The European Union's quest for rare earth deposits and the impacts on Sámi communities: a case study of the Finnish Sokli mine

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Globally, renewable energy and the *green transition* are viewed as a positive response to climate change. Wind farms, solar panels, hydroelectric power, and battery storage are often promoted as environmentally friendly ways to eradicate pollution and protect the planet. However, with the mining for rare earth minerals that are needed for these energy projects, many Indigenous communities face mounting challenges. Building renewable energy projects or mining operations on traditional Indigenous lands without their approval or free prior informed consent (FPIC) can repeat colonial patterns by taking land and resources while disregarding the needs of the local inhabitants. The global shift toward renewable energy is generally viewed as a positive step toward addressing climate change. Wind farms, solar panels, and mining projects are promoted as means to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and promote sustainability. However, for many Indigenous communities, these projects can carry risks. The term "green" is often used to describe projects deemed good and sustainable for the larger population and the surrounding environment. When renewable energy developments are carried out on Indigenous lands without proper consent from local Indigenous populations, they risk repeating acts of colonial violence under the pretext of "green" progress. This phenomenon is often referred to as green colonialism (Keskitalo et al 2025). In these ways, green colonialism differs from colonialism as a concept, which is commonly defined as a form of domination over a territory and other individuals, and is usually tied to an influx of permanent settlers connected to the colonizing state or power (Allard 2024). This paper is an exploratory policy analysis that synthesizes multiple legal frameworks, such as FPIC, Indigenous Knowledges (IKs), and current legal approaches to Indigeneity, and uses the case study of the Sokli mine in Finnish

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Eastern Lapland to examine the question of green colonialism in Finnish Lapland.

For Indigenous communities, land is more than a mere resource; it embodies their identity, culture, and way of life. Their knowledge system promotes respect and care for the environment, viewing humans as an integrated part of nature rather than separate from it (Leveridge 2024). When governments and corporations exclude Indigenous voices from green energy project planning, it often leads to damage beyond environmental destruction and cultural erosion. The Sámi people in northern Europe are an example of how this concern continues today. The Sámi homelands, known as Sápmi, span Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula of Russia. An example of contested resource extraction is the proposed Sokli mine in Finland. Sokli mine is hailed as a move towards procuring much-needed resources to not only fuel clean energy but also agricultural economic development. However, the mine is located on reindeer herding territory and thus endangers the Sámi's rights to land and traditional practices. The Sokli mine exemplifies how 'green' initiatives can still pose harm to Indigenous communities when they are not involved in decision-making.

Renewable energy projects quite frequently support communities far away from those bearing the cost of operations and power the homes of municipalities and urban areas far away from where the energy is produced. As such, the hydropower dams of northern Norway fuel the homes of residents in Oslo, many hundreds of miles away. Likewise, the contested Fosen wind park in Norway fuels the homes of residents of Munich, Germany, with a heavy investment of the Stadtwerke München (Munich's utility). Along the same lines, mining companies place heavy external costs on the respective regions and their people, nature, and wildlife while benefiting industries and urban centers that are many hundreds or thousands of kilometers away. Several foreign mining corporations are interested in minerals and rare earths found across Sápmi, the homeland of the Sámi people in the Scandinavian Arctic, such as the Dutch *Akkerman Exploration*, Swedish *Boliden*, or British *Anglo American.* Anglo American, headquartered in London, England, has entered into a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Finnish Minerals Group to explore Sokli mine's viability (Anglo American 2024, Borenius 2024). Anglo American and Finnish Minerals Group share other mining projects, such as Sakatti in Finland.

