

Road infrastructure development in the Arctic, security and local voices: Kuttura-Repojoki road as a case study

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Road development in the Arctic has traditionally been strongly tied with resource extraction and economic development. However, in recent decades, there has been increasing attention paid to questions concerning environmental impacts and effects on Indigenous communities. Although several road and railway projects in the Arctic have been opposed by Indigenous communities, one should not oversimplify the relationship between Indigenous communities and Arctic transport infrastructure development. There are also cases where Indigenous peoples have accepted and even promoted road development (Kylli and Saunavaara 2017; Bennett 2018). The tighter linkage between transport infrastructure development and national security is evident not only in Finland but also in different parts of the Arctic and Europe. Besides the Russian invasion of Ukraine, NATO's recent decision to raise defense spending targets to 5% of GDP—including a 1,5% portion that can be allocated to broader security-related investments such as critical physical

infrastructure—has likely contributed to this trend. Apostolos Tzitzikostas, the EU's Transport Commissioner, argued that Europe cannot defend itself unless troops and equipment can be moved swiftly from west to east. To address current problems related to military mobility, roads, bridges and railways across Europe are to be constructed or improved with the support of EU (Anwer 2025).

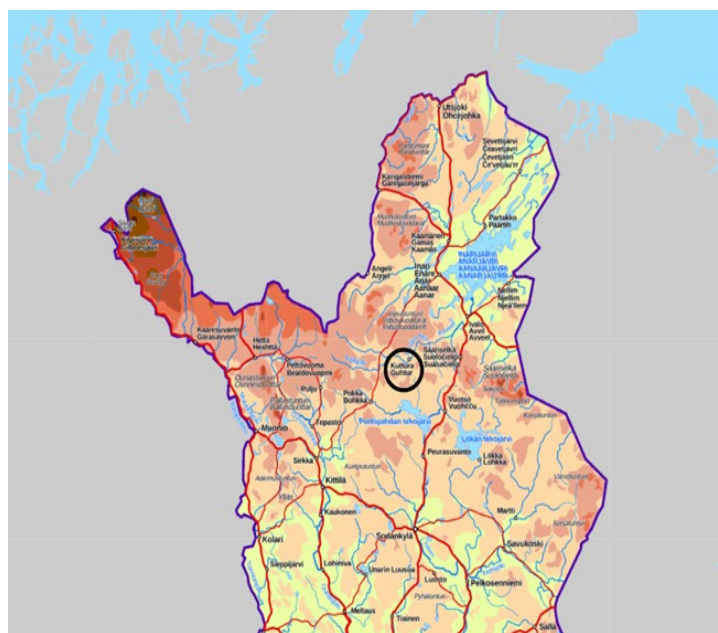
The Finnish Government decided in May 2024 to revise the focus of transport investments. In addition to promoting projects that support economic growth, funding was allocated to new initiatives aimed at strengthening national security and the security of supply (Valtioneuvosto 2024). Lulu Ranne, Minister of Transport and Communications, stated at the end of June 2025 that military mobility-related infrastructure projects worth of several billion euros were under preparation in Finland (Airasvirta 2025). While many of these road, bridge and rail projects were reported to be in Northern Finland, the

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leader of the opposition party criticized the government a week later for not giving sufficient attention to security policy, Northern Finland's growing military significance, and potential to receive NATO funding in its transport policy (Ijäs 2025).

The objective of this study is to understand the processes through which infrastructure development—at least partially motivated by national security and security of supply concerns—intersects with the needs, hopes and fears of the people living in small Arctic communities. To this end, a case study on the Kuttura-Repojoki road initiative, a proposal to build an approximately 19-kilometer road connecting the village of Kuttura to road 955 (also known as Pokantie) between Inari and Kittilä in Northern Finland, is analyzed. The debate surrounding the road during the second half of the 2000s is documented in a Master's thesis by Ulla-Maija Alapeteri (2010), while more recent developments are covered in a report prepared by Laura Junka-Aikio (2025) for the Sámi Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The latter has been prepared at least partly in parallel with this study, using the same sources and interviewing the same informants. However, the researchers were unaware of each other's projects the time. The informants include representatives of relevant organizations, such as the Sámi Parliament, the Regional Council, and

municipality, as well as individuals living in or closely connected to the village of Kuttura. As the road debate divides opinions within small communities, the names of the informants will not be disclosed.



