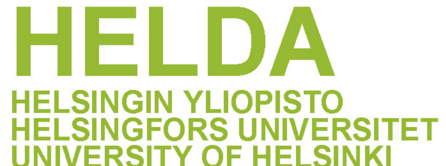

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ARTICLE

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Fear of the Russian bear? Negotiating Finnish national identity online

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Abstract

National identities are an important tool for collective political persuasion and mobilisation among political elites and lay people. Recent research on nationalism has shown that the negotiating of national identities, like any political deliberations and operations, increasingly occur on the Internet. In this study, we contribute to this research by examining the relational construction of Finnish identity online. More specifically, we focus on how the users of the largest discussion forum in Finland constructed Russia as a threat. A massive dataset spanning 12 years enables us to map the recurring patterns and temporal shifts in the discussions. We show that the construction of Russia as a threatening national other was used to both oppose and support Finland's alliance with the West, namely, becoming a member of NATO.

KEYWORDS
discourse analysis, Finland, national identity, national other, Russia, social media

1 | INTRODUCTION

Despite social media enabling the construction of global communities and a sense of interconnectedness, traditional ways of constructing national identity have seemingly also survived in the Internet era (e.g., Soffer, 2013). Nationalism can be defined as a collective strategy and successful socio-cultural recipe for constructing the surrounding

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world, one affected by various political and cultural modernisation processes (Pakkasvirta, 2013, p. 89). Strong evidence exists that social media discussions can maintain and strengthen traditional (exclusionary) nationalism and national stereotypes with renewed intensity (Bratten, 2005; Pakkasvirta, 2018; Pettersson & Sakki, 2017). As argued by Soffer (2013; see also Szulc, 2017), the architecture, contents and dynamics of the Internet reproduce and consolidate nationalist discourses.

Various scholars examining social movements on social media also acknowledge that the Internet has profoundly changed the ways in which nationalism is reproduced and disseminated (Bouvier, 2015; Magdy et al., 2016). For example, Skey (2009) has suggested that the emergence of social media sites that transcends national boundaries has profound repercussions for the ways in which nationalism is mediated. Since the Internet and social media platforms invite users to create, negotiate and disseminate new forms of national identity and re-interpret nationalism, sophisticated new methods and ways of analysing social media and other naturally produced digital material not originally created for research purposes are also required. This is especially relevant because a significant transformation is taking place in the ways people are engaging with political issues, namely a shift from collective and communicative actions to *connective* actions, referring to personalised content sharing across various media networks (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Though introducing digital media does not in itself dramatically change the core dynamics of traditional community-building processes, the logic of connective action does change them.

As a result of increasing interest in studying online discourses, different views have emerged among scholars about the implications of the Internet and social media for nationalism (Szulc, 2017). On the one hand, social media has accelerated the mainstreaming of nationalist anti-immigration political movements across Europe (e.g., Atton, 2006; Bratten, 2005; Pettersson & Sakki, 2017). On the other hand, the relation between nationalism, social media and populism has also been heatedly contested in the past decade (Brubaker, 2020). However, the success of nationalist discourses is not limited to exclusionary representations. For example, Szulc (2015) has studied how transnational minorities, such as the LGBTQ community, negotiate national affiliations online. He showed how pervasive nationalist discourses are in online environments and that the Internet provides a space where communities often excluded from the national project can construct themselves as part of an alternative online nation. Thus, as social media has the potential to both reinforce and challenge the nationalist order as a guiding principle of the social world, it deserves the analytic attention of scholars interested in contemporary forms of nationalist mobilisation.

The role of social media as a central venue for the (re)construction of national and political identities becomes accentuated during political conflicts and turbulences. Thus, social media signals can be used to model the ideological coordinates in changing societal discourse, as demonstrated in, for example, studies on the Brexit debate (e.g., Bastos & Mercea, 2018). As we next discuss more thoroughly, these coordinates often point at a "threatening national other" (Muller, 2008; see also Todorov, 1984) employed in both political and lay discourse to use national identities to both produce and account for political change. In this study, we explore the discursive dynamics through which users of a popular Finnish online discussion forum mobilise the discourse on a threatening national other and use it to make sense of national affiliations and identity.

1.1 | National identity construction in lay discourse

Previous research on how nationalism and national identities are discussed and negotiated online has focused on public and media representations (Saunders, 2011). However, as Billig (1995) has famously argued, nationalism is constantly being reproduced in everyday interactions and practices as a taken-for-granted principle for organising social life. The banal nationalism thesis calls for scholars of nationalism to direct their analytic attention to everyday life and micro-level interactions among ordinary people (De Cillia et al., 1999).

An important note related to banal nationalism is that the (re)production of the nation is a relational process: The national "us" is constructed in relation to a national "them" (Muller, 2008). In other words, national identity work is characterised by the simultaneous construction of sameness and difference (De Cillia et al., 1999). The construction of national differences and similarities online was recently examined by Pakkasvirta (2018), who studied national stereotypes of Latin Americans in *Suomi24* and demonstrated that online discussions are used to reproduce and disseminate old and established stereotypical images of other nations.

However, in the construction and negotiation of nationhood, some national out-groups are more relevant than others. Triandafyllidou (1998) argues that those national "others" that pose a threat to the nation are particularly influential in the construction of national identities. These significant others can pose a threat either to the territorial independence or to the cultural distinctiveness of the nation. While the role of national others in political discourse is a widely studied phenomenon (e.g., Muller, 2008), previous research on the construction of national identities and nationalism in online lay discourse in relation to threatening others is scarce.