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The case of the Sokli mine, its promises and limitations

It's really difficult to fight a mine. They have all the resources, they have all the means. They have the money. We don't have that, Kuhmunen said. *We only have our will to exist. To pass these grazing lands to our children.* (Dazio and Haarala 2025)

Moreover, the power imbalance between Sámi communities and the corporations driving these mining projects exacerbates the challenges we face. The Sámi lack the necessary resources to effectively challenge these projects. Without the financial means or human capacity, our ability to protect our rights and our lands is severely limited, leaving us vulnerable to exploitation by mining companies and governments. (Sámi Council 2025)

The proposed Sokli mine is located near Savukoski, Eastern Lapland, 12 miles from the Finnish-Russian international border and just outside the three-kilometer deep closed Finnish "border zone" (Aulio 2024), rendering this area the edge of the European Union and extremely remote. The only remaining semi-open border crossing into Schengen-Europe is *Storskog*, Norway (Nilsen 2025). If approved, the Sokli mine would tap into "one of the few carbonatite intrusions of the [Kola Alkaline Province (KAP)] located in Finland" (Aulio 2024, p. 5). The majority of the KAP is located on Russian territory, specifically the Kola Peninsula. The so-called *Sokli carbonatite complex* has been of mining interest since the late 1960s but it was not until the 2020s, that the rare earths and raw materials of the area became critically important to the agricultural, battery, steel, high tech, and food production industries", promising to be a "future-looking raw-material project" (AFRY AB, 2025) that would "improv[e] European self-sufficiency" that could last many decades (AFRY AB 2025, Aulio 2024, p. 4). The mining area is expected to be 14,580 acres (5,900 hectares) large. The Sokli mine could cement much-needed independence from third nations, such as China, Brazil, and Russia, and at this time, is undergoing a number of reviews to determine economic viability for its owners, Sokli Oy and Finnish Minerals Group, and is touted to bring economic opportunity to this remote area (Simola 2024). The Swedish engineering company and outside economic consultant, AFRY AB, highlights that the mine can supply phosphorus, iron, and many of the rare earths prioritized by the European Union and touts the goal to "find solutions that will ensure the preservation of the existing natural assets where possible and minimise the environmental impact on the Sokli area" (AFRY AB, 2025).

"… that the rare earths and raw materials of the area became critically important …"

Image 1: *Table of rare earths and raw materials to be extracted at Sokli provided in a slide deck for investors* (Heino n.d., slide 41)

At this time, Sokli is expected to assume operations "5 years from the date the mining district redemption gains legal force" (Heino, slide 40). "A final decision on whether to invest in and build the mine is expected in the early 2030s, after which construction of the mine structures would commence" (Sokli 2025). This means that pending needed approvals, the construction of the mine is only a few years away.

Geopolitics and the race for raw-materials

In response to the loss of Russia as a supplier of minerals and metals, and the closing of the Finnish border, the European Commission launched the *Eastern and Northern Programme* in 2024, which is intended to "support [Finland] to develop place-based transition strategies, to contribute to the implementation of your programmes, and [Finish] investments" and pushing cooperation amongst European nations (European Commission, 2024). Furthermore, the European Union passed the *Critical Raw Materials Act* (CRMA) in May of 2024, in response to raw materials markets lost to geopolitical changes, in particular the loss of the Russian market (Quinn 2025). The CRMA allows for the fast-tracking of mining projects with an "expedited 27-month permitting process" (Quinn 2025). At the current moment, roughly 96% of raw materials are produced by other nations in South America and Asia, as well as the Congo and Russia (Nilsen 2020). Both the Eastern and Northern Programme and the CRMA are responses to the mounting geopolitical pressures and Europe's increasing dependency on third nations for raw materials. The Scandinavian north, or European Arctic, has moved into the focus of the EU's energy independence goals.

Meanwhile, Sámi representatives warn that their communities are affected twice: once, by the immediate effects of climate change, and second, by the resource extraction promoted in the name of renewable and green energy. Criticism also addresses the fast-tracking of projects, classified as "Strategic Projects" (Sámi

Council 2025), which skirt the requirement for free prior informed consent (FPIC). These activities, to develop natural resource extraction without FPIC and proper consultation with local Indigenous, here Sámi, communities, are what is largely criticized as *green colonialism.* They impact traditional livelihoods, Indigenous knowledges, create irreversible land use, and threaten to further marginalize Sámi participation in the making of decisions directly impacting Sámi livelihoods (National Committee of The Netherlands 2025).

