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**POPULIST POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN SOCIAL  
MEDIA: A RHETORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Bachelor's thesis

Programme of International Relations

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Tallinn 2020

I hereby declare that I have compiled the paper independently and all works, important standpoints and data by other authors has been properly referenced and the same paper has not been previously presented for grading.

The document length is 8352 words from the introduction to the end of conclusion.

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## **ABSTRACT**

During the XXI century, politics have become more media-framed, and this factor has substantially re-conceptualized political communication as such. More specifically for the context, the situation has proven especially beneficial for populist parties, which are among the leaders in the process of utilizing social media-generated channels for effective promotion of their messages. This paper examines the ways populist rhetoric is constructed in social media by detecting and discussing different aspects of populist political communication. More precisely, this research focuses on the communicational practices of the largest populist party in Finland, the Finns Party.

Keywords: political communication, populism, the Finns Party, populist communication

## INTRODUCTION

The XXI century has experienced a noticeable rise of populist parties as well as movements in Europe. As Bartlett (2014, 101) noted, opposition to immigration, multiculturalism, and the European Union (EU) can be seen as the main focus points of the populist parties on the continent. The increasing power of populist parties as well as their ability to affect political agenda has been noted in several European countries. As the overall nature of politics can be seen more and more mediatized, scholars such as Hatakka (2018) have pointed out that populist parties and politicians are in fact receiving a larger amount of media attention than their political power would suggest. This paper aims to analyze the different elements of populist political communication, with an emphasis on populist political communication in Finland. As political communication can be argued to have shifted more and more from traditional mass media to social media, this paper will focus on how political communication is executed on the latter. It is clear that politicians are now more likely to be present on social media: they share their ideology and reach out to voters on different platforms. The relationship between populist actors and online communication has first been researched in the XX century. Bimber (1998, 139) has stated that the Internet benefits populists by offering different ways to increase the political engagement of individuals.

The effect of social media on political communication has been noted outside of Europe as well. The most notable examples are the presidential elections in the United States in 2009, 2012, and 2016. The contests in 2009 and 2012 saw Barack Obama's active campaigning in social media whereas President Trump's active use of *Twitter* before and after the 2016 election has been discussed widely, including President Trump's confession that social media, in fact, helped him in winning the election (Groshek *et al.* 2016). Naturally, this rise of social media in political communication has been noted in the field of research. Even though a large amount of research on the topic has previously focused on the relationship of populism and traditional media, scholars such as Ernst *et al.* (2017) have researched the shift of populist political communication from mass media to social media. On a concrete note, they have suggested that in social networks politicians can communicate to two different audiences: first of all, politicians reach their primary audience, mostly consisting of their followers. If this communication to primary audiences starts re-circulating in the social network, politicians reach to secondary audiences as well. It is clear that reaching these secondary audiences is crucial for politicians as they are then able to spread their ideology even further. In regard to political activation, previous research (Engesser *et al.* 2017)

has demonstrated increased activation in social media among those usually less likely to participate in politics.

The meaning of this thesis is to describe and analyze the role of social media in populist political communication in the context of Finland and the *Finns Party* (FP). The main argument to be tested in this paper is that the FP's popularity is largely attributed to the fact that the party is actively as well as effectively utilizing a populist communication strategy on social media. Therefore, the main research questions of the thesis are set to follow the 'from generic to specific' academic logic: 1) How is populist political communication constructed in the age of social media? After this question has been answered the focus can be shifted on 2) how and to what extent does the FP perform populist rhetoric on social media? The paper will focus on populist political communication as social media can be seen as an ideal way of communicating for populists. When it comes to mass media, journalists can act as gate-keepers in order to exclude narratives that may seem too confrontational. As Bartlett (2014, 106) has argued, the democratic, non-hierarchical, and distributed nature of social media makes the medium suitable especially for populist parties. The FP is used as an example as their political power in Finland has significantly risen in the XXI century. They are also the only political party in Finland that can be seen actively using populist rhetoric. The research is conducted by using a rhetorical analysis in order to identify how and why the populist rhetoric is used. The analysis is done by examining the party's official website, *Facebook*, and *Twitter* accounts as well as the corresponding social media accounts of the leader of the party. A wide range of primary and secondary sources supports this research.

The structure of the paper is the following: the first chapter offers the theoretical framework of the thesis and gives an overview of populism. The common populist rhetoric is also examined. The second chapter focuses on the relationship between populism and media, focusing on social media and its role in building populist rhetoric. The central populist communication strategies are introduced, giving a framework for the main statement of the paper. The concepts of filter bubbles and echo chambers are introduced as well. The third chapter focuses on the FP, starting from the history of populism in Finland and leading to the FP's relationship with media. An analysis of the FP's use of populist communication strategies on social media will also be provided. The following chapter then combines the two research questions of the paper through discussion. Finally, a conclusion will draw up the main findings of the paper.