Map 1: Major roads in northern Finland (based on: <https://laji.fi/map>)

This research acknowledges the existence of individual, proxy, and collective agency. It considers both individual acting as well as situations where one agent acts on behalf of another, as well as instances where individuals collaborate to form collective entities that engage in effectual activities (Ahearn 2001; Hewson 2010). The study emphasizes the role of human factors—particularly the lack of trust, along with legacy issues, historical baggage and past negative experiences—in the policy-making process. Rather than starting from the rational decision model,

which assumes a consequential and preference-based process consisting of a sequence of interlocked steps but overlooks limitations such as lack of information and time, this study draws on models recognizing the importance of perceptions and stakeholders' beliefs and assumptions about reality. The so-called belief system model suggests that what decision-makers perceive and understand is shaped by their concepts and values that guide their thinking (Allison and Zelikow 1999; Lindblom 1968).

The Failed Kuttura-Repojoki Road Initiative in the 2000s

The roots of the Kuttura-Repojoki road dispute can be traced back to the revision of the North Lapland Regional Land Use Plan at the beginning of the new millennium. The planning process was based on the existing Regional Plan and to the Regional Development Program for the years 2003-2006. Background materials also included transport assessments for both the whole Lapland and specifically for North Lapland. The Land Use Plan was approved by the Regional Council and the Government before entering into force in January 2008 (Alapeteri 2010).

Public debate concerning the Kuttura-Repojoki road began in 2003, when the municipality of Inari adopted a positive stance toward the project. According to the municipal government,

the initiative had been discussed with, and agreed upon by, the local Sallivaara reindeer herding cooperative. However, conflicting interests and opinions soon became apparent. When various stakeholders commented on the plan, a number of critical remarks were raised: the lack of studies on the actual need for the road; insufficient assessment of its environmental impact; difficulties in avoiding protected areas; no legal basis for deviating from the Wilderness Act and Nature Conservation Act; questionable benefits; negative impacts on reindeer herding; existence of better alternatives; the already challenging maintenance of existing roads; no significant impact on tourism; potential harm to the villages of Ivalo and Inari; the need to shorten travel time between Saariselkä and Levi skiing resorts is not important enough reason; and the threat to the unique milieu of Kuttura village (Alapeteri 2010).

The Kuttura-Repojoki Road Implementation Study focused on potential impacts on the transport network, environment, regional development, local residents, livelihoods, and three alternative routes. The study, which suggested that the road would help preserve Sámi culture and language —by enabling the transportation of schoolchildren to a school offering Sámi-language education —and support local reindeer herders, was heavily criticized. In February 2007, the Finnish Road

Administration's Lapland Road District launched a Needs Assessment, which eventually concluded that the payback time of the road would be relatively short and that a road through the wilderness would become an attractive product for international tourists. It was also assumed that increased tourism revenue would help secure local basic services and that the benefits would outweigh the environmental damage. Although the Road District received European Regional Development Fund funding for the planning of the road, critical voices gradually grew stronger. In March 2008, a local NGO launched an online petition opposing the Kuttura-Repojoko road (Alapeteri 2010).

When general planning, led by a consulting company, began in 2008, the Sámi Parliament refused to nominate a representative to the steering group of a project it opposed. However, due to the consultation obligation under Section 9 of the Sámi Parliament Act, a representative was present at the second meeting of the group, which also organized a workshop aimed at securing sufficient interaction with various stakeholders. The feedback received highlighted the widespread distrust and critical attitudes toward the project. Once the Environmental Impact Assessment documents became publicly available, the resistance became evident—not only among the local residents but also from the Ministry of Environment, the

Lapland Regional Environment Centre, the Finnish Forest Administration, the municipality of Kittilä, the Sámi Parliament, and several reindeer herding cooperatives. As a result, the Road District decided to abandon further planning of the road in August 2009 (Alapeteri 2010).

The proposed road disappeared from the regional development agenda and was not mentioned in Lapland's Regional Development Programs for 2011-2014 and 2014-2017 (Lapin Liitto 2011; Lapin Liitto 2014), nor in the 2017 Northern Finland Transport and Logistics Strategy (Ramboll 2017) or its 2020 update (Lapin Liitto 2020). The Transport System Plan for Lapland 2040 was approved in 2021 and outlined three scenarios for possible development of Lapland's operating environment. The Kuttura-Repojoki road was not discussed even under scenario 3, which envisioned a tense operating environment with closed borders and a situation in which the Arctic region becomes a focus of geopolitical interest and rising international tensions (Lapin Liitto 2021).

