



Indigenous narratives as enablers of policy change: the Saami Council's productive engagement for improving EU policies

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Abstract

This article focuses on how the Saami Council productively engages with the EU through its narratives in order to bring about change in EU policies and to navigate uncertainties threatening their future existence. Based on an emotion discourse analysis and narrative analysis of Saami Council's documents that focus on the European Union, the article finds that narratives have worked in two different aspects to enable the Saami Council to motivate the Sámi communities from the emotional states of fear, anger, resentment and disappointment to productively engage with the European Union. Working internally, their narrative has instilled hope in communities that a better future is possible. Facing outward, their narrative has demonstrated that the negative consequences of the green transition on their lands is a new form of colonialism, demanded respect for their internationally recognized rights in EU policies and underlined the significance of their inclusion in EU policy-making structures.

Keywords Saami Council · EU indigenous policy · European Green Deal · Narrative analysis · Emotions – action nexus

Introduction

This article argues that narratives can be productive of hope and political action in engagements with uncertainty that bears threats to one's future. Climate change is the start of all uncertainty for the Sámi peoples living in Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. Climate is warming in the Arctic region at a faster rate compared to global levels (European Environment Agency 2024). As the retreat of ice cover presents some new opportunities for business and employment especially in extractive

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industries enhanced by the rising importance of critical raw materials, rising temperatures pose threats to “many facets of Arctic livelihoods, culture, identity, health and security, particularly for Indigenous Peoples”, (Saami Council [SC] 2023a:33).

In the face of the threat of unadaptable climate change, the primary mitigation efforts about climate change have focused on the reduction of carbon emissions (United Nations, 2015), many countries voluntarily aiming for eventually net-zero emissions. Even though it has been significantly watered down in the second term of the von der Leyen Commission (Maurice, 2025), the European Green Deal (EGD) is the European Union’s comprehensive policy framework on how to achieve this net-zero target (European Commission 2019). Relying on energy transition towards production of electricity from renewable sources, the green transition depends on batteries to store electricity. Those batteries and part of the technology that enables energy production from renewable sources require critical raw materials and rare earth minerals, whose extraction most of the time concentrates in regions that are sparsely populated, remote, or seen as *no one’s land*. In Europe, such a place - among potential others - would be the Sapmi spanning across Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia, the homeland of the Sámi people (SC 2022), who are the EU’s only recognized Indigenous People (IP). Building on a long history of dispossession of their lands (Kuokkanen, 2023), the concentration of extractive industries on newly accessible territories in the Arctic (Kuokkanen, 2019) as well as the building of wind farms on their traditional herding lands pose a significant threat to the way of life and existence of the livelihood for the Sámi people (Saami Council 2023a: 29), which they call “the burden of mitigation”. (SC 2023a: 62). Such articulations are quite new and appear in response to the green transition policies of the European Union and the national policies that orientate their energy policies towards the Green Deal’s new de-carbonisation targets and that facilitate extractive industries’ novel engagements with newly accessible geographies. Whereas previous research had demonstrated that the Sámi did not securitize environmental and social issues by calling them threats to their survival and wellbeing (Greaves, 2016), current circumstances have brought the Sámi to see these economic and societal developments as a security threat towards the survival of their way of life and culture.¹

This situation is further exacerbated by the Draghi (2024) report which diagnoses the EU as losing the global competition over innovation, digitalization, and technology to the US and China. The report emphasizes that the competitiveness of European economy is now tied to de-regulation, which should ease the burden on companies to acquire permits by lowering administrative requirements. Especially the Critical Raw Materials (CRM) Regulation (Regulation (EU) 2024/1252) foresees faster permitting processes for strategic projects for extraction of critical raw material by shortening the time and procedures for local populations to give their consent. Acquisition of Free, Prior, Informed Consent (FPIC) is a principle legally upheld by the ILO Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples for any development projects to be carried out on the lands of Indigenous Peoples. The EU has

¹ For more on the problems facing Sámi cultural heritage and their connection to land see Valkonen, Valkonen and Lehtola (2017)



many times referred to this Convention in its Arctic Strategy (European Commission and High Representative 2021), even though it is not a party to the convention itself. Moreover, article 1 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) - to which all EU member states are party- highlights the right to self-determination of all people, which includes the rights to “freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development“. Despite official recognition of these rights, such fast-track permitting processes as foreseen in the CRM Regulation pose an additional threat to the Sámi people since the EU legislation could then facilitate overriding their right to (withhold) their consent for strategic projects.

Thus, for the Sámi communities, the uncertainty is not only about how climate change will impact their livelihoods, traditions, and way of life in general, but also about how much they will be able to preserve them, due their lands now being designated areas (see sacrifice zones in Juskus [2023]) for strategic projects of such extractive industries. Within this setting, as part of the Special Collection on *Narratives in Times of Uncertainty*, this article looks into the published documents of the Saami Council as the representative institution of the Sámi communities living in Norway, Sweden Finland and Russia that are directed at the European Union.

The Saami Council describes itself as

“a voluntary and independent cultural and political cooperative organization for the main Sámi organizations in Finland, Norway, Russia, and Sweden. The Saami Council’s overarching goal is to safeguard the interests of the Sámi as one people, strengthen the cohesion of the Sámi across borders as one People and an Indigenous People, and work to ensure that the Sámi are recognized as one people and an Indigenous People in the future, with their cultural, political, economic, civil, social, and spiritual rights respected. The Saami Council also works internationally to promote and secure the interests and rights of the Sámi and other Indigenous Peoples.” (Saami Council, 2024a:1)

and underlines their distinctiveness from local people of non-indigenous origin, who would not be under the same protection granted to IPs according to international law (SC 2024a). The Saami Council is one of the oldest and most enduring IP organisations in the international arena with its leadership and involvement in indigenous-led diplomatic endeavours, including the establishment of World Council of Indigenous Peoples, the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Peoples and the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (Laframboise, 2025). In the process that has led to the establishment of the Saami Council, deliberations of participants in their meetings demonstrated two aspects: an inward-looking interest for self-preservation through collaboration and creation of “greater group consciousness” (Laframboise, 2025:5) between different Sámi communities and an outward-facing “engagement with non-Sámi allies” (Laframboise, 2025: 6). Today, the Saami Council is a registered NGO at the UN, it is one of the permanent participants alongside other indigenous organisations at the Arctic Council (Laframboise,



2025), and is regarded by the EU as a salient stakeholder² for its policies towards the region.

