Populist Party Leaders Attempts to Control Racism Accusations in the Media –
A comparative analysis of the UKIP, the Finns Party and the Sweden Democrats

Abstract

In recent years, populist anti-immigration parties have gained wide media publicity and impressive electoral success throughout Western Europe. The willingness of these parties to change prevailing immigration policies has created publicity challenges for the party leaders, as time and again the actions and statements of such party’s members, candidates and even leaders have resulted in the public accusations of racism. In this article, we scrutinize the discursive strategies used by three populist party leaders—Nigel Farage of the UK Independence Party, Timo Soini of the Finns Party and Jimmie Åkesson of the Sweden Democrats—to manage racism accusations in the news. The research material consists of the online news published in the studied countries’ national broadcasting companies (i.e., the BBC, YLE and SVT, from 2010 to 2015) web sites.

Several nationalist-populist parties have gained impressive success around Western Europe in recent elections. These parties’ demands for stricter immigration control—as well as the party members’ controversial views on immigrants—have attracted wide media publicity. From time to time, the immigration-related statements of such parties’ politicians, members or candidates have met with wide disapproval, generated accusations of racism and escalated into challenging media sensations.

Since these parties are remarkably leader-centered and typically have weak party organisations, it is often the leaders that defend their parties against outside accusations. Racism, ethnic prejudices and xenophobia have strong negative connotations, and all are seen to go against the dominant democratic and humane social norms of Western democracies. This is why public accusations of ethnic intolerance, discrimination or hatred can be

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damaging for those targeted. Since racially prejudiced identities are no longer valued, negative evaluations of minorities are commonly preceded by such disclaimers as, ‘I have nothing against immigrants, but…’ (Augoustinos and Every 2010, van Dijk 1992).

However, it is vital to note that, although this kind of publicity can, indeed, be damaging, it also presents opportunities for the involved political parties. Defending their parties against the criticisms of journalists, political competitors and other public commentators provides party leaders an opportunity to explain and market their parties’ agendas to voters. While some of the voters find anti-immigrant statements deplorable, others welcome such views.

This comparative three-party and three-country study analyses how the leaders of three topical, electorally successful populist parties—Nigel Farage of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), Timo Soini of the Finns Party and Jimmie Åkesson of the Sweden Democrats—have discursively managed racism-related accusations in the public.

The major body of previous research on UKIP has focused on understanding and analyzing the party’s electoral performance, its ability to become a mainstream party and potential foreseeable difficulties it may face (Abedi and Carl 2009, Hayton 2010, Ford et. al 2011, Ford and Goodwin 2014, Lynch et al. 2012). Most of the previous research on the Finns Party has concentrated on party’s remarkable victory in the 2011 election and its consequences. Studies have also tried to understand the party’s recent success by studying its supporters (Borg 2012, Bäck and Kestilä-Kekkonen 2014, Westinen 2014), its leadership (Niemi 2012, 2013), its media coverage (Pernaa and Railo 2012), its position towards European integration (Raunio 2011, 2013) and its position towards immigration issues (Kuisma 2013, Mickelsson 2011). The Sweden Democrats have mostly been researched with regard to the party’s electoral success (Rydgren 2002, Rydgren and Ruth 2011, 2013), its discursive political content (Hübinette and Lundström 2011, Nordensvard and Ketola 2014, Widfeldt 2008), and its relationship with the media and public discussion (Hellström and Nilsson 2010, Hellström et al. 2012).

UKIP, the Finns Party and the Sweden Democrats are all leader-centered populist parties, for which anti-immigration policy stances have played a role in media visibility and electoral success. Therefore, it is somewhat surprising that Nigel Farage’s, Timo Soini’s and Jimmie Åkesson’s leadership, as well as their media strategies and immigration discourses, have attracted only minimal interest so far. Especially rare are studies featuring a comparative research frame. This article sheds light on the relationship between politics and media from
the perspective of populist party leaders’ media strategies and rhetoric. The main contribution of this study is therefore to provide answers to the following question: What have been the discursive strategies used by the leaders of the UKIP, the Finns Party and the Sweden Democrats in handling racism accusations in news stories reported by national broadcasting companies?

**Contextual Framework: Parties, Policies and Media**

**UK Independence Party and Nigel Farage**

Nigel Farage (born 1964) was one of the founding members of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). Farage had been active in the Conservative Party since his school years, but left the party after the Maastricht Treaty was signed in 1992. UKIP was founded at the London School of Economics in 1993 by the members of the Anti-Federalist League, a small cross-party organisation campaigning against the Maastricht Treaty. Since its foundation, the UKIP’s main objective has been the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union (Hayton 2010: 27).

Nigel Farage led the UKIP successfully from 2006 to 2009, stepped down for a while, then ran for the leadership position again in 2010. Following his 2010 re-election, Farage ensured that the party’s original Eurosceptic message was accompanied by calls for stricter limits on immigration. The UKIP also developed a more populist anti-establishment stance and adopted a stronger vote-seeking strategy, which reversed the party’s previous policy-seeking nature. Through these changes, the party gradually evolved from a single-issue pressure group into a serious contender for votes and influence in UK politics (Ford and Goodwin 2014a: 282, 2014b).