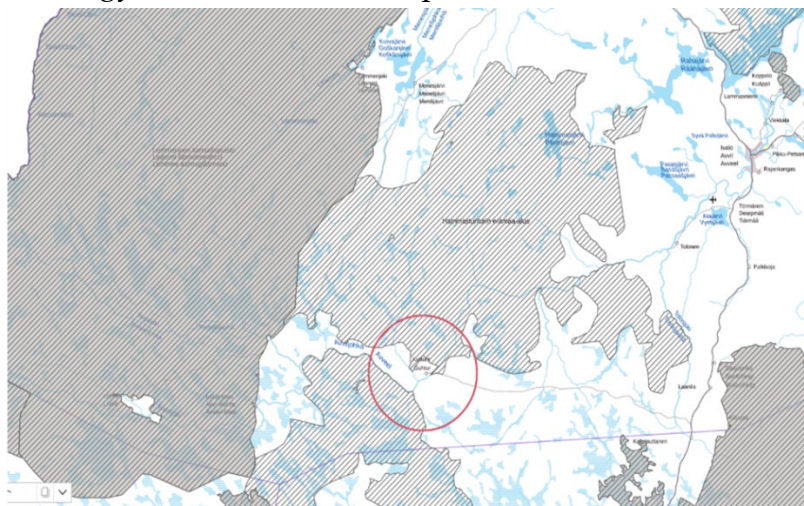
The Regional Council launched the planning of a new transport strategy extending to the year 2050 (Lapin Liikennestrategia 2050) in January 2024, and it was approved on 16 December 2024. The strategy recognized the importance of the transport system in areas such as security of supply, business investment

potential, forestry, mining, tourism and everyday mobility. It also considered the specific characteristics of Lapland, including reindeer herding and the Sámi homeland. Furthermore, the strategy emphasized the significant changes that have occurred in the operating environment. The operational program for 2036 stated that an assessment should be conducted regarding the Kuttura road to explore possibilities for improving east-west traffic in northern Lapland. The operational program for 2050 proposed that the actions based on this assessment should be implemented (Lapin Liitto 2024). Furthermore, on 2 December 2024, the Regional Council of Lapland decided to initiate the process for a Partial Regional Land Use Plan (vaihemaakuntakaava), which would update and expand the Regional Land Use Plan in matters related to security and transport until 2050 (Lapin Liitto 2025).

Divergent Interpretations Regarding the Road Initiative and the Reasons for Its Re-Emergence

The Finnish Defense Command proposed the inclusion of the Kuttura-Repojoki road in the new transport strategy in late 2024, during the final round of consultations (Junka-Aikio 2025). The proposal

emphasized the importance of the road from a military perspective and the need to improve east-west traffic (Pääesikunta 2024). Due to the late stage of the consultation process, other stakeholders



Map 2: Natura 2000 protected areas around Kuttura village
(based on:

<https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/3b9dbcd2e5f940fd822c7fd48be9f8cd>)

were unable to comment on the issue in their own written statements (Junka-Aikio 2025). Furthermore, as the representative of the Sámi Parliament was unable to attend the Regional Council meeting where the issue was introduced as a confidential matter, both the representative organizations of the Sámi and the local reindeer herders only learned about the initiative when it appeared in the media (Informant 1 2025).

When the Regional Council launched the planning of the Partial Regional Land Use Plan, it was anticipated that the Kuttura-Repojoki road would be one of the most challenging issues (Informant 2 2025). Besides the online

petition opposing the road, which gathered 6000 signatures in a relatively short period of time, the need for a careful assessment of environmental impacts was evident, as the proposed routes passes through the Hammastunturi Wilderness Area and either crosses or runs close to a Natura 2000 protected site. Although the wilderness area is continuous, there is a corridor of land between Kuttura and Repojoiki that, for unknown reason, is not included in Natura network (Syke 2025). The specific provision in the Wilderness Act (Erämaalaki 1991) allowing road construction within the Hammastunturi Wilderness Area—from the public road between Inari and Pokka to the village of Kuttura—originates from the earlier transportation needs of schoolchildren but does not explain the decision concerning the Natura protected area.