A study by Baruh and Popescu (2008) offers an example of relational national identity construction in the Turkish context. They analysed Turkish students' online discussions of Cyprus and identified three metaphors in Turkish nationalistic discourse regarding Cyprus: blood, sports and family. Students used the metaphor of blood to legitimise Turkish people's interference in the future of Cyprus by referring to the sacrifices made on behalf of Cyprus. They used a sports metaphor to present Cyprus as a prize to be won and to highlight the strategic dimension of international relations. They used the metaphor of family to juxtapose relations between Turkey and Cyprus with the relationship between a parent and a child.

The rhetorical strategies used to construct national identities are dependent on the relative polarisation of the intergroup context. Finell and Liebkind (2010) studied how high school students in Finland rely on and account for cultural symbols when constructing their national identities and found that symbols depicting intergroup antagonism or outgroup threat (i.e., war and competition) served as a source of oppositional (i.e., fight and achievement) strategies, resulting in a more nationalistically framed identity (Finell & Liebkind, 2010). Indeed, one of the most critical discursive contexts for discussions on the threat to national identity is war, which can become part of the narrative of national identity, as Campana (2006) argues in her analysis of Chechen national identity construction. According to Gibson (2011), examining the language of war and peace offers a fruitful terrain for discourse analysis related to a wide array of social issues, including the nation and national identities.

In this study, we examine how the users of Finland's largest online discussion forum, *Suomi24* (approximately 70 million discussions), construct and negotiate Finnish national identity in relation to a threatening national other, Russia. In addition to considering national identity construction as a relational process, it should also be recognised as a temporal process (Condor, 2006). Wodak et al. (2009) argue that the discursive construction of national identity revolves around the three temporal axes of the past, the present and the future. We are interested in the temporality of relational Finnish national identity construction in two ways. First, as suggested by Kolakowski (1995) and Wodak et al. (2009), we examine how national identity is constructed by drawing on historical memories and future expectations regarding the relationship between Finland and Russia. Second, we are interested in both the commonalities and the temporal shifts in the discursive construction of Russia as a threatening other in the lay discourse, located along a continuum between 2004 and 2016 and embedded in the context of two conflicts initiated by Russia, namely, the war in Chechnya and the invasion of Crimea. As described below, these conflicts challenged relations between Russia and the EU, especially with neighbouring countries like Finland, fuelling nationalist discourses in such border areas. While previous research has examined the ways in which political elites and the media have constructed the relations between Russia and its neighbouring countries, we focus on the online discourse in a forum that invites ordinary Finns to participate in societal discussions. With this focus, we aim to examine the processes through which societal and political events and circumstances are justified and contested. We argue that the lay constructions of national others and related negotiations of national identity have societal relevance and consequences beyond their immediate discursive context and therefore deserve a critical discursive reading.

1.2 | The construction of national identities in the border regions of Russia

National borders are crucial to the reproduction of national identity narratives (Paasi & Prokkola, 2008), but even more so if they invoke a symbolism involving wars and security concerns. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many countries sharing a border with Russia, such as Finland, also became border states between the EU and Russia, providing a new scale for nationalism and national identification in the region (Paasi, 1999). At the same time, Russian armed conflicts in Chechnya and Ukraine also resulted in new security concerns related to stability in the region. Thus, despite some fluctuations in meaning, threat perceptions are still seemingly the main denominator in contemporary discourses related to Russia in the neighbouring countries (Mole, 2007b; Noreen & Sjöstedt, 2004; Zarycki, 2004).

The current threat discourse in the region is not restricted just to military threat. It has traditionally included a cultural threat as well, emphasising the difference between Russia (cultural other, them) and the "West," or Europe (us), particularly in Estonia's discourse (Kuus, 2002). Thus, the portrayals of Russia have also functioned as discursive tools for claiming to belong to Europe and the broadly defined West. For example, Noreen and Sjöstedt (2004) have argued that since gaining independence, Estonian political discourse on Russia has been characterised by three dominant assumptions which are seen as given and incontestable among different political actors. First, it presupposes that the "West" is good, while the "East," represented by Russia, is less desirable. Second, the discourse assumes that Estonia is a modern and progressive state, both in comparison with Western European states and with the East in particular. Third, the discourse emphasises the country's European roots and the uniqueness of Estonian identity.

In a similar vein, Zarycki (2004) discussed the role of Russia in the construction of national identity in Poland. He argued that the representation of Russia as a threat is often employed in accounting for the history of Poland, especially to emphasise the Russian interferences and the role of Poland as the defender of Europe. Zarycki (2004) noted that in the current discussions, the most important function of the Russian threat representation is to legitimise the unity of Polish national identity and institutions. Presenting Russia as a threatening cultural other has also played a crucial role in the Finnish nation-building project after Finland gained independence in 1917 (Karemaa, 1998).

More currently, Finell and Liebkind (2010) have identified a rhetoric regarding the threat posed by Russia in the construction of Finnish national identity, particularly in adolescents' accounts of pictures representing the Winter War (1939–1940). The participants unambiguously defined the Russians as the national other by using Finnish derogatory term for Russians, *Ryssä*, and also such concepts as enemy or adversary. The authors noted that in this way, the respondents legitimised the courage and resilience of the small ingroup against a massive threat.