# 1. A THEORY AT WORK: SETTING THE BOUNDARIES

This chapter aims to present the theoretical framework of the paper by introducing the main concepts of populism and populist political communication. The chapter is divided into four sections: the first section of the chapter will construct a definition of populism by introducing the different approaches populism is represented in previous research. The second section introduces the historical context and current situation of populism in Europe. The third section will then examine common populist rhetoric. After this has been done the focus will be shifted on the concept of populist political communication. Central communication strategies will be introduced in the fourth section. This will lay a foundation for the research statement of the thesis as the FP's use of these communication strategies will be further discussed in the fourth chapter of the thesis.

## 1.1. Defining populism

It can be argued that the term 'populism' has been increasingly used in recent years not only in political science but in media as well. When it comes to political science, scholars such as Herkman (2017) are in agreement that populism can be seen as a 'slippery concept', therefore leading to different classifications of the concept. Moffitt *et al.* (2014) have represented five different approaches populism has been viewed as by different scholars. First, populism can be considered as a thin-centered ideology. This approach has been dominating the research on populism. According to this view, populism sees the society divided into the "people" and the "corrupt elite". This view also agrees that politics should express the general will of the people.

Populism can also be analyzed as political logic. This classification has been researched especially by Laclau (2005) who has argued that populism is a "structuring logic of political life." The third conception of populism is viewing populism as discourse. This approach can be divided into two assumptions. The first assumption suggests populism as a type of discourse that divides the society into the people and the other – thus being relatively similar to the conception which sees populism as an ideology. The second assumption – researched, for example, by Jagers *et al.* (2007) – uses qualitative methods to measure the level of populism in text.

The next approach views populism as a strategy or as an organization. In this conception, populism is seen as a strategy where the leader executes power based on direct support from a mostly unorganized group of followers. Finally, populism can be conceptualized as a political style. This

conception has been described by a wide variety of scholars. For example, Jagers *et al.* (2007) have described populism as a political communication style consisting of different political actors. Moffit *et al.* (2014) have pointed out that when populism is viewed as a political style it should identify how the communicational performance of populist leaders affects their followers.

All of these five approaches can be argued to be valid when classifying populism. However, in the context of this thesis, populism is viewed mainly as an ideology. The different dimensions of populist rhetoric introduced in the following chapters justify the claim that populism sees the society divided into two different groups.

### **1.1.1. Populism in Europe**

According to statistics, populist parties in Europe have tripled their support during the last twenty years. Interestingly, the largest rise in the support of populist parties has happened after major crises – such as the financial crisis in 2008 and the refugee crisis in 2015 – affected all of Europe (The Guardian 2018). Currently, European populist parties include for example the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), the *Sweden Democrats* (SD), and the FP.

Different reasons can be observed behind the rise of populism. Previous research (Hatakka 2018) has suggested three different explanations. First of all, increasing economic inequality has affected especially the working class in several European countries. At the age of globalization, traditional workplaces such as factories are often relocated from Europe to areas with lower business expenses which may consistently increase the level of unemployment in Europe. The second explanation is the increasing internationalization of politics leading to the power being shifted from national states to supranational unions such as the EU. Thirdly, the support for traditional conservative values has decreased whereas support for more liberal values has increased. Therefore, it is clear that individuals with a decreasing trust towards the institutions and entities in power may more easily be persuaded by the populist politicians. In addition, uncertainty caused by these three explanations can be seen favoring the populist parties' common program. It can be argued that the media has an important role in the rise of populism as well. This argument will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters.

## 1.2. Constructing common populist rhetoric and political communication

In order to construct common populist rhetoric as well as political communication methods, it is crucial to identify the main dimensions of populism. Three different dimensions can be found:

1. **People-centrism** can be argued to be the most important dimension of the populist rhetoric. Populist actors want to first and foremost refer to the people as well as identify with them. However, the people are seen as a monolithic group that does not have any internal differences (Jagers *et al.* 2007). It can be argued that populist actors aim to appeal to the common people by arguing to be exactly like them. For example, during his election campaign, President Trump often distanced himself from the “corrupt” politicians, representing himself as a part of the ordinary people (BBC 2016). Connecting with the ordinary people can be seen to be linked to the concept of familiarity. Ylä-Anttila (2017) has stated that populist rhetoric often uses familiar cultural experiences – such as singing the national anthem – as a way to engendering a feeling of belonging to the community and “the people”. Ylä-Anttila’s statement can be argued to be valid as appealing to familiar experiences underlines the way populist politicians communicate with individuals while addressing their similarity to the common people.
2. **Anti-elitism:** The elite mentioned by populist actors can be divided to – for example – political elite, economic elite, and media elite. The populist actor also emphasizes how estranged these elites are from the lives of the common people. Different problems faced by the ordinary people can therefore be blamed on the elite. The main argument is that the elite is estranged from the common people, hence being incompetent to pursue the best interest of the people (Jagers *et al.* 2007).
3. **Excluding ‘the other’:** This dimension as well is closely linked to the people-centrism. It is important to note that ‘the people’ identified by populist actors consists only of the native citizens of the state. Therefore, ‘the other’ consists of different groups such as immigrants, criminals, and ethnic minorities. People listed as belonging to ‘the other’ are seen as a threat to the well-being of ‘the people’ and the society in general. They are also seen as less-worthy than ‘the people’ (Wirth 2016).