**Table 1. The UKIP in the European Parliamentary elections and in the general elections, 1994–2015**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>EU elections</th>
<th>Seats</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Percentage of votes</th>
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<td>2009</td>
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The UKIP describes itself as ‘a patriotic party that promotes independence’, and it reassures voters that it is open to anyone wishing to identify with Britain, regardless of ethnic or religious background (UKIP home page: What we stand for?, Ford and Goodwin 2014: 7). The majority of the party’s supporters combine EU hostility with an anti-immigration stance, a dissatisfaction with the way in which British politics and society are currently functioning and a negativity towards both the Labour Party and the Conservatives, based on their handling of immigration and the post-2008 economic crises (Ford and Goodwin 2014: 282).

In terms of electoral success, the UKIP has been far more successful in European parliamentary elections, which use a proportional representational system, than they have been in British general elections (Table 1). Moreover, voters’ different choices represent another side of the story: Strategic voters, typically voting as conservatives in the general elections but supporting the UKIP in EU elections, explain the party’s success at the European level (Ford et al. 2012: 219–220). In the similarly protest-vote driven 2014 by-elections (Clacton and Rochester), the UKIP gained its first two elected seats in Westminster.

*The Finns Party and Timo Soini*

The Finns Party was founded on the ruins of the Finnish Rural Party in 1995. The party inherited its predecessor’s only Member of Parliament (MP), and, since then, it has held seats in *Eduskunta*, the unicameral national parliament of Finland. In the last two European Parliament elections (2009 and 2014), the party has gained wider support, and in the 2011 general election, it was able to multiply its seats in *Eduskunta* more than sevenfold compared to the results of the 2007 elections (Table 2). The 2015 general election is a focal point for the party, as it is trying to establish itself as one of the major parties in *Eduskunta* following its landslide victory in the 2011 election.

The Finns Party’s present chair (1997–present), Timo Soini (born 1962), has been a long-time member and is the last party secretary of the Finnish Rural Party. In 1995, Soini was one of the founding members of the Finns Party, and many other prominent members of the Finnish Rural Party also joined the new party. Soini has become well-known for his vivid political rhetoric and his role as the party’s charismatic sovereign and popular leader. In addition, he has been one of the leading vote-pullers in recent nationwide elections in Finland. (Niemi 2012, Ministry of Justice 2015)
Unlike the two other parties analysed in this article, the Finns Party has been, since its establishment, a generalist party with a broad policy agenda. This political agenda involves, in part, support for a Nordic-style welfare state and measures to take care of low-income members of the society’s population, features deriving largely from the heritage of the party’s predecessor—the Finnish Rural Party. (Ruostetsaari 2011, Nordensvard and Ketola 2014). The Finns Party’s ideology is a mixture of leftist social policy concerns, nationalist ideas of Finland’s place in the world and conservative views on minority rights and gender roles. The Finns Party has also stood strong against further supranational legislation within the EU. (Ruostetsaari 2011, Finns Party 2011, 2014) Criticism of Finnish immigration and integration policies is a rather new emphasis within the Finns Party’s policy agenda, since the topic was practically non-existent in party platforms prior to 2003 (Välimäki 2012: 268).

Table 2. The Finns Party in European parliamentary elections and in general elections, 1996–2015

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<tr>
<th>EU elections</th>
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<td>1999</td>
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The Finns Party has gained a great deal of visibility in print, television and network-based media, especially since its remarkable rise in the polls in the autumn of 2010. Finnish media has often taken a firm stance with respect to the Finns Party. In particular, the party’s ideas of societal reform have been widely criticised in mainstream media. (Hatakka 2012, Horsti and Nikunen 2013) The party leader, Timo Soini, has also been questioned publicly numerous times about the allegedly xenophobic public statements of some of the Finns Party’s candidates and members (Välimäki 2012: 282–283).

Sweden Democrats and Jimmie Åkesson

The Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna, SD) party was founded in 1988 on the foundations of Swedish extreme right sub-cultures associated with neo-Nazism and neo-fascism (Erlingson et al 2014: 198, Widfeldt 2008: 266–268). The party has described itself as a nationalist and value-conservative party that strives to uphold law and public order (Sweden Democrats 2011). The characterizations presented by other parties, scholars and the media contrast significantly with this self-representation. In academic research, the party is often characterized as an ‘anti-immigration’ (Erlingsson et al. 2014), ‘radical right populist’ (Rydgren 2002), ‘extreme right’ (Art 2006), and even ‘openly racist’ (Hübinette and Lundström 2011) party.