With the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the military threat posed by Russia dominated discussions in neighbouring countries. Nevinskaitė (2017) has analysed how Russian foreign politics was framed in the Lithuanian media from March 2014 to February 2015. Her analysis showed that the dominant frame of Russia as aggressor and the potential threat to Lithuanian national security rests on events in Ukraine, which are used as a justification, or an argument, for security claims. Koch and Vainikka (2019) similarly investigated how the Ukrainian crisis affected trust perceptions towards Russia in the Finnish border regions. The authors argue that after the Ukrainian conflict, the discourses of trust informing Finnish-Russian relations were predominantly marked by uncertainties and fear.

1.3 | Context of this study: Relations between Russia and Finland

In traditional political history, Finno-Russian relations have been characterised by wars between Sweden and Russia. The eastern provinces of the Swedish Kingdom were annexed by the Russian Empire in 1809 during the Napoleonic Wars, resulting in the Grand Duchy of Finland. Stories of violence and images of threats based on relations between Finland and the other have always played a role in Finnish national narratives (Paasi, 2000).

Especially after the October Revolution in 1917, Soviet Russia served as a new kind of other in the strengthening Finnish national identity. The revolution in Russia also accelerated the Finnish declaration of independence

in December 1917, which was followed by a brutal civil war (1917–1918) between the reds (socialist workers and landless peasants) and whites (the bourgeoisie and landowners), who won the war. While the official and strongly anti-socialist “white state” equated Russians with communists, many old negative stereotypes of Russia and Russians strengthened in a new ideological way, and relations between the two nations remained tense.

In November 1939, the Soviet Union attacked Finland, soon after Stalin and Hitler had signed a pact dividing up the neighbouring borderlands between them (Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and its secret protocol). During World War II, Finland first fought a separate Winter War against the Soviet Union, followed by a Continuation War as a co-belligerent with Germany. During the wars, the Finns suffered 90,000 casualties and killed an even larger number of Soviets (320,000 dead). In the peace treaty of 1944, Finland lost more than 10% of its pre-war territory, including the major city Vyborg, to the Soviet Union.

During the Cold War, Finland successfully balanced itself between the Western and Eastern blocs, being the only European capitalist country to share a lengthy border with the Soviet Union. After WWII, Finland, through skilful diplomacy and new social welfare policies, became a member of the Nordic family of nations (Kettunen, 2001, 2012) while still maintaining its role as a neutral country in accordance with the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance with the Soviet Union—but not joining the Warsaw Pact (Aunesluoma & Rainio-Niemi, 2016). This diplomatic conduct—with its various political nuances—has later been connected to the notion of “Finlandisation,” a concept in Cold War literature referring to the policy of neutrality in relations between Finland and Russia (e.g., Uutela, 2020). The concept of Finlandisation has also been used more negatively to describe Finland as being heavily influenced by the Soviet Union during the Cold War (Moisio, 2008). It is important to consider Finlandisation in the context of the end of WWII, and more specifically, the foreign policy of two post-war Finnish presidents, Juho Kusti Paasikivi and Urho Kekkonen. This so-called Paasikivi-Kekkonen line aimed at peaceful coexistence with capitalist Finland and socialist Soviet Union by emphasising a pragmatic approach in relation especially to the Soviet Union (see, e.g., Kuusisto, 1959). As a result of the Paasikivi-Kekkonen line, any overt alliance with the West, such as joining NATO, was out of question for Finland.

This historical period of Finno-Russian relations characterised by Finnish policy of neutrality ended in 1992 with the collapse of the Soviet Union and ultimately culminated with Finland joining the European Union in 1995. Nevertheless, the echoes of these historical paradigms—as well as the general history of close relations between large and small neighbouring countries in the Russian borderland region—have shaped relations between Russia and Finland in the post-Soviet Putin era. This is visible in continuous discussions on whether Finland will join NATO, which is a core issue to understand and analyse in Finland's relation with its neighbours (Cottey, 2018; Forsberg, 2018; Koch & Vainikka, 2019).

The collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s marked the beginning of considerable migration from Russia to Finland. Currently, Russian speakers form the largest immigrant group in Finland (Statistics Finland, n.d.). Even though a remarkable number of them are Ingrian Finnish, who not only self-identify themselves as ethnic Finns but also are officially considered as such by the Finnish authorities at the time of migration (for discussion, see Mähönen et al., 2015; Prindiville & Hjelm, 2018), Russian speakers are often victims of discrimination and prejudice (e.g., Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2006).

With respect to socio-political inclusion, Finland allows for dual citizenship and approximately one third of the Russian-speaking minority possesses Finnish-Russian dual citizenship (Varjonen et al., 2017). Recent research shows, however, that many native-born Finns question the national loyalty of dual Finnish-Russian citizens and hold them in as low esteem as that of foreign (Russian) citizens, leading to distrust, a reluctance to hire them for strategic positions and less support for their social influence in society (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2020).

Thus, the relationship between the two countries includes elements of conflict and elements of closeness, making this national context especially interesting for an examination of the ways in which ordinary Finns draw upon existing and prior conflicts to construct their national identity.

2 | DATA AND METHOD

In this study, we analyse online discussions on the Finnish language discussion forum *Suomi24* in the years 2004 and 2016. *Suomi24* is one of the largest non-English-speaking online discussion forums in the world (Pakkasvirta, 2018) and a treasure trove for a social scientist because it contains a myriad of naturally-occurring lay discussions on various topics dating back to 2001.

