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DISCOURSE ANALYSIS ON THE ROLE OF DAMAGE CONTROL TOOLS IN THE FINNS PARTY POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Bachelor's thesis

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ABSTRACT

Populism, a complex phenomenon in global politics, has some particular features in the Nordic countries. Finland is one of the Nordics where a local right-wing populist political party represents the second largest party in the parliament (YLE 2019). Considering a diverse range of communicational tools that are used by populism, this thesis will explore populist political communication exemplifying the discussion with the data gathered on the largest populist party in Finland, the Finns Party. The paper focuses on a type of political scandals deriving from discrimination, insulting immigrants and minorities and the use of offensive language. This paper will begin with the introduction of the elements of the populist political communication style. The thesis will continue to examine the media damage control tools and attempts to find resemblances and linkage with the FP's image repair strategy. This thesis concludes that the media sensations caused by the FP's representatives are purposely provocative, and the party follows a particular pattern in its damage control and image repair.

Keywords: Populism, Populist Communication, Damage control, Timo Soini, Jussi Halla-aho, the Finns Party

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the critical elements of populist communication, the populist political parties' controversial statements and the parties' strategies, so-called damage control, of responding to media accusations. The thesis will give an understanding of populist parties expressions and explanations used for publicly stating their utterances. Populism has become an increasingly important narrative-maker in politics, and populistic political parties have shaken European countries and their politics in different aspects. The noticeable rise of populist parties and movements is not 'restricted' to continental Europe but goes beyond and far. Since 2016, the not without employing a wide range of populistic methods of communication, the United Kingdom (UK) decided to leave the European Union (EU) through the so-called Brexit Referendum and the United States (US) voted for Donald Trump as the country's President. In 2017, the populist parties did not win in any of the Western European countries, yet populism has strong public support. Almost a quarter of the citizens of the EU voted for populist parties and with the exception of the Republic of Malta populism affects the entire EU (Boros *et. al.* 2017). Regardless of the 2017 elections, populism is still a modern phenomenon.

Common to many European populists, anti-immigration parties, are repeatedly under media attention for their possibly intentionally provocative statements and populist representatives' racist remarks. Scholars have analysed (Hatakka 2017) populist parties' media strategies related to aligning with racism and the different concepts populist representatives have used to respond and to deny racism accusations. According to Wodak (2013, 32), populist parties provoke the media intentionally by not following publicly accepted norms, by making false claims and by stating 'unsayable' statements. This may be understood as the specifically populist way of running their political agenda and getting their voice heard in the press.

Some notable previous research on the topic (for example, Herkman 2018) argues that the use of unacceptable language or behaviour, insulting non-native inhabitants and other minorities within the population can be considered essential elements, characterizing populist movements. The same research state that the consequences of media scandals depend on the size of the movement and the status of the representative behind the statements. Interestingly, some populist actors state

legislation against racist speech to be necessary. This may lead to a setting where a populist party uses double-meaning messages and other implicit ways to make its most outrageous statements. This way allows the populist communication to discuss controversial issues in an implicit way which allows different interpretations and enables two different messages. By communicating in double-meaning messages, populist parties may be able to create a setting, where the populist actors are not responsible for the reader's interpretations. The media often catch these remarks, and the populist parties are accused of politically incorrect content. These political actors then proceed to turn the false claims innocent, even by denying the statements and may avoid proper sanctions and disciplinary actions. This communication style and damage control may enable the populist representatives to keep the party favourable for political cooperation regardless and may provide them with the opportunity to cater for their more extreme supporters.

This paper attempts to describes the critical components of populist political communication, using the example of the Finns Party (FP) and aims at **claiming that The Finns party uses populist communication elements in their media scandal damage control.** This thesis introduces practical examples of populist political communication and damage control after media accusations by using the example of the FP. The example is limited to this political group, as the party was often mentioned during the search for information about populism and the populist relationship to media.

With the help of the following research questions, this paper will be able to explain the characteristics of populist political communication and to understand its way to form and explain its controversial statements. The analysis is divided into two interconnected sectors, which are examined with the help of two research questions. The main research questions of the bachelor's thesis are as follows:1) How is populistic political communication constructed? 2) How the Finns Party uses the elements of damage control tools after media scandals?

Methodologically, this research will extensively employ discourse analysis as a tool to detect the role and characteristics of populist political communication. This method aims at assisting to demonstrate the repetition of communicational practices in use clearly. Discourse analysis is useful for such analysis, due to its ability to specify why and how the style is followed. The style of analysis will examine utterances in a text such as written statements or even in films and paintings to convey the meaning in a context (Neumann 2008, 62). The methodology focuses on *how* the statements are expressed and the method can be used to explain how different phenomena are

defined through discourse. This paper will limit the discourse to a range of academic sources, the political party's official documents, and the Finnish press articles. Concentration is on analysing the populist political communication style used in democratic party systems by the main populist party in Finland.

