Lovozero

Most Sami have been forced to quit their nomadic lives

"The last villagers came to Lovozero in 1968," says Nina Afanasyeva. "But there were no jobs for them."

These days, some make traditional garments and souvenirs for the occasional tourist. And the Tundra reindeer farm cooperative provides some 300 jobs.

Yet the majority of the Kola peninsula's indigenous people are unemployed, and in most cases reindeer herding is no longer an option.

Instead, many spend their days in cramped apartments or in shacks on the edge of town, where vodka is their only comfort.

"People were promised apartments with modern conveniences, but only three people from my village got that," says Ms Afanasyeva, a Sami elder.

"The rest moved in with other families. To this day, many still haven't got their own place."

### Miners and soldiers

The deserted and seemingly endless potholed road to Lovozero cuts through a landscape of vast lakes and forests that has changed little since the nomadic Sami people arrived on the Kola peninsula some 5,000 years ago.

### Lovozero

The vast arctic tundra provided good grazing for their reindeer, so they quickly fanned out across invisible borders to the west, into neighbouring

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Norway, Finland and Sweden.

Over time, borders were drawn and strict controls were introduced. Then, during the Cold War, the border between Russia and the West was closed. Contact between Russian and Nordic Sami people was completely cut off.

The Sami people's traditional way of life has been under assault for decades as they have been gradually forced off arctic Russia's fertile tundra grazing-land and into artificially created towns.

Much of the displacement was caused by a steady expansion of industry, forestry and mining, and the arrival of hundreds of thousands of workers from other parts of the Soviet Union - many of them arriving as forced labourers in Gulag camps.

Then, during the Cold War, Sami coastal fishermen were ordered to move away from the shores of the Barents Sea, which is currently littered with secretive navy installations, and reindeer herders were forced away from a 200-mile exclusion zone that ran along the Cold War frontier.

Nina Afanasyeva is angry at the way the Saami people was treated by different regimes throughout the 20th century

Enlarge Image

To this day, the few who still herd reindeer complain about bored and hungry soldiers who use their machine guns to shoot their animals.

Urban Sami, meanwhile, bemoan the way powerful tourist companies prevent them carrying out their fishing traditions in Voronya River or Lovozero Lake.

"We are not used to private property rights, and we are not used to competing," laments Vatonena Lyubov, vice president of the Association of Kola Sami.

"We will never regain our grazing lands and our rivers."

Natural riches

Both the Kola peninsula's mineral riches and its geographical location, on the shores of the Barents Sea, make matters worse for the indigenous people.

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Existing mining and smelting activities have destroyed vast areas, and given the sharply rising demand for minerals these activities are set to expand fast in the near future.

Mining and smelting activities have wiped out much of the tundra, making it harder to find good reindeer grazing land.

In pictures

Add to that the many nuclear power plants and nuclear waste heaps that litter the peninsula, and the Sami people's future looks bleak.

Even the oil and gas industry threatens to encroach on their territory.

For years, there was talk of a pipeline connecting Siberian oil fields via Archangel, across the White Sea and Kola, to the ice-free ports in Murmansk.

And plans are under way to build a gas pipeline across Kola to link Barents Sea gas fields with the European pipelines further south.

"Other organisations with strong lobby groups, such as Gazprom, the tourism industry and mining companies, want access to the resources," says Ms Lyubov.

"We don't have much experience with capitalism and we never understood communism," she adds.

"We understand we will be the losers in any conflict, so we try to avoid them."

Public protest

Such fatalism is widespread among the Sami, though it is not shared by everyone.

Avdeeva Larisa shows of the Sami flag, which was banned along with traditional costumes during Soviet times

In pictures

In the middle of Lovozero's concrete jungle, the Sami flag is flying proudly over a cultural centre that was built in 2003.

From here, the formerly forbidden Sami language is spoken on the airwaves via the nation's own radio studios.

This is mission control for those who want to preserve Sami traditions and culture.

"The first public protest by Sami people took place in 1998, when a Swedish company wanted an open-pit gold mine nearby, in the heart of the grazing lands," says Larisa Avdeyeva, daughter of an activist reindeer herder.

"We think the region's resources belong to the Sami people," she says as she shows off traditional costumes that were banned during Soviet times, only to be painstakingly recreated from photographs in recent years.

"Our nation should have a share of the oil and gas, minerals and forestry profits."

With only 1,600 Sami people left in Russia, such a territorial claim could - in the unlikely event that it was successful - make them all very wealthy, but Ms Avdeyeva insists their claim is not about money.

Instead the Sami are fighting a perhaps futile battle for the right to decide when, if at all, they should join a supposedly civilised world.

If Ms Avdeyeva's sentiment is anything to go by, it will not happen anytime soon.

"The Sami cannot live without reindeer," she says