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Images of the Russian threat as printed at the border

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ABSTRACT

Since Finland's declaration of independence from Russia in 1917, the actuality of threats emanating from images of Russia has been one of the most debated topics in Finnish academic, political, and open discussion forums alike. Reflecting on previous studies, I have qualitatively examined how threats associated with such images were represented and challenged in 2016. My case study is based on an analysis of *Karjalainen*, the provincial newspaper of North Karelia, which borders another Barents Euro-Arctic Region, the Republic of Karelia, a subject of the Russian Federation. The daily media discussions on the pages of *Karjalainen* provide a view to the intersection of regional, national, and international news. I compare the newspaper contents to threats associated with Russia as recognized in previous research literature. The threat images are represented contextually in different ways when they are related to history, contemporary international affairs, the Russian people, and border life, as well as the less visible topics of the economy and the environment. The newspaper content rehearses the dominant image of Russia as a geopolitical threat, but even those who wrote about this, often problematized simplified images of an entire country.

Keywords: Country images, Russia, threat, regional media, border region

INTRODUCTION

The Finnish image of Russia is connected to several national debates and policies in Finland such as dual citizenship policy, arms acquisitions, energy politics, and relations with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). From the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, Finnish national identity was primarily determined in negation of Russianness. During the first decades of Finnish independence after 1917 up until World War II, relations between the two countries were distant and at times hostile (Paasi 1996). After fighting one another during the Second World War, relations between Finland and the Soviet Union turned pragmatic and formally celebrated.

Pragmatic relations prevailed past the collapse of the Soviet system. Following the illegal annexation of Crimea and the invasion of eastern Ukraine by Russia in 2014, Finland joined the sanctions block against Russia, but pragmatic relations continued. Finnish businesses, such as the state-owned energy company Fortum, invested in expensive projects in Russia and cooperated with Russian state companies – Rosatom, for example – until Russia initiated their major and widely condemned invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 (Yle News 2022).

Surveys through the 2010s indicated that 68–75% of Finnish respondents viewed Russia as at least a partly negative influence on Finnish security (MTS 2020, 44). News of the Russian government's actions against the domestic opposition, as well as elections meddling and military operations abroad have commonly led to increased concerns. Russian media and authorities, and a few Finnish commentators, have blamed Western media for Russia's negative country image (Oivo 2021). While scholars have generally not shared this critique against Finnish journalism, research does acknowledge the prevalent image of Russia as a controversial subject with many faces in the Finnish media (Paasi 1996; Lounasmeri 2011; Laine 2015).

In this article, I will contribute to the general discussion about the image(s) of Russia by examining daily media content and asking how threats associated with these images were represented in 2016. At the beginning of 2016, Russia allowed or directed refugees to its Finnish and Norwegian borders (more about this later in the article) in a controversial move, and Donald Trump's rise to become President of the United States stirred speculations about a new era in international politics. My research case is the Finnish regional newspaper *Karjalainen* in the eastern border province of North Karelia.

This study is a continuation of research conducted between 2016 and 2017, where I used the same data to study the discursive fear of Russia and how it produced geospatial identities (Oivo 2017). Now, with six years of hindsight, I reflect on the year 2016 and examine the textual and graphic content in *Karjalainen* through qualitative content analysis. I aim to categorize how the different threats associated with images of Russia, previously described in the relevant research literature, were presented in this regional daily paper. As a supplementary method, I apply discursive analysis to scrutinize the related perceptions and knowledge that enable and disable the actualisation of different representations.

In what follows, I review the ways in which previous research literature has examined images of Russia in Finland. In previous studies, regional contexts have generally been

only a secondary focus, which is a gap that current research seeks to fill. Provincial media provides an interesting case where the content's producers and audiences appropriate local, national, and international flows of news (Paasi 1996; Ojajärvi 2014). In the third section, I present my case study's regional context with the newspaper *Karjalainen*, and the research methods. The empirical analysis sections start with an examination of how the previously recognized threat images stemming from history and Russia's great power characteristics were represented in *Karjalainen*. The state-centred image of Russia influences not only people's attitudes towards the Russian regime and Finnish security politics, but also has an impact on other spheres, including ordinary Russians. Hence, I expand the analytical perspective, first to the representations of the Russian people. I will review the Russian-associated threat perceptions from the regional perspective of North Karelia, and, in the last analysis section, will highlight previously recognized threat images that were not represented in the newspaper, most notably environmental issues.