For the Sámi population, losing land equates to losing access to traditional foods, ceremonies, and stories that have been handed down over generations. Land embodies history, memory, and cultural duty. Consequently, many Indigenous communities, including Sámi, regard safeguarding land as equivalent to safeguarding life itself. The Sámi have endured this conflict for centuries as their territories were segmented by the borders of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia, often without their approval (Joona & Joona 2023). Today, Sámi reindeer herders continue to face challenges as governments prioritize energy development over the rights of Indigenous peoples. The newest attack on Sámi rights and lands has taken form in the Sokli mine. The company claims that it understands the impacts on local communities and reindeer herding, which it seeks to address with its FutureSmart™ mining approach and the purchasing of land areas for protection, such as 3,000 hectares of old forest near Inari, Finland, and restoring and protecting wetlands in Sodankyla (Anglo American 2025, Joona & Joona 2023, Nyssönen 2022). It appears, though, that there is no mechanism for due diligence and FPIC in partnership with the Sámi peoples and reindeer herding communities who are affected directly in this area.

Legal Standing of Indigenous Peoples in the Sokli Mine Proposition

Sámi land and resource rights are legally recognized, yet their practical enforcement often falls short due to a lack of sovereignty (Cambou & Ravna 2023). Unlike Sweden and Norway, Sámi are recognized as a group of people with a protected language and culture, but do not have the capability to completely govern themselves as they are still situated upon "state" owned land ("Human Rights Council" 2022; Government of Norway, 2007; *Finland 1999 (Rev. 2011) Constitution - Constitute* n.d.). Additionally, the Sámi have few legal precedents within Finland. Their right to practice reindeer herding comes from the Reindeer Husbandry Act of 1932, which recognizes all peoples' rights to practice reindeer herding and defines management regions for reindeer (*Finland 1999 (Rev. 2011) Constitution - Constitute*, n.d.). The second form of

legislation that creates legal precedent is the Sámi Parliament Act of 1973, which creates a governing body for the Sámi people and includes a refined definition of who is considered Sámi. Though the Sámi Parliament Act provides the Sámi people with a governing body, it does not recognize their ability to create legislation within Finland's territory and is largely used as a consultation body of Sámi culture (Kuokkanen 2024). The Sámi Parliament Act was limited again in a 1995 revision of "who is Sámi", which reduced its definition to three conditions:

a person is considered Sámi if (1) they, or at least one of their parents or grandparents has learnt Sámi as their mother tongue; (2) the person is a descendant of a person who historically was entered in a land, taxation or population register as a 'mountain', 'forest', or 'fishing' Lapp; or (3) at least one of their parents has, or could have been, registered as a voter for an election to the Sámi Parliament or its predecessor, the Sámi Delegation. (Kuokkanen 2024)

This redefinition allows a broader acceptance of who can be Sámi, but also allows for non-Sámi people to be considered impactful and important to Sámi consultation. In consequence, Finland has not signed onto the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP), which would provide Sámi peoples with the right to FPIC before any projects that impact their lands are initiated (United Nations 2007).

Similarly, the statutes being used by Finland's government in respect to the Sámi peoples in Savukoski, Eastern Lapland, Finland, can be recognized within the decades-long exploration of the viability of the Sokli mine. The notable legal framework that provides regional recognition of the Sámi people falls under the constitution of Finland, but despite its rather vague legalese, it does not recognize the Sámis' rights to land (*Finland 1999 (Rev. 2011) Constitution - Constitute*, n.d.). This has become the leverage point that Finland has used to delegitimize the Sámis' connection to their land in order to produce resource extraction. In relation, the Sokli mine is also providing a new framework for how the Finnish government is increasing capital value from the green transition movement at the cost of the legal standing of the Sámi people.