This research work is structured as follows: the first chapter presents the theme of the thesis and introduces the theoretical background by introducing the concept of populist political communication and presenting the critical elements of it. The paper then proceeds to the second chapter, which focuses on populism and its relationship to media scandals. The chapter continues to introduce the elements of damage control tools in political media sensations and scandals. The second research question is presented in the third chapter, which introduces the selected populist party and the party's relationship to media. The third chapter then combines the two research questions through discussion and discourse analysis. The chapter includes analysis on how the populist parties are able to avoid consequences of their public statements and if the crisis management, of these statements and the media attention gained, follows a particular pattern. As a final point, the conclusion summarizes the main findings of the research.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter aims to give an overview of the theoretical body of knowledge on the topic, identify the critical elements of populist political communication. The first section will answer the first research question by introducing the main concept of populist political communication and different approaches to the field. Then the chapter will then proceed to the second section, which will indicate the different elements of populist political communication. With the help of these elements, the concept of populist political communication is made understandable, and the rest of the thesis is connected to these elements.

1.1. Constructing populist political communication

In its most elementary form, populism is seen in modern democratic societies as an appeal to 'the people' working against the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society (Canovan 1999). To understand populist political communication better, it is important to indicate the two different approaches to the topic. The first approach can be understood as an actor-centered approach. In this approach the starting point for the analysis is identifying the characteristics of populist political actors. The main focus and the empirical object of the study is that the actors are defined as populist. In this approach the perspective on populism argues that populism is an ideology decoupled from how political actors communicate. The second approach to the study of populist political communication identifies the characteristics of populist political communication and focuses mainly on communication strategies, styles, and rhetoric (Aalberg *et.al.* 2017, 354). It can be deduced that the first approach views populism as an ideology, and the second approach views populism as a communication style. These two approaches to the study need to be combined to analyse populist political communication (Walgrave 2007). This combination helps to frame that populism can be a political communication style they refer to the people, appeal to, and identifies with people and publicly claims to speak in the people's name. Merely talking about the people is not enough to define a speech as being a populism-driven one. In this study, the definition of populist political parties and politicians include parties and politicians that claim to represent the true will of 'the people' against 'the elite' besides these descriptive elements the parties included are also against foreign migrants, or ethnic, religious or

sexual minorities. This definition and classification of a political populist party or politicians are in parallel to the definition used in the 2016 report "The State of Populism in the European Union" by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS).

1.2. The role of the people and the other

It could be argued that the principal claim of populist political parties and politicians is the will to act in the name of the people. This claim is also the core of populist political communication. Populist parties claim to restore the sovereignty of the people and to restore the authority of the people by giving the power back to 'the people' from 'the elites'. This automatically creates a contrast between the people and the dangerous other. A group of scholars (Aalberg *et.al.* 2017) argue that the importance of the people's sovereignty is overemphasized in the populist point of view and they often let it to rumble over another important liberal component of modern democracy such as human rights, the rule of law and the division of power.

The populist political communication tries to appeal to the people by highlighting the concept of placing the people and the people's will first in every political decision-making situation. The populist political communication style used tries to create a feeling of unity amongst the people by referring to 'we' and 'us'. There are always groups that are not considered in the populist views and definition of 'the people' and who are excluded from the populist target group. These people are seen as corrupt, or unreliable and are considered as 'the others'. The populist political parties draw a picture of the others as a dangerous and hostile group of people who act against the will of the people. The communication style is trying to build a distinction between the people and 'the others'. In the context of populist political communication, these others are often seen as a danger and an enemy.

According to Wodak (2015), for example, the populist parties seem to create challenges and enemies which rely on traditional collective stereotypes and images of the enemy. Populist political communication has found it essential to aim its communication to a specific audience and to adapt to a particular context. Most often, this other consists of political imaginaries, traditions and construct nationalist pasts. This way, the populist parties can create national identity narratives with emotional and historical background, which often appeal to the people. The enemy can vary depending on the situation, the country, and context; it can be the EU, different minorities,

capitalists, socialists, or the mainstream politicians. For example, in Italy, some parties gain support via stressing the fascist past and by focusing propaganda to a perceived danger to their national identities (ibid).

Currently, issues worrying European voters are typically financial and environmental crises which can be turned into fear, disaffection and pessimism and disappointment with mainstream politics. Often populist parties have trouble facing liberal democracy because of their distinctive consideration of the people. In the point of view of the populists, the supporters of liberal democracy are trying to limit the rights and well-being of the people by highlighting the rights of minorities (Taggart 2004). This may create tension between the supporters of liberal democracy, mainstream political parties, and the supporters of the populist parties.

1.2.2 Immigrants as the other

Typically, anti-immigration plays a vital role in populist political communication. Anti-immigration is often linked to racism. According to Mols and Jetten such (2014), populist political parties tend to justify their racist statements by creating a negative image of immigration and by using nostalgic references. Often anti-immigration and anti-multiculturalism are justified by referring to the sacrifices the nation has had to make for their survival. This historical memory has previously been one of the driving forces of populist political parties but there a change has been acknowledged. According to a group of researchers (Kasekamp *et.al.* 2018), Western Europe, immigrants, and more specifically, Muslims have become the primary target of the populist political parties. This situation has developed after the refugee crisis in 2015, and Islamophobia is also taking hold in the Northern and Eastern Europe. The populist right-wing parties have increased its visibility by taking an anti-refugee stance in their political agenda.
Some populist parties have even sought to normalize a racial nationalism based on 'whiteness as an essentialized social identity which they say is under threat' (Atton 2006).