Common populist rhetoric, as well as communication style, can be argued to be greatly supported by these three dimensions. Populist politicians have regularly made statements that can be

described as solely provocative. Certainly, the rhetoric can be described to be straightforward, remorseless, and disobeying towards common norms (Hatakka 2018). Populist actors are seen underlining how they represent the people against the elite while also protecting the society from the danger possessed by the other. Hence, emphasizing their closeness to the people can be seen as the uniting factor in populist rhetoric. For example, when facing criticism from the media or political parties, populists can blame these actors of being a part of the elite, therefore acting against the interest of the common people. In addition, strategies such as claiming victimhood, using ‘the others’ as a scapegoat as well as participating in conspiracy theories have commonly been used in populist rhetoric (Wodak *et al.* 2013, 28). For example, different problems in society may be blamed on the actions of immigrants.

Another concept that can be linked to people-centrism is the concept of ‘heartland’. Taggart (2004) has referred to this theory as an “idealized conception of the community”. This community has been based on the emotions of people longing for the past. Therefore, populist actors may use the admiration of the past in their communication while blaming the elite for changing society to worse. Additionally, populist actors also benefit from dramatizing the possibilities of different crises. By creating a visualization of an approaching crisis, the populist actors create an atmosphere of uncertainty among the citizens which can quickly lead to an increase of distrust towards the government. For example, the populist actor can blame the hypothetical, approaching crisis on a variety of different controversial political themes such as immigration (Moffitt 2016, 45). This benefits the populist party as they can underline contrasting ways how they would better control the situation when compared to the ruling government.

Statements presenting the threat demonstrated by the elite and the others as well as statements signifying the closeness to the ordinary people have been common practices to the populist communication (Wirth 2016). Populist communication can often be argued to be of an aggressive nature. When it comes to populist political communication, it is important to note the *right-wing populist perpetuum mobile* introduced by Wodak (2013, 33-34). According to this model, populist politicians use discursive and rhetorical strategies to control accusations in media. Wodak has implied that populist actors intentionally provoke media by producing, for example, racist statements. Once the media attention is granted, the populist actor denies these accusations by claiming they did not have racist motives. The populist actor can then claim victimhood by stating they have been wrongly accused of something they did not do. Wodak has stated that by using this strategy, populist politicians are rarely sanctioned nor demanded to resign. In addition, apologizing

is used in a calculated way. Therefore, populist politicians can produce politically incorrect statements without major consequences. It can be argued that corresponding politically incorrect statements can even increase the level of support the said politician receives. By publishing a controversial statement about – for example – immigrants, populist politicians can gain more support, especially from their more radical voters. Therefore, it can be argued that by generating strong feelings, populist politicians are able to increase the amount of support received from their voters.

Additionally, using bad manners can be seen as a common aspect of populist rhetoric. The use of bad manners includes the unconventional use of slang, swear words and sentimentality (Moffitt 2016, 44). In conclusion, using bad manners can be seen as an effective way of distancing the populist politician from the political elite as using politically correct language can be argued to be a relatively common characteristic of political communication.

### **1.3. Central communication strategies**

Previous research on the field of political communication has described different communication strategies used by populist parties. In order to set up a proper theoretical framework needed to frame this paper's discussion, this chapter will describe the central strategies in populist communication by combining previous research done on the subject. Populist political communication has facilitated different strategies such as tactically attacking the media, playing the underdog and taking advantage of professional expertise (Herkman 2017). Ernst *et al.* (2017) have concluded that populist communication demonstrates the populist actor's proximity by, for example, praising their achievements. They point out that strategies such as discrediting the elite and demanding the sovereignty of the people are common to populist actors. It is clear that these strategies are closely linked to the main dimensions of populism identified in the previous chapter.

In their research, Hatakka *et al.* (2017) have stated confrontational and submissive strategies used by populist actors. First of all, confrontational strategies include communicating contradictory accusations, defending acts and statements, denying factuality as well as refusing to acknowledge different accusations. Hatakka *et al.* have argued that populist actors can, for example, redirect the accusations to other actors or present counter-accusations. They can also justify their actions by suggesting the word choices of a statement may be controversial while agreeing with the content

of that statement. When it comes to the submissive strategies mentioned in the research, in certain cases populist parties have admitted that a member of the party has published statements that have breached social norms. However, Hatakka *et al.* have stated that the party distances themselves from these kinds of accusations by referring to the sanctioning of an individual member of the party.

In addition, negativity, emotionality and sociability are recurring dimensions of populist communication style. Ernst *et al.* (2019) have identified different stylistic elements regarding these dimensions. When it comes to the dimension of negativity, populist actors have attributed negative characteristics to different members of the society. They can also use the crisis rhetoric discussed in the previous chapter. Regarding the dimension of emotionality, populist actors may use emotional tone by sharing positive or negative emotions. Additionally, they have the tendency to use assertive tones by presenting something as the only possible option. They may also emphasize the patriotic connotation by emphasizing the supremacy of the politicians' nation. Finally, concerning the dimension of sociability, populist politicians may prefer the use of vulgar language as well as recounting details from their personal life.