Bearing these inward-looking and outward-facing aspects of their activities in mind, this article investigates “how does the Saami Council engage with the EU through its narratives in order to bring about change in EU policies and to navigate the uncertainties threatening their future existence?”. In order to answer this question, the article conducts an emotion discourse analysis and a subsequent narrative analysis of eight documents published by the Saami Council on EU policies. The emotion discourse analysis, as defined by Koschut (2018a) enables setting the discursive emotional background that Sámi narratives rise from and the narrative analysis of Saami Council documents tells the story of Sámi communities as it is chosen to be told by their wide-spanning representative institution. Some of these narratives reiterate what the Sámi communities already know, but some of them also envision a future in which the Sámi people and the EU can cooperate to build a better future for the (European) Arctic region. Thus, these narratives enable the Saami Council to take productive action in order to get out of the entrapment of their current uncertainties, from an emotional state of living in fear, anxiety, resentment, and anger to actively engage with the EU in order to bring about change in the latter’s policies directed at their territories.

The Saami Council is already quite experienced in bringing together different Sámi communities since 1956, internationally representing the Sámi as an Indigenous People at the UN, and building solidarity against colonial practices across the lands of Indigenous Peoples (Laframboise, 2025). Their engagement with the EU is however an example of going beyond the usual engagement with their national states, aiming to influence a supranational legislator with direct policy impact on their lands, and without the support and solidarity of other Indigenous Peoples that exist at the UN level.

The article consist of the following sections: The following section will present a brief summary of how the EU has so far engaged with the Arctic region and framed its policies in such a way that these impact the livelihoods of the IPs. Secondly, the article will present its conceptual framework about how it will analyse the narratives of the Saami Council documents as an enabler of productive action to bring about change. Thirdly, the article will elaborate on the emotion discourse analysis and narrative analysis as the chosen methods for this research and reflect on why their subsequent utilization is suitable for answering the research question. Fourthly, based on this analytical framework, the article will describe how the Saami Council presents its perspective on the dual challenges of climate change and the EGD-centered extractivism on their lands, ultimately demonstrating how an indigenous people has taken rhetorical action through its narratives to demand change of policies by their counterparts. The article concludes by underlining the contribution it makes to explaining the enabling function of narratives in turning a certain emotional state of being into purposeful action based on hope.

² The Saami Council itself would rather be regarded as a rights-holder in the region and not as a stakeholder (Nysto Keskitalo and Wingens 2023)



The EU in the Arctic region

The EU's affiliation with the Arctic region unfolds primarily through the territories of its member states Sweden, Finland, and Denmark (via Greenland³) in this region and its association with Norway and Iceland. It is through these relationships that the EU aspires to be "one of the main legislators" in this region (European Commission and the High Representative 2021).⁴ The 2016 Arctic strategy of the European Commission (European Commission and the High Representative 2016) did not specify the protection of indigenous peoples' rights as a priority policy area for the EU in this region, but it stated its readiness to work with them, especially towards developing a climate change adaptation agenda for the Arctic region. Dialogue with the Arctic indigenous peoples was at first one of many international cooperation initiatives for the EU. Within that framework, the EU promised further engagement to "ensure that their views and rights are *respected* in the ongoing development of EU policies affecting the Arctic" (European Commission and the High Representative 2016: 15, emphasis by the author). The 2016 Strategy also underlined the need for advancing consistency between the EU's internal and external policy towards indigenous peoples (European Commission and the High Representative 2016: 15), indicating that its policy towards internal indigenous peoples, who are EU citizens, does not match the EU's external human rights promotion agenda for indigenous peoples.

In a major leap forward, the 2021 Arctic Strategy (European Commission and the High Representative 2021) has explicitly focused on indigenous peoples' rights referencing internationally recognized documents - i.e. the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the International Labor Organization's (ILO) Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples. In this new Strategy, the EU has underlined "the principle of (FPIC) before adopting and implementing measures that may affect (the IPs) directly" (European Commission and the High Representative 2021: 14). A change has obviously taken place in the approach of the EU on this issue between 2016 and 2021. However, the new Strategy (European Commission and High Representative, 2021) bears contradictions in itself: It explicitly positions the EU in favour of securing the supply of critical raw materials with "full respect for and involvement of indigenous communities". The regulations on green transition adopted by the EU since 2021 have prioritised European competitiveness and security of critical resources rather than Indigenous Peoples' rights or environmental protection (Terzi, 2024). The Russian aggression and the start of the full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022 has resulted in the securitization of all sort of policies in this region, from resource extraction to border protection and militarization of land (van Loon and Zendee, 2024). These developments very much impact the respect for indigenous rights in the implementation of such policies.

³ Greenland is one of EU's Overseas Countries and Territories (OCT) as a part of the Kingdom of Denmark with a self-government regulation (European Commission n.d.).

⁴ The EU is also a de facto observer in the Arctic Council which is the main organisation of transnational cooperation in the region (Arctic Council Secretariat 2025).



The EU's actorness of in the region is becoming more visible (Raspotnik & Stepien, 2020), due to its competences (Koivurova et al., 2011), the increasing footprint of its policies (Koivurova et. al. 2021), its geopolitical drive (Raspotnik, 2018; Raspotnik & Østhagen, 2021), and its capabilities for pursuing a policy distinct from those of its member states (Pieper et al., 2011).

Due to the binding nature of EU law on both member states and EU-associated countries like Norway and Iceland, the European Green Deal has turned out to be the EU's primary regulatory influence in the European Arctic (Chuffart, et al. 2021; Raspotnik & Stepien, 2020). The European Green Deal has also led to competing claims about land use and has met the resistance of local and environmentalist groups as well as of indigenous communities (Sigeman, 2025). Some limited literature has focused on how Sámi communities have been impacted with this increasing influence of the EU and EGD in the region (Laframboise 2023a; Nysto Keskitalo & Wogens, 2023). This article thus contributes to filling a gap by focusing on the Saami Council's response to these EU policies by shedding light on the efforts of the Saami Council as an institution aiming to bring about favourable change in EU policies towards their communities, by focusing on the research question "how does the Saami Council engage with the EU through its narratives in order to bring about change in EU policies and to navigate uncertainties threatening their future existence?"

