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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Troll Tactics: Sowing Discord in Finland's Russian-Language Facebook Groups

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Abstract

This article examines a 2024 trolling campaign targeting a Russian-speaking Facebook group in Finland, in the context of Russian information warfare against the EU. Drawing on critical discourse analysis, it explores how pro-Kremlin trolls localized their messaging to exploit vulnerabilities of Russian-speakers in Finland. Two strategies – "fat" and "subtle" trolling – provoked emotional responses and led users to reproduce propaganda narratives, amplifying them and pre-existing tensions. The sentiment that the Russian-speaking audience "had no home" in Finland was a sensitive area. The article highlights the audience's role in negotiating the meanings of troll messages. The trolls drew on local media content and sociocultural tensions. While some users succumbed to provocation, others resisted, restoring group cohesion. The article underlines the importance of micro-level analysis of audience responses to understand their vulnerabilities and recommends further research in this area. To counter the threat of polarization by information warfare, it also recommends recognizing the "pain points" of target audiences and including them in public discourse as members of multicultural societies that accept difference rather than marginalize it.

Keywords: Finland; information warfare; political trolling; audience co-construction of propaganda meanings; critical discourse analysis; Russophone diasporas

Introduction

Not long after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, online groups of Russian speakers across Europe began experiencing coordinated trolling attacks.

Since the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the Russian state has deployed information warfare (IW) targeting both domestic audiences and those in the European Union and the United States (Kari and Pynnöniemi 2023; Shekhovtsov 2015; Chivvis 2017). Russian-speaking diaspora communities have been frequent targets of this IW (Rodríguez 2021; Romashko 2024), which operates at multiple levels — from public diplomacy and strategic narratives to the micro-level of social media groups. To influence these communities, the state relies on proxies such as fabricated media outlets, bloggers, and trolls to spread misinformation, sow division, and undermine trust in host governments.

This article presents a case study of one such episode: a targeted trolling campaign in the Facebook group *"RUFI Russians in Finland - FinRus RUFI"* between 23 January and 28 February 2024. By examining this case, the study addresses gaps in the literature on trolling as a tool of Russian IW against Russian-speaking diasporas, particularly in the Finnish context. This article examines trolling as a form of online behavior in which individuals deliberately post provocative or

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inflammatory messages to elicit negative emotional reactions and draw others into unproductive, often hostile exchanges.

The Russian state often views diasporic communities as instruments of influence over European political processes (Suslov 2017; Klyueva and Mikhaylova 2017; Cheskin 2016). Scholars identify structural, affective, and identity-based vulnerabilities among Russian speakers abroad that can be exploited by the Russian state. Ryzhova and Toepfl (2024) show that Russian speakers in Germany navigate competing transnational news environments, where uncertainty over whom to trust — amid rival authorities and truth claims — creates vulnerabilities beyond mere exposure to disinformation, often reinforced by a perceived moral obligation to believe Kremlin-sponsored media representing their homeland. Rönngren (2025) likewise demonstrates that young Russian speakers in Latvia interpret Russian strategic narratives through affective identification, highlighting the emotional and identity-based dimensions of reception. Hoyle et al. (2024) further find that perceived discrimination, reflected in "Russophobia" narratives circulated by Sputnik Latvia, can strengthen in-group identification and increase receptivity to divisive messaging.

In post-Soviet states — particularly the Baltic countries and Ukraine — such information influence seeks to deepen divisions between Russian-speaking populations and their governments, provoke socio-political tensions, and erode trust in NATO and the EU (Shekhovtsov 2015; Chivvis 2017). In Western Europe and the US, the Kremlin's strategy focuses on destabilizing institutions by sowing confusion and undermining confidence in democratic governance (Helmus, Bodine-Baron et al. 2018; Kondratov and Johansson-Nogués 2023). Across these contexts, communities of Russian-speaking users serve as key channels for disseminating such influence.

Pro-Russian propagandists adopt a tailored approach when addressing different audiences. Message localization (adapting content to resonate with specific cultural and political contexts) is a common tactic in IW campaigns targeting Ukraine and the Baltic states (Burda and Bundzíková 2025; Helmus, Bodine-Baron et al. 2018), and has also been observed in the Nordic countries, including Finland (Deverell, Wagnsson and Olsson 2021).

Although Finland long remained peripheral to Russian information warfare, its accession to NATO in 2023 marked a turning point. Russia now frames Finland as an "unfriendly" state and a security threat, making it a target of information campaigns. In 2025, Russian authorities advanced a new narrative portraying Finland as a historical adversary, recasting it from a neutral neighbor into a persistent source of danger (for example, Patrushev 2025). While Russia's tailored messaging toward audiences in Finland — including Russian speakers — has attracted scholarly attention, it remains relatively underexplored.

A prominent example of Russian information tactics in Finland is the case of journalist Jessikka Aro. In 2014, she investigated the St. Petersburg "troll factory" and invited readers to share their experiences of aggressive pro-Russian online accounts. She subsequently became the target of a coordinated harassment campaign. Her case illustrates the multifaceted nature of Russian information influence in Finland, combining alternative media narratives with targeted social media attacks (Aro 2014).

As Oivo (2021) notes, Russian influence in Finland often manifests itself through so-called "counter-media" — alternative news sites that criticize Western media and re-use RT and Sputnik materials to create distrust of Western institutions. Finland nevertheless possesses structural safeguards that limit the reach and effectiveness of such influence. Since Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014, Finland has systematically promoted media literacy as a defense against disinformation and psychological manipulation, consistently ranking among the countries with the highest levels of media literacy (Lessenski 2022).

Although trolling has been widely examined as a technique within IW, its operation in specific local contexts remains understudied. Much of it unfolds "under the radar," dispersed across numerous social media groups and local media ecosystems. This case study, therefore, explores the techniques trolls use to engage with Russian-speaking diasporas in the EU; investigates to what

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extent their messaging is tailored to the local media landscape and sociopolitical context; and examines the audience response to trolling.

Despite frequent claims about users' susceptibility to online influence, empirical evidence remains limited, particularly regarding audience reactions to trolling. This study assesses the vulnerability or resilience of Russian-speaking community members to political trolling and examines their role not as passive recipients but as active interpreters and producers of meaning. From this more nuanced understanding of how Russian-speaking diasporas engage with pro-Kremlin propaganda on social media, analysis of audience reactions to trolling can help identify the "pain points" (a term used in marketing to refer to specific frustrations or needs that users experience in their interactions with a product or service; see Platzer 2018), vulnerabilities and concerns of Russian speakers in Finland, as potential future targets of Russian influence.

Finally, I consider the policy implications of viewing Russian speakers in Finland not merely as passive recipients of propaganda, but as persons with agency who themselves construct and negotiate meanings in response to the narratives presented to them.

The article is organized as follows. I begin by outlining the theoretical foundations of information warfare, with a particular focus on Russia's war in Ukraine. I then examine the tactical use of trolling within these campaigns, before describing the landscape of Russian-speaking digital communities in Finland. This is followed by a presentation of the case study facts and the methodological framework guiding the analysis. The case study itself is then explored in detail. Finally, the article concludes by reflecting on the key findings and discussing their implications, as well as directions for future research.