Anti-immigration can be considered as a part of the concept of 'the others'. In the context of populist political communication living in the country or even citizenship of the country is not a reason to be included to populist view of 'the people'. According to previous studies, reasons such as dressing differently, different ethnicity, cultural heritage, or religion are a reason to exclude individuals and groups outside 'the people.'

1.3. Anti-Elitism

Besides the people and the others, the second core idea of the populist parties is anti-elitism. Typical populist anti-elitism is finding enemies, and commonly these enemies are those claimed to be responsible for such things as Europeanization and globalization, foreign influence, and foreigners (Wodak 2015). According to previous research (Niemi and Houni, 2018), some populist parties argue that the elites are establishing policies for immigration and multiculturalism for their benefits and ideologies. Populist political communication positions this as going against the will of 'the people'. This can be seen as a way to contrast the gap between the elite and the populist political party and to highlight the anti-immigration causes of populist parties. Populist parties have set accepting immigration as something the elites can take advantage of possibly in respect of the people.

Anti-elitism is also supported with a strategy of creating an image of being mistreated by the elite. In these cases, the elite and the people are deliberately put in the opposite sides, in polarized settings, while the populist aim is to achieve a positioning where the supporters see the party as a victim of the elites. If successful, this setting may create a situation where the populist parties are able to demonstrate the mistreatment to their supporters. This may lead to a feeling of sympathy towards the populist politicians and to increase the support of the party. According to previous studies (Wodak 2015), the Danish media went publicly against the Danish People's Party (the DPP), a Danish right-wing populist party. The DPP managed to proposition themselves as being under an attack and mistreated by the media. The media had created a situation where the Danish People's Party was seen as the underdog by the people, and as underrated by the others.

1.4. Debate on the role of leadership

Burns (1978,18), in his classic book *Leadership*, noted that "leadership over human beings is exercised when persons with certain motives and purposes mobilize, in competition or conflict with others, institutional, political, psychological, and other resources to arouse, engage, and satisfy the motives of followers." Leadership is an active part of political communication, and the importance of charismatic leader is often linked to the characteristics of populist political communication. As Burns further explains the role and position of leadership is a combination of mutual trust and benefitting the followers, who in this case are the voters. If the leader fails in his task, it is likely that his charisma and position as a leader will disappear. The literature on populist

parties tends to describe charismatic and dominant leaders as a characteristic feature and as a core of populist political communication. Some literature reviewed argued that populist political parties use and create an image of charismatic leaders who construct themselves as the picture of 'the people', as saviour and problem solvers. According to Wodak (2015), this may create an image that the charismatic populist leader is more effective in his politics and work ethics than other political leaders.

Soare (2017) argues that there is too little systematic research on populist parties and their leadership to make such a bold statement for its importance. She still acknowledges that the populist leaders are a part of the political communication style used in populist politics. Soare states that, in most cases, the centrality of the party leader translates into the emphasis on the unmediated, hence un-institutionalized, genuine democracy populist parties tend to preach. The need for a charismatic leader has become a routine, and a rule in all modern politics and the role and authority of top political leaders has become more visible, and the leaders are considering how the voters are viewing them. Going back to Burns' explanation of leadership, the political leaders tend to take a role as being more like the voters and acting in ways that are increasing the identification between leaders and followers. Nowadays, this can be considered as an essential part of modern politics rather than being specified strictly as the core characteristics of populistic political communication. Interestingly, this may be a result of the indistinct line between the popular and characteristics of the populist.

1.5 Rhetoric's used

With racist remarks, populists try to create a negative image of the others and most often the populist political party protects the party representative making these statements. According to Sakki and Pettersson (2015) one of the most common rhetorical methods of using racism is denying the connection between the statement and racism. Racism is often masked under criticism towards immigration and asylum seekers. This generally includes accusing the opponent of racism; hence they are making the connection. While criticizing multiculturalism populists deny the linkage with racism, accuses racism as a useless provocation of the opposition and accuses minorities of strategically seeking for attention and resources.

Other remarkable rhetoric styles for populist political parties are using authority, searching for the guilty and different conspiracy theories (ibid). For example, during the presidential elections in the US, Donald Trump consistently made public suggestions and conspiracies that now-former

President Barack Obama's birth certificate was fake and a hoax. Populist parties often refer to themselves as the 'common sense' and will of the people. Populist representatives and official statements use pervasive and straightforward language which is easy to relate to and appeals to the masses. This kind of rhetoric aims to pressure mainstream politics and to influence the masses with a repetition of the theme. The language selection is essential, words a picked carefully with possibly the aim of catching attention (Jackson *et.al.* 2018, 211).

2. THE POPULIST RELATIONSHIP TO MEDIA

In this chapter, the author indicates the found ways the populist political actors use to handle their relationship to media and the possible accusations made of their public statements. The first section will concentrate on the reasoning behind the need for such tools and in which way the populist politicians aim the public to understand their messages. The third section will go through the concepts and strategies used to soften the discriminative remarks.