The integration of International Environmental Laws (IEL) has become a forefront for justifying the construction of the Sokli mine. IELs are a legal framework designed to support anthropocentric narratives that satisfy economic growth, but have been recently used to push countries towards green energy production (Payva Almonte 2025). Paradoxically, the use of IELs as a way to produce carbon-neutral footprints is also

often the legal justification for extracting rare earth materials that cause significant damage to the local ecosystems and communities (Payva Almonte 2025). In concurrence with these laws, the Sokli mine distinguishes the application of Finnish and international law as legitimate over that of the Sámi people. It is arguable that IELs may need to be redesigned to acknowledge environmental damage and the communities they disregard. Further evidence suggests that implementing Indigenous knowledge within these legal frameworks would provide both a reduction of ecological harm and pollution reduction (Payva Almonte 2025). Specifically, resource projects such as the Sokli mine may benefit from the Skolt Sámi knowledge of respect. Respect includes "(1) reasonableness in the use of natural resources to secure continuity; (2) conservation of nature; and (3) respect and appreciation for nature as a large and important whole" (Itkonen 2022). Respect integration of IELs both provides a more sustainable platform for the green transition, as less material will be extracted, preventing wider spread ecological damage, and creating a more defined legal presence for Indigenous communities.

Environmental Impacts

Sámi voices are limited in the consultation process because the Sokli mine is located outside of legally recognized Sámi homelands (Joona & Joona 2023). This lack of recognition based on historic loss of land ownership creates a dilemma where the traditional Sámi ways of life are not protected, and yet they are directly affected by the new fast-tracked projects. Highlighting how climate change exacerbates the need for access to grazing land, such as in the Kemin-Sompio reindeer herding district of roughly 12,000 reindeer (Joona 2020), Finnish reindeer herder Minna Näkkäläjärvi explains, "It's not possible for reindeer husbandry and mining to co-exist in the same area…. The grazing land and migration routes vary from year to year depending on natural conditions" (Nilsen, 2020). In a news interview, Pirita Näkkäläjärvi, Member of the Sámi Parliament and Sámi-language news editor, explains the historic decimation of land and space available to traditional Sámi lifestyles and reindeer herding through other uses, i.e. private land ownership or roads: "When threatened by competing land usage, reindeer herders simply don't have anywhere else to go with their reindeer" (Nilsen 2020). This directly affects the 54 herding cooperatives in Finland, which are required to keep their reindeer within set boundaries (Nilsen 2020).

These concerns were directly reflected in the original application for the Sokli mine by Yara International, which included "a heating plant that would need up to 200,000 solid cubic meters of wood

per year" coming from as far as 100 km away (Joona 2020). The traffic associated with the mine, some 300 vehicles per day, the felling of the forests, and the loss of pasture would effectively prevent reindeer grazing and herding and nullify the Sámi's rightful way of life. This case was taken to the Finnish Supreme Administration Court in 2013, which "decided that under the Mining Act, reindeer herders, reindeer-herder cooperatives and the Sámi Parliament have no right to appeal on reservations[1] in the Sámi homeland. This right is reserved to competing companies only" (Nilsen, 2020). This decision, paired with a lack of funding, representation, and political clout, made it almost impossible for Sámi reindeer herders to fight back. Yet, Yara International did not move forward with the project at that time and transferred "technical and economic assessments, geological models, and rights related to the project to Finnish Minerals Group" (Finnish Minerals Group 2020).

Under the new owners, Finnish Minerals Group and Sokli Oy, and mining operator Anglo American, the project is touted as a FutureSmart Mining™ and sustainable mining operation. As such, the company intends to enter the deposit that is below the Viiankiaapa nature conservation area from outside the protected area and with a minimal footprint above the surface. Anglo American furthermore states that 50% of tailings would be used for mine backfill, and that they follow principles of *voluntary compensation* to achieve a net positive impact and emphasize building trust with communities, i.e., reindeer herders. Overall, the company presents an ambitious outlook of extracting raw materials without major impact on the local populations or environment, as concerns around traffic, population increase related to the needed amount of workers, impacts on reindeer grazing, and possible pollution (i.e., uranium) are not directly addressed.