Information Warfare in the Context of Russia's War in Ukraine

To understand the role of trolling as a tactic, it is first worth considering how information warfare is defined. By "information warfare", I refer to the comprehensive use of communication technologies to shape perceptions, influence behavior, and gain strategic advantage over an adversary—often by causing harm through the manipulation of information.

This article adopts the concept of information warfare rather than the narrower notions of information influence or digital propaganda. Although the case could also be examined through the related lenses of information influence — which focuses more specifically on shaping attitudes or behavior — or digital propaganda, understood as the online dissemination of ideologically driven or misleading content, the episode analyzed here, while micro-level, is embedded in the broader context of the war in Ukraine. I therefore approach it as an example of an attempt to achieve strategic advantage in an ongoing war through information operations targeting local communities at the micro level.

The concept of IW has been widely studied across various domains (see, for example, Arquilla and Ronfeldt 1993, 1997; Libicki 1995, 2007; Białoskórski 2023; Rid 2013) and has gained particular attention in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine, starting in 2014 and especially after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Applebaum 2014; Giles 2023).

The information revolution not only transformed societal structures and institutions, but also the way societies wage wars. In the 1990s this shift prompted researchers to study emerging forms of conflict such as "cyberwarfare" as an act at the military level, and "netwar" as "societal-level ideational conflicts waged in part through internetted modes of communication" (Arquilla and Ronfeldt 1993, 27). Martin Libicki (1995, 2007) emphasized the fragmentation of information warfare, arguing that it has no single front of action, and instead comprises multiple domains: command-and-control warfare, intelligence-based warfare, electronic warfare, psychological operations, hacker warfare, economic information warfare, and cyberwarfare. Both cyber warfare and psychological influence can be seen as "forms of war about 'knowledge'" (Arquilla and Ronfeldt 1993, 27).

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Modern conflicts that unfold not only on the battlefield, but in the information field before, during, and after hostilities, are labeled 'hybrid' (Chivvis 2017). The term became dominant in the 2010s and 2020s, both in the theoretical understanding of information warfare and in political and military practice (Fridman 2018; Kelly and Paul 2020; Matthews, Demus, et al. 2021; Dickey, Everett, et al. 2015). Hybridity refers to a warfare model that integrates tools and tactics across the informational, cyber, political, and economic domains (Giannopoulos, Smith, and Thocharidou 2021, Pearce 2018). They include cyberattacks (malware, DDoS, database hacking), manipulation of public opinion (fakes, narratives, trolling), and efforts to erode institutional trust (through rumors, fabricated evidence, fake sources), all understood as components of a coordinated strategic operation. Even the deployment of public diplomacy or "soft power" can be framed as part of this integrated approach (Kragh and Åsberg 2017, cited by Giannopoulos, Smith, and Theocharidou 2021). This perspective underpins current analysis of Russia's IW against Ukraine and Western countries (Fridman 2018).

The aggregation of users in social networks and the growing influence of providers, moderators, and algorithms have positioned social media and messaging platforms as key channels of information influence (Dijck, Poell, and Wall 2018). These platforms enable the rapid launch of disinformation, the manipulation of emotions, and attempts to shape electoral behavior. In this context, both propaganda (by which I refer broadly to the dissemination of information to manipulate public opinion) and disinformation (knowingly false, distorted, or incomplete information) have evolved significantly (Till 2021; Perach et al. 2023). Researchers increasingly highlight the technological dimensions of digital propaganda and study how technologies amplify its reach and impact. This includes the use of bots, trolls, and big data analytics (for example, Geissler et al. 2023; Sanovich 2017; Woolley and Howard 2018) as well as the training of large language models based on propagandistic content (Lesplingart and Châtelet 2025; Newport and Jankowicz 2025). Such content is made more persuasive through algorithmic personalization and deepfakes (Kuznetsova and Makhortykh 2023; Dugoin-Clément 2024).

Several scholars identify digital networks as a transformative force in IW. Białoskórski (2023) emphasizes "network-centric warfare" as a necessity for successful information warfare. Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018) describe "network propaganda" as a phenomenon in which social media creates new opportunities for information manipulation. Asmolov (2019) highlights the rise of participatory propaganda where the central dynamic is not top-down dissemination from state institutions, but the active involvement of ordinary social media users. These users contribute to IW by creating their own content based on propaganda messages, spreading disinformation, amplifying mutual distrust, and ultimately weakening horizontal social ties within communities.

Contemporary IW is characterized less by the concealment of information than by its overabundance. Competing streams of true, half-true, and false messages create informational "noise" that makes it difficult to recognize the truth (Rid 2013) and fosters uncertainty (Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014). The goal is often not to persuade, but to instill doubt. In this sense, IW extends beyond the promotion of specific narratives to shaping the broader contours of public discourse — that is, the ways in which issues of public concern are discussed within a society (Asmolov 2022).

Schwartau (1993) categorizes information warfare according to its intended targets, as personal, corporate, or global, corresponding to individuals, organizations, and states. While states remain the main actors in the political domain, the influence of non-state actors has grown significantly (Białoskórski 2023). IW on social media often involves covert influence, where actors do not declare their affiliations. For instance, Russia employs a variety of proxies to conduct discreet information campaigns below the threshold of formal institutional involvement (Asmolov 2019, 2022; Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014). Attribution is often ambiguous, making it difficult to determine whether an attack originates from state actors, independent hackers, or self-identified "patriotic" activists.

A multilevel analysis of information warfare should include the micro level of local communities and individuals. The infrastructure of networked IW penetrates deeply into the everyday life and private world of the individual, transforming individuals into potential participants in propaganda

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systems (Zvereva 2020b). To reach these targets, information campaigns extend to smaller-scale platforms such as local media outlets and social media groups. Through various proxies (bloggers, publishers of small magazines, trolls, and bots) these campaigns can disseminate disinformation and spread fear and social division.

Trolling as a weapon of information war

Trolling first attracted scholarly attention in the 2000s as a phenomenon of Internet culture. The term "trolling" serves as an umbrella for various forms of provocative communicative behavior, typically aimed at eliciting negative emotional responses from targets. Classic trolling involves provoking individuals by insulting their values or beliefs, often with the goal of drawing them into futile, emotionally charged arguments (Bishop 2013). The 'classical' internet troll does not adhere to any viewpoint but shifts positions strategically to bait their target. The widely accepted response strategy against trolling is to refuse to enter a dialogue with the provocateur, as summarized by the motto "don't feed the trolls."

Research perspectives on trolls, of course, vary by discipline, but by applying trolls to van Dijk's (2011) concept of ingroups and outgroups as a feature of discourse, I would argue that productive reconciliation can be engineered between two contrasting research perspectives. Early studies of trolls focused on their disruptive behaviour, antisocial stance, and the harm they caused. By breaking the norms of online communities, they constitute a deviant 'outgroup'. In contrast, digital anthropologists began to explore trolling from an 'ingroup' perspective, particularly within subcultures on platforms such as 4chan and Reddit. In these communities, trolling functions as a form of self-expression and identity performance, with implications for hacker culture, anonymous activism, and whistleblowing (Coleman 2014; Phillips 2015).