STUDIES OF THE RUSSIAN IMAGE

In this section, I review state-of-the-art research related to the images of Russia in Finnish public media. Overall, the images of Russia are diverse and vary across place and time. In many Eastern European countries, the history of the Second World War and Soviet influence are a powerful force in memory politics, impacting political conflicts today. This makes the starting point of understanding Russia different compared to many Western European states (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014). Images of Russia have been studied, for example, in othering and European identity production (e.g. Neumann 1999), transnationalism among Russian émigrés (Kissau and Hunger 2010), and internationally comparative history education (Christophe et al. 2019).

Images of Russia in Finland have attracted much academic interest, especially because the topic is highly relevant in Finnish national identity and security studies. Historians and geographers have provided a strong basis in this area, using inclusive historiographical perspectives from archives, policies, autobiographies, schoolbooks, and interviews (Klinge 1972; Immonen 1987; Karemaa 1995; Paasi 1996; Rentola 2005). Interview studies have been conducted by social and anthropological researchers on attitudes related to Russians and the Russian-speaking population in Finland (Raittila 2011; Brylka et al. 2015), while quantitative survey studies have investigated views on Russian immigrants in Finland (Sjöblom-Immala 2013) and nuclear security in Russia (Eränen 2001).

Mobile devices have made news media almost an omnipresent source of new and reproduced information, but it also has to be acknowledged that news tend to attract

criticism more often than other sources of information on country images, such as first-hand experiences, education, and popular culture. Images of Russia in Finnish media have been studied through differing frames, including content and discourse analyses for print (e.g. Lounasmeri 2011a), television, and online media (Ojala and Pantti 2017; Oivo 2022).

Among the Finnish newspapers, images of Russia in the *Helsingin Sanomat* have been carefully scrutinized due to its status as the biggest daily paper in Finland and thanks to the usability of its archives (e.g. Jouhki 2015; Laine 2015; Väistö 2019). In comparison to *Die Welt*, *The Guardian*, and *Dagens Nyheter*, representations of Russia in *Helsingin Sanomat* have been somewhat reserved (Ojala and Pantti 2017). The most relevant peer study for this article is that by Ojajarvi and Valtonen (2011), who did a frame analysis of Russia in Finnish newspapers and internet discussion forums and also interviewed newspaper editors in 2006–2010. Based on these previous studies, the main categories of threat associated with images of Russia in Finland stem from Russia's unpredictable otherness, history, power politics, and potential to cause environmental damage. In the analysis sections I will reflect on and elaborate these categories against the news representations.

ZOOMING IN ON A REGIONAL NEWSPAPER

To examine perspectives in the border regions on the images of threat posed by Russia in Finland in 2016, I have focused on a provincial daily newspaper *Karjalainen*, which is one of the main public forums of North Karelia. I will first introduce my selection of research material, the consequent regional perspective, and my research methods.

With the provinces of Lapland, Oulu, and Kainuu, North Karelia is the fourth Barents Euro-Arctic Region of Finland. It is the easternmost Finnish province and can be characterized as a “periphery” due to its aging and scarce population. The border station Niirala-Värtsilä separates Finland from, and connects it to, another Barents Euro-Arctic Region, the Republic of Karelia of the Russian Federation. Cross-border tourism and trade significantly decreased in 2014–2016 following the fall of the rouble's exchange value and the limits to trade imposed by international sanctions between Russia and the EU (Nieminen 2016, 115–118). Still, the vicinity of the border has also attracted people from Russia to travel and move into North Karelia (Varjonen et al. 2017, 11).

My primary research material consists of 139 paper issues of *Karjalainen* from 1 July–15 November 2016. I selected the starting date purely for work economic reasons and

the end date to include a week of discussion after the 2016 US presidential election. I read these issues at the time of their publication, scanning all the content referring to Russia and Russians. This provided a more immediate reading experience than would be common for many readers of daily newspapers like *Karjalainen*. I took notes about the contents and photographed all illustrated coverage. In this article, I refer to the publication date as “day/month”, as all the examined content comes from 2016.

Together with three other regional newspapers, *Karjalainen* is a member of the weekly editorial group “Sunnuntaisuomalainen” (freely translated as The Sunday Finn). Because the members of this group share some contents, a part of the content produced by *Karjalainen*’s journalists is published in other Finnish regional newspapers and vice versa. Moreover, many of the published international news articles come from national and international news agencies. Alongside the national and global elements, the regional perspective of *Karjalainen* caters to its target audience and journalists who reside in North Karelia.

The basic structure of *Karjalainen* is typical for Finnish newspapers: the first pages include a summary of the issue’s stories, followed by editorials, op-eds, topical news, culture and history articles, the opinions section, advertisements, announcements, entertainment news, television sections, and short news. Most of the messages in the opinions section are short text messages referred to in this article as “SMS”. While the basic opinion pieces are usually published under the writer’s own name, the SMS messages are anonymous, which may lower the threshold to make daring public statements.

