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TRACING THE CONCEPT OF HATE SPEECH IN FINLAND

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ABSTRACT

Hate speech, while historically not a new phenomenon in Finland nor elsewhere, has as a term become widely used in Finland only in the past ten years. The term has evolved alongside with political, cultural and societal changes. This paper examines the use and the formation of the concept of hate speech in Finnish public discourses. The focus is particularly on how the concept of hate speech is used by the members of the Finnish populist party The Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset), as well as in relation to them. In order to trace this, the use of the concept of hate speech is analyzed in the largest Finnish newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, in the party journal of The Finns Party, *Perussuomalainen*, and in the parliamentary plenary sitting discussing about the hate acts and racism. Based on the analysis it is argued that hate speech as a concept works as a ‘floating signifier’ (Laclau 2005) which meaning is constantly contested and negotiated.

Introduction

Together with the widespread digitalization and establishment of new media forms and venues of commentary, hate speech and freedom of speech have become central themes in multiple discussions and locations. It is seen that the social media, online publications and newspapers as well their commentary areas – not to forget the different kinds of discussion forums – offer a ground for hate speech to nourish and to spread (Kuntsman 2009; Suler 2004). Also the questions about online anonymity (Suler 2004) and those

of international and national legislations are entangled with the debates about hate speech (Pöyhtäri, Haara & Raittila 2013). Finally, lately it has been argued that we live in the society of ‘post-truth’, where the ideas and imaginaries spread by populist speech and hate speech are beginning, due to their affective appeal, to hold a more important position than ‘truth’ grounded on facts and well-grounded argumentation (Suiter 2016).

Simultaneously with the increasing growth of hate speech as well discussions about it, we have seen the rise of the 21st century populism. Populist rhetoric has been observed to utilize the kind of speech in its argumentation that can be articulated as hate speech. Moreover, populist rhetoric often aims at creating categories of ‘us’ versus ‘them’, which further facilitate aggressive and hateful forms of speech, often directed towards the minorities or what is considered by the populists as the ‘elite’ (Wodak 2015).

In addition to being a ‘hot’ topic of discussion, hate speech is also a somewhat muddy concept in itself – or at least can appear to be so in the public debate. Indeed, the way it is used in the public debates and everyday discussions is not always in line with the academic, political, nor with the legal understandings of the concept, but it changes and spawns new lines of articulation (Ruotsalainen 2017; Pöyhtäri, Haara & Raittila 2013). This further complicates the understanding of hate speech and its relationship to what is often in the everyday discussions articulated as its contrasting pole, freedom of speech. In short, by having porous boundaries, hate speech allows multiple, sometimes even contrasting definitions and usages.

Given the various ways the concept of hate speech is used in the everyday discussions and its intimate linkage to populism, my aim in this paper is to examine to use of the concept of hate speech in the Finnish public discourses, focusing particularly on how it is used by and in relation to the Finnish populist party, Perussuomalaiset, the Finns Party. Throughout the analysis my focus is two-fold: On the one hand I examine the way the concept hate speech is used, to what it is connected and how, and in this manner what kind

of usages the concept itself allows; on the other hand, I pay attention to how it is used by the members of the Finns Party and how these uses are related or vary from the other uses of the concept in public discussion.

To trace these articulations and usages of the concept of hate speech in Finland, I analyse editorial and opinion pieces from the years 2002–2015 from the most read newspaper in Finland, *Helsingin Sanomat*, the mentions of hate speech in the journal of the Finns Party, *Perussuomalaiset*, from the years 2004–2015, and a parliamentary plenary sitting about hate acts and racism, held in 14.10.2015.

Analysing hate speech as a concept

My approach to hate speech as a concept is mainly informed by cultural studies and this is visible throughout the analysis: my interest is on seeing to what larger discourses the concept of hate speech is attached to and what kinds of meanings and uses are assigned to it in the rhetoric of the Finns Party. As method of analysis I use thematic analysis and discourse analysis. By discourse I refer to the larger discursive frames which limit how the issues can be discussed and which are not particular to a speaker or driven by an individual agency. As such they are often covered and not explicit and produce power structures (Wodak 2011). In line with Tapio Nykänen (2016) and Sami Moisio (2003), I separate discourse from rhetoric: By rhetoric I refer to intentional use of language which, whilst being limited by the discursive frames, usually contains an intention, style and aim.