In Russia, public perceptions of trolling evolved significantly over time. In the early 2010s, trolls were portrayed in Russian media as youthful internet pranksters (Gorham 2020). However, pro-Kremlin discourse soon politicized the term, associating trolling with threats such as "pedophiles," "extremists," and "terrorists." This framing served to justify increasing state control over the Internet (ibid.). At the same time, Russian-language trolling has roots in oppositional subcultures dating back to the 1990s. Many trolls viewed themselves not as agents of state power, but as rebels challenging the system.

By the 2010s, internet trolling had moved beyond subcultural expression, as businesses and governments began to recognize its utility for disrupting online conversations and damaging reputations. In Russia, the hiring of trolls and hackers to discredit political opponents became widespread in information warfare in the 2010s and 2020s (Zannettou, Caulfield et al. 2019). Such organized trolling in the service of the Russian authorities is used to spread misinformation and manipulate public opinion. The shift, from trolling as a subversive, humorous practice to a professionalized tool of state power, coincided with the onset of Russian aggression on Ukraine in 2013–14.

The most extensively studied example of trolling by pro-government actors is the so-called 'Olgino Trolls' (Garmazhapova 2013). In 2013, the Internet Research Agency, based in the Olgino suburb of St Petersburg, hired staff to work for what became known as a 'troll-factory' – a conveyor belt of pseudo-bloggers to write posts and comments in bulk on prescribed topics: against the opposition, America, and Ukraine, and in support of the Russian president (Zakharov and Rusiaeva 2017). In 2018, the Internet Research Agency (IRA), among other companies and individuals, was indicted by a US grand jury for organizing activities for the purpose of interference in the 2016 US presidential election. This event prompted a surge of academic research into the IRA's impact on global information ecosystems (Zannettou et al. 2019; Linvill and Warren 2020). Russian trolls often target vulnerable or marginalized groups to exacerbate existing social divisions. For example, IRA trolls have used racial stereotypes to inflame tensions among various communities in the USA, including Black Americans, conservatives, and progressives on platforms like Twitter (Bradshaw, DiResta, and Miller 2022; Howard, Ganesh et al. 2018).

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The objectives of pro-Russian trolling in the current IW include promoting Kremlin narratives, deepening divisions and contradictions within and between the European countries, weakening EU cohesion, eroding public trust in national governments, and provoking public dissent. These efforts aim to pressure European governments into reducing or halting military assistance to Ukraine.

Earlier research on the aesthetics of Internet trolling identified several core elements: the participants (trolls, victims, and spectators), the troll text with its characteristic components and structure, and the distinctive "laughter of trolls" (Zvereva 2020a). The pleasure — the "laughter of trolls" — comes from seeing their targets fall for provocations, argue with each other, or show indignation, anger, or bewilderment ("I did it for the LULZ"). Political trolling, however, works differently. Its reward lies not in amusement but in achieving strategic outcomes: short-term (disruption of communication) and long-term (changing the attitudes and behavior of the "victim") effects. A distinctive feature of Russian political trolling is the appropriation by state actors of subcultural trolling's aesthetic of cynical humor, which was appropriated and absorbed by the cynicism of the Russian political authorities (Kukulin 2016).

Researchers have identified defining characteristics of Russian pro-Kremlin trolling: high levels of organization, automation, and operational scale. These campaigns often combine software-driven bots with human operators who manage complex online personas. To increase the reach and speed of content distribution, Russian trolls use automation to react quickly to events and spread disinformation in real time. Troll accounts that operate in this way can often be identified by behavioral analysis (Ezzeddine, Ayoub et al. 2023).

How effective is trolling? On a micro level, many troll activities seek immediate impact: derailing discussions, littering or flooding the communication channel, provoking conflict between users. Such micro-actions often succeed: users fall into quarrels with each other, or, faced with trolling, express reluctance to engage in political and sensitive issues in spaces where trolling is prevalent.

Russian information warfare often uses propaganda strategies modeled on marketing techniques and feedback loops (Asmolov 2022). Adapting messages reflects an intent to resonate with specific audiences. As Litvinenko (2022) notes, Russian propaganda operates "on demand," delivering contradictory messages tailored to different segments. Similarly, effective trolling targets the vulnerabilities and "pain points" of specific groups. In diverse online communities, antagonistic messages may provoke one subgroup while validating another, thereby deepening internal divisions.

Assessing the long-term impact of trolling is more complex. Do trolls' messages affect the worldview of an individual? Do they shape political actions, for example, participation in protests or voting patterns? These questions indicate a need for further empirical research into the sustained effects of trolling.

It is also appropriate to compare political trolling with political advertising and marketing mechanisms. Successful trolling employs attention economics and communicative patterns similar to persuasive political messaging — for example, by provoking emotional responses and drawing in audiences in ways that parallel how political advertising seeks engagement and visibility (Lieback 2019). Like advertising copy, political trolling campaigns can construct virtual communities of individuals who recognize or resonate with a particular narrative. An important tactic is identifying and exploiting pre-existing grievances in a community. Trolling efficacy depends on contextual relevance and strategy more than merely on the volume of posts (Paakki, Salovaara, and Vepsäläinen 2020). Rather than creating new attitudes or opinions, political trolling tends to reinforce existing perceptions among those who already share them, increase the visibility of certain ideas, and intensify attention to existing social and ideological fault lines.

Trolling campaigns always increase awareness of trolling itself as an IW technique. However, this awareness does not necessarily function as a protective mechanism. On the contrary, increased reflection on trolling can heighten mutual suspicion among users. Individuals may begin to assume that any opposing viewpoint is the product of trolling, leading to the breakdown of dialogue.

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One potential long-term consequence of trolling, therefore, is the erosion of shared spaces for meaningful discussion, as users come to associate disagreement with malicious intent.

Context: online groups for Russians in Finland

Russian is currently the third most spoken language in Finland, after Finnish and Swedish. As of 2024, there were 102,487 Russian speakers, or 1.8 percent of the population (Population Structure 2025). Finland's Russophone population is diverse, comprising individuals from various waves of migration during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods.

Not all Russophones have Russian as their native language, and they differ widely in ethnicity, culture, profession, income, and political orientation. They do not constitute a cohesive community, yet are often collectively labeled as "Russians." In Russian, a distinction exists between *rossiianin* (a citizen of Russia) and *russkyi* (an ethnic or cultural identity), whereas Finnish uses the single term *venäläinen* for both meanings.

Various Facebook groups, some with similar or overlapping names, have been established by and for Russian speakers in Finland. The largest include *Russkie v Finliandii* (55 thousand members), *Vse o Finliandii* (43,200), and *RUFI Russkie v Finliandii — FinRus RUFI* (37 thousand). All are moderated; *Vse o Finliandii* is open, while the others are closed. Discussions are primarily in Russian and focus on practical matters such as employment, services, events, and everyday experiences. The terms "Russian" and "Russian-speaking" are used inconsistently, sometimes interchangeably, and sometimes as distinct categories.

Given members' diverse backgrounds and goals, identity-related discussions often generate tension. While political views vary, the most active members often share the common challenge of integrating into Finnish society. Their posts suggest that many migrated as adolescents or adults and are familiar with Soviet and post-Soviet cultural codes.