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<th>EU elections</th>
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<th>Percentage of votes</th>
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<td>1999</td>
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<td>2014</td>
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<td>49</td>
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Though it has participated actively in all national and EP elections since the late 1980s, the Sweden Democrats remained electorally irrelevant until the 2006 election. By gaining popularity, especially among uneducated citizens in low-income areas with high levels of unemployment and high concentration of immigrants (Rydgren and Ruth 2011: 2013), the party won a significant victory in the 2010 national parliamentary election, securing 20 seats in the Swedish Riksdag. Traditionally, the support for far-right parties has been insignificant in Sweden, so the introduction of far-right-wing populism into the Swedish parliamentary system was welcomed with something less than open arms. According to Hellström and Nilsson (2010), other parties and the media reacted in a hostile manner to ‘the mainstreaming of the radical right’.

According to Anders Widfeldt (2008), the Sweden Democrats had to undergo through a process of change in order to broaden its appeal. The campaign to make Sweden Democrats non-threatening and generally acceptable as a party has continued and intensified since the
party’s current leader, Jimmie Åkesson, took over in 2005 at the age of 26 (Widfeldt 2008: 271). The Sweden Democrats have tried to shake the image of being a single-issue party, attempting to broaden the party’s profile to include defending the welfare state, opposing European integration and fighting poverty (Nordensvard and Ketola 2014, Widfeldt 2008). The party has also adopted more of a universal populist style with regard to catering to the nuisances of the ‘ordinary worker’ and the ‘common man’ (Belevander and Hellström 2011: 4–5), in an approach similar to those adopted by the UKIP and the Finns Party.

Even now that it has become the third largest party in Sweden, the SD party’s relationships with other parliamentary parties and the media have far from neutralized. All parties in the Swedish parliament refuse to cooperate with the party, and the media remains, in many cases openly hostile, towards it (Hellström and Nilsson 2010). In particular, following the 2010 elections, the Sweden Democrats was faced with an ‘explosive eruption of anti-racism’, not only from political parties, but also from journalists and citizens (Hellström et al. 2012, Hübinette and Lundström 2011).

**Populist newcomer parties and public debate on immigration**

The UKIP, the Finns Party and the Sweden Democrats have several ideological, structural and political similarities that make their comparison fruitful, including the populist and nationalist approaches in their policies, the central roles of the party leaders, the controversies surrounding their immigration policies and their electoral successes in the 2010s, to name only a few. In the well-known manner of populist right-wing parties (e.g., Canovan 2005: 75–76), all three also position themselves as apolitical and anti-establishment voices of the people.

Opposing prevailing immigration policies and stressing the negative by-products of immigration-related issues have been the common features in the parties’ policy agendas. Furthermore, as has happened to other similar, often right-wing populist parties, the UKIP, the Finns Party and the Sweden Democrats have been repeatedly and publicly accused of holding political views that have been labelled as xenophobic and discriminatory against so-called ‘out-groups’—such as minorities and immigrants. (On right-wing parties and immigration issues, see Betz 1994: 69–106, Givens 2005: 68–86, Mudde 2007: 63–89)

The parties’ have each experienced increasing support and salience in public discussion, which have occurred more or less simultaneously for each party in each of the three countries.
Immigration-related issues have been widely and publicly debated in the UK, Finland and Sweden throughout the 2010s, and the rise of the studied parties has introduced larger juxtapositions into the public debates on immigration occurring in each country. Both the parties’ genuinely different immigration policies (compared to those of the mainstream parties) and the statements of their members, candidates and politicians have created public interest, as well as controversy and criticism, that has further contributed to their visibility. As Nigel Farage, Timo Soini and Jimmie Åkesson have worked to make their voices heard in the media, support for their parties has also risen. In terms of gaining support, the parties’ stances towards immigration have represented one, but certainly not the only, means of winning voters. In any case, the rising support has made these parties even more relevant targets for public scrutiny.

Despite the parties’ similarities, we recognize that the political, societal and cultural contexts in which the parties have emerged and in which they operate are predominantly different. All three countries have somewhat different political climates, as well as differing experiences and policies towards immigration. The disparities in media systems, political systems and cultures are notable, especially between the United Kingdom and the two Nordic countries. Despite these considerations, the chosen research frame allows us to scrutinize the similarities and differences in the discursive strategies used by the populist right-wing parties’ leaders to handle accusations of racism and xenophobia in the public.

**Research material**

In order to provide a research frame with the most comparable data possible, this paper focuses on the reporting of the studied countries’ three national broadcasting companies: the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC; established 1922), Sveriges Television AB (SVT; founded 1956) and Yleisradio (YLE; established 1926). Since all three are publicly owned and funded by license fees, impartiality in reporting is one of their key objectives. The BBC describes its mission ‘to inform, educate and entertain’. It aims to provide ‘high quality news’ and wishes to reflect ‘the UK’s many communities, promoting awareness of different cultures and viewpoints’ (BBC 2014). SVT’s goals include providing news and information based on ‘impartiality and objectivity, variety and diversity, high quality and innovative form’ (SVT 2014, 2015). YLE claims to stand for ‘reliability, independence and respect for everyone’. Its self-articulated duties also include supporting ‘democracy and everyone’s opportunity to
participate by providing a wide variety of information’ and ‘tolerance and multiculturalism’ (YLE 2014a, YLE 2014b).