Environmentalists have cautioned about the dangers of the pollution of nearby rivers. In fact, the "main unconventional resource for uranium is rock phosphate" (World Nuclear Association 2025), which will be mined in Sokli. Since the early 2000s, opponents to the mine have warned that "phosphorus ores contain tenfold amounts of radioactive materials like uranium,

[1] *Reservation* refers to "reservations in the Mining Act (621/2011)", a mechanism to reserve land for mining exploration and "priority for an exploration permit and a mining permit" (Metsä-Simola et al 2022, p. 13).

thorium, radium and polonium" and threaten to pollute nearby national parks, wilderness, and rivers (Nuclear Heritage.net, 2015). The implications of uranium pollution on Indigenous lands have a critical precedent in the southwestern United States and similarly pose a serious concern for Indigenous rights in Finnish Lapland. At the same time, phosphorus, which is set to be primarily mined at Sokli, is not without concern either. Phosphorus and nitrogen use in synthetic fertilizers has had devastating impacts on coastlines, such as a "record-setting 8,000-kilometer-long seaweed belt" in the Atlantic Ocean (United Nations 2024).

The role of Indigenous Knowledges

Plants and animals serve as teachers, and humans have obligations to them (Kimmerer 2023). This perspective is significant because it highlights that land is more than mere property or territory; it is a living ecosystem in which humans are part of a broader community. For Indigenous peoples, caring for the land is essential, integral to their survival, culture, and identity, with colonialism slowly being recognized as an essential feature of capitalism. This raises the question "what does the earth ask of us?", suggesting a more holistic approach to taking resources from the earth.

In the Arctic, Sámi reindeer herders exemplify Indigenous knowledge in action. They possess a profound understanding of snow, weather patterns, and animal behavior, which has been inherited through generations. This knowledge also evolves to meet new challenges. Sámi herders collaborate with scientists to develop climate services that forecast seasonal shifts, providing support for herding practices while honoring local traditions (Terrado et al. 2024). They view climate change as both an environmental and justice issue, and as warming affects grazing lands, they emphasize the importance of integrating scientific research with Indigenous cultural knowledge to develop effective solutions (Lemet & Näkkäläjärvi 2009). This partnership demonstrates that Indigenous knowledge remains relevant, it is innovative, adaptable, and essential for addressing climate change. In a similar comparison, study conducted in connection to the oil/tar sands of Alberta, Canada explores what true coexistence would look like if Indigenous voices were included in the development of extractive industries. The study found that "misrepresentation of the Aboriginal landscape" and consultation "only designed to secure consent" ultimately perpetuate a "mainstream settler colonial viewpoint" (Baker & Westman 2018, p. 151-152). By evaluating the history and culture of local Indigenous tribes, green energy projects could be constructed in

efficient ways for all peoples, rather than primarily for non-Indigenous populations.

Indigenous knowledges are a scientific method and extend beyond cultural heritage, serving as a practical resource for developing energy and climate solutions that honor both communities and ecosystems. There have been accusations of cultural genocide of the Sámi people in regards to resource extraction projects and the continued threat of the loss of culture and survival for the benefit of Europe's green energy development. With recent constructions of windfarms disturbing reindeer herding and the looming construction of the Sokli mine contaminating the earth, Indigenous peoples are losing their ways of life at the hands of green energy development. When governments overlook these facts and sideline Indigenous Knowledges, they not only damage Indigenous peoples' existence but also miss critical opportunities to foster genuinely sustainable futures.

What's next for Sokli Mine and Finland's energy development?

Finland is one of Europe's most industrialized nations and a leader in mining (Finnish Energy 2025) and is actively working to increase renewable energy to 50% of total energy consumption by 2030 (Barnhart 2024). The newest construction of the Sokli mine could contaminate vegetation, soil, and water, resulting in loss of biodiversity and herding lands for the local reindeer herders (Global Atlas of Environmental Science 2025). Such projects pose a threat to the traditional ways of life of the Sámi community. The Sokli mine exemplifies the critical representation of colonial contradiction within Europe's green transition.

While the transition to green energy is central to the fight to combat climate change, the marginalization of Indigenous peoples and their knowledges highlights its social unsustainability. A just transition entails centering local Indigenous and rural communities by involving them in the planning of future land projects and replacing exploitative systems with those rooted in respect, fairness, and representation.

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