In this article, the "active core" refers to the relatively small group of users who regularly engage in debates, especially on contentious issues. Many others remain passive, avoiding political expression or confrontation with dominant voices. A systematic reading of their discussions indicates that the active core often articulates positions that can, with caution, be described as sympathetic to pro-Russian, anti-Western, or anti-NATO framings. These views are not universal and intersect with broader concerns about inclusion and belonging. This pattern aligns with media analyses showing that some participants in Russian-language social media in Finland reproduce narratives consistent with Russian state messaging, including interpretations of Finnish policies that echo Kremlin talking points (Helin and Ortamo 2024). Such positions are not unique to these groups, as similar views are expressed by some Finnish voters. What distinguishes the "pro--Russian" stance here is a heightened sensitivity to generalizations about "Russians" in public discourse on the war in Ukraine. For some users, this does not imply support for the President of Russia Vladimir Putin or the war in Ukraine; for others, it entails explicit approval of the Russian government's actions.

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, several developments contributed to heightened tensions among Russian-speaking communities in Finland. These included the closure of Finland's border with Russia, which disrupted travel and family connections; a reduction in Russian-language instruction in schools, and the increased reports of harassment targeting Russian-speaking organizations in Finland (for example, Schoenberg 2023; Rinta-Tassi 2022; Javits 2024); as well as political debates during the Finnish parliamentary election campaign in 2023 that featured discussion by candidates from across the political spectrum about potentially restricting dual Finnish-Russian citizenship. The lack of distinction in public discourse between civic and ethno-cultural identity, as well as the insufficient differentiation of Russian speakers in Finland by their political views, has provoked resentment among group members. In some cases, it has led them to deliberately exaggerate their 'Russianness' as a form of otherness.

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Between February 2022 and January 2025, Finland received 80,020 migrants from Ukraine (UNHCR 2025), which included Russian-speaking Ukrainians. Many of these, plus new emigrants from Russia, joined existing Facebook groups for Russian speakers in Finland. The newcomers, often unfamiliar with Finnish society but strongly critical of Russian policy and Putin's regime, introduced new tensions into the groups.

Methodology

This article presents a qualitative case study based on textual analysis conducted between 2024 and 2025. It focuses on posts in a single Russophone Facebook group *RUFI Russkie v Finliandii - FinRus RUFI*, mentioned above as the third largest Facebook group for Russian speakers in Finland by number of users. The facts can be summarised as follows.

Beginning on January 23, 2024, a series of posts was made by one or more anonymous users that differed markedly in tone and content from typical discussions in the group. Each post seemed unconnected to the group's usual themes and contained an obviously polarizing statement or question designed to provoke group members into agreement or disagreement. The culmination of this publication activity by anonymous users was February 23, a day celebrated in Soviet culture as the Day of the Soviet Army and Navy, and in contemporary Russia as Defender of the Fatherland Day. On this day, several Russian-speaking Facebook groups that I follow across Finland, Sweden, and the UK experienced a surge of congratulatory posts from anonymous users. The scale of the activity was unprecedented compared to previous years. This coordinated behavior suggests a planned campaign, likely executed by a group of individuals, and closely resembling the tactics of pro-Kremlin trolling.

Many users commented on the unusual nature of the posts, referring to the "inadequate" behavior of one anonymous user, or an information attack on the group. Despite these concerns, the anonymous posts continued to attract engagement, with users entering into heated debates. The group's administrators kept a low profile. Some members appealed to them to intervene, but no action was taken. Eventually, four weeks later, one active group member succeeded in contacting an administrator and obtained moderator rights for the group. They then disabled anonymous posting and removed all anonymous posts and associated threads. Following these actions, by February 28, 2024, the group returned to normal activity.

I read all the posts and threads in the group *RUFI Russians in Finland – FinRus RUFI* between January 23 and February 28, 2024, the period when there was notable activity by anonymous users. The total number of posts averaged 15 per day during the period studied. After that I continued to monitor the group's activity to better distinguish between typical and atypical user behavior. I was examining both the anonymously published posts and those by users responding — directly or indirectly — to the troll attacks (for example, posts urging others not to fall for provocations). To study the texts, I copied them in the form of threads saved as Word documents and screenshots. I anonymized the comments by deleting or redacting usernames. I then analyzed this material using critical discourse analysis methods.

Data were collected through participant observation (Villegas 2018), with my role limited to that of a non-intervening observer. In accordance with the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), no personal data was collected from participants in the discussions. All cited material has been fully anonymized, translated into English, and stripped of URLs or direct links to the original posts. Moreover, following the incident under examination, the group moderator deleted all anonymous posts and related comments from the period in question. After consultation on the ethical implications of the project at my university, and taking into account the clear public interest of the topic as well as the high level of data protection ensured, I consider it ethically justifiable to cite both anonymous posts and user comments, as they can no longer be used to identify individual participants.

I conceptualize political trolling as a communicative process through which political and socio-cultural meanings are produced, circulated, contested, and either accepted or rejected (Hall 1973).

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This process involves multiple actors: the trolls themselves and, as I argue, the pro-government Russian institutions that commission and direct such communication as part of an information warfare strategy. It also includes the target audience — users of the Facebook group — who are subjected to the information attack. This audience is heterogeneous and exhibits different responses to trolling. To better understand these, I draw on Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, which posits that media messages are interpreted based on the audience's prior experience and ideological positions (Hall 1973). A message may be (1) accepted, when it aligns with the audience's dominant or "hegemonic" worldview; (2) rejected when the message contradicts their ideological stance; or (3) "negotiated", when the audience partially accepts and partially resists the meaning of the message. This theoretical framework highlights the active role of the audience, as "readers" who interpret and define the meanings of the trolling text.

For the analysis of texts, I use critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Van Dijk 2011; Wodak and Meyer 2001) alongside Norman Fairclough's framework for analyzing media discourse (Fairclough 1995). According to Fairclough, CDA should examine not only the content and representations within texts themselves, but also the social relations and identities associated with their production and consumption. This includes stable, dominant structures, as well as evolving dynamics of discourse, such as shifting power relations and emerging identities in media discourse. Following Fairclough, I treat my case as a communicative event — a specific instance of discourse situated within a particular social context. Accordingly, my analysis focuses on three interrelated dimensions: the texts produced by trolls and commentators; the discursive practices within the Facebook group, including how these texts are introduced, discussed, and interpreted; and the broader social practices that frame this communicative act. This case offers insight into how Russian political trolling operates among Russian-speaking Facebook users in Finland during the active phase of Russia's war in Ukraine. Contextualizing the analysis in this way allows us to examine, first, how the overarching Russian strategic narrative — anti-Ukrainian, anti-Western, and pro-war — is adapted and localized for Finland as an EU and NATO member state, and for its Russian-speaking community. Second, it helps explain the audience's interpretive responses: whether they align with hegemonic readings, reject the messages, or engage in negotiated interpretations in dealing with troll texts.

Analysis

In the following analysis, I consider the techniques of trolling, the adaptation of troll messages to the Finnish context, and audience reactions to trolling.

