

Briefing Note

A Survey of Finnish Media Debates on the Arctic Corridor Railway Planned to Connect the Silk Road and the Polar Silk Road

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Introduction – China’s Interest in the Arctic

China’s *Silk Road*, *One Belt-One Road*, and *Polar Silk Road* global policies and strategies have given plans for the construction of a railway across Lapland, discussed in Finland over a long period, new impetus and an increased understanding of its logistical importance. At its first seminar (23rd-24th May 2018) the recently established Eurasian Studies network initiative at the University of Eastern Finland addressed the prospect of an Arctic railway, attracting the attention of Finnish bodies such as the Finnish Transport Safety Agency, TRAFI.

Finland has offered China cooperation and joint investment opportunities in this Arctic railway project. “The growing collaboration between the world’s second-largest economy and a small Nordic nation of 5.5 million people highlights a little-known fact: China’s One Belt, One Road (OBOR) project has an Arctic angle, and Finland could play a pivotal role” (Tsuruoka, 2017). The railway would be an essential link, connecting the Silk Road and the One Belt, One Road with the Arctic and Polar Silk Road route, making Finland a logistics hub in Northern Europe. “The Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st century Maritime Silk Road (Belt and Road Initiative), an important cooperation initiative of China, will bring opportunities for parties concerned to jointly build a ‘Polar Silk Road’, and facilitate connectivity and sustainable economic and social development of the Arctic” (White paper, 2018, China unveils, 2018). Intensification of economic and technological cooperation in the

area is expected in fields such as the Arctic maritime industry, Arctic geology, marine and polar research, environmental protection technology, and shipping and maritime safety, including vessel monitoring and reporting (Staalesen, 2017). Because China is interested in raw materials from Europe and resources from Arctic regions, it may see the Arctic railway and the port of Kirkenes as a third transport hub serving Chinese interests, after Piraeus and Rotterdam (Miettunen, 2018b; Peipponen, 2017).

Such global projects are “a matter of change in relations between institutions, and between institutions and the ‘life-world’, which ties economy, governance and culture together in new ways” (Fairclough, Cortese & Ardizzone, 2007: 29). This dominant strategy for a transition between economy and governance informs economic and social regulations which call for a change in cultural values. Strategies for transition structure “relations between scales – e.g. the structured relations between global, macro-regional (e.g. EU), national and local scales with respect to the governance of national territories. [...] Strategies of governments, political parties, international agencies, members of local communities, etc.” (Fairclough, Cortese & Ardizzone, 2007: 30).

If a port in Kirkenes and the Arctic railway are built, “China would have access to a new piece of infrastructure which easily can bring goods to and from the whole North and Central European market” (Staalsen, 2015). Globalization promises big changes for the residents, local communities, and Indigenous groups of northern Finland. A balance is needed between rapid geopolitical changes to society and the sustainability of local communities and Indigenous groups. Following the assumption that media texts “do not merely ‘mirror realities’, as is sometimes naively assumed; they constitute versions of reality in ways which depend on the social positions and interests and objectives of those who produce them” (Fairclough, 1995: 103), it is important to see all sides of the debate for and against the construction of a new Arctic railway across the territory of Finnish Lapland. My survey of the Finnish media covers both the economic and democratic scenarios for European states, reflecting on political, business, local community, and Sami interest in planned global projects. In this research note I outline some of the main discussions concerning the human factor in this development plan, contrasting the different visions of politicians and locals, following a Critical Discourse Analysis approach.

A Critical Examination of the Media

Interviews with locals and other articles in the media chart the changes in the discussion and planning of the Arctic railway. The most efficient approach for an analysis of media information is Critical Discourse Analysis, a research approach for theory development and extension in social media. Through the prism of Critical Discourse Analysis “social media can be conceptualized as an emerging frontier where new forms of social relations [...] develop at the intersection of human collective communicative acts and information technology” (Albert & Salam, 2013: 1). Critical Discourse Analysis sees events and texts in a broader social and cultural context. It may be described as “a proposition which focuses on how power abuse, dominance and inequality are practiced in the discursivity of the social and political context” (Ramanathan & Hoon, 2017: 7). However, the present research uses newspaper analysis “to identify messages, examine how those messages are framed, and see how existing coverage of

an issue could be improved” (Writing a Media Analysis, 2004: 1). This variation might be described as “textually oriented discourse analysis”. The application of media discourse analysis to the planning issue is only “one analytical strategy among many, and it often makes sense to use discourse analysis in conjunction with other forms of analysis, for instance ethnography or forms of institutional analysis” (Fairclough, 2003: 2).