The discussions on *Suomi24* are divided into 21 thematic areas, ranging from health to entertainment, relationships, science and politics. Due to a policy of anonymity, the topic-oriented discussions do not openly promote the identity formation efforts of the author. Thus, the material offers unique perspectives for studying the dynamics of interaction, whether emotionally supportive, everyday problem-solving or conflict-oriented types of interaction. The most active discussion area is "society," which includes several subareas, such as "history," "human rights," "patriotism" and "media."

As a result of collaboration between the owner of the site and a group of researchers and research institutions, approximately once a year the comments posted in the forum are extracted, moved to a separate data corpus and made available for researchers to download and analyse. In May 2020, the dataset consisted of all the discussions from 2001 to the end of 2017 and included approximately 4 billion words.

As to the question of who typically uses the *Suomi24* site, an online survey of forum users ($n = 1395$, Dec. 2016; see Harju, 2017) revealed that the majority of users are middle-aged (40–50 years old) or elderly persons. Sixty-three per cent of the respondents were male, and 55% were either married, in a registered partnership or cohabiting. Eighty per cent of the respondents did not have children in the household. The respondents were well educated, with 46% of them having a university or college degree. Forty-five per cent of them reported having used the forum for 10 years or longer: 17% defined their role as a reader, 44% as a reader-commentator and the remaining 39% as a random visitor. Thirty-six per cent of the reader-commentators reported contributing to the forum discussions at least weekly, while 17% said they do so on a daily basis. According to the readers and reader-commentators who completed the survey, the three most important themes in the *Suomi24* forum discussions included local issues, politics and concerns about Finland and Finns.

2.1 | Analytic procedure and method of analysis

We adopt a constructivist, discursive approach to studying national identities (e.g., Mole, 2007a). This approach emphasises the socially constructed nature of social phenomena as well as the context-dependent and socially consequential nature of discourse. More specifically, the final interpretative reading was informed by discursive social psychology (e.g., Potter, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). This analytical approach requires a detailed analysis of talk and texts and focuses especially on what is accomplished through dialogue (Goodman, 2017). Discursive social psychology offers analytical tools for examining the micro-level rhetorical construction and negotiation of social phenomena, and it is a well-suited approach to studying online interaction (Jowett, 2015).

The research material was collected using the search tool Korp (Borin et al., 2012), which enables the mapping of general discussion features and making data-driven choices regarding a more thorough qualitative analysis. More specifically, Korp makes it possible to conduct keyword searches from the database consisting of all *Suomi24* discussions between 2001 and 2017. It also provides direct links to the discussion threads, which makes it possible to read them in their original format.

To best map the general features of the discussions related to Russia and Russians in the forum, we conducted a search of the *Suomi24* database (2017) using the keyword "*venäl**," referring to the lemma of the adjective "Russian." The keyword produced 456,831 results in the forum and discussions, in which participants used the search term to cover a wide variety of topics ranging from intimate relationships between Finns and Russians to travel tips and political debates.

We chose to focus our qualitative analyses on two time points, March 2004 (3262 hits for the keyword) and March 2016 (16,585 hits). From a volume standpoint, the general dynamics of the discussions clearly differed at these two time points. As Figure 1 shows, in 2004, the number of discussions related to Russia and Russians was stable and not overly popular, while during the period between 2014 and 2016, the topic became significantly more popular. Thus, comparing how the discussions unfold in these two contexts makes it possible for us to examine both the recurring patterns and the more context-bound specificities of the discourse. As our focus was on societal discussions, we only included the threads that were posted in the discussion area called Society.

The analysis was conducted in two stages. We began with a preliminary reading of all the comments from the selected time points and noticed that the construction of Russia as a threat to Finland dominated the overall discussions on Russia in *Suomi24*. As discursive examination requires a detailed analysis of interaction, at this stage of the analysis we made two analytical choices to restrict the overall amount of data: (1) from a topical standpoint, we merely focused on the discourse of threat and omitted other topics, such as travel to Russia, Russian cultural traditions (cuisine, music, and celebrities) or relationships between Finns and Russians (interpersonal, marital, and work-related), and (2) from a contextual standpoint, we only analysed two sets of discussions relating to two armed conflicts initiated by Russia: the war in Chechnya and the war in Ukraine.

The final dataset subjected to a close reading and examination consists of 30 discussion threads ranging from 2 to 76 comments (one thread consisted of 499 comments, but it can be considered as an outlier): 13 threads from 2004 that mention the war in Chechnya and 17 threads from 2016 that mention the war in Ukraine. Notably, these discussions took place in seven different discussion areas, with the majority taking place in the areas entitled Global Issues (*Maailman menoa*; 12 discussions threads) and NATO (9 discussion threads), which gave us reason to anticipate the political loading of the discourse. Lastly, it is noteworthy that these threads were selected because they contained a mention of either Chechnya or Ukraine. However, this does not mean that the discussion focused only on those topics. On the contrary, the threads form a compilation of versatile discussions that all touch upon a war involving Russia, thus making them suitable for a discursively-oriented analysis.

The final analysis was conducted by the first and third author, who carefully read through the 30 discussion threads by paying attention to recurring arguments and patterns of talk. More specifically, when examining the construction of the national other we especially focused on comments in which Finland, Finnishness or the Finns were mentioned in relation to Russia or Russianness. At this stage of the analysis we focused on the discursive and rhetorical resources used to construct and negotiate Finnish national identity within the context of Finnish-Russian relations.