In conclusion, it can be argued that the communication strategies used by populist actors are often confrontational and underline the populist views of anti-elitism and people-centrism. Therefore, blaming the elite or the others for different issues as well as emphasizing the closeness to the individual people are framing these communication strategies. Claiming victimhood can also be seen as one of the divisions of populist political communication strategy. By playing the underdog in media, populist actors also gain free media publicity (Niemi 2012).

## **2. POPULISM AND MEDIA**

The aim of the second chapter is to answer the first research question by introducing different ways populist rhetoric is used in media, emphasizing the use of rhetoric in social media. However, the relationship between populism and mass media is discussed as well. Ernst *et al.* (2019) have highlighted the importance of researching populist communication on multiple media platforms as the characteristics of the media channel have influenced the amount of populist communication performed. The concept of filter bubbles and echo chambers will also be introduced as it can be argued that taking these concepts into account when researching the effect of political communication on social media is crucial.

### **2.1. Populist actors' relationship with media attention**

The increasing mediatisation of politics has increased not only the significance of media publicity for political parties but as well the significance of professional political communication and personalization of politics (Herkman 2012). Evidently, all political actors benefit from media attention. However, as Herkman (2017) has noted, populist actors in particular are dependent on media attention in order to succeed. The provocative nature of populist rhetoric can also be argued to gain more media attention. In fact, it can be argued that populist politicians intentionally provoke media to gain support. The aforementioned Wodak's *perpetuum mobile* is a positive example of this. As Wodak *et al.* (2013, 34) have argued, the populist parties' way to frame media debates forces media outlets to react to the often-radical statements. Despite media outlets articulating the views of populist parties, the majority of the press seems to react critically towards populist actors (Hatakka 2018).

Mazzoleni (2003) has introduced four phases that occur during the relationship between populist parties and media. These phases are also introduced in Table 1. First of all, there is the ground-laying phase which occurs when a state experiences social and political discontent. During the period, the media aims to – for example – personalize political issues and therefore produce a neo-populist discourse. The ground-laying phase is followed by the insurgent phase. During this stage media's attention on neo-populist movements increases and their rhetoric is introduced more in media. The third stage is called the established phase when the neo-populist actors achieve more

legitimacy as a political player. However, during this phase their share of media attention decreases. On the other hand, the media must now treat the populist politician as a serious, legitimized political actor. Finally, the relationship enters the decline phase where the populist actor's success fades. During this phase, the media attention of the populist actor fades as well. However, Mazzoleni has noted that the probability of this phase differs from country to country.

Table 1. Four phases of the relationship between populist parties and media.

<b>Name of the phase</b>	<b>Effect to the party's media attention</b>	<b>Special characteristics</b>
Ground-laying phase	Media attention is increasing	Personalization of political issues
Insurgent phase	Media attention is increasing	More intense media attention on the populist rhetoric
Established phase	Media attention is decreasing	Populist parties achieve more legitimacy and political power
Decline phase	Media attention is decreasing	The political power of populist parties decreases

Source: Mazzoleni (2003)

Even though populist actors benefit from media attention, the common guidelines of mass media restrict to what extreme the populist agenda can be presented. If a populist party publishes a more radical statement, those statements may need to be modified before it is published in mass media. This is due to concepts such as journalistic gate-keeping which can be seen as a dominating measure in mass media. It can be argued that social media offers a new, prosperous environment when it comes to populist political communication. As Ernst *et al.* (2017) have indicated, there are four considerable reasons why social media offers positive opportunity structures to populist actors. Firstly, as there are no gatekeepers in social media, populist actors can communicate more directly to their followers and possible voters. Secondly, social media makes populist actors seem

more open as it gives them a chance to create a closer connection to their followers compared to the means of communication through mass media. Thirdly, as social media gives the opportunity to share aspects of personal life, populist actors can use this opportunity to construct their interaction to be more personalized, including features of their private life. Finally, social media gives individuals the opportunity to connect with different groups. Populist actors are able to use these groups for their advantage as they can target their agenda to a specific unanimous group of individuals.

In conclusion, it can be argued that social media offers populist actors a unique opportunity to become closer to the people by directly interacting with them and therefore emphasizing their role as an advocate for the people against the elite. As supporters of populist parties may distrust mass media, social media can seem as a more democratic and convincing medium to these supporters (Bartlett, 2014, 106). When it comes to political communication strategies, it should be noted that in the current political environment populist actors benefit from exploiting both mass media and social media. By employing the use of mass media outlets, populist actors are able to distribute messages and statements to larger audiences. However, by using social media channels, they can publish more radical statements that would not be accepted to mass media by the journalistic gatekeepers (Engesser *et al.* 2017). Regarding the individuals supporting populist actors online, it should be noted that previous research (Bartlett *et al.* 2011, 18-19) has shown that these individuals have displayed decreasing levels of trust towards national and European political institutions as well as towards the justice system in general.