Techniques of trolling: "fat" and "thin"

The central theme of the analyzed posts was the war in Ukraine. The anonymous accounts exhibited a hallmark of troll behavior: the strategic alternation between conflicting positions. They included expressions of support for Russia and praise for Vladimir Putin alongside derogatory remarks targeting the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukrainians, and the Ukrainian military. Conversely, some posts expressed admiration for the Ukrainian army, condemned Russian war crimes, or insulted Putin. Others directed insults towards either Russians or Ukrainians as generalized national groups. Besides war-related content, the posts frequently shifted focus to local and regional issues. Some praised the Finnish government or EU leadership, while others lamented the dominance of immigrants, rising prices, and economic decline in Finland and the EU. For example:

> Anonymous: The bloody regime of Zelensky is dying in agony. Let's place bets on how long the agony will last and when the war will end. I give it one year max. (RUFI 24.01.2024).

> Anonymous: Putinists, why do you torture yourselves by staying in a NATO country? (RUFI 21.02.2024).

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The troll posts were often phrased as categorical assertions, conveying a sense of certainty and finality. This style contrasted with the typical communication patterns within the group, where even strong opinions are usually expressed indirectly through irony, innuendo, or memes. Such indirectness appears to be a strategy for avoiding Facebook's content moderation and potential legal consequences under Finnish hate speech laws, a concern frequently voiced by group members. Although the group's usual style is fairly aggressive, this aggression tends to be ritualistic rather than confrontational. Exchanges of insults often function as identity performances, where participants assert their views without necessarily seeking to "win" the argument. This performative aggression serves as a mechanism for maintaining group cohesion by avoiding direct, irreconcilable conflict. Against this backdrop, the troll posts stood out due to their overt harshness, their engagement with controversial topics, and their alternation between opposing viewpoints, all of which clearly marked these posts as trolling.

A common technique employed in these posts was the combination of broad political claims with seemingly personal commentary (for example, "I give [Zelensky] a year at most," or "my candidate [for president] …"). Notably, the anonymous posters did not limit themselves to simulating personal presence through such statements. They consistently engaged with commenters, responding in ways that suggested a nuanced understanding of the discussion. This level of interaction suggests that the posts were likely authored by real individuals rather than chatbots or automated systems. The tone of these replies varied significantly, from neutral or pseudo-serious to mocking or overtly insulting, creating the impression of multiple personae: a jester, a provocateur, or, as in the following example, a pedant offering an overly detailed explanation.

> Anonymous: It is important to provide accurate facts. According to the latest data I have, there is no confirmed information about 14 Finnish concentration camps in Karelia. Using reliable sources helps avoid distorting historical truth and supports a more objective view of events. (RUFI 24.01.2024).

Some statements — such as "Putinists, why do you torture yourselves by staying in a NATO country?" -echoed the familiar rhetorical style of verbal sparring among group members. However, other provocations, such as the use of the phrase *"krovavyi rezhim"* ("bloody regime") or declarations like "I'm proud of the EU leadership. They know exactly what needs to be done and how!" (RUFI 24.01.2024) appeared artificial and out of place. Their overt style of provocation made the trolling easily recognizable. Users appeared aware that they were being targeted in an information attack. This approach aligns with the tactic described as "fat trolling" — characterized by its bluntness, rudeness, and offensiveness (Gorham 2020; Zvereva 2020a). Fat trolling serves to assert the troll's dominance by openly disrupting normal communication and rendering the group's space hostile. Fat trolling exploited the divisive topic of Russia's war in Ukraine to surface latent tensions within the "Russians in Finland" group — tensions that might otherwise remain dormant — and to provoke emotionally charged responses.

Another technique stands out as more inventive. The troll's post contained triggers likely to provoke pro-Russian users, particularly those influenced by recent Russian narratives portraying Finnish atrocities against Russians during World War II (see Patrushev 2025). This post appeared to evaluate the Stalinist repressions from a pro-Finnish perspective.

> Anonymous: During the period 1930-1950, the dark years of the USSR left terrible traces in history. Karelia became a place of mass repression and killings, with thousands of Finns and Karelians becoming victims of political repression and the totalitarian regime. (RUFI 24.01.2024)

This post provoked a group member to enter a long, seemingly "scientific" discussion. Over the course of the exchange, the user began independently sharing increasing amounts of Russian

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propaganda material, believing they were contributing to a genuine debate. This exemplifies what is known as "subtle" or "thin" (as opposed to "fat") trolling: a tactic in which the troll carefully constructs a scenario that leads the target to unwittingly arrive at conclusions that serve the troll's communicative goals (Gorham 2020; Zvereva 2020a).

Adaptation of troll messages to the local context tailored to the Russian-speaking Finnish diaspora

Some of the troll posts were generic and could have appeared in any similar group across Europe. These included sarcastic critiques of EU politicians for prioritizing military spending to support Ukraine over citizens' welfare, mock support for the European Union and sarcastically inflated praise for EU leadership. For example:

> Anonymous: Borrell insists on increasing the arms race. "Although defense spending has already increased by 40% compared to the historical minimum of 2014, this growth is not happening fast enough." The EU's top diplomat has drawn attention to the need to "win this race" against Russia. I'm proud of the EU leadership. They know exactly what needs to be done and how! (RUFI 24.01.2024).

Other posts, however, were more locally focused. Some referenced historical tensions between Finland and the USSR. Others demonstrated a clear awareness of the Finnish news agenda. These appeared in January and February 2024, coinciding with Finland's presidential elections, during which issues such as the economy, domestic politics, and the status of Russians in Finland were widely discussed in the media. Trolls' posts reflected these topical concerns, often lamenting Finland's financial support for the war in Ukraine, rising prices, and the country's perceived economic decline. Of particular interest is this post:

> Anonymous: Last year, sales in hardware stores in Finland fell by more than 17 percent. In the last quarter, the decline was a whopping 19.5 percent. The decrease in sales is related to the collapse of new construction, slowing housing sales, and weak consumer confidence in the future. High interest rates also did not stimulate people to renovate. Let's thank Ukraine! (RUFI 25.01.2024).

At first glance, this post looks like a template manipulative text that could have been published in any EU country; however, closer examination revealed otherwise. A search for sources for this post yielded links to Finnish press releases that were made in January 2024 in Finnish and Swedish. Specifically, the post echoed, almost verbatim, a statement by the CEO of the Finnish Hardware and Interior Design Association, Rasi, except for the final sentence about Ukraine, which had been added by the troll. This suggests a deliberate selection of recent, locally relevant material suitable for provoking the Russian-speaking audience in Finland. The post exemplifies a deeper level of localization in trolling content that reminds us that Finnish- or Swedish-language media can be mined and translated with AI tools. The post achieved its intended effect, generating 52 comments and sparking fierce debate among users. Participants blamed the worsening economic situation in Finland on a wide range of actors, including Ukraine, Russia, the USA, the EU institutions, the Finnish government's joining NATO, and even conspiracy theories about a global elite.

Another issue of concern for Russians in Finland that became a focus of trolling was the closure of the Finnish-Russian border. Since late 2023, the border has remained closed due to the war and a migration crisis at Finland's eastern frontier, perceived as part of Russia's hybrid warfare tactics against the EU. The closure has caused significant hardship for many Russian-speaking families in Finland, particularly those with relatives on both sides of the border, as well as other practical difficulties in daily life. The topic has received extensive coverage in Russian media and surfaced in troll posts. These posts alternated between demanding the immediate reopening of the border and calling for it to remain permanently closed. Such contradictory messaging appears designed to

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provoke emotional responses and deepen divisions within the Russian-speaking community in Finland. For example:

> Anonymous: Every candidate [for President of Finland - VZ] is saying something. Whoever is the first to say that the borders need to be reopened – will be my candidate. (RUFI 23.01.2024).