Surveys of public perceptions concerning the impartiality and trustworthiness of the BBC, SVT and YLE show that all three are very well or relatively well trusted by their audiences and that their online news sites are among the most visited news sites in their respective countries (BBC 2014a, 2014b, KIA-index 2015, SVT 2014, 2015, YLE 2013, 2014c).

The research material for this study has been collected from the following online news pages: BBC News Online (bbc.co.uk/news), YLE Uutiset (yle.fi/uutiset) and SVT Nyheter (svt.se/nyheter/). The collection was undertaken in February 2015 to encompass the time period from 2010 to 2015. As Tables 1–3 illustrate, all three parties have gained increasing electoral success over the past five years. From this perspective, the Finns Party has been leading the way: Its biggest electoral success took place first, in the general elections of 2011. The UKIP’s most notable success so far occurred during the 2014 European Parliament elections, and the Sweden Democrats achieved their greatest victory during the 2014 general elections. The amount of media visibility for each party, including criticism and public scrutiny, has grown hand-in-hand with the growth of the parties’ political weights. These facts seem to be reflected in the media scrutiny of each party, as well as in the likeliness of the party leader himself to come forward and explain his party’s views.

The stories used in this study were gathered from the respective news sites’ archives by using the names of the party leaders and the party in combination with the following keywords: ‘immigration’, ‘racism’, ‘racist’, ‘xenophobia’. It is worth noting that, due to the deeply negative connotations of the words ‘racism’, ‘racist’, and ‘xenophobia’, the explicit use of these words in news stories is sometimes avoided. Instead, accusations are often made via subtle arguments, in which different types of euphemisms, such as ‘bullying’, ‘discrimination’ and so on, are used instead (Riggs and Due 2010). Therefore, a snowball method was implemented, that some of the news stories used were found via links attached to other news articles. Additional Google searches were done as a double check to ensure that no stories were missed. These searches proved the existence of a number of racism-related articles on these parties available through other news media sites. Such articles were not included in this sample; however they could be used later. Moreover, although party leaders are not the only party representatives to comment on accusations of racism in the media, we limited our enquiry to cases in which the party leaders themselves commented on the issue.
The news stories were selected based on the following criteria:

1. The news story appeared in the online news page of the BBC (UKIP and Farage), YLE (the Finns Party and Soini) or SVT (the Sweden Democrats and Åkesson) between 2010 and 2015.

2. Both the party and its leader were mentioned in the story.

3. Accusations of racism or xenophobia were explicitly or implicitly present in the news story.

4. The leader of the party responded to the accusations and was cited in the news story.

The use of these criteria resulted in differing numbers of stories: 8 on the UKIP, 24 on the Finns Party, and 25 on the Sweden Democrats. It needs to be stressed that our sample includes only those cases in which the party leader commented on the controversy that the party was facing. Therefore, several news stories in which other party representatives responded to accusations were excluded from the analysis. For example, in Finland, the Finns Party Secretary Riikka Slunga-Poutsalo and the head of the party’s parliamentary group, Pirkko Ruohonen-Lerner, often explained the party’s stance regarding racism-related cases. In the United Kingdom, the UKIP employed a similarly set of individuals, as well as unnamed party sources (‘UKIP’, ‘a UKIP source’ or a ‘UKIP spokesman’), to handle the racism accusations. The named sources included, for example, the head of communications Patrick O’Flynn and the Pakistani-origin politician and businessman Amjad Bashir. In some cases, the criticized politicians themselves were the main sources explaining their actions or word choices. In Sweden, commentators other than the party leader included, for example, the party’s press secretary, the chief of staff and multiple local politicians.

Cases – ‘modern racism’

The expression of negative views of others, coupled with discursive strategies that present these views as being ‘not racist’, have been named as ‘new’ or ‘modern’ racism. The denial of being racist contrasts with the approach of ‘old-fashioned racism’, which was less ambiguous in terms of its racist agenda. Furthermore, what is considered (potentially) racist discourse has changed and developed over the course of the past several years. Only relatively recently have social scientists, for example, begun to understand and consider cultural-difference-talk as racist (Every and Augoustinos 2007: 412–413, 426).

Accusations of racism may stem from a party’s programmatic output, its leaders’ or party members’ public comments and word choices or a variety of symbolic and concrete acts.
Generally, racism denials represent part of a defense strategy, presupposing either explicit or implicit accusations (Van Dijk 1992: 91). In our data, the cases in which the party leaders commented on such accusations fell into three general categories, since the accusations were typically related to 1) Party leaders’ own or other members’ or party candidates’ controversial statements or actions; 2) Party’s or party members’ controversial connections or past; or 3) Party’s controversial ideology, policies, political manifesto or platform.

Most of the racism accusations in all three countries concerned party members’ or party candidates’ statements or actions, often on social media platforms. When reporters were scrutinizing a political party and trying to make sense of its ‘nature’, the histories and connections of the party and its members were sometimes also brought into the daylight. Furthermore, the parties and their leaders were challenged in the public service media for their parties’ ideological and political outputs. Moreover, although this approach was not very common, controversies concerning party leaders’ actions or word choices were scrutinized. These cases had the potential to be especially damaging, since the leader symbolises the party entity in the eye of the public and since the leader's image is closely linked to the reputation of the entire party.