## **2.2. How is populist rhetoric adopted in social media?**

It can be argued that populist rhetoric fits well into the norms of communication on social media. Ernst *et al.* (2017) have stated how social media sites are based on the logic of virality: in order to gain popularity on the platform, political actors need to communicate messages, which their followers choose to like, promote and share. Regarding this framework, populist rhetoric clearly has an advantage compared to other political rhetoric. Populist parties have also been more active in spotting the different opportunities social media may offer in terms of political communication (Bartlett 2014, 100). Engesser *et al.* (2017) have proposed the concept of online opportunity structures which can be seen relevant when defining the relationship between populism and social media. This concept refers to the different actors who are seen fundamental to social media. In the

Internet, attention is seen as a scarce resource over which the different actors need to compete, therefore leading to the Internet favoring content, which maximizes attention. Therefore, the common attributes of populist communication – such as emotionalizing and simplifying different issues as well as using negative connotations – efficiently receive a high amount of attention in social media. By publishing a controversial statement on social media platforms, the populist actor gains a larger following, especially if the post is shared to secondary audiences. Populist parties also gain an increasing number of new followers on social media especially after a political event that relates to the populist rhetoric. For example, AfD saw a rise in followers in 2015-2016 after Syrian refugees were allowed to cross the German borders (Dittrich 2017).

Populist actors can also utilize the means of traditional media while still communicating through social media platforms. Hatakka (2018) has researched how populist politicians share mass media articles on their social media accounts. The aim of Hatakka's research was to introduce how populist actors use social media to reframe news regarding the Euro crisis in 2010. The research showed that populist politicians focused on sharing news and articles, which portrayed an exceedingly dark picture of the crisis. Additionally, they emphasized the uncertainty caused by the occurring crisis. The populist actors were also seen highlighting statements ideologically aligning with the personal views of the politician. As Hatakka has pointed out, by sharing these bits of news with attachments of their personal commentary, the politicians had the ability to reframe the causes of the crisis and suggest how the crisis should be handled by redefining the root causes and consequences of the situation. The politicians were also expressing how the populist politicians would be more capable of handling the crisis. Such reframing of news can be seen as an effective way for populist actors to employ their rhetoric on social media. In conclusion, it can be argued that populist rhetoric is primarily used in social media through publishing controversial posts as well as employing the populist rhetoric to redefine different topics presented by mass media.

### **2.2.1. Filter bubbles and echo chambers**

The concepts of filter bubbles and echo chambers can be noted to be of interest when researching the effect of populist communication on social media. Pariser (2011) has referred to the filter bubble as a space where individuals surround themselves with information supporting their own opinions and thereby reducing their exposure to contradictory views. When it comes to the concept of echo chambers, these chambers are generated as social media gives the opportunity to create

different social groups composing solely of individuals with similar opinions that support the already existing political views (Bartlett 2014, 108).

It can be argued that populist parties benefit from the emerging of filter bubbles and echo chambers in social media. Through these approaches, populist actors are able to allocate their rhetoric to different social groups who have already expressed unanimous opinions. For example, a Facebook page of a populist party is likely to consist of individuals already interested in that party. In case an individual is following only this page, they expose themselves to unilateral information. Becoming a part of the echo chamber may then only exaggerate the existing political attitudes of the individual.

### **3. POPULISM IN FINLAND: THE CASE OF THE FINNS PARTY**

This chapter will start by introducing the history of populism in Finland. It can be argued that considering the historical background of Finnish populism is needed in order to understand the FP's current position on the political map of Finland. An overview of the party's leaders and politics will be given after which the party's relationship with media is examined. The chapter proceeds to analyze how the FP utilizes populist communication strategies in social media. Through this analysis, the second research question of the thesis is answered.

#### **3.1. The FP: an overview**

The political landscape in Nordic countries has been confiding on multiparty democracy which can be argued to be the main reason why populism has been relatively successful in these countries as the political environment can be accused of elitism by the populists (Herkman 2017). When it comes to Finland, the Finnish Rural Party (*Suomen Maaseudun Puolue*, SMP) has been viewed as the first populist party of the nation. SMP gained more popularity in the 1970s and was part of the governing coalitions between 1983 and 1990 (Arter 2010). Interestingly, Finland has therefore the oldest populist tradition when compared to other Nordic countries (Niemi 2013). However, it can be argued that populism in Finland de facto started gaining more support after the FP was founded in 1995. The FP – *Perussuomalaiset* in Finnish – was founded as a successor of the center-populist SMP (Niemi 2012). One of the party's founding members, Timo Soini – a former party secretary for SMP – became the chairman of the party in 1997 (Arter 2010). Soini led the party until 2017 after which the party has been led by politician Jussi Halla-aho. The party has followed a left-wing course on economic issues but is located on the right in the political map when it comes to social policies (Pappas *et al.* 2015).