2.1 Populism and the importance of media visibility

During the recent years, media's role in politics has grown, and media has a significant role in the public support of political parties. Mazzoleni (2003, 5, 228), argues that populist political communication often concentrates on low perception-threshold issues using controversial but straightforward messages such as xenophobia and nationalism. The emotional character of the issues is turned into political problems and conveyed into national emergencies. Visibility in the media is seen as growingly crucial for the success of populist parties. Populist political parties are often in the headlines of different media platforms which offers them much-needed publicity, and the media coverage can turn into legitimacy in public. The commercial media often cover and dramatize the unusual language of populist party leaders, which provides them priceless visibility (Mazzoleni 2011). This may be understandable since the rhetoric's of charismatic leaders of populist parties may be very different from the conservative mainstream party leaders. They are easily seen as more exciting characters to report.

Researchers have demonstrated that (Pernaa 2012), the relationship of commercial media and populist parties follow a repeated pattern. The first phase of the pattern is that the commercial newspapers ignore to report about populist political parties. In the second the populist parties have already gained a supporter base, success, and attention, which is the reason they draw media's attention. A new actor in politics is an issue the media is not able to pass, and they give significant coverage to the party. In the second phase, the populist political party, its representatives and the leader are followed intensively and reported widely. In the third phase, the situation balances, the media attention decreases and sets to the same level as with mainstream political parties.

Mazzoleni (2003, 219) implies the relationship between populist parties, and media depends on the journalists' understanding of media's position and role as a political actor, media's capability and opportunities to report politics and to control the public political agenda. This is the reason behind the media's different attitudes towards the populist movements that vary on the country.

Wodak (2013, 32), points out that populist movements and populist political parties intentionally provoke the media by violating publicly accepted norms to gain attention and media support. The media is left in a situation where the options are narrow; either to not report about the scandalous racist statements and possibly be accused of endorsing it. On the other hand, if they do report about it, they reproduce the arguments made and the populist political objectives stated by giving it a platform spread it further. This may lead to a situation where the media is blamed for supporting the populist political statements. According to a group of scholars (Kasekamp *et.al.* 2018), the media, knowingly or not, help the populist parties by devoting attention to the populist representatives and their political agenda. The scholars found that the more exposure the populist parties received from the media, the more votes they collected in the 2009 European elections. It is also noted that tabloid media is the most appealing to the voters with populist attitudes. Journalists of tabloid outlets are recognized to use the populist style of communication themselves (Hameleers *et.al.* 2017).

The results of a study of politics and the media (Mazzoleni 2003, 30) show a relationship between several political attitudes and the use of different weekly and daily print media. This was noticed to be the case, especially in themes as fear of foreigners, authoritarianism, party weariness, political alienation, and disaffection from politicians. According to the study, these themes can be explained through the above-average percentage of people from the lower educational strata. It is also stated that the fear of foreigners.

2.2. The demand for damage control strategies

Previous research (Hatakka *et. al.* 2017) indicates the importance of strategies of image repair and crisis communication. In the case of populist political communication, it may often be understood as a strategy for racism denial. The research shows that the most essential tools for populists are denying the accusations, providing excuses and justifications for the remarks made. These procedures aim to convince the audience, not always the voters, that the defendant has not broken

publicly accepted norms. The author has chosen to tell more about the characteristics of damage control used in populist political communication to help understand the process:

1. Redirecting the blame. Previous research has found that populist party representatives tend to redirect blame by counter-accusations, for example, blaming the media for scrutiny and 'hunting' the specific party or blaming mainstream, rival, parties.

2. Pledging for victimhood. Researchers (Hatakka *et.al.* 2017) have indicated that the core element of populist damage control is turning the scenery around and taking the role of a victim. The event is often dramatized, and the populism party may claim to be wrongly accused of racist or fictional remarks. The populist politicians may use the right of freedom of speech to justify their statements. This strategy also includes the idea of the populist actors being the actor of stating the voice of the people, something that the people are thinking but the populist actors are the ones stating the public opinion and taking the blame. The role of a victim consists of the idea of being media hunted, targeting the media spotlight on their party, or otherwise being discriminated by the media. Victimhood of the media may contain claiming the media of being biased and undermining freedom of speech.

3. Finding justification for the actions. The populist politicians may try to turn their statements into criticism and claim for being misunderstood for only criticizing the immigration policies. Wodak (2013), explains that the populist politicians may be reaching for the right of freedom of speech to justify their remarks. The populist politicians claim only to criticize topics such as immigration or asylum seeker policies. In this category, the populist parties may also be denying the accusations by trying to justify it with claiming the statements to be

4. Apologizing. Apologies populist party representatives give can be implicit and vague but still convincing enough for the public. According to previous research (Hatakka *et.al.* 2017), populist party representatives rarely answer to racism accusations by apologizing, asking for forgiveness, or providing an expression of regret. Research has shown that even if apologies are expressed, they are rarely accepted, and public opinion has not changed. Wodak has stated (2013) that populist parties need to find a balance in the between of its right-wing populist supporters and in the eyes of public opinion, to enable possible cooperation in the administrative work. In the same research, Wodak argues that populist

parties mostly apologize for the people's misunderstanding rather than for their own mistakes.