The scale of representations on Russia and Russians in a newspaper like *Karjalainen* is limited by ethical editorial policy that excludes hate speech and offensive content. As such, *Karjalainen* represents arguably a more established public forum than, for example, do provincial internet forums, where there is less moderation of published messages (Oivo 2017). Moreover, *Karjalainen* published several messages in the opinions section that notably contradicted the paper’s editorials. The opinions section provides an interesting perspective on how newspaper readers reflect and at times even challenge the top-bottom-dominated representations of the world.

Although the popularity of newspapers is gradually falling, Finnish newspapers have managed to hold on to their readers relatively well in international comparison. Also, the Finnish press profile is regionally oriented (Lehtisaari et al. 2012, 12). In 2016, the subscription of *Karjalainen* was 35 435 (Media Audit Finland 2017). Newspapers

in Finland have a loyal readership in all age groups. While the print newspaper is most popular among the older demographics, it was generally a more popular news format as a whole in 2016 than the digital version (Merikoski 2016). The social role of Finnish provincial newspapers has been regarded as constructing a regional identity (Paasi 1996; Ojajarvi 2014). The relation between the opinion sections of Finnish newspapers and the public opinion has often been referred to as a “hazy reflection”, in accordance with the thesis of David Grey and Trevor Brown (Ojajarvi and Valtonen 2011; Laine 2015).

As an analytical tool, I have mainly applied qualitative content analysis, which was developed to recognize contextual themes from samples of medium-sized data through manual examination. The researcher expands the contexts of empirics by descriptively reflecting it against contextualizing material (Drisko and Maschi 2015, 2, 81–120), seen here as the relevant research literature. I extend this approach with elements of Foucauldian discourse analysis by problematizing textual and graphic media contents as representations of knowledge and perceptions that function as common principles for constituting and making claims about subjects (Husa 1995), in this case Russia and Russians. The discursive threat images produce action from everyday exchanges across the Finnish-Russian border to the constitution of political questions and choices. Additionally, I problematize the inevitability of the represented threat images by posing the Foucauldian question of how things could be different.

RUSSIA OF THE PAST

In the examination period of July–November 2016, the main themes of discussions in *Karjalainen* reflected the period's news agenda: the new Finnish customs regulations for petrol and cigarettes; shorter working hours at the Niirala-Värtsilä border-crossing point; doping allegations of Russian athletes in the Sochi Winter Olympics; the transfer of Russian Iskander missiles to Kaliningrad; violations of Finnish airspace by the Russian Air Force; Russian involvement in Syria; and speculations of Russian interference with elections abroad, including the 2016 American presidential elections. In addition, there were some more sporadic topics, particularly on the regional level. News articles, arguably with a strong truth authority, had seemingly neutral tones and minimal visible “handprints” of the author. Opinion pieces, editorials, and op-eds were much more transparently subjective. The references to causal connections in these texts were more straightforward than in the news articles. I will start the empirical review and analysis by looking at presentations and representations of the geopolitical threat image in *Karjalainen*.

Ojajärvi and Valtonen (2011) have concluded that the Second World War, NATO, and Russian otherness are consistent Russian-related topic frames in Finnish newspapers, regardless of the daily news agenda. This conclusion is based on an analysis of press content between 2006 and 2010, which preceded Russia's occupation of Crimea and involvement in war in eastern Ukrainian territories beginning in 2014. In this regard, my observations from *Karjalainen* in 2016 and re-reading in 2022 suggest that little has changed in the relevance of the topics related to Russia. While *Karjalainen* was careful to refer to the conflict as “war”, Ukraine and Russia were represented as embroiled in a territorial struggle which produced something of a war map in a news article about peace negotiations in Berlin (20/10).

Like academic literature, discussions on the pages of *Karjalainen* rarely disputed the notion that frictions in the image of Russia in Finland stemmed from history. Scholars are divided over the nature of Finnish antagonism towards Russia: is it historically more ethnically xenophobic (Immonen 1987; Karemaa 1995) or ideological and political (Klinge 1972; Vihavainen 2013)? The national threat image of Russia was notably instrumentalized in uniting a politically fragmented Finland in the first decades of independence in the 1920s and 1930s (Paasi 1996). The demand to maintain aspects of this historical threat image was recognizable in Finland even in the 1990s after the disappearance of the political and military threats of the Soviet Union (Moisio 1998).