The FP gained more political power after their victory in Finland's parliamentary elections in 2011. The significance of this victory can be described by the size of their parliamentary group: while after the 2007 elections, the party's parliamentary group consisted of 5 members, the number had increased to 39 members after the 2011 elections, leading the party to become the third-largest party in the Finnish Parliament (Niemi 2013). Currently, the party is in opposition. However, the support for the party is constantly increasing. According to a survey made by the Finnish newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* at the end of 2019, the party was the most prominent political party in Finland with a support rate of 22,4 per cent. The voters of the FP can be seen not only more

dissatisfied regarding the functionality of the current democracy but also more critical regarding different political entities when compared to the voters of other parties (Paloheimo 2012, 338-339).

An interesting factor in the structure of populist parties is the presence of a strong and public leader figure (Niemi 2013). This is also the case when it comes to the FP. The party was long personified to the long-term former chair Soini. An example of the significance of the party leader can be given through Soini's strong presence in media, which has been also noted in research: Niemi (2012) has argued that Soini was able to captivate more media visibility to the FP than the parliamentary size of the party would have suggested. The current chair of the party, Jussi Halla-aho, has also had a relatively strong presence in the Finnish media during his chairmanship.

It can be argued that the main principles of the party have stayed relatively similar during their existence. The first principle program of the party in 1995 underlined how every Finnish citizen has an equal possibility to affect the decisions made by the party. The program also stated how the party looks forward to changing the Finnish society more humane and fair (FP 1995). When it comes to the FP's most recent principle program published in 2018, the party has underlined how "The emphasis is on the value of the ordinary Finnish citizens and their role and voice in the politics, economics and culture of Finland. The focus is neither on any particular professions nor 'interest groups' but on the Finnish nation as a whole." It is clear that accentuating words related to Finland and its citizens combine both of these principle programs. This emphasis is naturally also seen in the name of the party. Therefore, it can be argued that emphasizing Finnishness is an important part of the party's rhetoric.

During the XXI century, the party has adopted different ideological characters which have made the party increasingly similar to other European radical-right parties (Hatakka 2016). The party can be seen opposing issues such as immigration and multiculturalism and distinguishing nationalism. They are also referring to themselves as the only anti-immigration party in Finland and are openly against the European Union. According to their immigration policies, immigration causes an increasing amount of problems, which is why radical changes must be made: for example, the refugee quota and humanitarian-based immigration should be abolished (Perussuomalainen maahanmuuttopolitiikka 2019). In addition, the party promotes conservative values and is a strong defender of the sovereignty of Finland (Pappas *et al.* 2015).

### 3.2. Relationship with media

The FP's relationship with media can be seen obeying the classic populist-media relationship: the party has been criticizing media as being a part of the elite but at the same time the party has needed the attention provided by media. When it comes to the four phases regarding the relationship between media and populist parties described in the second chapter, it can be argued that the FP reached the insurgent phase during 2011. The party has had a relatively strong presence in Finnish media especially during and after the 2011 parliamentary election. Before Soini's retirement in 2017, the main media attention regarding the FP could be seen culminating in Soini's media presence. Previous research (Niemi 2012) has suggested that in 2011 Soini had the largest amount of media visibility in tabloids when compared to the leaders of other political parties. Soini could often be seen using common populist rhetoric during his media presence. For example, Niemi (2012) has stated that when facing negative publicity after his views on abortion, Soini employed the role of the underdog, therefore turning the publicity to his advantage.

Both Soini and current chairman Halla-aho have also gained media attention through their controversial blog posts. For example, Halla-aho wrote racist remarks about Islam and Muslims to his former blog Scripta. These remarks finally led to the Supreme Court sentencing him of agitation against an ethnic group (HS 2017). The remarks have been widely discussed in media therefore highlighting Halla-aho's reputation as a controversial, anti-immigration politician. As a party, the FP can be seen intentionally provoking media by utilizing mediated political scandals. These scandals are sustained by media activity, hence giving the other party of the scandal-free media attention (Herkman 2017). For example, in 2015 the FP gained an increased amount of media attention when a member of the party, Olli Immonen, published a picture on Facebook where he was posing with neo-Nazis. Later, Immonen wrote about fighting for "one true Finnish nation" (Herkman 2017). By utilizing these scandals, populist actors not only gain media attention but are able to stimulate societal discussion. A more recent scandal happened in June 2019, when a member of the FP parliamentary group, Juha Mäenpää, gave a speech at the parliament associating immigrants as an "invasive species" (YLE 2020).

In January 2020, the FP released its agenda on media and cultural politics. In their agenda, the party underlines their support for widespread freedom of speech and announces that the party has proposed an act which would reduce the punishments regarding hate-speech and agitation against

ethnic groups. When it comes to agitation, the party suggests that punishment should primarily be given only if an individual threatens an ethnic group with violence (Perussuomalainen media- ja kulttuuripolitiikka 2020).