In the UK, the UKIP has repeatedly been placed in the spotlight for its party members’ public comments or actions. Moreover, the leader himself, his past and his comments have fallen under scrutiny. However, according to our data from BBC Online News, until 2014, these cases were mostly explained and handled by people other than the party chair (i.e., Nigel Farage). As our focus was on cases in which the leader handled the accusations, several racism-related news stories were left out of the analysis.

In Finland, the years following the Finns Party’s landslide victory in the 2011 general election were especially turbulent. The media’s attention was heavily focused on the newcomer party, and some of the Finns Party’s new MPs became caught up in discussions over their public statements on immigrants. As a result, the party leader, Timo Soini, was constantly questioned about the statements of some of the party’s MPs or local politicians.

The have faced plenty of negative media publicity revolving around allegedly racist statements or actions. As with the UKIP and the Finns Party, such accusations of racism often originated from the party’s local politicians’ use of social media; however, they also involved more senior party members and offline environments. Following the 2010 elections and the first widespread public scrutiny (Hellström and Nilsson 2010, Hübinette and Lundström 2011),
the party’s public efforts to control mediated racism accusations increased once again in the fall of 2012. The reason for this was Jimmie Åkesson’s declaration of a zero-tolerance policy towards racism within the party—a move that was not only an attempt to clean up the party’s ranks, but also a step towards polishing the party’s image for the 2014 elections. The new party line led to the expelling of about a dozen party members within a year. On the SVT online news, only the most salient of these cases were reported, and the party leader commented only on the most visible controversial statements given by more high-level party actors.

**Party leaders’ discursive strategies**

Political movements, including populist parties, participate actively in the negotiation surrounding their place and acceptability in society. At the time of intensified media visibility, the discursive negotiation over who can legitimately participate in parliamentary democracy most often takes place in mediated public spaces. The art of media management—that is, the framing and rhetorical packaging of public discussion—can be regarded as a form of politically motivated participation in symbolic struggles over, not only significations and meanings but also the hearts and minds of the people. By analyzing the ways in which populist leaders discursively protect their parties from public accusations of racism or prejudice, we can analyze how populist movements are trying to legitimize their positions in their native political landscapes. We call these signification struggles ‘party leaders’ discursive strategies’.

In classifying these discursive strategies, our starting point was Teun van Dijk’s (1992) categorization of the different types of cognitive and social strategies for denying racism accusations. This categorization will be later cultivated to better explain the ways in which party leaders publicly defend both themselves and their parties. According to van Dijk, building a defense against racism accusations centers on different discursive forms of denying accusations and providing justifications and excuses for allegedly controversial actions (van Dijk 1992: 91–93). The aim of this tactic is to convey to the audience that the defendant has not breached any social norms of tolerance or acceptance (van Dijk 1992: 89).

Certain contextual factors need to be taken into account when analyzing the discursive strategies utilized by party leaders. First, a party leader is a spokesperson of a specific community—namely, the party organization. Therefore, in essence, he or she is not speaking only on behalf of him- or herself, but also on behalf of the party and its members. This
position has considerable impact on the ways in which such leaders formulate their statements. Second, the statements analysed here all took place in public venues. In consequence, the leaders were addressing their words to a wider public, including party members, political opponents and the media. This audience influenced the content of the arguments used, as it was in the leaders’ interest to be understandable and acceptable to as many people as possible and to try to avoid the costs of negative publicity by shutting down negative scrutiny as effectively as possible. However, immigration-related news topics may not only be negative for the studied parties, since such topics also offer leaders a chance to try to positively affect those voters who share their views on immigration.

Our analysis found that outright denials of accusations or claims that the accusations were false or fraudulent were quite rare. Most of the party leaders’ discursive strategies involved the more intricate task of reframing either the accusations themselves, the people involved or the events behind the accusations in a way that ultimately communicated the core message, ‘We are not a racist party’. In many cases, the party leaders admitted, to some extent, certain racist characteristics in relation to a statement, an action or a person; however, at the same time, they sought to separate these characteristics from the party and its core identity. According to our analysis, the populist leaders’ most prevalent discursive strategies for handling accusations of racism fell into four main categories, which are explained next. It is worth noting that the party leaders could (and often did) use more than one strategy simultaneously in the handling of an individual case. The leader could, for example, both provide justifications for allegedly controversial statements and take the position of a victim, saying that the party has been unfairly attacked by the media. Furthermore, the categories sometimes overlap; for example, a response that begins as a justification may well end up distancing the party from the actions causing the accusations.

1) Distancing the party from accusations

This category involved party leader admitting that the controversial statement or action of a party member was blameworthy. However, since the criticised action or choice of words was presented to be in contradiction with the party’s values, the criticism was not to be interpreted as a sign of party racism. When handling accusations by using distancing discourses, the party leaders used a variety of strategies.