This affords a theoretical framework for the study of social issues through analysis of discourse, where “social media is a discursive system in which social issues are enacted through textual discourse” (Albert & Salam, 2013: 6), helps to define “power differences among social actors as manifested in communication and language” (Albert & Salam, 2013: 1), and “encompasses evaluation of the discourse, the relationships between the discourse communicators, [and] attributes of the institution which impact the discourse” (Albert & Salam, 2013: 2). “Critical Discourse Analysis can be used as a conceptual and analytical framework to investigate and make sense of the ways in which the media conveys meaning and how it generates ideologies through linguistic choices, so that they can be more easily challenged” (Sriwimon & Zilli, 2017: 141). Texts are elements of social events, and “we are not only concerned with texts as such, but also with interactive processes of meaning-making”, where “meaning-making depends upon not only what is explicit in a text but also what is implicit – what is assumed” (Fairclough, 2003: 10-11).

“The analysis of representational processes in the text, therefore, comes down to an account of what choices are made – what is included and what is excluded, what is made explicit or left implicit, what is foregrounded and what is backgrounded, what is thematized and what is unthematized, what process types and categories are drawn upon to represent events, and so on” (Fairclough, 1995: 104). In discussing text analysis Fairclough suggests two major aspects of representation in the text: structuring and combining propositions to demonstrate the power of the media word. “A text’s presuppositions are important in the way in which it positions its reader or viewers or listeners: how a text positions you is very much a matter of the common-sense assumptions it attributes to you” (Fairclough, 1995: 107). In media reports they establish represented realities as convincing.

What the Newspapers Say

Finnish newspaper articles on the subject come from three categories of speaker: state officials, regional officials, and the Sami community. A review of texts reveals the tools of meaning-making. “The social effects of texts depend upon processes of meaning-making – we might want to say that the social effects of texts are mediated by meaning-making, or indeed that it is meanings that have social effects rather than texts as such” (Fairclough, 2003: 11).

Initially (in 2016), the materials on a possible Arctic railway referred to the international need for and international investments in the project. Reference to the outside interest in and support for the railway project could be seen in most publications. “The track is not just for Norway and Finland, but China, Asia, all the Nordic countries and the Baltic countries” (Miettinen, 2018a). “If Finnish state authorities take the initiative to access a railway connection between Finland and Kirkenes, then Norwegian authorities are positive to contribute” (Staalesen, 2017c). Former Finnish Prime Minister Lipponen “underlined that it is high time for the EU to secure its logistics access to the Arctic Ocean by launching a project

for a rail-road connection from Southern Finland to Kirkenes, Norway, the last ‘missing link’ in EU South-North traffic network” (Staalesen, 2017c). The railway construction should also be seen with “the so-called North-East cable initiative, a projected laying of a fiber cable across the Northern Sea Route from Asia to Europe” (Staalesen, 2017d). According to Finnish Foreign Minister Timo Soini “the construction of a railway from Finland to Norway would take full advantage of Europe as a whole” (Akimo, 2017). “With the track we could keep the Arctic region alive and get our business here. [...] The track would also play a major role in the trade between Europe and China, which is about three billion euros a day” (Akimo, 2017). The proposed railway will speed up the development of the region and promote its growth and employment and improve climate change preparedness (Staalesen, 2017a). No other solutions for the Lapland transport route, such as upgrading the local road to a motorway, can serve this goal (Jokiranta, 2017). “They (China) now clearly have this One Belt, One Road strategy. They want to improve connections between China and Asia to Europe, they want to invest in such transport infrastructure” (Peipponen, 2017).

Some articles especially stress the example of Norway’s preparation for the railway project (for example, Mienttunen, 2017, Kankaanranta, 2017b, Staalesen, 2017b, Staalesen, 2017c, Akimo, 2017, etc.). By 2018 external factors had been transformed in Finnish newspapers from factors under consideration to decisive and critical factors: “It is not even Finland’s decision, it is an international and European logistical solution that connects Arctic Europe more firmly with Central Europe. The line would connect Central Europe with North-East” (Torvinen, 2018a). “Finland will no longer be a periphery or island in the future, but a hub for global passenger, goods and data flows” (Taponen, 2018).