In this regard, it is interesting that discussions in *Karjalainen* of the period when Finland was a part of the Russian Empire (1809–1917) were virtually disconnected from Russian threat images associated with the post-1917 period. Representations of this 1809–1917 era were generally conflict-free, and even positive. Supporting the textual presentations, the graphics accompanying these articles were calm and often painting-like. The articles included stories of St Petersburg as a city where Joensuu dwellers hoped to find a better life (18/10), portrayed a Russian merchant who established a historical guesthouse in North Karelia (14/9), depicted a statue of the Czarist two-headed eagle that was erected for the glory of Pielisjoki's grand canal project (30/7), and featured Russian cartographers that mapped most of Finland (26/10). This kind of micro-historical perspective is somewhat characteristic of regional newspapers (Ojajärvi 2014).

Like the articles about pre-independence Finland, the articles related to the Winter War and Continuation War in WWII also presented microhistories. These stories focused on small Finnish units, individuals, historic buildings, and even war dogs that tried to

survive the war. The USSR and its citizens were rarely mentioned, usually impersonally as the opposing party in the wars (2/7, 1/8, 12/10, 14/10, 16/10). While the reasons for, and perpetrators of, the two wars were not deliberated over in the history articles of *Karjalainen*, in the opinions section the USSR and Russia were at times referred to as rogue states due to the wars and the harsh terms of the subsequent peace treaty concluded with Finland. This image of a dangerous historical Russian state also discursively shaped representations of some topical news articles, particularly those that covered Russia's involvement in events in Ukraine (e.g. 3/8 and 11/8).

The Soviet threat in the informative articles of *Karjalainen* was often personified by Joseph Stalin and his era, but there were strong historic threat perceptions drawn from later Soviet regimes as well. In the September 9 issue of *Karjalainen*, an article about Urho Kekkonen, president of Finland in 1956–1982, argued that Kekkonen and his active cooperation with the Soviet leadership saved Finland from being “devoured” by the USSR. While this article was mainly about Kekkonen's successful cooperation with the Soviet leaders, the detail mentioned above provided the story with its key meaning. The essential Soviet threat was briefly referred to as common knowledge in the national narrative of Finland.

UNUSUAL GREAT POWER

The discussion in *Karjalainen*'s letters section showed how deductive information about Russia's past constituted knowledge of the geopolitical “true nature” of contemporary Russia. The “true nature” translated into a notion of Russia as a great power posing a military threat to countries such as Finland. As in classical geopolitics (e.g. Kelly 2016), a popular embedded idea represented in *Karjalainen* implied that great powers have their inherent interests, tendencies, and concerns related to international relations. In the discussions about world politics, the misuses of power by Russia and Western states alike against smaller states were often referred to accordingly. In terms of Finland's sovereignty, however, Russia was the only threat:

After all, Russia is a mysterious and unpredictable neighbour. We have seen this (not experienced it ourselves yet)...Neutrality could perhaps lead to strong defiance against Finland, perhaps a conflict of sorts unless we join NATO. (opinion piece 22/7)

In *Karjalainen*, representing Russia as a great power implied an idea of an antagonistic game between great power states that undermines international affairs. As noted in previous research on the Finnish press (e.g. Jouhki 2015), the Western community was

represented clearly as Finland's group of international identification in juxtaposition to Russia. During the US presidential election campaign in 2016, it was often speculated that the election of Donald Trump could lead to the United States "retreating" from the Baltic region, letting Russia fill the void and increase its influence over countries in the region. This concern crystallized in an article of *Karjalainen* on November 11 when the (in)famous member of the Russian *Duma* and party leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy was portrayed in a centrefold picture toasting to celebrate Trump's election victory (10/11). Zhirinovskiy was referred to as "the eater of Finland" after suggesting that Russia reclaim lands previously within the Imperial Russian borders, including Finland (see Paananen 2015). While this raised Finnish suspicions towards Russia, the image of geopolitical threat discursively excluded ideas of common national interests between Russians and Finns in *Karjalainen's* news and discussion sections.

Possible mutual interests between Russia and Finland may explain the particularity in *Karjalainen's* overall media image of Russia. Previous research has noted that media images of Russian-related threats are balanced by ideas of economic opportunities with Russia (Lounasmeri 2011a). This was also the case in *Karjalainen*, which featured the positive potential of Russian trade and tourism in the regional context. For example, when the Barents Euro-Arctic Council accepted the membership application of North Karelia in November 2016, *Karjalainen* made much of the possibilities for the province to develop its traffic corridor with towns in the Russian Republic of Karelia (14/11). On a global level, however, this balancing element in the overall image of Russia was virtually absent.