In this article, the term 'European Union' refers to the EU institutions involved in the making of EU legislation. As the initiator of EU legislation, the European Commission is the primary point of contact for the Saami Council, but the European External Action Service is significant as well, since the Arctic Ambassador of the EU is appointed from this institution. The European Parliament (EP) is an influential actor in the making of EU legislation and is sympathetic to the cause of the protecting Indigenous Peoples, including the Sámi (Terzi, 2020). In its "Resolution for an integrated EU policy for the Arctic", the EP (2017a) had taken a much more normative stance than other EU institutions and acknowledged the indigenous peoples' rights before the Commission and the High Representative did in the 2021 Strategy. The spirit of the document reflected a certain level of solidarity with the Arctic Indigenous Peoples that support, for example, the establishment of a representation for the Sámi in Brussels. The recording of the plenary session (European Parliament, 2017b) that led to the adoption of that resolution displays the contestation during the adoption of the text. For example, certain MEPs (from European Conservatives and Reformists, Socialists and Democrats, and European Peoples Party) stressed that the EU should not contravene Norwegian interests regarding the Arctic region and its Indigenous Peoples since the EU is not only dependent on Norwegian gas and oil as the only secure source of energy from a stable region, but also because Norway (and the US) are the only supporters of the EU within the Arctic Council in the face of the (previous) Canadian and the current Russian vetoes against the EU gaining of an official observer status.

While the EP is the most supportive actor among the EU institutions for an explicit support for the protection of the Indigenous Peoples in the EU's Arctic Strategy, it has also adopted several resolutions for the protection of indigenous peoples in certain regions globally (European Parliament, 2018, 2021). The European



Commission (2016) has also adopted a text on the protection of indigenous peoples' rights as an external policy issue area. Despite all this recognition of the rights of Indigenous Peoples external to the EU, implementation of IP rights in the EU seems to be more complicated than the general stance adopted by the EU in its external policy. In the face of such an institutional setting, the Saami Council has published a series of reports and policy documents, which -when read together- portray a message about what the EU policies do to the Sámi communities and what the Saami Council's preferred way of action would be to collaborate with the EU for transforming these policies. The following section presents the conceptual framework for this analysis.

Narratives as enablers for communities to move from emotions of deprivation to productive action

This section presents the conceptual framework to analyse the Saami Council's narratives that aim to bring about a change in the implementation of the EU's Green Deal policies in the European Arctic. The article adopts Tekin and Meissner's (2022: 74) definition of narrative as "a story constructed by a specific actor or group of actors", which also serves as a tool for political actors. Narratives signify how humans comprehend the social world around them -"how we make sense of the environment around us" (Spencer, 2016)- on which their identities and actions then rely, at both the individual and the collective levels. Thus, sense-making, identity construction and enabling subsequent behaviour are the three functions of narratives. While fulfilling the functions of sense-making and identity construction, the narratives can be expected to work internally, towards the community itself. While fulfilling the function of enabling subsequent behaviour, narratives would guide the action towards third parties, by creating expectations and interests, consolidating collective action by a community (Subotic, 2016). The political reality that narratives reveal facilitates the common understanding of the targeted political behaviour in that community (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019), thereby linking these inward-looking and outward-facing functions.

As part of the above-mentioned behavioural function, narratives also serve a purpose-driven function (Holland & Mathieu, 2023:2): Accordingly, narratives possess policy-shaping power by 'foreclosing' certain policy options, while facilitating the creation of more favorable policy alternatives for a community (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019; Subotic, 2016). In doing so, narratives 'play an important role in the construction of norms...that are fundamental to the construction of not only the... past historical world, but also the current political world' (Spencer, 2016: 23). As will be demonstrated in the sections below, the engagement of the Saami Council with the EU institutions is inherently normative and refers to treaties and norms that the EU aims to uphold globally, therefore locking the EU into its own declared principles.

There is rarely only one version of a story. Many times, there is a battle of narratives between those of different actors. Some narratives gain the ground and turn out to be stronger than others (Spencer, 2016: 37) because the societal power structures



turn out to be in favour of one of the narratives, or because of the relationship of one narrative with other pre-conceived and well-established narratives. Nevertheless, these power structures as well as established narratives can also be evolving in time. For example, as opposed to the EU's narratives on dangers of being over-dependent on unreliable third parties for CRM or the EU needing to boost its competitiveness in the face of competition from China and the US, the Sámi narratives would tell their audience in "what direction to think about" regarding the past and current events and which emotional valences to attach to these events (White quoted in Spencer, 2016: 26).

Because of this linkage to the emotional meaning of narrated events, this article takes the expressed emotions in Saami Council's documents about EGD policies as the starting point of their narratives: these emotions range from fear and anxiety about the future -due to impacts of climate change as well as the impact of green transition policies on their culture, livelihoods and ways of life- to resentment -due to their internationally recognized rights being disrespected in EU policies and their national implementation-, and anger at history repeating itself once again, this time under the green disguise of colonialism.

In this relationship between the emotions embedded in narratives, emotions give the narratives their subjective meaning. Is what happened a positive or a negative experience, desired events or unwelcome developments for a community? In return, narratives put the emotions into context (Hutchison, 2016: 36) and thus feed into the direction for future action: whom are the emotions directed at? Why do these emotions exist? Are they doomed to stay the same? What is the prospect of change? This is why in the analysis of the Saami Council's narratives towards EU policies, emotion discourse analysis becomes a necessary starting point in understanding how narratives drive those emotions into action.

This article adopts and further develops the framework of analysis of Gürkan and Terzi (2024) that links emotions to action and inaction in (EU foreign) policy through enabling and constraining mechanisms. Developing this framework originally designed for the EU further and applying it to an institution that is the EU's counterpart in this analysis, this paper argues that institutional narratives function as part of an enabling mechanism to bring about action from an emotional state of being in desperation.

As will be explained below, the Saami Council has both cooperated with the EU on project-based initiatives and also launched rhetorical and legal action to resist EU policies. This means that the analysis needs to focus on the enabling mechanism that have brought about this action that aims to bring about change in EU policies. Whether this rhetorical and legal action through narratives will be successful in bringing about the desired change is part of the uncertainty that their narrative is trying to tackle. As the Saami Council constructs its story to tell the EU about what is happening in their lands as an outcome of EU's policies, it does not yet know whether it will succeed in its efforts. Not knowing what the future will bring, its narratives have worked as an enabling mechanism to take productive action from a state of being embedded in fear, anxiety, resentment and anger to building and maintaining hope within their communities while effectively engaging with the EU to resist being sidelined in the implementation of the EGD. This article looks into how these



narratives have accomplished this transition from living in a haunting emotional state of being into adoption of an action with the aim of changing the course of EU policies. The effort by the Saami Council is one to be acknowledged as a successful example of taking up productive action in the face of a threatening, unknown future. As Holland and Mathieu (2023) underline, narrative power is structural and structural narrative power shapes the politics and political realities. The Saami Council is thereby trying to move the narrative structures in such a way that indigenous realities are also heard and that they bear moral and legitimate power over policy decisions.