3 | RESULTS: MOBILISING (AND CHALLENGING) THE CONSTRUCTION OF RUSSIA AS A THREATENING NATIONAL OTHER

In this section, we discuss the ways in which those participating on the *Suomi24* site constructed Russia as a threatening national other and the ways in which this threat construction consequently served to discursively construct

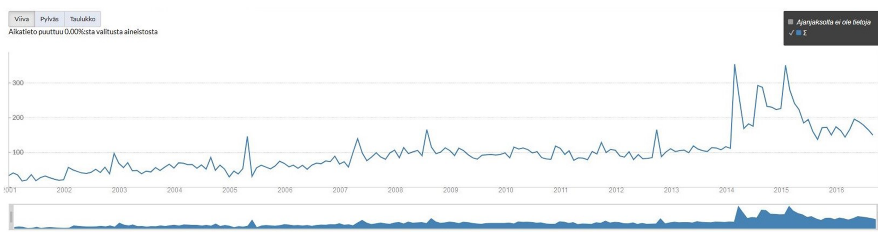

FIGURE 1 The appearance of the word "Russian" in *Suomi24*, 2001–2016 [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

and negotiate Finnish national identity. More specifically, our analysis shows that participants often constructed Russia as a Finnish national other to strengthen the image of Finland as a small, vulnerable nation critically located between the West (Europe and the United States) and Russia.

Thus, not surprisingly, one of the dominant issues in the discussions was a debate on whether or not Finland should join NATO. The debate on NATO membership can be seen as part of a negotiation on Finnish national identity and national security, as those arguing for NATO membership constructed Finland as part of the West while the comments against it often highlighted the importance of maintaining good or neutral relations with Russia, which would help ensure the security of Finland. Thus, constructing Russia as the Finnish national other enabled them to argue both for and against Finland's membership in NATO.

The results are presented through four excerpts that showcase the various ways in which the threat construction was rhetorically accomplished and the functions it served. While all the excerpts exemplify recurring patterns of argumentation identified in the broader dataset of the 30 discussion threads (e.g., constructing Russia as a threat to oppose Finland's membership in NATO or referencing collective memories and future scenarios), they are also unique examples of the discourse on the *Suomi24* site, revealing the types of argumentative tools participants used when attempting to persuade others. Through a detailed analysis of these excerpts, we thus highlight the ways in which *Suomi24* participants devised arguments and ultimately show that while certain elements of the threat discourse persist, the discussions in 2016 featured elements of an increasingly polarised and suspicious atmosphere.

Excerpts 1 and 2 exemplify the discourse most common in the 2004 data, whereas excerpts 3 and 4 represent the arguments present in the 2016 data. Importantly, discussions at both points in time not only capitalise on the need to secure Finnishness, but also exemplify how security talk can be used for both pro- and anti-NATO arguments.

3.1 | 2004: (Not) joining the NATO as protecting the nation against the threatening other

The debate on Finland's NATO membership was one of the dominant features of the threat discourse in 2004. The war in Chechnya was used as evidence of Russia being an imperialistic nation that presents a direct military threat for Finland. To deal with this threat, the participants argued that Finland should or should not join the NATO, as excerpts 1 and 2 show.

Excerpt 1 is part of a long opening post in a discussion about Finland becoming a NATO member. To better focus the analysis, only those parts of the post are disclosed that deal with the threat construction of Russia.

Excerpt 1, March 2004

> Why are special arrangements needed in the case of Finland? Well, that's relatively clear. Russia has always been a great threat to Finland, and it still is. Even though Russia has advanced quite a bit from its former, completely communist ways, it remains a relatively unstable state. By special arrangements, I mean that NATO should place permanent military bases, troops and war material along the eastern border of Finland. I do not wish to hurt any Russians, but every now and then, when I follow the political incidents in Russia, I break out in a cold sweat.
> Special arrangements are needed if, for some reason (for now, I cannot think of any such reason, and it is very unlikely and impossible) Russia attacked Finland, one would not have time to ask for war equipment and troops from the other NATO countries, because the amount of equipment and troops that Russia has to send to the front is something utterly unbelievable.
> For example, if the Russians attacked Finland tomorrow for no reason, with full force (without nuclear weapons, that is), the largest Finnish cities would be heavily bombarded, the military bases would be almost completely demolished and airports and airplanes would be smashed by the day after

> tomorrow. The eastern border would be moved at least 200 km to the west, and it's very likely that Helsinki would be occupied by the Russians. This might sound ridiculous, but it is not. The number of tanks and amount of war material possessed by the Russians is something utterly unbelievable. Just when it comes to tanks, they have the largest number in the world, and I would not be surprised if they had as many tanks as Finland has capable soldiers.

Excerpt 1 starts with a rhetorical question regarding the "special arrangements" Finland would require if it was to join NATO. A rhetorical question allows the author to account for why it is important for Finland to form military alliances, and the justification relies on constructing Russia as a threat to Finland. With a three-part concession (Antaki & Wetherell, 1999), the author constructs an argument about Russia as a threat that is balanced and not solely informed by personal opinions. The first part, called the proposition, is strengthened by the author providing an extreme case formulation, "Russia has always been a great threat to Finland and it still is." The subsequent concession, "Even though Russia has advanced quite a bit from its former, completely communist ways," is followed by a reassertion of the original argument: "it remains a relatively unstable state."

