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Debate

Resilience Across Borders: Sámi Identity, Politics, and the War in Ukraine

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Abstract

This text explores the resilience of Sámi identity in the context of the war in Ukraine and the movement of Sámi individuals across state borders. Through the case of Andrei Danilov, a Sámi activist from Russia who sought asylum in Norway in 2022, it illustrates how geopolitical pressures, migration, and Indigenous political participation intersect. Danilov's efforts to engage in the Sámi Parliament in Norway elections—despite legal and procedural obstacles—reflect the broader Sámi commitment to sustain cultural and political ties across Sápmi, which spans Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. These experiences underscore the importance of continued discussion on transboundary Indigenous issues in contexts shaped by international law, state policies, and geopolitical conflict.

Keywords

Sámi – Indigenous rights – migration – asylum – resilience – war in Ukraine

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Andrei Danilov, a Sámi from Russia, moved to the Norwegian part of Sápmi in 2022.[1] His decision to leave the Russian part of Sápmi was driven by the war Russia launched against Ukraine, which he strongly opposed. Due to his activism in defending the rights of Indigenous peoples and his opposition to the authorities, it was no longer safe for him to remain in Russia. In August 2025, after more than three years, Danilov finally received approval for his asylum application in Norway.[2]

For Danilov, maintaining a connection to his land and his people was of crucial importance. Remaining in Norway—a country that, along with Finland, Sweden, and Russia, forms part of Sápmi—allowed him to preserve that connection. He also wished to continue his activism for Indigenous rights in Norway and to participate in Sámi politics. One of his key goals was to take part in the elections of the Sámi Parliament in Norway.

The process of obtaining permission to vote in these elections was challenging. Danilov had to demonstrate that he met the criteria for inclusion in the electoral roll and complete numerous formalities related to the exercise of his voting rights. At the time of his application, Danilov was still an asylum seeker and lacked official identity documents. According to the Sámi Act § 2-6 (Right to Vote), the right to vote in elections to the Sámi Parliament is granted to those who:

> have the right to vote in municipal council elections in the municipality where they reside, and
> are entered in the Sámi Parliament's electoral roll.

The criteria for voting in municipal elections in Norway are set out in the Norwegian Election Act § 2-2 (Right to Vote in Municipal Council Elections), which provides that the right to vote in municipal elections is granted to any person who:

a. turns 18 years of age by the end of the election year, and
b. is a Norwegian citizen, or a citizen of another Nordic country registered in the national population register as residing in Norway no later than June 30 of the election year, or
c. is a foreign citizen who has been registered as residing in Norway for the last three years before election day.

After receiving a positive decision from the Sámi Parliament, Danilov sought guidance from both the municipality and the asylum reception center regarding

1 Ekaterina Zmyvalova, 107–111.
2 Sveriges Radio.

the formal procedures for voting.[3] Furthermore, despite receiving approval to be included on the Sámi Parliament electoral list, Danilov remained uncertain about whether his vote would ultimately be counted. One source of uncertainty was that asylum seekers are not formally considered residents in Norway.[4] This means that being on the electoral roll does not automatically grant voting rights.[5] However, everyone is allowed to cast a vote, which is only reviewed by the election committee after the election. As a result, it was possible that Danilov's vote could be invalidated when the results were finalized after election day on September 8.

The approval of Danilov's inclusion on the Sámi Parliament electoral roll led some news sources to describe him as the first asylum seeker to vote in the Sámi Parliament in Norway.[6] It should also be noted that the Sámi Parliament in Norway, along with the Sámi Parliaments in Sweden and Finland and other Sámi organizations such as the Sámi Council, have expressed long standing support for Danilov and other asylum seekers from the Russian side of Sápmi. The Sámi Parliamentary Council, a body that coordinates the Sámi Parliaments in Norway, Sweden, and Finland on issues affecting the Sámi across borders, have called on the migration authorities to process these cases as quickly as possible, as many have been waiting for a very long time.[7]

Noteworthy, the Sámi people are the Indigenous people of Sápmi and live across the territories of four countries: Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. Despite being divided by state borders, they have maintained strong ties in many areas, including culture and politics. The war in Ukraine has, however, further strengthened the divisions between the Sámi of the West and the Russian Sámi due to differing opinions on the conflict. Since the start of the war, cooperation with the Russian Sámi has been significantly reduced.[8]

Danilov's story highlights both the resilience of Sámi identity across national borders and the challenges faced by those seeking to maintain political and cultural participation under difficult circumstances. His determination to vote and participate in Sámi politics reflects the broader commitment of the Sámi people to preserve their community, rights, and heritage despite the obstacles posed by geopolitics and migration status.

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5 NRK Sápmi.
6 Wåhlberg, I.
7 Samisk parlamentarisk råd.
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