In conclusion, it can be argued that the FP's relationship with media is complex similarly to other populist parties: on one hand, the party has harshly criticized different journalistic decisions as well as the way the party has been portrayed in the media. On the other hand, media attention has been essential to the party in order for them to share their political views for a larger demographic. It can be argued that the propositions made in the party's 2020 media and culture agenda have suggested the party's appeal to modify the social norms regarding controversial statements: if the act was passed in the legislature, the members of the party would be able to release more controversial statements in social media without negative repercussions.

### **3.3. Analyzing the FP's utilization of populist communication strategies on social media**

The aim of this chapter is to answer the second research question of the thesis by introducing the ways the FP uses social media to employ both populist rhetoric and communication strategy. This analysis has been conducted by using a rhetorical analysis. Rhetorical analysis has been used as it offers a way to describe how communicational methods function in different instances (Zachry 2009, 68-69). According to Zachry, a common rhetorical analysis is conducted by using four steps: first, the texts for the analysis are identified. Then, the texts are categorized according to the purpose and type of text. After that, the constituent parts of the texts are identified. Finally, the structure and findings of the texts are discussed. The theoretical framework of the analysis has been based on the common populist communication strategies introduced in the chapter "Central communication strategies". The framework has been combined with the rhetorical analysis of the FP's communication on social media. More precisely, the social media presence of party leader Jussi Halla-aho on Twitter and Facebook will be examined in addition to the social media activity on the party's official Twitter page. Halla-aho has been chosen because of his status in the party as well as his long-standing and active presence in different social media channels. The following examples were published between February and April 2020, therefore emphasizing the effects of the COVID-19 outbreak. The first example of the analysis is a recent Facebook post by Halla-aho. On 16<sup>th</sup> April 2020, the party leader posted a statement on his Facebook page criticizing the Social

Democratic Party of Finland (SDP). The statement was posted with a news article about an SDP councilman's suggestion to offer health services in Russian, Arabic and Somali in the Helsinki area. Halla-aho can be seen combining this to the rising number of COVID-19 infections among the Somali community:

[...] unfortunately, Somalis are viewed as the sacred cow in Finland. Any problem regarding the Somalian population is not caused by them. A Finn can be blamed for their problems. Overrepresentation in crime statistics is the fault of the Finns. Lousy employment rates are the fault of the Finns. The weak health situation is the fault of the Finns. The coronavirus infections are the fault of the Finns because there hasn't been enough information provided in Somali.<sup>1</sup>

The second example is published on the FP's official Twitter account on 16<sup>th</sup> March 2020. Similarly, to the first example, this post is also posted with a news article. The article – published by Suomen Uutiset, the FP's own media outlet – details the Finnish government's decision to declare a state of emergency due to the virus outbreak: “The government is acting now, just like the Finns Party suggested last week – better late than never”<sup>2</sup>.

The third example is published by Halla-aho on his Twitter account on 29<sup>th</sup> February 2020. In his tweet, Halla-aho accuses the Finnish Left Alliance: “Violent extreme left has gained more political power in Finland. If we had a legitimate media, it would have researched this matter”<sup>3</sup>.

All three statements are categorized as examples of the use of populist rhetoric in different social media channels. When it comes to the constituent parts of these three texts, it can be argued that all of the statements share a variety of similarities regarding populist communication strategies. First of all, the language used in the statement is arguably confrontational. Second of all, the second and third statements assert different levels of anti-elitism. Regarding the second statement, the FP can be argued to be accusing the government of being part of the elite and therefore not directly pursuing the best interest of the common people. When it comes to the third statement, Halla-aho's wish for “legitimate media” can be seen as accusing the existing media from being elitist and therefore declining the people's need for trustworthy media. All three examples are also expressing negative feelings, common rhetoric for populist parties. Furthermore, the use of articles

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<sup>1</sup> Published in Finnish by Jussi Halla-aho on his official Facebook account. Translated by the author. Non-official translation.

<sup>2</sup> Published in Finnish by the FP on the party's official Twitter account. Translated by the author. Non-official translation.

<sup>3</sup> Published in Finnish by Jussi Halla-aho on his official Twitter account. Translated by the author. Non-official translation.

provided by mass media outlets connects the first and second examples. This augments Hatakka's argument of populist politicians' ability to reframe the articles they share. In addition, the second example implies that the FP suggests that they would be more capable of handling the current situation than the government. This can also be seen as the FP dividing the society into us and the others: an important characteristic when populism is viewed as an ideology. Other political parties can be seen representing the others whereas the FP is defending the interest of the common people. Regarding the first example, when writing about the Somali community Halla-aho can be seen implying that this community is a part of 'the other', consequently distancing them from 'the people'.

## **4. DISCUSSION: POPULIST RHETORIC ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS**

This paper has attempted to argue how the populist political communication is constructed on social media as well as how and to what extent the FP performs populist rhetoric on different platforms of social media. The aim of this chapter is to discuss the main findings of the thesis and link the research questions to the theoretical framework.