While dealing with an uncertain and threatening future, narratives that do not yet have a precise ending to the story that they are telling prescribe what is seen as possible or desirable and impossible or undesirable outcome in this effort to tackle ‘uncertainty’ (Holland & Mathieu, 2023: 36). These prescriptions guide behaviour towards action or inaction. In this respect, narratives are a productive, enabling tool that function in two aspects of the enabling mechanism for a community to take action, as demonstrated in Figure 1: The inward-looking dimension and the outward-facing dimension. In the inward-looking dimension, one expects an enabling narrative to unite the community around what is possible and desirable, and thus encourages action towards it from the inside of the community. In the inward-looking dimension of their enabling function, narratives would aim at the (indigenous) community itself, enhancing community coherence towards a possible action, building in-group solidarity towards desired goals, and boosting ownership of identity.

In the outward-facing dimension, one expects an enabling narrative to tell the outside world about what is wrong – for example, the injustices being experienced- or what they would like to change and asks for solidarity and collective action. It would remind the outside world and especially their counterparts about norms and

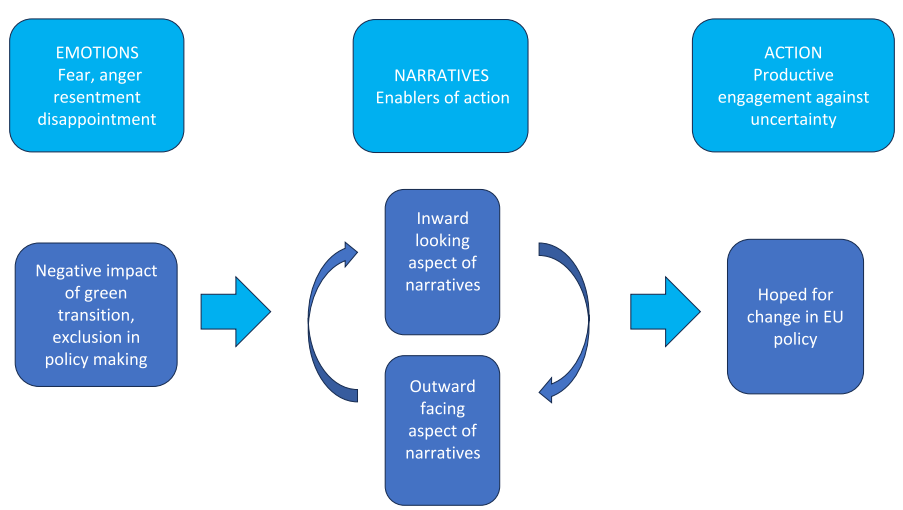


Fig. 1 How narratives work as enablers of productive action. Source: Created by the author.



how things *ought to be* (Subotic, 2016), calling on the counterpart's moral values. Through these two dimensions, these narratives would work their way internally through the group and externally towards outside actors to bring about the desired change. As will be analysed below, the structural narrative power that the Saami Council is trying to build through their communicative actions would tell their story, with the expectation that others will see that there is only one moral and legitimate way of resolving of the tensions they live in, i.e. respect for their internationally recognized rights.

Methodology

The analysis of the Saami Council documents according to the conceptual framework outlined above is carried out in two steps: First, an emotion discourse analysis is conducted, followed by a narrative analysis. The starting point of the analysis is the emotional state expressed by the Saami Council in their published documents in the face of the double threats of climate change and green transition policies that threaten their livelihoods. This article takes Mercer's (2014: 516) definition of emotion as "a feeling that has intrinsic importance to an actor in some relationship with an entity". In this analysis, the entity in question with which emotions have been related has been the nature and land, the EU, and state authorities depending on the content of documents or the context they have been referring to.

The focus on emotions in the analysis of the discourse allows for reflecting on the power relationship behind emotions and the power of emotions in transforming relationships (Koschut, 2018a, 2018b). Emotions attached to events are significant components of how we make sense of the world around us (Hutchison, 2016) and also demonstrate what we care about and value (Frijda, 2007). Events that do not align with these values or the norms that one would like to uphold trigger a certain emotional reaction (Frijda, 2007). Whether this emotional reaction turns to action or not depends on other enabling or constraining factors both for individuals (Turner and Stettis 2005) and for institutions (Gürkan & Terzi, 2024).

Thus emotion discourse analysis as developed by Koschut (2018a, 2018b) presents the first step of the analysis in this article. This would require that first the documents posted on the website of the Saami Council in English are compiled. These include eight documents which are policy documents, strategy documents, and project reports. Afterwards, these documents are read and coded according to the emotional references they make. These emotional references are either direct mention of emotions like "fear" or "despair" or explanation of situations that present an emotional context, for example mentions of loss, being colonised, being made invisible, or being neglected. These emotional references are then put into the context that they have been expressed to reveal the emotion discourse around a certain situation. This step of the analysis presents us the 'emotional setting' that Saami Council's narratives towards its EU counterparts are built on.

While conducting the narrative analysis, as the second step of analysis, those documents were read again, this time to apply narrative analysis as explained by (Spencer, 2016:3) to demonstrate how the Saami Council narrates its stance and



its actions towards the EU. The narrative analysis as prescribed by Spencer (2016) comprises three components: 1. the setting, 2. the main characters of the narrative and 3. the emplotment that [temporally and causally] links how ‘the setting, characters and events are connected to each other’. Thus, in a narrative, the description of characters already forebears a standing point. For example, the characterization of the IPs as *right-holders* signifies them as distinct from stakeholders, who would have other material or profit-driven interests in the region. Or designation of IPs as a group that is associated with certain behaviour, like being *stewards of nature* already conveys the value IPs attach to nature as part of their identity. The last component in a narrative, the emplotment - the story line, has a beginning, the plot in the middle and an end to that emplotment, the conclusion of the story, the lesson to be learnt (Shenhav, 2005).