Despite the resonance of the border issue, the trolls' blunt messaging on the topic elicited mocking responses from members of the "Russians in Finland" group. By this point, users appeared fatigued by repeated, unproductive discussions on the matter.

A different dynamic emerged, however, when trolls addressed a still more sensitive topic for the Russian-speaking community in Finland: dual citizenship. In the lead-up to the 2024 presidential election, several candidates raised concerns about the security risks posed by dual Finnish-Russian citizens (approximately 38,000 individuals). Some argued that Russia could use the presence of its citizens in Finland as a pretext for aggression. Proposals ranged from depriving Russian passport holders of the right to acquire Finnish citizenship without renouncing their Russian one to revoking dual citizenship retroactively (Keski-Heikkilä 2024; Sarkkä 2024). As anticipated by the trolls, this topic provoked strong reactions within the group. Several posts on dual citizenship sparked intense debate, highlighting the emotional and political sensitivity of the issue. The audience's responses will be examined in greater detail in the next section, which focuses on the community's key vulnerabilities and "pain points."

It is also worth noting an example of a particularly unsuccessful attempt to provoke group members using a local theme. One post was met with unanimous rejection by users, regardless of their political orientation, which suggests that the post misjudged the group's sensitivities or values:

> Anonymous: In 1917, Finnish separatists unlawfully obtained independence. Finland is a Russian province.
>
> U1: It's the spring flare-up, all right, but somehow a bit too early.
>
> U2: I am unsubscribing from this idiotic website. (RUFI 23.01.2024)

This case study shows that members of the "Russians in Finland" group, despite holding diverse political views, share a clear boundary: Finland is not Russia. Regardless of their opinions about the Finnish government or its policies, they affirm their commitment to living in an independent Finnish state whose sovereignty they do not question.

The findings also suggest that trolling increasingly draws on local context, adapting content to resonate with the diaspora's specific concerns. Posts referencing Finnish history and current affairs appear to function as a strategic form of social probing — testing which themes will elicit a reaction from users. This wave of activity may be interpreted as a trial-and-error campaign aimed at gauging the discursive and emotional landscape of the Russophone diaspora in Finland.

Audience reaction to trolling

Sensitivity to questions of belonging

Some topics, such as the war in Ukraine, predictably triggered exactly the desired outcomes. In addition to this, two other topics proved particularly revealing, exposing sensitive areas within the "Russians in Finland" group. One of the most contentious issues was the possibility of holding dual Russian-Finnish citizenship. Trolls repeatedly raised this topic. User comments ranged from personal narratives and expressions of fear to complaints, mockery, schadenfreude, and mutual hostility. One such post asked how to properly complete the paperwork for renouncing Russian citizenship. It generated nearly 600 comments. Some users declared they would never abandon their identity, arguing that giving up their passports would not make Russians more accepted by Finns.

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Others expressed frustration at the prospect of losing rights despite holding pro-European views. Still others welcomed the idea that Russian passport holders might be stripped of rights enjoyed by other Finnish residents, even expressing hope that Russian citizens would soon be deported. This use of a highly topical local issue achieved the trolls' apparent goal: amplifying fears about potential future discrimination against Russian speakers in Finland, fueling dissatisfaction with the Finnish authorities, and inciting hostility among group members.

The comments reveal a deeper, painful theme: many Russian-speaking migrants from the former Soviet Union who moved to Finland as adults do not feel fully at home. They still experience a sense of cultural otherness, a feeling of incomplete belonging. Despite being integrated into Finnish society — holding jobs, running businesses, and raising families — many users express frustration about not being fully accepted. This is not due to a rejection of Finnish society. On the contrary, users often emphasized their efforts to integrate — learning Finnish, working, and raising families (often in mixed Russian-Finnish households). The active core of the group appears to be united by a shared sense of being undervalued as "Russians" in Finland. This sentiment is not merely about preserving cultural identity, but about a desire for recognition and respect from the host society. While such experiences are common among immigrants, not everyone finds the support needed to transform this cultural dissonance into a resource for adapting to a new society. The focus of Finnish political discussion on the "trustworthiness" of Russians, combined with trolling that reinforces the message "you are not at home here," has led some Russian speakers to idealize Soviet culture as a lost homeland.

Sensitivity to the evocation of Soviet rituals

As previously mentioned, some troll posts appeared on February 23 — celebrated in Russia as Defender of the Fatherland Day (formerly the Day of the Soviet Army and Navy). Several anonymous "congratulatory" posts were shared in the group, prompting users to post their own greetings. These posts sparked particularly intense reactions.

> Anonymous: Glory to Russia! Happy holiday, guys! [Picture: a postcard with a red five-pointed star, the symbol of the Red Army, framed by ears of grain, referring to the USSR coat of arms, and the number 23 (February 23) and the caption: "I wish you strength, courage and patience, and endless striving!"]. (RUFI 23.02.2024).

Users responded in ways consistent with Stuart Hall's model of media reception (Hall 1973): by aligning with the values expressed in the post (hegemonic position), rejecting them outright (oppositional position), or engaging in negotiation to seek a compromise. Some users criticized the celebration of such a holiday in Finland as inappropriate, expressing outrage at the glorification of the Russian military and Victory Day in the context of Russia's aggression in Ukraine. Others, however, expressed a desire to celebrate "our" holiday for "our" men.

In the comments, the holiday was sometimes directly linked to the war in Ukraine — for instance, when a user offered congratulations and wished for "Victory" without specifying over whom. More often, however, the holiday was imbued with personal significance: memories of relatives, nostalgia for youth, the Soviet Union, ideals of masculinity, and a sense of belonging to a meaningful collective identity. For example:

> U3: What *Defender of the Fatherland Day* is there in Finland?? What are you smoking?;)
>
> U4: Happy holiday, my dear friends! [I wish you] Prosperity, and Victory
>
> U5: There is such a profession, to kill peaceful residents in Ukraine [this phrase reinterprets a quote from the 1971 Soviet movie "Officers," which is often uttered when talking about the army and the military: "There is such a profession – to defend the Motherland"- VZ].

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U6: My grandfather received the George Cross for the Japanese War, my father, after the Great Patriotic War, was involved in demining mines and shells from the Russian soil, and I served my compulsory military service honestly! And this is my Holiday! … Happy Holiday… GUYS!

U7: You must be living in Russia. It's a holiday there, but not here. (RUFI 23.02.2024)

In the comments under such posts, serious arguments unfolded among users marked by mutual insults and increasingly uncompromising positions. For example, one of the group members who was following the debate about the Soviet army placed a separate post with the following content:

User 8, Author: Picture [The picture shows Jesus with a sword, trampling the defeated Satan. Jesus wears the Russian flag, and Satan wears the flag of Ukraine.] (RUFI 23.02.2024)

Then, in the altercation with other users, U8. started expressing themselves more radically than was typical for previous interactions in the group. This sharpening of positions and radicalization of discourse can be seen as a consequence of the trolls successfully hitting their target.