For the analysis I have used data gathered from three different sources. Firstly, for the examination of the concept of hate speech in public debate for a longer period of time (from 2002 up to 2015), I used the data gathered from *Helsingin Sanomat*. *Helsingin Sanomat* is the most widely read newspaper in Finland and it is read all across Finland. I examined all the opinion and editorial pieces from

Helsingin Sanomat from the years 2002–2015. In total there were 101 pieces mentioning hate speech. I discuss the concept of hate speech in the editorial and opinion pieces of the *Helsingin Sanomat* more thoroughly elsewhere (Ruotsalainen 2017), so here this data is discussed rather briefly and mainly serves to track the recent history of the concept in the public discussions and thus allows tracing it vertically in time.

Secondly, I examined the use of the concept hate speech in the party journal of the Finns Party, *Perussuomalainen*, from the years 2004–2015. The data has been gathered from the year 2004 onwards as this is the first year the journal was published. The journal is freely available online¹. From *Perussuomalainen* a total of 18 mentions of hate speech were found.

Thirdly, I examined the concept of hate speech in the parliamentary plenary sitting held in 14.10.2015. The plenary sitting was titled racism and hate acts in Finland. The plenary sitting was aired live and is still accessible at the website of the Parliament.² For the analysis, I used the transcript of the plenary sitting and I paid special attention to how the concept of hate speech is used by the representatives of the Finns Party and positioned these uses on the framework of the recent history, as traced from the data gathered from the *Helsingin Sanomat*, and to an extent from *Perussuomalainen*, and on the wider discourses around the hate speech in Finland.

The Finns Party

The Finns Party is a political party, known for its antagonism towards the European Union, immigration, and the political ‘elite’ (Rahkonen, 2010). The Finns Party was founded in 1995 and it has been from the beginning lead by Timo Soini. Soini is currently the minister of Foreign Affairs in Finland and the Finns Party is currently a governmental party, having received 17.7 % of votes in the last elections, held in 2015. While this is the first time the Finns Party has become a governmental party, the popularity of the Finns

Party has been in considerable rise in Finland since 2011 and it has grown from a rather small party to a large political influencer.³

The Finns Party is largely defined as a populist party (Nykänen 2016). Definitions and attempts to capture what populism actually is are multiple and varied: some equate populism with rhetoric or style (see Jagers & Walgrave 2006), while some argue it is a logic of social formation which constitutes a populist party or movement (see Laclau 2005). Moreover, it is to be noted that most, if not all, political parties use from time to time populist rhetoric and appeal (Wodak 2015). It is thus not easy to create a comprehensive definition of what populism is and what constitutes a populist party or populist politics. Here I endorse mainly Wodak's (2015) definition of populism. She argues that all populist parties do not only use populist style of rhetoric, but also the contents are of a particular kind. According to Wodak, typical of (right-wing) populist parties is evoking fear and constructing scapegoats, as well as the appeal to nationalism and creation of – material or immaterial – borders.⁴

In Finland in the public discussion hate speech is a topic quite often discussed in relation to The Finns Party and numerous members of the Finns Party have become known for their engagement in online environments with the kind of forms of speech which can be classified as hate speech⁵. Maybe the best known case in which a member of the Finns Party was connected to hate speech was in 2011 when Jussi Halla-aho was found guilty of both disturbing religious worship and of ethnic agitation by the Finnish high court, but this has not been the only case.⁶ I will next examine in more detail the concept of hate speech in recent history and its uses and connections with the members of the Finns Party.

Hate speech in Finland

Hate speech really became a topic of discussion in Finland in 2011, but it is not a new phenomenon in itself. In Finland minorities such as the Roma people and the Sami have been historically subject-

ed to hate speech (Pöyhtäri, Haara & Raittila 2013). Despite hate speech being a phenomenon with historical roots in Finland, in the light of the data analysed here the concept of hate speech became part of public discussion in Finland rather late. In the editorial and opinion pieces of *Helsingin Sanomat* the first mention of hate speech (in the data I examined from 2002 onwards) was found as late as in 2007 and it is only from 2011 that the concept starts to be drawn on increasingly. It is most likely no coincidence that the concept was most used in the election years 2011 and 2015: in 2011 it appears 33 times and 2015 29 times, while before 2011 there were only few mentions of it per year.