In some cases (Hatakka *et.al.* 2017), the parties admitted breaking some socially accepted norms and their statements being blamed for a reason. The party admits the mistakes made but claim that the party member behind the controversies did not represent the opinion or the communication strategy of the party. The party leaders try to distance the party from the situation and accusations by referring that the party will take care of the disciplinary actions for the individual representative breaking the norms. These actions are subscribed as submissive strategies, and he claims that the closer the responder is to the party core, the more actively they use submissive strategies than other representatives. This strategy aims to normalize the situation and end the accusations by referring to a range of disciplinary measures. It has been recognized that most often, these sanctions were targeted to a low-level member of the populist party.

Populist parties may not want to divorce them from their racist remarks or controversial statements; hence by racism-related media scandals the party is able to cater to their more extreme voters and constituencies. Most right-wing, anti-immigration, populist parties have a strong supporter base with voters who highly criticism immigration and the party aims to keep these constituencies. In the case of populist parties, it depends on the recipient if the messages are understood as hostile and racist or honest and as 'common sense'.

2.3. The Wodak's perpetuum mobile

The dynamic Wodak is arguing for consists of several stages. Wodak's work implies that populist parties and movements have managed to develop discursive and rhetoric strategies to damage control media accusations. Often the events before the media attention are intentionally provoked by the populist movement. With the help of this dynamic populist politicians have the possibility to say politically incorrect statements, yet sound innocent and to deny the obvious.

The apology style populist movements have is defined as calculated and ambivalent, while still sounding convincing. According to Wodak, these populist politicians often avoid being appropriately sanctioned, and they are not asked to resign. This definition consists of a theory that the right-wing parties and politicians have created discursive and rhetorical strategies to allow themselves to intentionally say politically incorrect statements and make false claims and yet sound innocent and convincing. The theory is convincing since, as mentioned earlier, populist

parties have had scandalous headlines and a racist statement which gain considerable media attention and the MP's have not been properly sanctioned. In the case of the FP and Jussi Halla-aho's offensive statements and his court sentences, Halla-aho did not need to resign from the party, and his support grew.

Wodak argues (*ibid,* 32) that populist movements and populist political parties intentionally provoke the media by violating publicly accepted norms to gain attention and support. The media is left in a situation where the options are narrow; either to not report about the scandalous racist statements and possibly be accused of endorsing it. On the other hand, if they do report about it, they reproduce the arguments made and the populist political objectives stated by giving it a platform spread it further. This may lead to a situation where the media is blamed for supporting the populist political statements.

3. POPULISM IN FINLAND AN OVERVIEW

This chapter aims to evaluate the relationship between populist parties, the media, and introduce the examples mentioned before. The first section introduces populist parties in Europe and focuses on practical examples. The section then proceeds to Wodak's *'Right-wing perpetuum mobile'*, which is used as part of the analyse of the populist parties' double-meaning messages and explanations for their public statements. The second section, where the practical examples of populist political communication are introduced. The last part then concentrates on the way the populist parties have used double-meaning messages as public damage control and the possible consequences of the statement the populist actors.

3.1. The roots of populism

Interestingly, there is no specific, prevailing ideology between European populist parties. Some European populist parties are far right, some left wing and some even position themselves at the center (Aalberg *et.al.* 2017). Political populism is not a new phenomenon in Europe and the new period of populism can be understood as a reaction to the failure of traditional parties to respond to the global economic crisis, globalization, the considered consequences of European integration, immigration, etc. The populist electorate alternatives have emerged by offering a 'common sense' solution to society's issues with promising radical changes to the society and politics and claim to be able to succeed in making them happen (Albertazzi and McDonell, 2008). These have also been recognized as reasons behind the rise of subsidiary factors – cuts to welfare provision and loss of national sovereignty, which may have a connection to the appeal of populism (Beirich and Woods, 2000). This might be the reason populism has had its share of the public support in the Nordic Welfare countries with comprehensive social benefits and welfare system such as Finland. In general, populism in the Nordic region has experienced an increase and especially soared in Finland (Pappas *et.al.* 2015).

 The political objectives of these populist political parties may differ, but they share similarities in terms of the powers engaging in politics in the name of "the people" and against "the elite". In addition, they express their disappointment to liberal democracy and campaign with a focus to

oppose European Integration and often international cooperation. During the 21st century, populist actors and populist parties have been in the European Parliament elections and the national and local elections in European countries. This has led to populist actors in European national parliaments. It seems that the role of media exposure is growingly essential. According to Niemi (2012), different sizes of media scandals have become more regular in the Nordic countries since the 1990s.

3.2. The Finns party

The FP was founded in 1995, but its roots are in the agrarian populist Finnish Rural Party. The party has made considerable electoral gains with the leadership of Timo Soini (Pappas *et.al.* 2015). The FP claims to be for the 'people' and be against the 'elites,' and the party can be positioned as a populist right party. The party's description of its values in 2018 was the following:

> The True Finns Party is a nationalist Christian-social party, which is striving for nationalist benefits. We appreciate and highlight the voice of the average people and their role in politics, culture, and history. We are not focusing only on a single profession or an interest group but the Finnish people as a whole. We are on top of the old-fashioned and unfair interest group politics. As part of our nationalist and fair politics, we help the ones in need, those of bad luck and the outcast of the Finns. We want to help those in need inside our country. We call this internal solidarity. [1]

As the party's value statement describes, the populist ideology of the party refers to the people, the community, and the society and nation. The political rhetoric used portrays the FP as the representatives of the Finnish people and the Finnish nation. The FP is on the right in social policies but follows a left-wing course on economic policies and issues. The FP believes and promotes the traditional family model and values and require immigrants to accept Finnish cultural norms (Pappas *et.al.* 2015). Overall, The FP may be distinguished by its nationalism, the maintenance of the Finnish social welfare system, and anti-immigration stance.