Moreover, narratives are linked to each other. Newly emerging narratives make a connection with pre-existing narratives in one way or another. Narratives are stories of events that are worthy of telling because they are about something noteworthy, special or something problematic from the perspective of the narrator (Spencer, 2016:16). The ‘emplotment (of the narrative) allows the audience to understand the relationship between the setting, the characters and events by outlining how and why things happened the way they did.’ (Spencer, 2016: 35) The plot analysed in the narratives here is the tension about the Sámi communities’ traditional way of life and the threats to it emerging from the increased use of their land by the extractive industries, like mining and green energy infrastructures, such as windmills, all encouraged by the EU’s Green Deal.

Through these two rounds of readings, the findings are applied to the conceptual framework outlined above to demonstrate how the Saami Council has narrated its side of the story to transform the narrative power structure and to bring about a favourable change in the implementation of the EGD in their territories. This analysis does not build causal hypotheses as to how narratives of indigenous communities eventually enabled their action, but to introduce narratives as a component of an enabling mechanism that leads from an emotional state of being to action. Based on these two steps of emotion discourse analysis and narrative analysis, the conclusion discusses how the narratives of the Saami Council enabled productive engagement with the EU and which possible ways of resolution of the tension were desired in these narratives.

Emotional setting of Saami Council narratives about the impact of EGD on their lands⁵

Indigenous Peoples are often acknowledged to be the “stewards of nature” (United Nations Environment Programme 2017). The Saami Council reinforces this by stating that in the Sámi cosmology “humans are regarded as part of nature, not above

⁵ In this section, the words in *italics* in the quotes are the emotion words or words that signal an emotion that the author wants to emphasise.



other forms of life” (SC 2024b: 3). In their cosmology, “*maintaining harmony within the ecosystem is a basic priority*” (SC 2024b: 3). Therefore, “one of the most serious threats to Sámi culture is the *loss* of nature in conjunction with the climate change and its consequences. Sámi people’s relationships to land and water, as well as our reliance on nature for *survival* is significant” (SC 2024b: 16). This perception of threat and fear of loss is further explained as,

“Climate change *threatens* the culture and existence of the Sámi indigenous people in two ways: firstly through direct environmental impacts such as changing weather conditions and ecosystems, and secondly through the increasing number of energy projects and resource extraction in Sapmi in the name of ‘green’ development and ‘clean’ energy transition.” (SC and AI, 2025:7)

These quotes reveal the perception of threat towards the survival of Sámi culture. This fear is coupled with the feelings of resentment due to the neglect the Sámi face from authorities who should be protecting them. Local and state authorities disappoint the Sámi by “*failing* to meet their needs” (SC 2024b: 3). Outside forces, like EU policies, national development projects and extractive industries have a great impact over the Sámi individuals lives, which leads to a “*sense of powerlessness*” (SC 2024b: 3). “Sámi needs are... made *invisible* because regional decision-makers focus primarily on traditional industries such as mining, renewable energy, and tourism, with little or no emphasis of existing Sámi business or land use in the Arctic.” (SC 2024b: 3). The stance by the local authorities reinforce the “*general lack of regard* from the majority society for the Sámi people’s demands” (SC 2024b: 3)

The Saami Council has co-authored with the Amnesty International (AI) a report, aptly titled “Just Transition or ‘Green Colonialism?’”. In this report they explain “(h)ow mineral extraction and new energy projects without acquisition of ... (FPIC) are *threatening* Indigenous Sámi livelihoods and culture in Sweden, Norway and Finland”. These development projects are underlined as threats to “the health, well-being and entire cultures of the Sámi and other Arctic Indigenous Peoples” (SC and AI 2025: 8) Moreover, the report outlines “how inadequate legislation and policies can lead to years-long disputes *with great personal costs* for affected Sámi. The resulting uncertainty over current and planned land use is *draining* and *frustrating* for Sámi communities and hinders the development of their culture and traditional livelihoods.” (SC and AI 2025: 8). From the perspective of the Sámi, “these projects are often *devastating*” (SC and AI 2025: 8). Uncertain future prospects exacerbated by ongoing conflicts about land use, hate speech, and racism that is triggered by such conflicts cause anxiety, depression, exhaustion and disappointment, and over-the-average rates of suicide among the Sámi (SC and AI 2025). Another report by Saami Council states that “current legislation does not ensure that the Sámi people have effective power in decision making... The so-called ‘dialogue and consultations’⁶

⁶ The dialogue and consultations mentioned in this quote are meetings organized during the permitting processes of mining or other development projects to receive FPIC from indigenous communities.



do not necessarily ensure just and meaningful participation. *We feel unheard and powerless to influence these dialogues*". (SC 2023b: 5)

Both the EU's renewable energy directive and the CRM Regulation present potential damage to Sámi livelihoods by assigning land to windmills and also mining projects through simplified permit-granting processes that claim an 'overriding public interest' over, for example, existing EU environmental protection regulations or over dialogues and consultations with local populations. Such prioritisation of a wider public interest limits the ground for legally challenging such permits. For this reason, the Saami Council has also adopted a policy paper, stating that IPs cannot be seen as any local people, but that they are a special group under international protection, whose special attachment to their land cannot be compensated or overridden. (SC 2024a). Reflecting on the impact of the CRM regulation on Sámi lands, the Saami Council writes "It is a paradox that the argument for mining on a worldwide scale is the need for a transition to a 'green' economy as well as geopolitics, but the change has the potential to destroy an indigenous culture that has existed since time immemorial". This quote not only underlines the threat and the fear associated with it, but also aims at shaming the policy makers that allow the destructive impact of the CRM Regulation while aiming to be green.

All this perception of threat, fear, feeling unseen and disregarded leads to feelings of distrust and suspicion as explained by the president of the Saami Council, Per-Olof Nutti: "The Sámi people have learned to be on alert when the term 'green transition' is mentioned. We see that it is a new name for old models of action. We are used to others wanting us to step aside so that they can fulfill their needs at our expense." (SC and AI 2025: 5). The resentment for the long history of colonialism is visible in his statement that "colonialism is a continuous process that keeps inventing new ways to re-colonise the land." (SC and AI 2025: 5). But he also induces hope by saying that "we must believe that this cycle can be broken and that there is another way for us to coexist and collaborate" (SC and AI 2025: 5). He signals at two sources for this hope. "Our (indigenous) knowledge is vital to mitigating the effects of the climate crisis in our lands" and also that "the recommendations in this report set forth a path to a better future" (SC and AI 2025: 5).