The municipality of Inari has not been active in this matter, as its main interest lies in lobbying for the improvement of the Inari-Pokka/Kittilä road (Informant 3 2025). The Regional Council of Lapland does not consider itself an active promoter of the road, but as an actor who, according to the law, had to respond to the initiative originating from the Defense Forces (Informant 2 2025). Here, the interpretation of the Land Use and Building Act—which states that land use planning must safeguard the development needs required for national defense, border security and surveillance,

civil protection, and security of supply, and ensure that the operating conditions of the responsible authorities are not undermined—plays a significant role (Alueidenkäyttölaki 1999). Junka-Aikio (2025) argues that the Regional Council incorrectly interprets that projects related to national defense are automatically more important than others and must therefore be carried out. She emphasizes that sectoral legislation cannot be considered in isolation from the broader legal system and international agreements.

While the majority of stakeholders seem to agree that the initiative came from the Defense Forces, some actors question this explanation. In this interpretation, the Regional Council appears as the most active agent, and references to national security are considered as excuse or smokescreen hiding the real motivation, namely the desire to build the road to serve the needs of tourism industry (@pessiyoste 2024; Informant 4 2025). During the process, the possibility of adding a barrier to restrict the road's use to the military and local reindeer herders was proposed. The Regional Council's opposition to this idea has been interpreted as a sign pointing to hidden tourism-related motivations (Informant 4 2025).

The Regional Council is aware of the proposal regarding the barrier, but the starting point for its planning is that the

road is public. Ultimately, the decision concerning limited access to the road belongs to the state. If the road were private, it might not be necessary to include it in the regional land use plan (Informant 2 2025). While the representative of the Sámi Parliament shared the view that geopolitical situation and the Defense Forces initiated the process, she also assumed that the tourism industry would not oppose the road. The only exception might, however, be the tourism actors in Inari as some of the future tourist flows could bypass the village (Informant 1 2025). The representative of the Regional Council understands the concerns regarding tourism-related use of the road but also asks why the road had not been incorporated in earlier regional development plans if the Council had any tourism-related interests in mind (Informant 2 2025).

Meanwhile, references to the Defense Forces' long-term interest in the road have also been made. This interpretation assumes that the Defense Forces have reserved for themselves, or have had an unofficial reservation of, the possibility of extending the road to the Litmour fell radar station, which is located northwest of Kuttura and is already connected to the Inari-Kittilä road by a road blocked with a barrier. According to this interpretation, the new security environment has triggered the

implementation of a plan that is decades old (Informant 5 2025).

During discussion concerning the



Picture 1: The current road to Kuttura village

road, several themes have frequently emerged, ranging from the local need for the road (or the lack thereof) to possible alternative routes, such as existing forest truck further south that could potentially be improved. The interviews also revealed that different stakeholders have varying understandings regarding the schedule, the type of the road that could be built, the road's impact on other activities such as forestry and gold mining, and the role or function of the different regional planning documents (Informant 1 2025; Informant 2 2025; Informant 3 2025; Informant 4 2025). The predominance of negative comments about the road in public discourse and the media has not surprised the Regional Council. In general, those who are satisfied with—or are at least not opposed

to—the proposal tend to be less active in publicly announcing their views on matters related to land use planning (Informant 2 2025).

It has also been argued that those supporting the road are reluctant to express their views due to fear of disapproval and potential exclusion within in the local (Sámi) community (Informant 5 2025). The representative of the Sámi Parliament confirmed that varying opinions exist within the Sámi community. However, the representative organizations formulate the official stance on this matter, which reflects the majority opinion (Informant 1 2025).

Legacy of the Past and Lack of Trust as Obstacles to Negotiations

It has been argued that Finnish people's trust in societal institutions is strong, and the mutual trust between authorities and citizen—described as society's most valuable and most vulnerable resource—is considered the cornerstone of Nordic societies at large (Finnish Government 2023; Nordic Co-Operation 2017). However, problems related to the lack of trust have been widely discussed as part of the Truth and Reconciliation process in Finland and Norway, for example (Andersen and Dankertsen 2023; Valtioneuvosto 2021).

Part of the background material regarding the Kuttura-Repojoki road is not public or accessible to all stakeholders. This type of secrecy is, of course, not unique to Finland or the Arctic. The EU is developing a strategy to improve troops mobility by upgrading 500 infrastructure projects along four military corridors spanning Europe. The exact location of these corridors, selected in cooperation with NATO commanders, remain classified for security reasons. (Anwer 2025). However, the Defense Forces' inability to share information explaining the need for the road in the proposed location, as well as the lack of openness, has often been identified as a problem (Informant 2 2025; Informant 3 2025; Informant 4 2025; TVM; Junka-Aikio 2025).