The FP has labelled itself as an anti-immigration party, but the immigration views inside the party vary. In the 2008 parliamentary elections the True Finn Party, (*perussuomalaisten puolue*) achieved a historical win and gained 34 more seats in the Finnish parliament and journalists and

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[1] Translated from Finnish into English by the author. Non-official translation.

commentators referred the vent as a 'the breakthrough of right-wing populism in Finland'. The historical events were a result of the election themes which were around anti-Europeanization and anti-immigration (Arter 2010). The reasons behind the sudden popularity of the FP have been studied, and according to Pernaa (2012) Eurozone economic crisis had increased the negative perception of the EU in Finland. These themes were a significant advantage for the FP since Finland was going through economic severe difficulties due to the global economic crisis and structural changes in the society due to globalization.

While the FP has made public statements, demanded particular policy changes, and preached for the traditional Finnish values and norms, it's way in the politics has not only been a success. According to some scholars (Wahlberg 2016), the FP has faced some difficulties due to its cooperation and coalition with the mainstream centrist political parties. The coalition forced The FP in many difficult political compromises concerning EU policy, immigration, and asylum policies. This may conflict with their public political stance, which is openly anti-EU, anti-immigration and its politician openly racist statements.

3.3. The Finns Party's relationship to the media

The relationship between the FP and the Finnish media can be described as contradictory. During the 2011 parliamentary elections, the commercial media described the FP as unrealistic, accused the party of provoking dissatisfaction, and it was accused of not giving a political agenda and ideology. The FP members accused the media of sabotaging the FP political campaign and of being bias and favouring the mainstream political parties. (Hatakka 2012) This gave the FP the opportunity of playing the role of an underdog, who was chased by the mainstream political parties and the media. The FP is known for its direct and demotic way of speaking, which appeals to the people and for the commercial media (Pernaa 2012). The party labels itself as a Christian-social party (The FP 2018), but the party has been in the headlines of the media for openly hostile and even illegal statements. The FP has had to correct its immigration views several times due to individual representative's controversial statements.

The FP has a strong anti-immigration wing inside the party, and one of the most well-known anti-immigration representatives is Jussi Halla-aho. He has progressed as a politician at a high speed since he was elected an MP in 2011 and a Member of the European Parliament (MEP) in 2014. His history in politics consists of being an independent blogger, and he has gained a reputation for

testing the limits of free speech with his anti-immigration, anti-multiculturalism, and anti-Islamist blogs. Halla-aho started his blog Scripta in 2003 by using a tagline: "Writing from the sinking West", he positioned the blog within the global *counter-jihadist* movement. Halla-aho published writings about his views of a dangerous Muslim invasion in Europe, and he has stated that as a result of the immigration of Muslims, the whole Western Civilization is in danger. He has published his aims to bring together the Finns who want to politicize immigration and make Islam a cultural-political issue in the country (Ylä-Anttila, 2017). He also proclaims for a need to fight for the survival of Western culture, more specifically Finnish culture. Due to his writings, Halla-aho received a court sentence for disturbing religious worship. In 2012, the case was settled by the Supreme Court, and the conviction was confirmed with an addition of a conviction for hatred against an ethnic group (Wahlberg 2016). These controversial statements made by Halla-aho highlight the FP anti-immigration stance and the definition it has gained as a populist party.

The Finnish media has paid its interest and attention to the acts of The FP and the writings made by Halla-aho are well known in public. The media have widely reported the writings of Jussi Halla-aho in Finland, and he has gained a significant amount of media attention which propelled his political career. Halla-aho has had large electoral support in all elections he has taken part. Currently, he is the leader of the FP and a member of the European Parliament. Despite the offensive and politically incorrect arguments made by Halla-aho, the FP declines its responsibility from the racist statements of its representatives and insists of not being a racist party. The FP has repeatedly taken the role of a victim of the adverse reporting in the mainstream media. The party officials and the politicians active claim the media of being consisted of biased journalists and blame the journalists of the negative portrayal of the party.

Besides Halla-aho's statements other the FP representatives have been had their share of the controversial media attention. In June 2015, The FP member Olli Immonen was photographed with several convicted neo-Nazis at a commemoration of Eugen Schauman's, a nationalist anarchist who murdered Governor-General Nikolai Bobrikov in 1904 (HS 17.6.2015). Soon after the incident, Immonen published a Facebook post encouraging people to fight against "the nightmare called multi-culturalism" (HS 25.7.2015). According to Herkman (2017), both of these scandals were debated in mainstream popular and prestige media creating publicity for Immonen and the FP. The other mainstream rival politicians gave critical statements about the populist politician and the party. The leaders and other members of the FP criticized Immonen but interestingly, they were not as harmful as mainstream politicians and the media. The party

dismissed the media sensation, and the former party leader Sampo Terho corrected that Immonen was presenting his own opinions, not the party's opinions. Many of the FP members resigned from the statements, but only a few publicly condemned him (Herkman 2016). Immonen decided to temporarily resign from the parliamentary group although his party only reprimanded him.