The 2016 US presidential elections became a popular example of the image of Russia as resorting to covert measures to influence countries during and particularly after elections. There were also plenty of other examples reproducing this image. The decision of Montenegro to join NATO was reported by quoting stern objections from senior Russian politicians whose attitudes towards the alliance were clearly antagonistic (28/9, 1/10). The decision to join NATO also led to opposition demonstrations on the streets of Montenegro, commonly seen as orchestrated by Russia, "at least according to Montenegro's western-minded government", as argued in *Karjalainen's* news piece (28/9). In the context of other regional countries such as Moldova, where the recently elected president considered joining the Eurasian Economic Union, *Karjalainen* saw this as presenting his people with "the iron fist of Putin" (12/11). In Georgia, the representation was more neutral. An odds-on-favourite party in the Georgian parliamentary elections was said to strive for neutralized relations with Russia (6/10). While the

suggestions about Russian involvement in other countries' elections were not associated with Finland in any news article, the news agenda can indicate what journalists expect their subscribers to be concerned about.

In the letters section, when discussion arose about whether Finland should apply for NATO membership or not, the Russian threat was part and parcel of the debate. This discussion problematized claims of legitimate threats, justified fears, and Finnish security policy choices. The Russian threat was commonly suggested to serve as a manipulative instrument in the Finnish political power play. The threat image was claimed as biased either by downplaying or exaggerating it. One opinion piece, for example, speculated that the Finnish mass media cultivated the image of the Russian threat to boost support for NATO membership, whereas the Finnish Defence Forces used the concept to justify expensive military equipment purchases (Opinion piece, 13/7).

The state-centric geopolitical emphasis is quite common in news journalism, because the news criteria highlight urgency, danger, and negativity that are less prominent in transnational, regional, and local everyday life. However, the contents of *Karjalainen* portrayed several cases where Russian (geo)politics were connected to less conventional news spheres. Such cases included doping allegations against the Russian Sochi Olympic team (18/7, 22/7), trends of Russian tourism in Turkey and Finland (11/8, 27/9), and Russian tourists suspected of espionage in Sweden (22/9). On a few occasions, the association of geopolitics with unconventional contexts was not even acknowledged. For example, interviews with an author and a visual artist, who both had a background in Russia and the USSR, casually led to discussions about Russian politics (11/9, 12/10).

The contents of *Karjalainen* support the thesis by Laine (2015) and Pietiläinen (2011) that the news articles themselves rarely suggest directly that Russia is a military threat to Finland. The portrayal of *Karjalainen's* news articles on conflicts in Ukraine and Syria pointed to the possibility of inaccuracy of sources, qualifying arguments with the caption "according to sources". The paper in fact emphasized the intrinsic bias associated with reporting on conflicts by running an article which was headlined "Only hand-picked truths from East Aleppo", highlighting a journalist's point of view on the war in Syria (27/10).

Graphic representations of Russian military force alone can reproduce pre-existing perceptions of Russian geopolitical threats. These images are easy to digest even for those who just scan newspaper texts. The articles in *Karjalainen* about Russian state-level

politics typically used archival images of the people involved. The image of military threat was reproduced more clearly through news graphics than through textual contents. Besides the war images and maps from eastern Ukraine and Syria, the violation of Finnish airspace by a Russian fighter featured a map of the Baltic Sea with a fighter plane (8/10). In the opinions section of *Karjalainen*, this graphically produced presentation of the Russian (increasing) military might was a notable grievance:

Russian arms exports have been the largest in the world since 2012 and grow like mushrooms. It has so much hardware that there is no room for it in Baltic Sea airspace. Yeah. No reason to fear Russia! (SMS 16/10)

The sarcastic remark at the end of this message refers to previous messages claiming that people should not fear Russia. It manifests how perceptions of the temporal severity of threats vary in different forms of speech. Overall, the representation of Russian military potential in *Karjalainen* was intertwined with the memory of Moscow's historical actions. This constituted an image of Russia as a great power whose reliability is questionable. While the articles on history also provided alternative historical images of Russia, the images of geopolitical threat entailed influential discursive knowledge about an essentially hostile and manipulative Russia that cannot fundamentally change to enable a less threatening relationship with Moscow.

PEOPLE UNDER THE STATE SHADOW

It is difficult to assess the degree to which the threat perceptions of Russia in *Karjalainen* are strictly associated with the state and not with the Russian people. It is nonetheless important to consider the need and possibilities to fight prejudice. Based on survey research in 2012, Brylka, Mähönen, and Jasinskaja-Lahti (2015) concluded that the perceived threat related to Russians is not concrete, but rather the phenomenon of Russian immigration to Finland was considered a threat particularly among Finns with a strong national self-identification. Subsequent research has supported the thesis that Finnish prejudices against Russians are connected to general xenophobia (Krivonos 2019).