The scenario of Russia attacking Finland is constructed in the second and third paragraph to strengthen the threat construction. This scenario is worked up with detailed description of the destruction (references to, e.g., heavy bombing and complete demolition) caused by the attack and Russian domination (unbelievable amount of war material) during the attack. These details and the three-part concession construct this description as factual (Potter, 1996) while the author also describes this scenario as "unlikely" and "impossible." Thus, while the attack is constructed as improbable, the threat is presented as real and becoming a NATO member as a way to deal with that threat.

In this discussion thread, the war in Chechnya provided a means to construct Russia as a country that allows "cruel killing and kidnapping of completely innocent civilians," as one poster argued. The presentation of this level of cruelty, together with a vast military arsenal, functioned to complement the construction of Russia as a threatening national other.

In contrast, excerpt 2 exemplifies how some commenters *opposed* NATO membership by also referring to Russia as a threat. In the opening comment of the thread, the author supports NATO membership and deems not joining the NATO as a sign of Finland's stubbornness. Others disagree, however, with the debate over NATO membership hinging on the relationship between Finland and Russia. Similar to the discussion in excerpt 1, authors posting in this discussion thread make references to Chechnya to construct Russia as an "aggressive, totalitarian, militaristic empire" that does not respect "small neighbouring nations," such as Finland or Chechnya. In excerpt 2, Russia's reaction is presented as one of many reasons for Finland not to join the NATO.

Excerpt 2, March 2004

> As a history teacher, I might be able to note that I have some experience with the world situation. I think joining NATO is completely useless because it would just make Russia hostile towards Finland and, secondly, there are no guarantees that an attack would not come from within NATO. Probably no one has even bothered to think about the repercussions of an internal conflict. NATO would also cost a lot of money and, at the same time, we would have to make cuts to welfare services. And under no circumstances would I like Finland to form a close alliance with states engaged in the "oil war." Use your own brain people … what are the consequences when an organisation grows too much → inefficient decision making, a circle of strong countries develops and Finland, for example, would not have a say in anything. As a result, to put it bluntly, Finland would just donate its defence forces to the United States …

Excerpt 2 showcases how Finland is presented as having to balance between two potentially threatening powers: Russia and NATO. The threat posed by Russia is given as the first reason for Finland to stay out of the

NATO, but interestingly, it is not further justified or explained. In contrast, the author provides several reasons for his/her claim that NATO membership can also be harmful for Finland. Membership in NATO is presented as expensive (leading to weakening welfare services) and a threat to national identity (alliance with countries fighting the "oil war," "not having a say in anything").

In other words, while Russia's aggression is treated as self-evident, not needing any justification, the threat from NATO was constructed as a neglected issue that "[p]robably no one has even bothered to think about." While the author claims authority as a history teacher offering his/her personal opinions ("I think," "… would I like …"), (s)he also appeals to common sense ("use your brain people") to convince others that the threat from NATO is real. Thus, excerpt 2 presents NATO membership as leading to a situation where Finland, a small country, would be caught between a rock and a hard place, not being able to rely on any alliances to bring security. This kind of argumentation can be traced back to the Paasikivi-Kekkonen line, which stressed the importance of Finland's neutrality in relation to Russia, and thus, not forming alliances with the West.

3.2 | 2016: Emerging pro-Russia voices and the continuing debate on NATO membership

Next, the focus shifts from the discussions of 2004 to those of 2016. This second dataset shares many features with the first one, including vivid debates on, for instance, whether Finland should join NATO. However, there are also clear differences between the two sets of discussion threads. First, compared to the 2004 discussions, the pro-Russia voices are more prevalent in 2016. Second, we also detected a novel pattern of argumentation related to discrediting previous comments via accusations of trolling.

Throughout the data (i.e., both datasets), participants' efforts at constructing Russia as a threat to Finland relied on historical references to the several wars fought between Finland and the Soviet Union during the WWII period (see excerpt 3) and on scenarios addressing the possibility of Russia attacking Finland in the future (excerpts 1 and 3). According to Kolakowski (1995), historical memory (or collective memory) is an indispensable prerequisite for national identity, regardless of whether the contents of such historical memory are true, partly true or imaginary, that is, in the realm of myth. The further back into the past that the real or imaginary memories extend, the more securely national identity is supported (Kolakowski, 1995). For example, Bonacchi et al.'s (2018) study on the Brexit debate has shown how ideas from the pre-modern past (from the Iron Age to early medieval Britain) were employed to construct a political identity relating to the UK's membership in the European Union in Facebook.

Excerpt 3 exemplifies how the history of wars between Russia and Finland is evoked to support Finland becoming a NATO member. The excerpt is a part of a longer comment posted in a discussion thread on Finnish military history. In the opening comment, the author opposes Finland's NATO membership by stating that it would go against "the interests of the Fatherland." Excerpt 3 is part of a longer comment in which the author challenges the opening comment and blames the communists for the wars that Finland fought against the Soviet Union.

Excerpt 3, March 2016

> Finland needs allies in trying to avoid the repetition of what happened in the Winter War, in which we fought alone against two great powers: the Soviet Union and its ally Germany [sic]. Now is the time to choose sides, because like then, no one can remain a bystander and at least I prefer to have NATO troops here rather than the Russian army. Once Russians have boots on the ground, they tend to stay in that place, like in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, not to forget parts of Georgia.