4. DISCUSSION: HOW THE FINNS PARTY USES DAMAGE CONTROL TOOLS

In this chapter, the author aims to combine the findings of the first and the second research question through discourse analysis. It is crucial to acknowledge that there may occur conflicts between groups and people because the discourse and text are new to others (Neumann, 2008, 67). This chapter will use the discourse analysis toolkit created by Neumann (2008, 76); introducing the texts out of the social world, converting the material to be analysed, basing the phenomena to being about the same subject, cutting the phenomena into different representations, sections, layering the phenomena and latest reflecting and analysing the phenomena. This chapter concentrates on recognizing and analysing populist political communication elements and the damage control the FP has used during its media accusations and scandals. The discussion will follow the results of Walgrave's (2007) findings that to analyse and understand populism the two previously mentioned approaches need to be combined. This discussion aims to find links between the mentioned core elements of populist political communication and the acts of damage control and the possible consequences of the FP representatives.

4.1. The Finns Party and their view of media scrutiny

According to Pappas and Kriesi (2015), the rise of the FP was "a consequence of the combination of national political crisis and the discursive opportunity generated by the economic crisis elsewhere in Europe." A significant part of the literature reviewed, therefore, claimed that the media played an essential role in the rise of populism (e.g., Mazzoleni, 2003, Hameleers *et.al.* 2017, Klotz 2017) and it was also argued (e.g. Wodak, 2013, Hameleers *et.al.* 2017) that by reporting about the populist views journalists also engage in the widespread of populism. Interestingly, these studies conflict with the populist view of media discrimination and scrutiny. In this pattern, if the support in the polls is low, the populist parties believe to receive less coverage than other mainstream parties. The populist parties share an idea that negative media coverage cannot always be inadequate. For instance, the Sweden Democrats were covered growingly

intensively over time to the point where the party received more media attention than some of the government parties (Esser *et.al.* 2016).

By analysing the statements published by the FP representatives' different themes can be found to dominate the party's political communication style and damage control in media crises. In addition to Immonen's and Halla-aho's visible media sensations in the FP, the former leader of the party Timo Soini has had his share in the media scandals. Soini was accused of not explaining and actively refusing to explain his stand on abortion to the public. The relationship between the FP and the media is complicated and some of its representatives' scandals have profiled the FP. He was accused of behaving arrogantly towards a 9th grader schoolgirl asking for him to answer if he would deny abortion also to victims of rape. The Finnish press discussed the events widely in the media and Timo Soini and the FP were mentioned frequently in a negative light. A popular tabloid IltaSanomat wrote that Soini had "flared up" for the schoolgirl (IltaSanomat 28.3.2011). Soini's first reaction and response to the media attention was to accuse journalists of scrutiny and mischief. He criticized the Finnish press of targeting him and the FP. Later he explained his reaction by appointing to his painful memories of childhood and supported his argument by stating to his personality as an emotional person.

By looking into Soini's reaction and explanations through the theoretical framework of populist political communication style and damage control tools, there are recognizable features of image repair and crisis communication. In this case, Soini is pledging for victimhood by making counter-accusations and blaming the media of for media hunt and scrutiny. It can also be recognized that Soini is trying to find justification for his reaction by repeating a story of a painful personal childhood memory. These damage control tools were introduced as characteristics of populist political damage control (Hatakka *et.at.* 2013). Soini's efforts to handle the media scandals and his immediate response may have possibly prevented the sensation from growing and spreading. According to Niemi (2012), Soini managed to turn the publicity of the media attention to his advantage by pledging for victimhood and by taking the role of an underdog. Interestingly, Soini's accusations of journalists portraying him in a lousy light conflict with the study results of Herkman (2017). According to the same study, IltaSanomat was most positive in its articles discussing Soini and the FP and only two of its articles have criticized the party.

4.2 The party's reactions to racism accusations

Anti-immigration stance has been critical in the statements, arguments, and discourse of the FP top representatives. Halla-aho's blog has been extensively used to spread anti-immigration and Islamophobic opinions, and due to the attention, his statements have gained, the content attracts a relatively broad audience (Palkama 2017). It can be understood that the amount of attention and exposure the media gave to Halla-aho's writings might have encouraged many to enter his blog. These actions may have helped him to promote his and the FP's political agenda. Halla-aho's scandal received a massive amount of media attention which caused the supporters of Halla-aho to react, create a counter-attack, and accuse the Finnish press of media hunt (Herkman 2016). As mentioned before, one of the main elements of populist damage control tools is to illustrate as a victim and make accusations of media hunt. In this case, the aim is proven, and the party tries to reduce or avoid the possible consequences by creating a setting of media scrutiny and being the victim of the mainstream media.

In the case of Immonen and his media scandals and connections to the neo-Nazis, the FP was mutually reluctant to sanction the representative properly. Immonen caused a media scandal with his Facebook posts and with being photographed with convicted neo-Nazis. The party was unwilling to sanction him; he was not terminated from the party and the party leader Sampo Terho used damage control tools to overcome the situation. Terho admitted Immonen's mistake and admitted him breaking socially accepted rules but claimed that the controversial media scandals caused by Immonen were not the party's opinion (Wahlbeck, 2016). By doing so, Terho tried to distance the FP from the scandal. In this case, Immonen was a representative of the party in the parliament. This may have been the reason behind Immonen only being reprimanded.