The determination to build a better future for their community enables the Saami Council to engage productively with the EU to ensure their visibility and inclusion in the decision processes. In engaging with the EU institutions, the Saami Council does not know whether it will eventually succeed in its efforts, but the emotional setting of the narrative that explains their cause motivates them to take this action. Based on this portrayal of the emotions in place as the psychological setting of the Saami Council's narrative, the following section looks at the characterizations and the plot, as the second and third steps of narrative analysis according to Spencer (2016), in the narratives of the Saami Council in their engagement with the EU to bring about a change in the latter's policies.



Narratives in Saami Council's engagement with the EU: the tension in the relationship

Based on Spencer's (2016) three features of the narrative analysis, i.e. the setting, characters and the emplotment, this section focuses on the main characters and the tension in Saami Council's narratives. The emotional 'setting' is based on the perception of the perpetuation of the colonial relationship through the green transition policies and the associated feelings of anger, disappointment, resentment and fear presented in the emotion discourse analysis above. It is possible to identify four main characters in the narratives of the Saami Council: the Sámi communities, the state authorities, mining industries and other resource and energy investment projects, and the EU. The uncertainty and the associated tension about whether the Saami Council will succeed in bearing an influence on the EU about its policy implementation and in gaining wider visibility in EU decision structures is the emplotment. This section first provides a short characterisation of the main actors in Sámi narratives and then describes the emplotment around the EU -Saami Council relationship, presenting the ground for the analysis in the following section on how the Saami Council's narrative has been enabling it to productively engage with the EU for finding a solution to the tension in their relationship.

The Sámi communities

The Sámi are an indigenous people with collective rights enshrined in international treaties. "Although (they) are divided by the formal boundaries of these four states, they continue to exist as one people, united by cultural and linguistic bonds and a common destiny" (SC and AI 2025: 13). They are the only recognised indigenous people in the European Union. "For centuries (they) have been subject to colonization, abuse and discrimination by other dominant cultures." (SC and AI 2025: 14). As described in detail in the above section, they suffer personal and collective costs in the face of the development projects on their land. Their connection to Sápmi and nature is the centre-piece of their identity built on distinctive traditions, livelihoods and culture. This emphasis on identity and values is the starting point for the Saami Council to demonstrate the significance of the Sámi for the EU and what the EU policies towards the Sámi should acknowledge.

Mining and other resource and energy investments

These investment projects have been there for a very long time and have in the past also caused unrest about the resources in the North serving the needs of the South without providing sufficient returns to the local people. The land traditionally used for herding is becoming sites for (CRM) mining or renewable energy production. These investment projects are often seen by the Sámi as triggers of disputes between their communities and the state authorities (SC and AI 2025: 8). In the words of the President of the Saami Council Per-Olof Nutti,



“Mining and industry projects are usually very open about being for-profit business ventures. In the wake of the ‘green transition’ however, we see a new development where these same kind of ventures are suddenly being sold to us as a service to humanity. The ‘green transition’ becomes a way to talk about for-profit business as something supposedly morally good and justified and how these resources are essential for safeguarding a sustainable future. This portrayal is difficult to stand against or even criticize” (SC and AI 2025: 5).

With the EU’s CRM Regulation now designating such extraction projects as strategic investments that serve a wider public interest, these enterprises now ask local, national, and EU authorities for faster permitting processes that endanger the FPIC process. In response, the Saami Council emphasises these investments’ profit-driven nature and underlines the difference in status the Sámi should have against these enterprises as ‘right-holders’ under special protection, as opposed to ‘stakeholders’ with private interests.

The state authorities

According to the joint report by the Saami Council and Amnesty International, the national authorities are actors that justify these projects as “part of the transition away from fossil fuels and towards a low carbon economy”. They are described as having “a poor understanding of Sámi culture, power imbalances and the limited opportunities for meaningful Sámi participation” which “challenges the realization of the rights and the possibility to obtain legal redress for the affected Sámi” (SC and AI 2025: 8). There are also other incidents where national mechanisms deprive the Sámi of certain benefits they could have used at the national level, as a result of their countries being EU members. For example, Sámi ways of food production - e.g., through reindeer herding - comply with EU farm subsidies from the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and also from national subsidy schemes but are excluded from a significant amount of such support by not being recognized as such, which seem “unjust to the reindeer herder” (SC, 2024b: 15). Not only the CAP support, but also “financial mechanisms established by the EU Biodiversity Strategy are not intended to address the requirements of the Sámi (to maintain reindeer husbandry)” (SC 2024b: 17). Last but not least, even though the Saami Council has been allowed to participate in the European Commission’s Forest and Nature Working Group, the costs of its participation are not supported by member states or the Commission, which presents limitations on their effective participation. (SC 2024b: 19). These practices feed into the Sámi feelings of not being seen or heard, sense of powerlessness, resentment, disappointment and anger.



The European Union

The EU is the source of many of the problems that the Sámi face, due to its ‘green transition’ policies that boost extractive industries in the region. The Saami Council’s 2023 report further explains that

“the EU asserts that the demand for natural resources is critical, but the EU world cannot depend on a few Arctic countries to supply the EU...Additionally Sámi people are often forced to accept exploitation of their lands and waters against their will. These developments are unjust because decisions concerning Sámi lands and waters are made without our consent. Without consent, such actions are violations” (SC 2023b:6).

But at the same time, the EU is the partner they can collaborate with thanks to EU funding for the activities that raise awareness in the EU about the Sámi, their way of living and the problems they are facing. In the words of the Saami Council, “There is an urgent need for an EU-Sápmi partnership in advancing effective climate action to cope with current and future changes. This should be acknowledged in the implementation of the European Green Deal” (SC 2022: 11). And expected action from the EU is that “The EU (should) respect the rights of the Sámi people in the implementation of the European Green Deal by upholding the FPIC principle in decision making, securing Sámi access to climate financing, and including Sámi traditional knowledge in climate adaptation research, strategy development and policy implementation” (SC 2022: 11). The EU also presents a potential partner for Sámi communities to circumvent their national authorities by gaining direct access or influence in Brussels over local implementation of EU-level policies.

These characterisations of the actors in the narratives help us understand the stance of the actors that make up the plot explained below: The EU is the main actor in the regulation of industries relating to CRM and green transition, whereas state actors have both local and EU-level impact on participation of IPs in decision-making and on their benefitting from existing support mechanisms at the EU level. The section below explains the plot in the narrative, which is the tension in the EU-Saami Council relationship.