Pentti Raittila (2011) found that when asked about negative perceptions of Russians, his Finnish interviewees often replied by talking about the perceptions of their acquaintances and people they had met, instead of their own prejudices. This suggests that Finns are discouraged to admit their own negative perceptions, which is why they are filtered and depersonalized. Similarly, I did not recognize explicitly negative attitudes against Russians in *Karjalainen*, which is partially due to the journalistic filter: many

statements in the letters section and journalistic stories claimed that such attitudes are covert but real. Hence, the outspoken general perceptions and meta-discussion can provide an important perspective on how the threat images of Russia can produce unwanted subject relations between people.

In *Karjalainen* it was popularly believed that fear, prejudice, and other negative attitudes that Finns harbour against Russians were grounded in lacking personal experiences with Russians and life in Russia. This was suggested, for example, in an article about the reluctance and reservations of Finnish students to head to Russia for exchange studies. The reluctance was deplored in an interview by a student who had experience as an au pair in Petrozavodsk and as an exchange student in St Petersburg (4/10). This article encouraged Finns to meet Russians and travel to Russia. The prevalent public attitude in Finland towards Russia was considered neither rational nor desirable. A few messages in the opinions section referred to the perception of negative attitudes towards Russians as a myth, a misunderstanding: “There is no fear against Russians. Only fear against Russia, and it is based on history and the current day” (SMS 9/11).

The effort to disconnect negative attitudes towards the state regime from the Russian people also manifested a popular concern that unconscious association could cause undesirable confusion between the two. An editorial of *Karjalainen* referred to this concern in commenting on news about controversial property purchases in strategic Finnish military locations by Russian citizens. These were construed as suspicious efforts to establish secret bases. The editor-in-chief emphasized that the property issue, fed by already existing attitudes and perceptions, could create collateral damage by promoting bad behaviour against ordinary Russians:

Talking openly about the murky deeds of Russians was long fought off by the will to avoid increasing racism towards Russian tourists and shoppers. They should not be placed under suspicion now either. (4/11)

The illustrations representing ordinary Russians worked to prevent the alienation of common Russian citizens, which was also the editorial line of *Karjalainen*. Russian politicians were often presented in close-up archival images or talking behind a cabinet desk, while average Russian people were characteristically portrayed in full body photographs and active movement. In addition to images in local sports news (3/7, 17/7), illustrations of ordinary Russians featured a jogging man in an article about Russian compatriots in Estonia (20/8), a woman walking on the street in an article

about Russian tourism in Finland (21/10), and in an item about hot water regulations in St Petersburg, a woman washing her hair (30/8). These stories familiarized readers with people who were dealing with topical issues.

Besides xenophobia, a prominent news topic in 2017 was the fear of Russia's using its "compatriots' policies" to exert influence in Finland through dual citizens holding security-related offices (Oivo 2022). During the investigated period, *Karjalainen* carried one news article about a bill to exclude these persons from national security-related employment (8/10). The background section explained, in passive voice, that the Finnish government had initiated this process after Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, which Moscow justified by citing a need to defend its compatriots there. The article also noted that one-third of Finnish citizens with multiple citizenship have a Russian background. However, the visibility of this aspect of the story was arguably diminished as it was only mentioned at the end of the article.

Previous interview studies have noted that corruption and crime are examples of otherwise rare concrete threat images that Finns have related to Russians (Raittila 2011). There is even a concept of "eastern criminality" (*itärikollisuus*) in the Finnish language, which refers to Russian, and to a lesser degree Estonian, organized crime. In *Karjalainen*, such images were barely featured at all. They were generally implied in descriptions of the social order in Russia and were rarely accompanied by illustrations. For me, the most notable example of this genre was an article commemorating the investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya (7/10). It was noted that Politkovskaya's unsolved murder makes little difference to people who deal with multiple problems related to the everyday life in Russia. *Karjalainen's* discussion section referred on a few occasions to issues with the legal order as an established part of the image of Russia. While this image was not often on display, its unquestionability entails a strong discursive power, associating the Russian threat images not only with the Russian state but also with the Russian people.

THREAT ON THE BORDER

There is a well-known saying in Finland: "We cannot fix geography". Finland's geostrategic vicinity to Russia, and St Petersburg particularly, is a fundamental factor in Finnish security politics. This commonly held belief was also manifested in the geopolitical reasoning in *Karjalainen*. However, the association of Russia's geographical vicinity with security concerns was represented as an exception to the "normal" in North Karelia. In this section, I will review how Russia is seen from the perspective of closeness.