In Excerpt 3, the author argues for NATO membership by presenting two options "we" (Finns) have: either having NATO troops or the Russian army in Finland. The reference to the Winter War (1939–1940) is used to construct Finland as a lone, small country forced to fight against two superpowers (cf. excerpt 2). The threat construction bears

resemblance to the argumentation in extract 1, where the author constructed Russia as a threat by referring to its superior military arsenal. A sense of urgency ("now is the time to choose sides") strengthens the threat construction and draws on the anticipation of future conflicts. In excerpt 3, a temporal continuity with past (Winter War, Georgia) and present (Crimea) conflicts is invoked to construct Russia as an enduring threat to its neighbouring countries.

The last excerpt exemplifies the two novel and interrelated features of the 2016 discussions as compared to those from 2004: the emergence of comments that conform to official Russian narratives and the accusations of trolling.

Excerpt 4, January 2016

1. Russia explained away the attack on Ukraine by referring to [the threat[1] of] American politics. That's why Russia had to occupy the Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. Now in Russia, they talk about the threat of NATO via Finland. Nothing in Russian politics has changed. Should we just wait for the shelling of Värtsilä (Mainila)?
2. Hey [username of the author of the previous comment]! How is the weather at the Baltic troll factory? Do you receive an overtime bonus for working on a Saturday?
3. The person who started the thread is again mistaken. Russia could not have explained away something that never happened, right? Eastern Ukraine has not been occupied, and if was then why have the tabloids not yet managed to cry about it? Crimea was fenced off to secure the people there, and this was ensured by voting. And it has also been confirmed by surveys, that is, the people's satisfaction with the present situation.
4. Does not it get tiring just repeating Putin's silly and desperate propaganda lies? Especially when you know that they are complete nonsense and that no one believes them, not even any Russians who think about it. Or do the Russians pay you so well for taking their side that you just keep on going …

5. They have speculated a lot in Russia about a preventive strike on Finland. This is what Putin said: "if there will be a fight, we'll be the first to strike".

6. At least you are trying to bring about that fight. But even though us patriots oppose NATO, which is ruled by America, we defend our country. The easiest way [to defend one's country] would be to use diplomatic means, but at the moment NATO supporters are preventing that.

Excerpt 4 exemplifies the polarised nature of the 2016 discussions related to Russia and the war in Ukraine. The discussion thread starts with an account of how Russia has justified the attack on Ukraine by referencing the American political threat and the claim that now Finland is seen as a threat in Russia. A rhetorical question at the end referring to the shelling of Mainila, a military incident that began the Winter war between Finland and the Soviet Union in 1939, suggests that some kind of action in relation to Russia is needed to avoid conflict.

The first comment is followed by an accusation of trolling (Hardaker, 2010) to discredit the previous account as a whole (Knustad, 2020). By referring to "a troll factory" and questioning whether the previous author receives an "overtime bonus" for so tirelessly working there, the second author suggests that the first comment is the result of a deliberate and strategic disruptive operation. The author of comment 3 joins in by challenging the first comment, claiming that there was no attack in the first place, but merely a demarcation of an area in Eastern Ukraine to protect an unspecified group of "people," an operation approved of by voters. The author of comment 4, for one, discredits comment 3 as mere Putin propaganda. In addition to raising suspicions about the trustworthiness of the previous comments, the accusations of trolling link this debate to the current political context, where troll factories are used (especially by Russia) to influence domestic and international audiences to advance certain political agendas and even military operations (Jensen et al., 2019). Thus, these accusations highlight how the participants view *Suomi24* discussions as susceptible to attempts at disruption and political influencing (Knustad, 2020).

In comment 5, the possibility of Russia attacking Finland is again brought up and an alleged quote from President Putin is given to provide credibility for this claim. Comment 6 juxtaposes NATO supporters and patriots. NATO

supporters are presented as hampering any attempts to defend one's country by diplomatic means. Thus, opposing NATO is constructed as a truly patriotic act that will help maintain peaceful relations between Finland and Russia. Excerpt 4, thus, exemplifies how negotiating the meanings of a military conflict initiated by Russia, that is, constructing Russia as the threatening national other and challenging such a construction, are intertwined with constructing a nationalist identity.

4 | CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis highlight the relational nature of banal nationalism online. Through the analysis of two sets of discussion threads separated by 12 years, we were able to show that Finnish online discussions surrounding two Russian military conflicts provided a space for constructing Russia as a threatening national other to Finland, and that this construction was accomplished through referencing the temporal and spatial/territorial dimensions of two different conflicts. The participants often juxtaposed the conflicts in Chechnya and Ukraine with Finnish-Russian wars of the past to demonstrate the continuity of the Russian threat to Finland.

Before reflecting on the theoretical background and implications of these findings, let us return to the *Suomi24* forum to consider what this study can tell us about its societal context. According to the user survey discussed earlier, the typical person posting on the forum is a middle-aged or elderly male. Thus, the extent to which our findings can be generalised to society as a whole can be questioned. In addition, it is important to once again note that this analysis does not provide an exhaustive presentation of Suomi24 discussions on Russia as a variety of topics and discussions were left outside the focus of this study. However, it was not our aim to formulate any kinds of generalisations based on the views of the forum users. On the contrary, the present study examines online discussions as evolving as a part of the shared cultural meaning-making processes through which societal phenomena can be legitimised and/or contested. Our focus was on these processes and their functions, not on Finns' opinions or attitudes. As we argue next, the antagonism towards Russia was used for national identity construction as well as political persuasion and mobilisation.