From the beginning, hate speech is discussed in *Helsingin Sanomat* mainly in two ways: first of all, hate speech is discussed as a malicious and harmful speech directed towards minorities. As such, it is perceived as being similar to racism, but with an accent on that it refers to a form of speech, rather than to an act – even though it is often pointed out that from speech it is short way to acts. Secondly, it is discussed as a phenomenon related to political debates and as a style used in these debates. In these pieces hate speech is characterized by its aggressivity, by the unwillingness of the speakers to engage in a mutually respectful dialogue and by the way those practicing hate speech tend to overlook facts in the debates (see also Ruotsalainen 2017). Thematically hate speech is frequently discussed in relation to immigration, the extreme right, fascism, multiculturalism, political correctness, and borders. In addition, especially in the later mentions (this tendency becomes particularly pronounced in the year 2015), hate speech becomes intimately linked with the web and the online environments. It is seen that they both facilitate and help the spreading of hate speech. Moreover, it is not only an extreme which is assigned as producer or as a part of the hate speech, but there is also discussion about two extremes between which hate speech is seen to happen. Broadly these are articulated as those ‘against’ and ‘for’ immigration. As such, hate speech and its production become increasingly characterized by a lack of communication and the rise of hate speech becomes to

be seen as connected to fear and in this manner also psychologized, which in turn tends to privatize it.

While the two ways of understanding hate speech – hate speech as a malicious speech directed towards minorities and hate speech as a form or a style of communicating – are rather distinct in the first mentions of the hate speech, they become increasingly more entangled by 2011 and the topic of the freedom of speech becomes central to the hate speech discussions. It is discussed in what ways we should limit malicious speech, what consequences this has for freedom of speech, and finally through this it is asked what then actually is hate speech. In a similar manner, by the 2011 the question who can be a target of the hate speech arises. Here the Finns Party is very central to the discussion, as it is a member of the Finns Party who suggested that it is the members of the Finns party who are subjected to the hate speech – instead of being ones producing it as had been argued until that in the hate speech debates.

The Finns Party and hate speech

The members of the Finns Party and the party itself are a visible part of the hate speech discussions in *Helsingin Sanomat*. They are mentioned frequently and a few pieces written by the members of the Finns Party were also found in *Helsingin Sanomat*. When examining the opinion and editorial pieces from *Helsingin Sanomat*, I found in total 101 mentions of hate speech. In these 101 mentions, the Finns Party or a politician connected to the Finns Party was mentioned 27 times - while other political parties were mentioned only occasionally. The Finns Party appears in these discussions both as those who are perceived as producing hate speech and as those who are perceived (and perceive themselves) to be the targets of the hate speech.

Thematically, these discussions linger around different topics, but one case stands out. In 2011 the discussions circle around *Hommaforum* and term ‘Immigration criticism’⁷. *Hommaforum* is a dis-

cussion forum on the internet, started in the 2008. In the data I examined from *Helsingin Sanomat*, *Hommaforum* is frequently connected to the Finns Party, together with term ‘immigration criticism’, which is seen to be used by both members of *Hommaforum* as well as the members of the Finns Party (Ojutkangas 2011; Oja 2011, Soininen 2011). In the editorial and opinion pieces of *Helsingin Sanomat* ‘immigration criticism’ is directly connected to a derogatory way of speaking about Islam and immigrants, seen spread especially through *Hommaforum* but also through the blog of Jussi Halla-Aho, *Scripta* (Ojutkangas 2011; Oja 2011). It is also asked why Timo Soini, leader of the Finns Party, claims that ‘immigration criticism’ is not a form of racism (Oja 2011) and it is demanded that Soini as the leader of the Party take more responsibility around the actions and the speech of the party members of the Finns Party (Oja 2011; Soininen 2011).