Previous interview studies with senior residents (Laurén 2012) and youth (Limnéll and Rantapelkonen 2017) of the (south)eastern Finnish border region conclude that border inhabitants worry relatively little about Russia. Studies suggest that the prejudices and fears of Finns towards Russians have gradually lessened as personal encounters have increased. At the same time, Limnéll and Rantapelkonen (2017) have observed more concerns over Russia among the youth living in the Finnish southeast than in the western parts of the country. This shows that there are generational and other intersectional differences between people's threat images that the approach of current research does not catch. In *Karjalainen* the representations of Russians and Russian regions along the Finnish border plainly contradicted the threat images associated with Russia. Russian border regions near Finland were portrayed as sharing challenges, interests, and opportunities with North Karelia. Images of the Russia nearby predominantly depicted people on the move as illustrated in the previous section.

Generally, there was little implication that the proximity of North Karelia to Russia would give residents of the border region cause for more concern than to people living in other areas of Finland. Instead, the demilitarized Åland archipelago between Finland and Sweden was identified as being more threatened due to its geostrategic importance (3/8, 20/10, 23/10, 3/11). Everyday life close to the Russian border appeared to dissolve active concerns and frictions, but it also embedded a certain passive risk awareness.

In a special section of *Karjalainen* dedicated to the municipality of Tohmajärvi (10/12), a local resident mentioned in an interview that during the Soviet era, her friends from other parts of Finland often asked if the border's vicinity made her scared. While the interviewee downplayed the fear her friends had anticipated, she also quipped, as an afterthought, that "the Finnish Border Guard is close anyway". Recalling and bringing up this old question and the added remark about the Border Guard refer to passive and externalized concerns recognized previously by Raittila (2011).

The position of the people writing about their first-hand experiences with the Russia nearby often fundamentally differed from general threat images of Russia – and this was often highlighted by the respondents themselves, too. In the opinions section, there was much discussion about issues related to the daily visits of border inhabitants to Russia, especially to refuel their cars. The SMS quoted below refers drily to the geopolitical threat in a regional everyday context: "At least there is no fear of Russia occupying Finland through Niirala, they are way too slow at that crossing point for it" (SMS

16/10). The direct military threat was at times even made fun of by pointing out how alien the idea was from the perspective of actual everyday experiences on the border.

Unconventional threat images have also been observed from the border perspective. On October 17, *Karjalainen* published a report about a questions and answers session in Joensuu between pensioners and a representative of the Finnish Border Guard. One of the key issues discussed at the meeting was the recent rise in the number of asylum seekers to Finland from Russia's border areas. This took place at border stations in north Finland in late 2015 and early 2016 when Russian border officials unexpectedly gave 1 741 asylum seekers access to the border zone (see Virkkunen and Piipponen 2019). The representative of the Finnish Border Guard explained that the admittance of the asylum seekers to the border did not violate official agreements. However, he characterized this as a "bizarre episode", because it contradicted the established practice of not admitting civilians to Russia's border zone without proper documents. He added that in common sense reasoning, the asylum seekers did not appear on the border out of the blue (17/10). This asylum-seeker scenario was exceptional in *Karjalainen* as other articles regarding the Russian Border and Customs officials presented them in familiar ways, for example conducting bilateral cooperation with their Finnish colleagues (14/8, 14/9, 21/10, 3/11).

Overall, the closeness and familiarity of the Russia nearby represented a very different image compared to the more distant Russia of geopolitics. The down-to-earth scale of regional issues and the personal experiences that represented relationships with Russians as equals produced empowered positions for Finns and North Karelians. Images of the Russian-Finnish border area balanced the geopolitical threat images with transregional cooperation opportunities.

THREATS OUT OF SIGHT

All the threat images of Russia acknowledged in previous literature were not explicitly manifested on the pages of *Karjalainen*. In this section I review how some of them were merely hinted at or not represented in the period of current research. They are nevertheless relevant as proposed by previous research. The non-represented images can be interpreted as exclusions in discursive production and as reminders also to researchers that things could be different.

There are several established, indirect ways of referring to Russia without mentioning it. These innuendos can be connected to the Finnish historical narrative and collective

memory about the time when negative references to the USSR were a taboo (Lounasmeri 2011b; Pietiläinen 2011). Several articles in *Karjalainen* discussed Finland's topical hard security concerns, but did not elaborate what these concerns were (column 13/9, news 13/8, 28/9, 2/11 editorials 1/10 and 20/10). In the absence of other established security threats in the Finnish imagination, a familiar chain of ideas enabled readers to associate these vague threats with Russia. The opinions section particularly carried several indirect references to Russia through euphemisms such as "the neighbour" and the "east". The writers expected readers to recognize Russia from such euphemisms, which implies familiarity with these shorthand, veiled references. This way of writing reproduces not only a collective memory, but also an image of a continuous, mysterious, exceptional, and unpredictable Russia.