Typically, the parties and their ideology were distanced from the persons behind the controversies. For example, when a UKIP council candidate tweeted homophobic views and
claimed that Islam was ‘evil’, party chair Nigel Farage’s response was to distance the candidate from the party and to downplay his role within party politics: ‘I've never heard of the bloke until last night. I've no idea who he is. I think he comes from the north west of England –– Clearly his attitude and views are entirely inconsistent with being a member of UKIP. Simple.’ (BBC 3.5.2014)

In another case, Nigel Farage argued that there had been an error in the ‘system’. After admitting that a party member had published racist Twitter messages, Farage said ‘I'm going to find out what's gone wrong, and someone's going to take the rap for this.’ He also stated, ‘[S]omeone somewhere has made a very, very major error.’ In these cases, according to Farage, something had gone wrong with the UKIP’s ‘systems’: That is, ‘This guy should have been weeded out and he wasn't’ (BBC 25.4.2014). This strategy aimed to position the accused person as someone who did not represent the party or its ideology (even if the person was a party member, candidate or representative). Farage, for example, commented as follows when it appeared that a party councilor had made racist remarks during a televised interview: ‘Clearly, she doesn't have any understanding of the deep offence she has caused by her comments, and we took the right decision [by expelling her]’ (BBC 22.2.2015).

In some incidents, the party leaders did, indeed, admit the parties’ mistakes, take responsibility for them and promise or describe disciplinary actions; in some cases, in fact, they even apologized. For instance, Timo Soini of the Finns Party replied in this manner when he was questioned about a local party councilor’s statements suggesting that a person who had been involved in a racism-motivated killing deserved an honorary medal—statements that ultimately led to a police investigation. Soini stated in an article that the councilor’s statements were ‘absolutely outrageous and anti-human’ and ‘unacceptable’. He continued by stating that there would be serious consequences: ‘In my view, expelling is the result’. (YLE 21.2.2012, see also YLE 28.4.2011) In a similar manner, Jimmie Åkesson stated that a more than 10-year-old radio statement in which the party’s vice president Jonas Åkerlund discussed deporting ‘half a million of the worst parasites’ was ‘unacceptable’ and ‘reprehensible’. Despite not expelling Åkerlund, Åkesson distanced the party from the statement by stressing that the radio show was broadcasted a long time ago and that Åkerlund no longer thought the same way. (SVT 12.11.2013)

In Finland, party chair Timo Soini also used a strategy of distancing the party from alleged xenophobia by positioning his own stance and beliefs as a guarantee of a decent party
ideology. This discursive approach proposed that, if the leader of the party was not racist himself, the party could not be racist, either. For instance, after the 2011 election, YLE news reported on the tough criticism facing the Finns Party’s minority and immigration policies in the Swedish media. Timo Soini replied in an article, ‘I’m sad and surprised that the conversation is on that level.’ Characteristically for a populist leader representing himself as an embodiment of the party, Soini continued by referring to his substantial role as the guarantor of a decent party line: ‘Find me even one MP who says that I’m a hater of Swedes or a racist. You won’t find even one.’ (YLE 20.4.2011, see also YLE 28.7.2011)

Jimmie Åkesson’s declaration of zero tolerance towards racism can be interpreted as a discursive distancing strategy. While the declaration increased the media’s tenaciousness with regard to looking into incidents that might have seemed like breaches of the declaration, it also gave the party leader a chance to expel unwanted people from the party and made it possible to discursively distance the party from lower-level ‘trouble makers’. When local politician Eva-Marie Olsson wrote anonymous online comments about ‘spawning immigrants’ and ‘negro slaves’, Åkesson was able to not only explain that ‘these kinds of expressions are completely unacceptable’, but explicitly state that ‘people who do that are not welcome in our party’ (SVT 27.8.2014).

2) Justifying statements or actions

In this category, we included cases in which leaders suggested, for example, that a controversial comment was, in fact, just telling the truth, or that a controversial act or word choice was otherwise factual and acceptable. In contrast to the previous category, justification took place when party leaders attempted to stand behind the people and statements that caused controversy.

In 2013, Timo Soini of the Finns Party was forced to reply to accusations originating from the nomination of one of his party’s MPs as the chair of Suomen Sisu, which had a reputation for being a nationalistic organization, for promoting xenophobic ideas and for being a home for far-right extremists. In a YLE article, Soini was said to have refused to comment on the MP’s nomination and its consequences for the Finns Party. However, Soini did give the impression that there was nothing peculiar about the nomination: ‘Sometimes people get nominated as – – the chair of a hunting club. This is one non-governmental organization among others.’ (YLE 12.3.2013)
Likewise, in Sweden party leader Jimmie Åkesson was asked whether Markus Wiechel, a person with two court convictions related to hate speech, could represent the party in parliament. Åkesson replied that ‘Wiechel has been convicted of writing on his blog’, and that he didn’t ‘consider that serious enough that he couldn’t represent the party’ (SVT 30.11.2012). In a similar manner, UKIP leader Nigel Farage defended his own views on Romanians and criminal gangs: ‘Any normal and fair-minded person would have a perfect right to be concerned if a group of Romanian people suddenly moved in next door’. After wide public criticism, Farage gave a conditional apology stating: ‘If I gave the impression in that interview that I was discriminating against Romanians, then I apologise certainly for that’. (BBC 20.5.2014, BBC 18.5.2014)