While in 2011 The Finns Party and its members receive criticism for using the kind of speech that can be classified as hate speech, there are also those who defend Soini and the Finns Party. It is suggested that instead of condemning all the members of the Finns Party, there is need for more fine-tuned distinctions between the members of the party, as well as for communication and cooperation (Komsu 2011). Moreover, it is pointed out that the Finns Party should not alone be accused for unsavoury opinions, but it is actually members of other political parties (referring to members of the Left Alliance and the Green Party) who most easily use the ‘stamp of racist’ on members of the Finns Party (Räsänen 2011). Finally it is also claimed that it is the members of the Finns Party who are targets of hate speech. The representative of the Finns Party Maria Tolppanen writes: ‘EU and immigration criticism does not mean hate towards foreigners or fascism... Immigration criticism means taking responsibility of the people who come to this country. For each of them it is necessary to be able to provide language, reading and writing skills, as well as vocational education and work. Placing immigrants into reception centres or to suburbs without work does not amount to humane life. Hate speeches and writings need

to be absolutely condemned. At all levels. Hate speech is now targeted towards the Finns Party.’ (Tolppanen, 2015.)⁸

Traditionally hate speech is seen to be targeted towards ethnic, linguistic, religious and sexual minorities. By positioning a political party as the target of the hate speech, the concept is effectively emptied of the idea that hate speech is malicious speech directed at these minorities and it is furthermore decoupled from racism (see also Ruotsalainen 2017). Instead, it becomes argued in the public discussions that a political party can alike be a target of hate speech. In the data examined from *Perussuomalainen* this tendency is visible as well.

The Finns party and hate speech in the Perussuomalainen

To further examine how hate speech is discussed amongst the members of the Finns Party and how these discussions tie together with public debates around the hate speech, I examined the use of the concept in the party journal of the Finns party, *Perussuomalainen*. While hate speech rather often becomes equated with the Finns Party in the data gathered from the *Helsingin Sanomat*, it is not discussed as much in the *Perussuomalainen*. I examined all the issues from the year 2004 onwards up to 2015 and found in total of 18 pieces of mentioning the term hate speech, first from the year 2008.

In these 18 mentions of hate speech in *Perussuomalainen*, it is rather often asked what hate speech is. For instance, Ahonen writes: ‘What is hate speech? Is it bringing out defects? Or is it defending the frail citizens of your own nation and own municipality? For some reason hate media wants to elevate as heroes those who ridicule those who care the most about the matters of their own nation and its real well-being.’ (Ahonen 2012.) Here, in addition to questioning what hate speech is, also the articulation of us versus them

is clear, as well as the idea of bordered nations – both landmarks of a populist party (Wodak, 2105).

Also a more precise definition for hate speech is asked for as ‘according to current practice every defiant word or a written word is labelled as hate speech’ (Hyry, 2015). Through this questioning, the victim of the hate speech is often redefined - to be the Finns Party or its member. This can be seen, for example, in the article discussing about James Hirvisaari, a member of the Finns Party who was found guilty of ethnic agitation in the 2010, due to his blog post. In the article it is said: ‘I do use colourful language, but I am never angry when I write. Demonization is a weapon used by a political opponent, which is used to label especially those who do not think that multiculturalism is wonderful. It is rather that the opponents produce hate speech towards the Finns Party, says Hirvisaari who has been labelled as hate speaker.’” (PS, 2010).

In this manner, similarly as in the data examined in *Helsingin Sanomat*, the Finns Party becomes (self-)defined as the victim of the hate speech. In *Perussuomalaiset*, we thus see the same rhetorical style as we saw emerging in *Helsingin Sanomat*. In this style, there is a double meaning assigned to the hate speech. On the one hand, it is questioned what hate speech actually is and it is claimed that it limits freedom of speech or what is articulated as telling the truth or telling the facts. On the other hand, the premises of hate speech are taken for granted and the members of the Finns party are articulated as victims of the hate speech themselves. These two meanings are constantly present and used when they are seen fitting for the context. In the parliamentary plenary sitting a similar tendency of questioning what hate speech actually is and henceforth who actually can be seen as target of it, continues and strengthens. I will next turn towards this.

Hate speech and the Parliamentary Plenary sitting

The Finnish parliament consists of a total of 200 seats and eight political groups, of which at that point of time in 2015 Centre Party (49 seats), Finns Party (39 seats) and National Coalition Party were part of the government. The Parliament holds parliamentary plenary sittings four times week. All the sittings are streamed and streams and transcripts are accessible to the wider public.

