

Finland's plans of the Arctic Ocean rail line are buried deep beneath the ice – or are they really?*

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Northern Finland is located only a few dozen kilometres from the northernmost Norwegian ports of the Arctic Ocean. Before the Second World War, Finland had a port and a direct connection to the ice-free Arctic Ocean. In the peace agreement with the Soviet Union in 1944, Finland lost this connection. Since then, discussions have from time to time popped up on how Finland could develop its logistics to the High North. Melting of the Arctic sea ice has strengthened the desire to gain more substantial logistical access to the Arctic Ocean. Often these discussions have included visions of the Arctic Ocean rail line.

The latest attempt to open a railway to the Arctic Ocean started in the early 2010s. An important step was the year 2017 when the Finnish Minister of Transport and Communication requested to explore the possibilities of a new Arctic railway in cooperation with the Norwegian transport

authorities. According to the Ministry, a route to the Arctic Ocean would strengthen Finland's security of supply and improve Finland's logistical position and accessibility. At that stage, the projected cost to Finland was approximately two billion (one thousand million) euros.

There were several options. Two of them would cross the region of Lapland to Norwegian ports, either Kirkenes or Tromsø. One suggested connecting the Russian railway system to the Kola Peninsula. Additional two alternatives would pass through Sweden to the Norwegian harbour Narvik. In the bigger picture, the Arctic Ocean railway is tied to the vision of being connected with the European railway network through an undersea tunnel from the capital city Helsinki to Tallinn, Estonia. The access to the Arctic Ocean would open a connection to the Northeast Passage, shortening the distance from Central Europe to Chinese ports considerably. However, only if and when the ice would melt.

These Arctic railway plans gained plenty of attention nationally and locally. Interest groups of several industries and the Regional Council of

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Lapland were among the active supporters of the megaproject. The Sámi Parliament, Reindeer Herders' Association and several northernmost municipalities opposed the project, with the support of non-governmental organizations, such as Greenpeace.

The main arguments for the Arctic railway included new business opportunities and strengthening of the national security of supply. The opponents argued the megaproject's negative impacts on the indigenous Sámi culture, risks to traditional livelihoods, especially reindeer herding, as well as the local ways of living. The confrontation was visible in public discourse and demonstrations against the rail line gained much attention. The line from the Norwegian port of Kirkenes through the Sámi Homeland to Rovaniemi was the primary option. It was calculated to cost less for Norway and would have supported the development of the Kirkenes harbour.

The controversial project lost much of its national support after the Finnish-Norwegian working group announced in its report in 2019 that the potential volumes of cargo would be too small to justify the high costs of the railway. After the report, the Finnish Minister of

Transportation and Communication took a mainly neutral stance on the Arctic railway. The Regional Council of Lapland, representing Lapland's municipalities, remained the leading supporter. However, the northernmost municipalities have mainly continued their opposition towards the planned railway.

The Arctic Ocean rail line suffered a significant setback after the redraft of Lapland development plans was accepted by a vote of 43 to 3 in the Regional Council of Lapland. The vote was supposed to mean the end of railway planning. However, Markus Lohi, the Council Chair, confirmed the decision, which overrode the earlier will of the Board of the Regional Council to continue the planning process in a slightly obscure way: *"Because the will of the council was so broad, the Lapland Regional Council will not support the Arctic Ocean route [...] In the light of current information, the Arctic Ocean line is not economically viable, and it won't become so in the near future either. However, it could happen in the coming decades.* (The Finnish Broadcasting Company Yle 19.5.2021 [Lapland council scraps plans for controversial Arctic rail line | Yle Uutiset | yle.fi](#)").



Map. The Arctic railway transit corridor. Foto: Arctic Corridor

A few months later, on the 15th of October 2021, The Regional Council of Lapland announced a new proposal that did not surprise those who had followed the Finnish Arctic railway plans for decades. It suggested a new railway plan that would be a loop not entering the Sámi homeland but instead connecting the existing northernmost railways in Kolari and Kemijärvi. This new loop would connect the municipalities of Kittilä and Sodankylä to the existing railway network in Kemijärvi and Kolari. According to the Regional Council of Lapland, the railway would foster tourism, mining, and forestry. No cost

analysis yet exists, and the planning is at an early stage. Critics claim the new loop railway plan is only a trick to get the existing railway further north, a step closer to the melting Arctic Ocean. Either way, the rail line plans continue to divide the local communities.

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