Claims have also been made that the Regional Council and Ministries do not understand or respect the meaning of negotiations with the Sámi Parliament as mandated by the Sámi Parliament Act. Rather than treated as genuine negotiations, they are considered as a stakeholder meeting that must be conducted in order to proceed. As a result, the demand for Free, Prior, Informed Consent, as outlined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, is not fulfilled. Furthermore, a lack of knowledge concerning local circumstances and differing understandings of (sustainable)

development have also been highlighted (Informant 1 2025; Junka-Aikio 2025).

Besides the challenges related to the role of the Defense Forces as one of the parties involved, the discussion concerning the road is further complicated by the historical burden linked not only to the troubled history between the Sámi and the state of Finland but also to local memories. The connection to the process that took place in the 2000s is strong. While the issues debated—ranging from possible routes and their impact on Sámi culture, reindeer herding and environmental impact—have re-emerged, so too have the opposing arguments and methods of resistance (such as the address). Both the interviews conducted for this study and Junka-Aikio's report indicate that some of the local residents still remember the failed attempt to resist the establishment of the Litmour radar station. However, informants appear to have differing opinions regarding local inhabitants' attitude toward the bridge over the River Ivalo, which was built in 1996 (Informant 5 2025; Junka-Aikio 2025). Furthermore, the current discussion, strongly connected to the perceived threat of Russia, has also evoked memories related to Kuttura's history during the World War 2 (Informant 5 2025).

While security needs are described as the driving force behind the road initiative, there appear to be differing

views on whose security is being referenced. Some residents have questioned the necessity of the road as a means of providing security, noting their ability to escape through the forests if needed (Rauhala and Guttorm 2024). Although the Defense Forces have not openly disclosed their strategic reasoning, it is assumed that the initiative is not based on the needs of the small number of people living in Kuttura village but rather on the need of deploying troops to the area and to evacuating residents from larger villages such as Ivalo (Informant 2 2025).

Questions concerning legacy and history are also linked to the long-standing importance and symbolic value of Kuttura village within Sámi culture. Considered as one of the last remaining traditional Sámi villages, and a source of inspiration for various authors, the village, along with the protection of its current state, holds significance even for Sámi who do not reside there. However, some informants have expressed concern about the declining population, the high average age of residents, and the fact that most younger generations from families historically living in the village have moved away, even if they continue to visit, particularly during the summer (Informant 5 2025; Junka-Aikio 2025).

Ways Forward?

One of the objectives of this study was to identify pathways potentially leading to compromises acceptable to all parties involved. However, this objective has proven difficult to achieve. While advocating a conciliatory approach on many issues, the representative of the Sámi Parliament described the Kuttura-Repojoki road as a case in which any form of compromise is difficult or impossible to envision (Informant 1 2025). According to the representative of the Regional Council, the local reindeer herding cooperatives have been unwilling to assess the advantages and disadvantages of the different proposed routes and have instead simply promoted the southern alternatives, which are located in an area belonging to another cooperative. He also pointed out that if the state's determination to proceed with the project is strong, it might be beneficial for those opposing the road to attempt to include specific planning regulations (such as overpasses and underpasses for reindeers) in the Partial Regional Land Use Plan currently being developed. This could help steer future planning in a less harmful direction (Informant 2 2025). While this pragmatic approach to avoiding the worst possible outcome may be reasonable, it could also weaken the position of those opposing the project if their sole objective is to prevent the road's construction.

While the possibilities and challenges related to a barrier have already been discussed, other ways of limiting or at least controlling access could also be considered. Although a road toll could both reduce the number of road users and generate revenue that could be allocated to the those adversely affected by the road, such solutions are not commonly used in Finland. Furthermore, the existing lack of trust between stakeholders might lead to debates over whether the access restrictions and related—introduced to gain acceptance for the road project—might later be withdrawn.

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Note: English language editing assistance was provided by ChatGPT (OpenAI).

This work was partially supported by: Kakenhi 基盤研究(C)25K1558405; Arctic Challenge for Sustainability 3 (ArCS-3), Program Grant Number JPMXD1720251001; JSPS (フィンランド(RCF)との共同研究)