Previous research has found that the military threat in the media images of Russia have a notable counterforce in representations of economic opportunities (Lounasmeri 2011a). In *Karjalainen*, however, the opportunities of Russian trade and tourism were barely referred to, and only on the border regional context. By the logic of "no news is good news", the absence of Russian economic opportunities from *Karjalainen's* contents does not mean that they do not exist. Sakari Höysniemi's (2022) interview study with Finnish experts on energy issues shows that the discourse of Russia as a reliable and profit-interested energy producer is strong compared to the concerns about its political risks.

Another relatively absent side of the image of Russia in *Karjalainen* was the environment and energy politics, but this could be due to the relatively limited timeframe. Similarly, Niko Väistö's (2019, 20) study of the representations of Russian nature in *Helsingin Sanomat* in 2008–2016 found comparatively little content about the topic. Yet, Väistö recognized that *Helsingin Sanomat* represented Russian nature fairly regularly as a collection of environmental issues that characterize Russian state and society. Nature in Russia was cast in the role of a carbon sink swallowing carbon emissions, but it was also portrayed, as were the many Russian peoples living close to nature, as being threatened by the state (Väistö 2019).

I propose that the unrepresented perceptions and knowledge of Russian-related environmental issues in *Karjalainen* were inactive due to the temporal news agenda. According to Raittila (2011), images of environmental threat are notably connected to the news agenda, and in 2011, the fear of Russian nuclear plants and the remembrance of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster increased in the immediate aftermath of the Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan. Russian-related environmental topics in regional

newspapers have previously been recognized as having grass-roots perspectives, such as road damage from import and export trucks (Ojajärvi and Valtonen 2011, 26). These local issues were briefly reported also in *Karjalainen*, but they were rarely referred to in the opinions section. A lone opinion piece participating in the popular discussion about the Finnish plans to shorten opening hours at the Niirala-Wärtsilä border-crossing point (for budget reasons) pointed out that the plan threatened to increase vehicle traffic on the winding roads of the region (15/9).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

I have examined how *Karjalainen*, a daily newspaper in the Finnish border region, covered and represented threats associated with Russian-related images in 2016. This was not an exceptionally dramatic year in terms of the image of Russia in Finland in comparison to 2014 or 2022. It was rather a year when familiar threat images became gradually more established and believable through their recurring representation in the media. At the time, the threat image of Russia as being involved in election meddling was rather new, but it was represented in line with an established image of Russia as a suspicious, and at times antagonistic, opponent of western democracies. My research observations support previous conclusions (Pietiläinen 2011, Laine 2015) that daily presentations of Russia in media did not notably essentialize Russia as a threat. Rather, the threat and the images of Russia overall were clearly a diverse sum of diverse current events, national history, personal experiences, as well as impressions from public opinion and political values.

In *Karjalainen*, the most notable facet that the newspaper illustrations added to the threat image was the military potential of Russia. Despite its prior existence, this image understandably featured far less in the opinion surveys before Russia started the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. However, a good proportion of the illustrations in *Karjalainen* were plain archival photographs of Russian politicians, and I was not able to draw conclusions on what kinds of messages they mediated.

Generally, ideas of environmental and human security have expanded traditional conceptions of security beyond the realist view of military and institutional security. However, in 2016, traditional geopolitical conceptions of security appeared as the primary threat image associated with Russia. Based on my previous immersion in the discussions, it was no surprise that the military threat was presented against the backdrop of the Finno-Soviet wars in the discussions section of the *Karjalainen*. It was more unexpected that the representations of the Soviet state and its peoples were

virtually absent in informative articles on these wars. The microhistorical perspective in these articles can be interpreted as an effort by the editors not to reproduce images of the national enemy and aggressive relations. Intriguingly, the most undisputed threat image of Russia in the historical discussions of *Karjalainen* was not related to the Finno-Soviet wars, but to the idea that the Soviet Union still wanted to “devour” Finland after Stalin’s death.

The selective remembrance of Russian history in *Karjalainen* often embedded geopolitical logics and perceptions of Russia’s threatening essence as a historical great power. This was not balanced by references to cultural and economic opportunities with Russia on the international level, making Russia seem exceptional in comparison to other great powers. These opportunities balanced Russia’s image only in the regional contexts where threat images were presented more as exceptional or disconnected from the “reality on the ground”. By the time of Russia’s reinvasion of Ukraine in 2022, these positive images may seem distant, but they are still a recent part of the regional collective memories.

Karjalainen’s content underlines how media discourse encourages society to separate the generally pejorative geopolitical image of Russia from the people and Russia as a place. The separation of these different “faces” of Russia offered a viable alternative to comprehend Russia in a way that does not pose harm to average Russian people. Sanctioning Russia for its aggression against Ukraine in 2022 has challenged what used to be a powerful discourse and deserves further attention from researchers and public authorities alike.

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