In some instances, party leaders defended accusations from the point of view of societal norms or sought-after state of affairs. For example, Timo Soini utilized this type of justification strategy when he stressed the importance of open public debate on immigration issues, even when such debate led to increased visibility for extreme views (YLE 28.7.2011). Populist parties have often been eager to stress the importance of speaking out about those issues that they claim have not been openly or sufficiently debated in the past by ‘the establishment’ (i.e., by the societal and political elite and the mainstream media) (e.g., Canovan 2005: 76).

Party leaders have to balance between gaining the acceptance of the mainstream public and catering to more extreme, yet important constituencies. In some cases studied in this paper, the party leaders even defended the validity of statements and word choices that, in their original contexts, could easily be interpreted by most people as racist. When asked whether it was okay to say that a person born in Sweden with an immigrant background can be said to not be Swedish, Åkesson replied: ‘Depending the context, it can be’ (SVT 18.11.2012). In another context, when an MP wrote allegedly racist statements on Facebook and a reporter asked ‘isn’t it racist to call people ‘damn monkeys’’, Åkesson replied with: ‘That depends entirely on what is the premise for one to give such a statement’ (SVT 27.4.2013). Similarly, when two of Jimmie Åkesson’s past statements were challenged, he briefly elaborated on his statements, but stood behind them without apologizing (SVT 27.11.2012, SVT 22.11.2013).

3) Giving excuses for statements or actions

The category of giving excuses included cases in which the blame for a controversial statement or act was placed on, for example, the special circumstances of the criticised
incident. Such strategies included leaders attempting to explain away the controversial incident, regardless of whether the leaders themselves approved or disapproved of the actions or statements that had caused the controversy.

In 2012, the Sweden Democrats were involved in a publicity scandal titled in the media as ‘the iron pipe scandal’. Three party members got into a verbal argument on the street with a Swedish comedian who had an immigrant background. The event was filmed, and in the video, the three SD members were seen to engage in a verbal altercation with the comedian and a female bystander. The three men were also seen picking up metal pipes, after allegedly being threatened by another bystander. In an interview, Åkesson described his fellow party members’ behaviors as ‘stupid’, ‘not rational’ and not ‘in accordance with the party’s communications strategy’ (SVT 18.11.2012). Still, in the same interview, he offered several mitigating excuses for the MPs’ behavior, explaining, for example, that they were unable to act rationally because the ‘situation was stressful’ and ‘under the influence [of alcohol]’ (SVT 18.11.2012). When asked whether what happened was racist, Åkesson replied: ‘First of all, do not mix apples and pears. To express racist political opinions, for example, that's one thing. If you take up an iron bar to defend yourself, that's another thing’ (SVT 30.11.2012). When SD MP Oleg Datsisin was expelled from the party after he liked the Ukrainian extreme-right-wing party Svoboda on Facebook, Åkesson later defended him for ‘not obviously knowing he was doing anything wrong’ (SVT 25.11.2013).

4) Reversing accusations

In this category, we included cases in which party leaders tried to re-direct blame away from their parties. In these cases, the party leaders responded to accusations with other accusations, stating, for example, that their parties were pigeon-holed by rival parties, the media or the establishment.

At the end of 2011, the Finnish daily Helsingin Sanomat published a survey that stated that more than one fourth of Finns Party supporters ‘recognised racist features in themselves’. YLE news reported that Timo Soini criticized the survey for being ‘purpose-oriented’. Soini was also said to have commented on the survey on his own web page, where he said that there was ‘nothing noteworthy’ in it. (YLE 13.11.2011)
In Finland, there was also a case in which the party leader’s strategy of excusing took the form of downplaying, and even bantering. Timo Soini was questioned about accusations made by the Swedish National Party’s chair, Carl Haglund. Haglund had been criticizing Soini for not sufficiently condemning the racist features in the Finns Party in Soini’s previous interview on BBC Hardtalk. In the YLE article, Soini replied: ‘It seems to be very hard for Haglund that Soini has been invited to debate in the Hardtalk.’ Soini was said to have considered Haglund’s statements ‘awkward and poorly thought through’. (YLE 21.2.2013)

In the UK, when UKIP chair Nigel Farage was interviewed on the ‘repellent’ opinions of a UKIP council candidate, Farage admitted that his party had ‘problems’. However, he claimed that the UKIP was the only party to be criticized, stating, ‘– – please don't think we have a monopoly on stupid people or extreme people. It happens in all parties, I'm afraid’ (BBC 24.5.2014). He also argued, ‘[T]here is a completely disproportionate media spotlight on what goes wrong in UKIP compared to the others. – – Yeah, we've got some idiots. [But] what is happening here is the establishment is singling out a handful of unpleasant comments made by UKIP people, and yet the other parties do these things and say these things’ (BBC 3.5.2014).