In order to research populist political communication, it is important to describe the relationship between populist actors and media. Surely, this relationship can be described as a complicated one. Populist actors have criticized the media and accused them of elitism. However, populist parties have exploited media channels in order to gain more attention. Examples of this exploitation include the use of discursive and rhetorical strategies in order to control accusations presented in media. However, the guidelines of traditional media have prevented the populist politicians' possibilities to fully present their agenda on media outlets: for example, controversial statements have often been modified before the publishing by the journalistic gatekeepers. Therefore, the populist communication can be seen increasingly shifting to social media platforms which lack these regulations. In addition, previous research has indicated an increasing amount of distrust towards traditional media among the supporters of populist parties. As a consequence of this distrust, these supporters can be seen becoming more active on the social media platforms of the party. Additionally, social media has allowed the politicians to connect to their followers on a closer level which has emphasized the populist actors' intention to appear as a part of the common people. Through different social media platforms, populist politicians are also able to target their agenda to a distinct group of individuals.

As the theoretical framework has suggested, populist communication strategies combine people-centrism, anti-elitism, negativity and bad mannerism. In addition, populist actors tend to exclude "the other" and claim victimhood. Sharing mass media's articles with personal commentary is also an important part of how the populist political communication is constructed on social media platforms. Through this action, populist politicians are able to redefine and reframe news articles by employing populist rhetoric. The populist actors are also often seen intentionally provoking the media by, for example, publishing controversial statements. In conclusion, it can

be argued that populist political communication in social media has been constructed through adept use of the aforementioned communication strategies.

The populist communication strategies are also clearly visible in the *Facebook* and *Twitter* examples provided in the previous chapter. The examples suggest that the FP has actively utilized different populist communication strategies such as anti-elitism, reframing information, controversial statements as well as dividing the society to the people and the other, on social media. Based on these findings, it can be argued that the main argument of the thesis “the FP is actively and effectively utilizing a populist communication strategy on social media” is valid. These findings also answer to the second research question of the thesis: how and to what extent does the FP perform populist rhetoric on social media? Based on the analysis, it can be argued that the FP actively uses different social media platforms in order to perform populist rhetoric. More precisely, this is done not only through the party’s official social media accounts, but through the accounts of individual politicians, such as the party leader Halla-aho. Halla-aho’s presence in social media is strong and his use of populist rhetoric is clear. However, regarding the analysis, it is important to note that as the analysis part of the thesis has only consisted of the social media activity of the party leader and the party itself, the results may be biased. Nevertheless, it can be argued that analyzing these two components still offers an advisable perspective not only on the use of populist communication strategies but on the relationship of populist actors and social media as well.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed to underline the ways the FP employs populist communication strategies on social media. As the tools of political communication in general have increasingly switched to the online platforms during the last decade, it is important to understand the different ways these communication methods may be executed in social media. More precisely, the focus is placed in the populist communication as the opportunity structures of social media can be seen advancing the populist rhetoric. The emphasis has been established on populism as populist parties around Europe have obtained a solid following and therefore established themselves as a legitimate actor in global politics.

Regarding the structure of the paper, the thesis has commenced with the introduction of the theoretical framework supporting the research. The framework has consisted of defining the concept of populism through a review of the work of several scholars. It has been argued that – in the context of this thesis – populism is viewed primarily as an ideology. In addition, the framework has been established by the construction of populist rhetoric and political communication as well as detailing the central communication strategies used by populist actors. This framework has been used in the research in order to identify and analyze how the FP's political communication has been constructed. Arguably, the central populist communication strategies include, but are not limited to, people-centrism, anti-elitism, dividing the society to the people and the other as well as attacking the media and playing the underdog.

When it comes to the FP, different remarks about the party have been made throughout this research. The FP is seen as an anti-immigration, anti-EU, populist party with relatively conservative values. The party's relationship with media is complex: they have criticized different media actors but have simultaneously utilizing media attention for example through different mediated political scandals. The media presence of the party has been strong especially after the party's triumph in the 2011 Finnish parliamentary election. Regarding leadership, the former leader of the party Timo Soini, as well as the current chairman Jussi Halla-aho, have both released controversial blog posts and statements in media. Additionally, they have actively and effectively used common populist rhetoric in media.

The main research of the paper has been done by using rhetorical analysis while exploring how the FP utilizes populist communication strategies on their social media accounts on *Facebook* and *Twitter*. The main findings of the research have suggested that a wide variety of different communication strategies such as reframing information and accusing different actors from elitism are used by the party. Through their statements, the FP has been distancing themselves from the 'political elite' by highlighting the party's will to fight for the common good of the people.

In conclusion, the paper has recognized the complexity of the populism/media relationship by introducing the different aspects of the construction of populist parties' political communication in social media platforms. The populist parties can be argued to be dependent on the attention and opportunity structures provided by traditional as well as social media. Therefore, it can be argued that populist parties are still dependent on the media attention provided by traditional media outlets. Hence, the use of purely online communication channels is not yet viable for populist parties. Regarding future research, it would be useful to further examine how the use of populist rhetoric in online communication de facto affects the political opinion of the voters, especially during elections. Furthermore, the effect of online communication on the populist rhetoric should be researched in more depth.

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