4.3. Populism, scandals and it's effects to the supporter base

The amount of political media scandals has not mainly grown in Finland, but the elements of it have changed. According to a study (Herkman 2016), the amount of scandals resulting from offensive language and discriminative statements has grown in line with the success of the FP. The same study distinguishes that it is possible find a pattern in the damage control of populist parties. The media sensations and scandals tend to start from an individual representative's insulting blog or Facebook post – most commonly targeted to an immigrant. It is common that the publications are provocative, and the purpose is to break the publicly agreed norms. After the media scandal, the supporters and the party representatives form a counter-attack by using the damage control tools of accusing of media scrutiny, pledging for victimhood or trying to find justifications for the

statements. The amount of negative attention has not done harm to the party's support, as the latest parliamentary election poll, provided by the Finnish public broadcasting company YLE (2019), indicated that the FP has grown to be the second largest political party in the country with the support of 16,3%.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this research is to determine populist political communication themes and the damage control tools the FP uses in its communication in the context of accusations of racism and political incorrectness. Research on the topic is needed to understand the reasons behind the rise of populist political parties and the populist parties' and its' representative's media behaviour in a more sophisticated way. The thesis started by establishing a theoretical framework on populist political communication and approaches to the study field. The theoretical framework was introduced to understand the broadness and to recognize the characteristics of the communication style. The paper's valued added to the general debate of populism is in the approach of populism as a thin ideology and more as a communication style. This paper identifies the main characteristics and tools of the populist political communication style and then analyses the communication of the FP through the characteristics. The paper has recognized that it is essential to highlight that a set of strategies are at hand, which range from creating a communication style to communicate in the media, with the media and after media accusations to the public. Due to the number of previous studies on populism focusing on the demographic characteristics of a populist voter, this study has not determined these factors.

So far, we have outlined the characteristics and the actors in populist political communication. Populism has become a part of global politics, and it has widespread effects. Populism may not be tied to specific policies, and ideologies it has emerged quite rapidly. The consisting populist political communication style is connected to the characteristics of populism, and at its thinnest, populism is described as a communication style. The key to populist communication is the use of the people, and the contrast to the others comes in the form of such ways as anti-elitism, anti-immigration, and anti-EU.

The relationship between media and populist political parties has been complicated. Both sides have tried to advantage of another, media has been reporting about populist parties because of their commercial value, and at the same time, populist political actors have tried to provoke the media to gain media coverage and that way to receive legitimacy, publicity, and supporters. The ways the populist representatives have been in media is at least controversial. In the case of the FP, the

representatives are placed in the headlines of the media due to their politically incorrect, controversial argumentation patterns and possibly even hostile statements. The FP representatives are often accused of racism and discrimination due to their statements, and remark. Both representatives, Olli Immonen and Jussi Halla-aho, used their personal platforms (blogs and Facebook) to publish these statements. This might be because they aim to avoid journalist commentators and censorship, which helps if the meaning is to provoke the media purposely.

This media scrutiny has caused the populist political parties to use ways to damage control of these so-called media sensations. In the case of the FP, the ways the party publicly reacts to the media sensations have been quite vague. Immonen was only rebuked after his connections to neo-Nazis and his racist statements on Facebook. If Immonen was a lower-level party member, he could have possibly had a stronger disciplinary sanction. Halla-aho was convicted of his racist statements, but he's popularity only grew. The court case was highly followed by the media, which may have helped Halla-aho to create his name as an anti-immigration politician. In the case of Soini, the damage control and image repair followed the same pattern; at first, Soini accused and criticized the journalists and the Finnish press of media hunt, pledging for victimhood and secondly, he justified his reactions with personal reasoning. This indicates, that the FP is familiar with populist communication and the damage control tools offered.

It can also be argued that the party uses submissive strategies, where the party sanctions lower-level representatives but not the parliamentary representatives. In addition to the submissive strategies, the party also acknowledges that its members are stating racist remarks. The party leader has admitted the mistakes but also turned into the responsibility of the representative, trying to distance the political party from the individual making the statements. The party has managed its media scandal's well, without stepping away from the populist communication style and it has managed to keep its political stance in damage control as well. After evaluating the content in the media of the FP, it is fair to say the party has kept anti-immigration, anti-EU, refugees, and anti-media as their main communication themes in the media. The party does not publicly acknowledge its ties with the radical right or racism.

In the study or international relations, populism has been studied as an ideology and communication style and the relationship between media and populism has been attempted to determine. Future research should focus on the relationship between the populist voters and the media. It would be crucial to determine the connection between the voter's media behaviour and

if it is the case that voters with populist attitudes and views select literature and media content that stresses the populist communication, the polarization of 'the people' and 'the other.'

The relationship between populist political actors and media may be complex and complicated. Media and populist actors are working closely together and the nexus between media coverage and publicity and the populist parties support and the legitimacy it creates. In this way, the communication methods used in populist political communication would get more specific. This would also help the media to avoid provocations and to understand the media's contribution to the support of populist political parties.

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