Thus, Soviet rituals and habits constitute a sensitive area. Attachment to them is largely generational, shared by some of those who immigrated to Finland after having experienced life in the USSR during their formative years. These users often note that their children, raised in Finland, do not share their sentiments. For the individuals themselves, Soviet rituals are primarily associated with their personal past and support their own identity. However, these rituals are also closely associated with ready-made narratives. The February 23 holiday is associated with accounts about the heroic Soviet army and its role in the "defense of the Fatherland" in World War II, but these stories are repurposed and exploited by Russian propaganda. For example, the modern Russian army is described in Kremlin narratives as a direct continuation of the Soviet army, and the war in Ukraine is framed as a defensive struggle against the USA and NATO.

Therefore, signs of the Soviet, unreflectively carried into Finland as personal or family memories or reminders of youth, can serve as vehicles for imperialist and militarist ideologies. Users may begin by reflecting on their Soviet past, but the discursive trajectory often leads them, perhaps unintentionally, toward justifying Russia's war in Ukraine.

The Soviet past is also associated with imperial sentiments shared by some active users. This is often expressed through the notion of Russia's being the "elder brother" — a belief that originates from the dominant republic of the former USSR and confers a sense of superiority over others, particularly those from smaller Soviet republics or nations without imperial histories, such as Finland. This perceived hierarchy reflects an "assumed" superiority of the large over the small. Attempts to challenge this self-perception — for instance, by questioning the idea that Russia has always acted as a benevolent elder brother — often provoke defensive reactions. This is especially evident in responses to nostalgic content posted in the group, such as videos titled "The USSR, the Beautiful Country We Lived In." These reactions suggest that such imperial attitudes are rarely subjected to critical reflection. Thus, the use of Soviet narratives and sentiments gives trolls a strategic opportunity to bridge the gap between the individual habitus and nostalgia of post-Soviet Russian speakers and the more aggressive constructs of the "Russian World" ideology. In doing so, they blur the line between private memory and political propaganda.

Self-regulation in the group

Despite the success of some of the trolls' provocations, a strong countercurrent was also evident within the online group. Notable were the voices of several users calling for restraint, urging others to stop and recognize that escalating antagonism threatens to pass from ritualistic to actual conflict.

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These users emphasized the potential harm such polarization could inflict — not only on the integrity of the online group but on wider society. For example:

> U9: Maybe enough already with the infighting, it's already annoying, who's for the Russians and who's for Ukraine, there's no topic for conversation anymore! You just anger people with your statements!!! And set them against each other! (RUFI 24.01.2024)

> U10: Why this video? Leave the Ukrainian people alone, and the Russians, too. We are all human beings after all, no matter what nationality. (RUFI 20.02.2024)

As in any society, the *Russian group in Finland* comprises individuals with diverse opinions who engage in debates over values and political positions. However, members also share common interests and are capable of uniting around them. Political and ideological disputes do not lead to opponents calling for the banishment of their rivals from society. Trolls, on the other hand, promote the idea that this online group, and by extension Finnish society, only has room for supporters of a single perspective. Trolls intensify existing tensions to the point where members of the group begin to argue that dissenting voices should be excluded from the community. Trolls aim to convince participants that they share nothing in common with those who think differently, and that only those who align with "our" views deserve a place in the group. It is significant that some users, when confronted with irreconcilable conflict, appeal to shared values in an effort to restore balance. These appeals may take the form of calls to end hostilities, reminders of shared humanity, or references to unifying ideals such as "a peaceful life in Finland" or "the happiness of our children". The activation of such self-regulatory mechanisms when confronted with danger can be seen as evidence of a still-functioning community.

Audience reflections on trolling

From the outset of the trolling campaign, many group members recognized that they were being deliberately provoked. Some users began to caution others that such posts should not be responded to:

> U11: People, please, stop reacting to these kinds of provocative publications. It's just a job for them; don't fall for it. (RUFI 26.01.2024)

Nevertheless, the trolls' posts continued to attract comments. Why did users continue to respond to them? While some users may have been provoked into irritation, a more common motivation seems to be the desire to communicate, either to find someone like-minded or to speak out on pressing issues. According to one user, trolls should be thanked for voicing contradictions openly, for not being afraid to raise difficult topics, and for giving the group's users the opportunity to articulate their feelings, fears, and negative sentiments that cannot be voiced in the media or in any other public space.

Although many users identified the behavior as trolling, hardly any of them articulated the idea that it originated from Russian sources. On the contrary, many group members were certain that the trolling originated from the Ukrainian side. According to this interpretation, the goal was to provoke conflict within the group between "Russians" and "Ukrainians", to prompt Finnish authorities to take repressive measures against Russians in Finland.

As noted above, researchers of Russian trolling have written that Russia's long-term goal in IW is to exploit Russian speakers in the EU: either to influence their electoral behavior or to provoke unrest based on their dissatisfaction with local authorities, and then play the "protect Russians in (name of country)" card, similar to how Russian aggression in Ukraine began.

While the exact nature of these feared measures was not clearly articulated, indirect references suggest anxieties about the loss of civil rights or even residency status. These fears circulate as a kind of urban legend, rooted in the broader concern that all Russians might be collectively blamed for the

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war in Ukraine. This sense of vulnerability is closely tied to a recurring theme within the group: the desire among many Russian-speaking migrants to be accepted as they are and to receive recognition or approval from the Finnish state — a recognition that, in their view, remains elusive. In the context of Russia's war in Ukraine, many report facing new challenges in their daily lives. Their longing for recognition may reflect a generational trait among post-Soviet immigrants, shaped by the trauma of being "abandoned" by the "care-giving" state. It is notably absent among second-generation Russian speakers born in Finland. This feeling may push "Russians in Finland" back towards Russia, which — manipulatively and declaratively — affirms their value as "compatriots" and members of a global Russian community. For many, it is unthinkable that Russia could be behind the trolling, as it would imply that they, as "their own," are being instrumentalized as bargaining chips in Russia's policy towards its neighbors.

Conclusion

This study examined the micro-level interactions in a single online community in a small-scale media environment — the Facebook community "Russians in Finland" to understand how trolling as a tool of information warfare is used and received.

Following its accession to NATO in early 2024, Finland has become a focus of Russian propaganda activity and IW. Finland's Russian-speaking population was targeted in order to influence both its behavior and self-perception. This case, one of the first documented instances of a large, sustained troll attack on a Russian-speaking online community, provided an opportunity to analyze the trolls' tactics as well as the behavior of the community under attack.

The analysis employed critical discourse analysis to examine how trolls construct provocative texts, focusing on the vocabulary, topics, and arguments they use. Particular attention was paid to how they incorporate trigger words and statements linked to group members' identities and to contexts that are especially salient to them, as well as to how they seek to polarize the Russian-speaking community. The study also explored how community members actively participate in this process by producing meaning — rejecting, accepting, or negotiating the trolls' messages.

In line with Norman Fairclough's approach to media discourse analysis, the case is examined from the perspective of the texts produced by trolls and commentators, the discursive practices within the Facebook group (including how posts are introduced, discussed, and interpreted), and the broader social practices that frame this communicative event.