The tension in the EU- Sámi Relationship

As the Saami Council further explains

“The lack of knowledge about us at the EU level puts us in a position where decision makers do not have enough knowledge of how the decision will affect Sámi youth and our culture. Without knowledge, there is a huge risk that our rights and needs are not weighed in or the decisions can have a negative impact on Sámi youth’s daily life, rights and possibilities to practice our culture. Awareness of Sámi people in the EU institutions and Europe, in general, will build a more inclusive Europe” (SC 2023b: 9)



This quote shows that the Saami Council presents the EU as an actor who is benevolent and would change its policies in the region if they knew better about the local impact of these policies. Therefore, they have applied for and received EU funding to enhance knowledge about the Sámi in the EU and about the EU among especially the Sámi youth (SC 2023b: 7). Through this project, the Saami Council demands that the EU should “allocate funding for establishing educational programs for youth to learn about EU policies and policy implementation such as the European Green Deal and EU Arctic Strategy”. It has also recommended that “the EU, Finland and Sweden ...provide civil servants and politicians with training in Sámi history and legislation, including the impact of land encroachments on Sámi Culture” (SC 2023b: 6).

The Saami Council has also seized opportunities to become counterparts of the EU in policy development and implementation, for example through the Saami Council’s participation in the working group activities in the European Commission. Such contact allows the Saami Council to become a counterpart for the EU without being forced to go through national or member state representations.

Among the knowledge development projects funded by the EU has been the EU-Sápmi Knowledge Gaps project aiming to build up capacity in EU-related issues in the Saami Council and to spread knowledge about how EU decisions affect Sámi everyday life. A second project has focused on creating ties between the EU and the Sámi Youth through dialogues and building “idea labs”, which aim at mutual solidarity and understanding by underlining the common challenges for the youth like climate change and democratic erosion. At the same time this project aims at conveying an understanding among future policy makers about the challenges that the Sámi youth faces about their culture, livelihood and languages (SC 2023b). Even though its policies are the source of many problems of the Sámi, the Saami Council effectively engages with the EU and portrays it as a potential partner who may also be the source of some solutions. The EU-funded AWARE EU-SÁPMI project for example aims at “form(ing) the basis for evaluating the relevant EU policies’ effect on Sámi culture” (Saami Council, 2024c: 2).

What is evident from the reading of Saami Council’s documents on the EU is that there is both a portrayal of the EU as the source of threatening policies and a potential partner with benevolent intentions for the solution of problems. In their engagement with the EU, Saami Council does not fall back on the nation-states involved but directly engages with the EU to bear an impact on its policy implementation.

Through initiating projects for mutual knowledge-building and collaboration, and through its proposals for inclusion in policy and decision meetings, the Saami Council demonstrates that the Sámi and the other actors do not necessarily need to be trapped in their opposing positions. They reiterate that there are possible solutions to current problems, which is a standing point that acknowledges and encourages agency of both the Sámi, the state and EU decision makers. Such a stance aims for a situation in which “Sámi and EU specialists... collaboratively analyse and develop a structural approach to Sámi representation within the EU, ensuring protection of Sámi rights” (SC 2023b:7). The building of the process that leads to the adoption of an EU strategy by the Saami Council has also been



funded by the EU and resulted in institutional capacity improvement for the Sámi by further institutionalizing a Sámi think-tank and building of a strategic policy planning towards the EU, based on the recognition that “the EU and its policies and regulations - as well as its financial instruments that support Sámi Culture - have direct impacts on the day to day life of the Sámi people” (SC 2022: 4).

According to the EU Strategy of the Saami Council, “the foundation of the partnership between the EU and the Sápmi is the acknowledgement of and respect for Sápmi as the homeland of the Sámi people, including the requirement to obtain the consent of the Sámi people when taking action on traditional Sámi territory” (SC 2022: 4). Through this statement, the Saami Council also forecloses other policy options if the EU and the Sámi communities are to build a respectful relationship. It is explicit in its demands from the EU;

“The EU has adopted the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)...EU commitments under UNDRIP also apply to the Sámi People. However, the EU has not created an internal European Indigenous Peoples instrument, but rather placed the portfolio of relationships with Indigenous Peoples in the hands of the European External Action Service. This creates a vacuum for Sámi issues within the framework of the EU.... A prerequisite for a true partnership between the EU and Sápmi is the recognition of the Sámi people as an Indigenous People within the EU framework.”(SC 2022:7).

It also requests that the EU funds “a Sámi mechanism within the framework of the EU, in order to establish the Sámi representation that is necessary for securing the Sámi people’s access to the EU’s institutional set-up and funding programs” (SC 2022:7) The Saami Council’s EU strategy mentions specific “Sámi needs in EU policy-shaping”, like a Sámi representation, long-term funding and a Sámi programme that promotes “cross border cooperation among the Sámi people living in four countries, as well as build(s) a strong feeling of unity in the region”, while “breaking silos between internal and external Indigenous Peoples policies” (SC 2022:8).

With these explicit requests, the Saami Council produces policy options it deems as possible and feasible pathways for building a future collaborative relationship that would be respectful of the indigenous rights of the Sámi people. This narrative is expected to facilitate a brighter future in which Sámi concerns are part of the EU decision-making process and are acknowledged and respected. Sámi knowledge is presented as an asset that will empower EU’s climate policies. Aiming to contribute to such a future, the Saami Council has also initiated the EU-funded project Sámi Influence and Knowledge Exchange in EU Policy project (SIKE) looking into both how the presence of the Sámi can be enhanced within the EU institutions and how the Sámi way of thinking can contribute to EU policies on the circular economy, nature and biodiversity conservation (SC 2024d).

What is significant in analysing the plot in the narrative of the Saami Council towards the EU is that the story is not yet concluded. In all these actions, the Saami Council has taken a principled stance, made explicit demands for recognition and acknowledgement, and has reminded the EU of its legal responsibilities both as part of the EU’s global normative stance but also due to the moral responsibility for implications of EU’s own legislation. The Saami Council does not know whether



it will succeed in achieving its goals, and whether its requests from the EU will be granted at the time when these documents were produced.

Active engagement through narratives

It is possible to outline several ways that the narratives of the Saami Council aiming to produce a favourable outcome for their communities and for the Saami Council as an institution, brought about action towards the EU: The first of these is how the Saami Council characterized the EU in their narrative with two different faces. On the one hand, the EU facilitates the new green form of colonization that the Sámi communities have been suffering from. On the other hand, the EU is a counterpart who can help the Saami Council build capacity and become visible in decision making mechanisms. Both aspects of this characterization are correct at the same time. The Saami Council's narratives portrays the EU as an actor that would do better if they were better informed about the Sámi and the impact of their policies on Sámi lands and communities. Therefore the Saami Council's action aims towards better connecting with the EU through projects that build dialogue, information exchange and aim at co-creation of policies, or at least their implementation.