Concerning domestic factors, the state authorities stress: “What we need now ... [is] to make the project real in cooperation across the whole country and the whole political spectrum. [...] The decision has to serve all the parties in the best possible way” (Staalesen, 2016). The benefits of the project in its entirety are demonstrated by the opinions of Members of Parliament (Jäämeren Rata, 2018). Furthermore, evaluating Lapland officials’ perception of the railway underlines that “it is [an] exceptionally big dream from Lapland’s point of view” (Kankaanranta, 2017a). The tourist business, however, offers no support for the railway project, whatever route it may take (Pylkkänen, 2018).

Some newspapers see the discussion concerning the plans for a railway as simple: if the EU is involved as a financier of the railway project, Lapland will receive large investments in various areas, and “all these debates should be stopped” and only straightforward charting would remain (Mauno, 2018). Meanwhile, articles covering meetings of local Lapland councils such as the League of Lapland reveal that there is no agreement about the project among the population: the representatives of various regions speak about their own problems and say little about the future of Lapland as a whole (Rytkönen, 2017).

The newspapers point out that the “Lapland disagreement would not be swept away by the Ministry of Transport” (Kallio, 2018). However, the Sami attitude towards the proposed railway is very negative, as is revealed in these headlines: “Sanila-Aikio: Railway would be a complete disaster for the Sami” (Torvinen, 2018b); “Sami concerned about Arctic railway plans” (Nilsen, 2017). Nevertheless, very few articles express this opinion. The Sami are very concerned about such a railway going through their land without regard to their rights. “The

railway will go through such areas that are very important to Sami people, the people that are practicing their traditional livelihoods, especially fishing and reindeer herding. If we have a railway, it will separate areas from each other and practicing Sami traditional livelihoods would be very difficult” (Nilsen, 2017). The new northbound railway could prove a threat to the Sami culture as we know it today. “It might be a kind of decision that will make the Sami people extinct. [...] The Sami people are really to be involved with the decision-making and the planning. If there are communities which say no, that means no” (Nilsen, 2017). According to the Minister of Transport and Communications all these challenges and repercussions “are treated with the greatest seriousness in the continuation study” (Taponen, 2018). Obviously, ‘to treat’ the situation there should be considerably more dialogue, open to the public, and all sides of the planning process should be heard. So far, the Sami have not accepted this. It concerns more than the railway: there will be more mines in the Sami homeland, more forestry, and more tourism. “We will deal with the ministerial decision at the top level, the Sami Parliament, so that we have an official position on the project” (Torvinen, 2018b).

The study of the variability of identities and relations in media news segments is a special field that aims to answer the question: does the media’s construction of the relationship between politicians and newspapers’ readerships constitute a democratisation or does it play a “legitimizing role in respect of existing power relations?” (Fairclough, 1995: 126). To analyse the goal of the key players in the discussion, it is necessary to understand that “how relations are constructed in the media between [its] audience and those who dominate the economy, politics and culture, is an important part of a general understanding of relations of power and domination in contemporary societies” (Fairclough, 1995: 126). Seen from three different perspectives – those of state officials, regional authorities, and the Sami population – the discussion of the railway project is a complicated process. It is seen as desirable at the state level, supported by the regional authorities and business, but seriously questioned by the Sami. The Finnish media reflects the attitudes of all three players in various but consistent ways: there are no variations in the perspectives and expressions of the three sides. Each could be seen as inflexible in their perception of the changes in the period between June 2017 and May 2018. Such reflection by the media proves that if the Arctic railway is to be constructed, much work needs to be done to bring together the desires of state officials with the awareness and fears of the Sami reindeer-herding population. The purpose and motivation of Critical Discourse Analysis is “to improve reality for low-powered groups” (Albert & Salam, 2013: 3).

Instead of a Conclusion

Based on media discussions after 2017, the finding is that locals have been marginalized by policymakers and continue to hold largely negative views of such mega-projects. There have been significantly fewer articles reflecting the Sami voice than those describing the opinions of officials.

The discussion has now been transformed, as China no longer seems interested in the development of the railway. Current discussions suggest that the governments of Finland and Norway will move ahead with their own plans, applying for EU investment. In future my

research will examine this Nordic attempt to transform the region into a logistics hub. What exactly is the aim, and what precisely are the lessons to be learned from the Chinese experience? This experience may prove of interest to Norwegian specialists in evaluating their segment of the railway. The need for a transport link between the Silk Road and the proposed Polar Silk Road is obvious, but its route and concept seem a long-term topic for discussion.

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