When SD leader Jimmie Åkesson was asked whether the party’s MP’s involvement in two racism-related scandals said something about the party’s views on immigrants, Åkesson replied: ‘They may say lots of things. I don’t know what kind of questions were presented to the Social Democrats party leader when their youth organizations’ leader argued with a guard’ (SVT 30.11.2012). There were also instances in which Åkesson pinned the blame on the media for quoting statements ‘out of context’ (SVT 12.11.2013, SVT 27.11.2012).

Discussion

In this article, we asked how the leaders of three electorally successful populist parties—Nigel Farage of the UKIP, Timo Soini of the Finns Party and Jimmie Åkesson of the Sweden Democrats have handled public accusations of racism. First, we defined the contextual similarities and differences among the parties and their leaders. Based on news stories published in the online news pages of the national broadcasting companies (BBC, YLE, SVT) for the studied countries between 2010 and 2015, we then formed four main categories of discursive strategies through which to examine the leaders’ approaches.
Based on our sample, there was no disagreement regarding the factuality of the events or statements causing racism accusations. Instead, disputes typically involved different interpretations and framings of the events and statements, with the party leaders trying to offer their readings of what had happened and what one should think about it.

The leaders appeared to have two central goals with regard to handling accusations of racism. The first was to explain and market—in a somewhat moderate manner—their parties’ views, values and, for example, immigration policies. The second was to reject all accusations that racism, prejudices or xenophobia had any foothold in their parties.

In the news material analysed, the discursive strategies used by the leaders fell into four main categories. In our limited sample, the most commonly used strategy was distancing the party from the accusations by arguing that the person in the spotlight or the content of the controversial statements did not represent the party or its values. However, the distancing strategy has its limitations: When, for example, the leader himself faced criticism, this strategy could not be used. In contrast, the strategy of justifying actions or word choices was, in fact, useful even when the leader himself came under fire. While the starting point for distancing strategy was admitting that a mistake had been made, in justifying strategy the premise was that the actions or comments that caused criticism were actually quite normal and could be understood and accepted if properly explained. When leaders relied on the strategy of giving excuses, they brought up, for example, various mitigative circumstances to explain the actions or statements of party actors. Whether they expressed approval or disapproval for the incidents that took place, they asked the audience to show understanding.

Finally, leaders utilized the strategy of reversing the accusations. This is a useful strategy for populist leaders, since populist parties position themselves to be in conflict with various elites, including the media elite. When negative publicity surrounded the studied parties, blaming the media was often part of the discourse.

Leaders of populist parties face the challenge of balancing: how to discuss sensitive issues, such as immigration, in public, since different audiences have different appetites. The publicity provided by national broadcasting companies reaches the masses, including politicians and supporters of other parties, as well as populist parties’ own members and supporters, some of them more and some less motivated by the parties’ immigration policies. In consequence, while a party leader needs to attempt to reject negative accusations and prevent his or her party from appearing too extreme for moderate voters (e.g., those
supporting the party mainly for its anti-EU stance or its calls to help the poor), the message needs to be appealing and believable enough for those inspired mainly by the party’s profile on immigration issues (Niemi 2014).

There is no doubt that restrictive immigration policies have played an important role in creating support for all three of the parties analysed. While the topic is not the highest in the hierarchy for all voters, it is for many. The UKIP, the Finns Party and the Sweden Democrats have all gained plenty of negative publicity due to racism accusations; however, it is likely that they have also all generally benefitted from the resulting interest and visibility. Even some of the racism-related cases that appear to be negative publicity have given the party leaders the chance to explain their parties’ policies to potential voters. While countering accusations and denying allegations of racism and xenophobia within their parties, the leaders are also given the chance to explain their parties’ identities of and to market their ideologies. It is not only possible, but also likely that some of the statements and actions that create accusations of racism are welcomed and identifiable among some of the voters.

From this first draft, there are several possible directions in which we could develop our analysis. During the data collection, it became apparent that several racism-related news stories surrounding these parties would be excluded from the study because our focus was on party leaders’ actions and their discursive strategies, and several racism-related cases were handled without the leaders’ involvement. Therefore, an interesting question for further study arises as follows: When do leaders personally take part in handling accusations of racism, and when are such accusations handled by other party representatives or spokespersons or even the person facing the accusations?

Increasing the number of news stories analysed would allow us to study the popularities of the various discursive strategies used. It is possible, that, due to the differing political cultures of the compared countries, there are differences in this sense. On the other hand, scrutinizing the life cycle of the already-analysed cases more closely would enable us to evaluate the effectiveness of the different explanations used. For example, do the party leaders change discursive strategies if their first responses are not enough to end the negative publicity? What kinds of discursive strategies are most likely to put an end to accusations? Moreover, a closer case analysis might reveal other interesting elements, such as what triggers accusative stories and which party members (other than the party leader) are given voices in such stories.
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21


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25