The unfinished story in the narrative - the unresolved plot- further enables the narratives to facilitate action, since the end of the story is not yet determined and thus can be changed with agency. That is at least the impression of the Saami Council gives at the time of its writing of these documents. Therefore the rhetorical action of the Saami Council can aim at requesting or foreclosing certain policy choices by the EU. For example, the EU may not provide fastened permitting processes, if it was better informed about the impact these were creating on the Sámi communities. Another way that Saami Council's narratives aim at policy change is through shaming: By showing that the EU preaches in one way to the rest of the world about IP rights in its external action, but does not uphold the same rights internally. This request for better streamlining of EU policies internally and externally could guide the EU to consider improvement of FPIC practices internally. Other solid requests for example for help with capacity building and opening a representation in Brussels also show a certain direction about which way they would like to see EU policies developing towards. These aspects are how the narratives are working externally towards the EU counterpart.

The narrative of the Saami Council has enabled the community's agency by creating a new rhetorical structure that empowers these communities against the narratives of the EU, which focuses on the urgency of climate change mitigation, strategic projects of the extractive industry corporations, emphasizing the threat of resource scarcity and its dangers for European security and autonomy. In order to be able to achieve their desired policy changes, the Saami Council and the communities they represent need to believe that the changes mentioned above are possible and that they can shift the power balance between their narratives and that of the EU. This is then how the narratives also work internally



Table 1 Two aspects of narratives enabling emotions into productive action

Narratives	(Emotional) Setting	Characters	Possible end to the the Plot: resolution of tension,
Inward looking aspects	Green colonialism is colonialism in disguise (anger, resentment, fear and disappointment). We can change EU policies by informing it better. EU can help us build capacity. Change is possible. There is hope	The Sámi Communities: The connection to our land is our identity; our knowledge is our power and is useful for the EU. Many EU policies on green transition are harmful for us, but it is possible to inform the EU better.	A better future is possible through engaging with the EU, so we (esp, the youth) should build up knowledge on the EU and engage with future policy makers.
Outward facing aspects	Past grievances of colonization must be acknowledged and not be perpetuated. We believe in the EU to improve its policies and their impact on the ground.	EU: EGD is the source of current problems with extractive industries and state authorities, but also a partner for strengthening Sámi institutions and knowledge capacity through its funding instruments.	EU can become more inclusive in its policy-making and can act in accordance with its legal and moral responsibilities. We have solid requests for capacity building and respect for FPIC.

Source: Author's own compilation



to uphold the belief that a better future is possible and that power dynamics can shift. The narrative instills hope as in the words of the Saami Council president Per-Olof Nutti: “we must believe that this cycle can be broken and that there is another way for us to coexist and collaborate” (SC and AI 2025: 5). It reiterates to the communities the significance of their ties to the land and nature for their identity and its survival. It strengthens the belief that despite their long history of being colonized, their knowledge and contribution is important for the EU and that they can help the EU achieve better results on climate change, circularity and biodiversity policies. Table 1 below presents the main aspects of how the Saami Council’s narrative functioned as an enabling mechanism in its inward-looking and outside-facing aspects, collectively leading emotions to productive action.

Conclusion: narrative as enabler of productive action

Coupling emotion discourse analysis with narrative analysis, this article has sought an answer to the question how the Saami Council productively engages with the EU through its narratives in order to bring about change in EU policies and to navigate uncertainties threatening their future existence. Further developing the framework of analysis about how emotions turn into policy action or inaction by Gürkan and Terzi (2024), this article has introduced the narrative (of the Saami Council) as part of the enabling mechanism at play that has facilitated the Saami Council to move ahead of the grievances and hopelessness felt by their communities towards engaging actively with the European Union.

In the inward-looking aspect of the mechanism of the enabling mechanism outlined in the conceptual part of the article, the narrative of the Saami Council have reminded the community of its connection to the land and past grievances as part of its identity; it has underlined the significance of Sámi knowledge as power; and has induced hope for a better future through a strengthened relationship with the EU. In this inward-looking aspect of the narrative, the audience of the Saami Council has been its member national organisations and Sámi communities.

Facing outward, the narratives by the Saami Council have engaged with the EU in four different ways: first by underlining the linear and (causal) relationship between past injustices and the way current policies on renewable energy production and CRM extraction at the national and EU-level infringe the rights of Sámi people; second by making visible the EU and national actors’ responsibility for practicing the indigenous peoples internationally recognized rights; third by appealing to sense of justice in the audience -who are primarily policy makers-; and fourth by appealing to the requirement to abide by the law in a democratic state.⁷

⁷ In Norway, courts have already decided that a breach has been committed by state authorities of the internationally recognized rights of the Sámi people. But these decisions are not being implemented (Laframboise 2023b).



In both dimensions, the narratives chosen by the Saami Council have worked to enable action stemming from the state of frustration of the Sámi communities. These narratives have instilled hope in the community, while being very explicit towards the EU in what they demand, demonstrating both internally and externally which changes are necessary. The resolution of the tension in the relationship lies in the future which is expected to rely on a respectful working relationship with the EU, where the Sámi are included in decision-processes and their rights are acknowledged and integrated into the implementation of EU policies. The article has demonstrated that the unconcluded nature of the narrative in which the story had not yet reached an end-point has been decisive in encouraging active engagement with the EU.

If the Saami Council had adopted other narratives stopping short of inducing hope, not seeing a potential partner in the EU, and downplaying their agency, thus presenting no effective way forward, those could have had a constraining effect on their action. But the case under analysis in this article is one of an enabling effect.

Future research should look further into other positive examples of narratives enabling collective action by indigenous peoples or by other historically disadvantaged communities, - enabling them to take action from a position of disappointment, frustration and weakness - aiming at a desired change in policy of a counterpart. Furthermore, opposite examples, where narratives have inhibited potential effective action from being taken can highlight when narratives can constrain action in communities at despair when they are facing uncertain futures. This article has demonstrated that narratives *can* enable productive action aiming at change in the face of uncertain futures. And that the content of unfinished stories in a narrative can enable or constrain action by these communities.

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Declarations

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