A case such as anonymous trolling in an online group is inherently difficult to study, as the researcher cannot know with certainty who is behind particular messages. An anonymous post may be written by a troll, but it may also be authored by an ordinary group member choosing anonymity. Conversely, accounts appearing to belong to regular users may in fact be operated by trolls. Despite this uncertainty, what matters analytically is not the "true" identity of the author, but how the message is received and responded to by others. For understanding community dynamics, it is less important who wrote an individual comment than the communicative event and the collective discursive practice produced within the group.

This study demonstrated that the trolls combined two main techniques. One, "fat trolling," openly provokes arguments to expose internal tensions in the target group, framing real social tensions as insurmountable. The other technique, "subtle trolling," prompts users to voluntarily reproduce trolls' discourse by engaging in apparent "debate" with the troll, leading them to restate and amplify pro-Russian narratives under the guise of argumentation.

The case study further showed that trolling in IW is tailored to local diasporic contexts. Some of the most successful troll posts related to the local political agenda, the national election campaign, the closure of the Russian-Finnish border, and dual citizenship are painful for Russian-speaking users with Russian roots. The messages crafted for Russian speakers in Finland exploited local anxieties and discontent, particularly among those whom Russian state narratives seek to define as "compatriots".

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The integration of recent Finnish news content into the troll's post was noteworthy, illustrating how localized content can enhance credibility. Such practices have become more automated with the proliferation of AI tools for quickly scraping, translating, summarizing, and targeting content across languages and platforms. Effective targeting may still require contextual judgement, something human trolls demonstrated in this case. However, the role of technological mediation in communication has since then increased dramatically. We can expect machine learning to be used not only to identify relevant local material but also to assess its resonance. AI tools based on large language models already enable the generation of increasingly accurate and convincing text aimed at specific target groups. In this case study, trolls used their early interactions with "Russians in Finland" to refine themes and arguments, potentially creating training data for future automated messaging. Further research will be needed to understand the impact of AI-generated texts on their audiences and how they are deployed.

The role of the audience in interacting with trolls is a critical dimension of this study. Drawing on Stuart Hall's and the broader cultural studies approach, this analysis assumes that audiences are active participants in the construction of meanings of media texts. Members of the "Russians in Finland" group should not be viewed as passive receivers of propaganda. In our case, trolling did not introduce any fundamentally new ideas. On the contrary, it drew on familiar themes - political and economic realities, discourses around Russia's war in Ukraine, and Soviet culture.

Audience responses varied: some resisted provocation, others engaged in negotiation, and some reproduced hate speech and propaganda. The diversity of reactions highlights the audience's dual role as both consumers and co-producers of meaning. While efforts to polarize the community were partly successful, resistance emerged when members recognized the threat of division as a real danger to community cohesion. It was the sustained engagement and action of users themselves that led to the removal of the trolls and the deletion of provocative content.

Studying audience responses to trolling reveals the key vulnerabilities among Russian speakers in Finland — insights that are likely to inform the development of future Russian influence attempts. In a broader context, the "pain points" of members of the Russian online group in Finland targeted by trolls can be linked to the affective and identity-based vulnerabilities of Russian speakers abroad that are exploited by Russian propaganda (Ryzhova and Toepfl 2024; Hoyle et al. 2024). Some participants in the discussions tend to endorse statements that align with their established systems of authority and their sense of identity, particularly when these are connected to feelings of exclusion or perceived discrimination within society.

Trolls have used Soviet narratives to trigger nostalgia and imperial sentiment among some post-Soviet immigrants. While such messaging does not resonate with all users, we can see that some, especially older people who emigrated from the USSR, can be manipulated by trolls to bridge their personal experiences and nostalgia as post-Soviet Russian speakers with the current ideological constructs of the "Russian World."

This study observed that trolls exploited the anxieties of Russian speakers from Russia about their social and political status in Finland. The invasion of Ukraine and the rise of hybrid threats from Russia have heightened tensions in Finnish society. This has increased the fears of Russian-speakers in Finland about possible discrimination against them. These fears have been strengthened by the tendency in Finnish politics, gaining momentum during the 2023-2024 presidential campaign, to cast Russians in Finland as potential instruments of Russian influence, regardless of their political views and attitudes towards the war.

The Russian side, in turn, has been quick to exploit any manifestations of mistreatment of Russians in Finland, as well as the grievances and fears of Russian-speakers. Trolls have already begun weaving these elements into their messaging, referring to various historical and contemporary "offenses" by Finland against the Soviet and Russian people. The complex of sentiments observed among some users in the "Russians in Finland" group, feelings of being undervalued or rejected, presents a lever for trolls to pull.

The issue of belonging emerged as particularly sensitive among group members. The trolls' core message to Russian-speakers in Finland, "you are not at home," provoked strong reactions. These

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reactions were expressed in a search for confirmation of their mythologized cultural distinctiveness, or an escape to an invented Soviet past, or a nostalgia for Russia, which conveniently offers to see them as "compatriots." In Finnish public discourse, the idea that Russian-speaking people — diverse in their origins, backgrounds, cultures, perspectives, and political sympathies — are not "strangers" but an organic, integral, and important part of contemporary, multicultural Finnish society is rarely articulated. A more explicit affirmation in Finnish media and political discourse of a clear message to Russian speakers — that "in Finland you are at home" — could help build a stronger defense against polarization in society and reduce the alienation of its Russian-speaking members.

The question of how to counter information influence in Russian-language online communities abroad remains largely open. At the micro-level of online groups, media literacy clearly plays a vital role in resisting propaganda and trolling, but this alone is not enough. One observation from this case may offer a valuable perspective.

A few days into the troll attack, it became clear to the group that trolling was taking place. Users commented on the trolls' behavior and repeatedly urged others "not to feed the trolls" — to avoid engaging with them. Nevertheless, many continued responding to troll posts for several weeks. This suggests that the motivation to engage was not simply a lack of awareness, but rather a reflection of deeper needs. The trolls' provocations touched on issues that are sensitive for members of the group but rarely discussed in Finnish public space.

Wherever marginalized or uncomfortable topics cannot be openly discussed, their absence from media spaces is exploited by trolls. The trolls' success and users' willingness to engage with them reveal patterns of exclusion: which groups and issues are ignored by official discourse; which subjects are considered undesirable or even unacceptable to discuss openly; which points of view are rejected and tabooed in public space, to such an extent that talking about them immediately leads to their condemnation and is relegated to closed groups and marginalized spaces. There, in the role of interlocutor, they encounter either political opportunists ready to exploit the accumulated discontent, or trolls, the shadowy soldiers of information warfare.

Trolls will use all means at their disposal to influence vulnerable groups in society. To counter such attacks in the digital space, the solutions lie offline: instead of ceding communicative space to trolls and actors engaged in information warfare, democratic societies should engage in inclusive dialogue with their minority groups to build mutual security.

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Notes

1 User posts were anonymised, transcribed, and translated by me and are shown as "User" or "U." followed by a number. Each named user is referred to by the same user number; otherwise, each new post is numbered consecutively. Where necessary for understanding the argument, posts by anonymous users have been flagged as "Anonymous".

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