Kolakowski (1995, as cited in Wodak et al., 2009) argues that national identity is characterised by five elements. First, it involves the substantialising idea of a national spirit, or "Volksgeist," which expresses itself in certain cultural forms of life and particular collective manners of behaviour, especially in moments of crisis. Second, it involves historical memory. Third, it is characterised by anticipation and future orientation, reflecting concerns about potential adversity accompanied by preparations for how to face such adversity and survive. Fourth, it is characterised by a national body that manifests itself in discussions about national territories, landscapes and nature as well as the physical artefacts shaping those elements. Fifth, national identity has an identifiable starting point, which often marks the founders and the beginning of historical time. Wodak et al. (2009) further note the interrelated temporality (past, present and future), contextuality and spatiality of the discursive construction of national identity. They find that in identity work, the claims of origin and continuity associated with timelessness do not exclude, but rather are intertwined with, accounts referring to transformation, change and anticipation; likewise, spatial, territorial and local dimensions are significant in this discursive construction of national identity.

When assessing the data, we can clearly see how participants constructed Finnishness along these dimensions. Finnish identity was indeed constructed as a special and unique characteristic of a small, but definitely Western, nation on the north-eastern border of the EU, one which from a historical perspective the participants in the online forum perceived as being very much on its own both spatially and politically despite being a member of the EU. The identity construction was accomplished via references to the historical memory of wars, celebrating the spirit of a small nation not afraid to protect itself against an attack from Russia, having paid its war debts and succeeded in maintaining a neutral position during the ensuing Cold War. The future dimension was likewise present in the identity work. The participants expressed concern about the future, often by constructing Russia as an unpredictable and powerful neighbour with the capacity to attack Finland. This future scenario made it possible to present the position

of Finland as insecure, being on a constant state of alert. Such a construction of Russia gave rationale for both anti- and pro-NATO arguments. The temporal line of this discourse followed a common pattern: historical memory of losing wars to Russia, evidence from the recent invasions of Chechnya and Ukraine, and concern over Russia's geopolitical interests combined with superior military power all served to justify both the rationales for reconsidering the security provided by either staying neutral (excerpt 3) or becoming a member of NATO (excerpt 2). The construction of Russia as Finland's threatening national other served opposing ideological ends, in other words, it is a dilemmatic construction (Billig et al., 1988).

This study is not the first to show how Russia is constructed as a threat by its neighbouring countries. For example, Nevinskaitė's (2017) analysis of the Lithuanian media and Zarycki's (2004) study of the Polish context both show that national identity construction is based on an image of Russia as an economic, political and security threat to Lithuania and Poland, respectively. Interestingly, and most likely due to the methodological choices regarding the set of discussion threads, our data does not make much reference to cultural differences between the two nations, unlike the Estonian rhetoric of Russia as a cultural other and Estonia as part of the European "West" (e.g., Kuus, 2002). However, constructions of Russia as an "aggressive, totalitarian, militaristic empire," or "the Eastern bear," can be seen as references to a more primitive culture that is aggressive and unpredictable in nature (Platoff, 2012).

To conclude, while neutrality in relation to Russia can be seen as an integral part of Finnish national identity and national security as defined by the state (Aunesluoma & Rainio-Niemi, 2016), our study reveals how its consequences are debated among lay audiences. The data reflects Finland's complicated relationship with Russia and the two arguments used to deal with it: the Paasikivi-Kekkonen line opposing alliances and the anti-Russian discourse stressing that Finland is part of the West. These findings highlight the discursive processes through which national identity and security are intertwined (cf. Mole, 2007b).

The results are also timely as at the end of 2021 the growing tensions in Ukraine intensified the NATO discussion in Finland. As a part of this debate some political actors claimed that Finland should prepare for immediate NATO membership application, even without referendum. In January 2022, the daily newspaper Helsingin Sanomat (2022) reported that the opposition towards NATO membership among the Finns is historically low with 42% opposing, 28% supporting and 30% uncertain of their view.

In terms of the consequences of the discursive accounts analysed in this study, we cannot dismiss the strategic use of threat construction for both pro- and anti-NATO arguments. According to Wohl and Branscombe (2008), people respond to threat with collective angst, and reminders of historical victimisation may initiate defensive responses that result in a desire to protect ingroup interests. Considering the interdependence of online and offline discourses, our study suggests that discussing Finland and Russia online not only reflects, but may also contribute to, official political discourse by voicing the concerns and ambiguity related to the relationship between Finland and Russia. Wohl and Branscobe's study aligns with our observations that the construction of Russia as a threatening national other has collective political implications, as the current societal discussion on Finland's NATO membership exemplifies. Interestingly, also Russia has been found to use the discourse of threat and fear strategically to demonstrate its military power and justify its actions on its border areas (Ventsel et al., 2021). Thus, these discourses should be considered as having cross-border functions and mutual relevance.

In addition to unravelling the dynamics of the threat discourse, our study shows that the discursive context for discussing Finnish-Russian relations has changed. The emerging pro-Russia voices and trolling accusations show that the participants treated *Suomi24* as a space that is susceptible to foreign efforts to disrupt and influence domestic lay discussions. This caution and its effects on societal deliberation among ordinary people should be taken seriously and further studied as they can have detrimental consequences for societal participation and even democracy.

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ENDNOTE

[1] The first comment had plenty of spelling errors, which leads to ambiguous expressions. It was possible to also interpret the first sentence as referring to American politics without presenting it as threatening.

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