The topic of the parliamentary plenary sitting taking place on 14.10.2015 was hate acts and racism and it was initiated by Nasima Razmyar, member of the Social Democratic Party. Razmyar also held the opening speech of the plenary sitting. Already in the opening speech the term hate speech is introduced to the discussion. Razmyar calls out for zero tolerance of hate speech and racism ‘as from them it is a short distance to acts themselves’. Hate speech is a pronounced part of the plenary sitting thereafter.

In what follows, I examine the rhetoric of the members of the Finnish Party and look at what discourses they are attached to and how the concept of hate speech here resonates with its other uses. Moreover, I trace the larger discourses which are connected to hate speech in the parliamentary discussion hour. While political interests are inexplicably part of the discussions, they are usually articulated through rhetorical means – while the discourses precede these rhetorical devices and as such also limit and frame them.

The major themes around hate speech in the plenary sitting are racism, immigration, asylum seekers, and the need (and therefore the lack of) communication: hate speech is often articulated as something that mainly exists in ‘extremes’ and is provoked by fear.*⁹ It is thus seen that by establishing functioning communication and ‘true encounters’ hate speech could be lessened. In a similar manner, immigrants (who are framed as the other and those who

* In 2015 there were more than the usual amount of immigration and asylum seekers coming to Finland. This gathered considerable civil, media, and political attention.

evoke fear) are also, even if indirectly, assigned to be the cause of the hate speech. The Minister of internal affairs, Petteri Orpo, states: ‘Increased immigration creates tensions, which have already resulted in hate crimes’ (2015).

Together with this, the rhetoric of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ immigrant or asylum seeker is pronounced in the discussion (see also Lähdesmäki & Saaremaa 2014). Multiple times it is called out that the best form of integration is work and it is also seen as the way immigrants and asylum seekers can earn their place in a society. In a similar vein, fear is articulated as a prominent reason why people produce hate speech or are against immigration. Moreover, in the discussions immigrants are often objectified and discussed as them or the others – instead of as part of us.

The wider discourses surrounding hate speech are thus rather similar to those visible in the data gathered from the *Helsingin Sanomat*, with an accent on immigration and on the need of communication and encounters. Moreover, there is only a minimal amount (even though some) of discussion about the possibility of institutional discrimination or how hate speech, hate acts and racism could be tackled through institutional interventions. More often than not, the problem of hate speech is privatized and responsibility (not only of producing it, but also of containing it) is set on the individuals: multiple members of the parliament call for individual acts to compete against racism and hate speech as well as for the help of the volunteer organizations.

As good and constructive forms of communications are called out for as a solution, there are also concerns of the ‘stamp of the racist’ being used too easily. The members of the Finns Party are not the only ones bringing this up, but this discourse is visible across all the governmental parties, while the tendency of accusing others of applying ‘the stamp of racist’ does become especially prominent in the statements of the members of the Finns Party. For instance, Juho Eerola from the Finns Party states: ‘[--]. Of course we are all against racism, but the problem is that when one criticizes for instance immigration policies or its shortcomings, then one receives

a stamp of a racist, and this is what it is many times about'. And Veera Ruoho, from the Finns Party, on her turn: 'indeed, the law protects from racism and hate speech. What then is hate speech and racism, surely not bringing up the facts? For instance already years ago the Finns Party brought up the issues with our integration policies. What happened? The politicians of the Finns Party were labelled as racists, only because we brought forward the public facts that can be seen from the statistics.' And Mika Niikko, from the Finns Party: 'At the same time, as it is important to condemn hate speech, it is as important to accept different opinions. That means also freedom of speech and accepting different opinion than those that are one's own. And in that sense we have to be really careful when we condemn racism, so that we do not condemn a person who worriedly shows his own disposition or opinion, and that we have room for that as well in this society'. There is also a tendency to victimize the Finns Party. Juho Eerola from the Finns Party states: 'Hate speech and racism are wrong, and according to European Social Survey Finland is one of the least racist countries - we can per se even congratulate ourselves. Racism is often connected to multiculturalism....In addition to racism, I condemn all violence directed towards political activities, no matter if it is done with the right or the left hand, and especially I want bring out the attacks carried out against the Helsinki regional office of the Finns Party.'

The rhetorical style of turning hate speech to be something that is directed towards those who are accused of being ones who produce it – and that we have by now become familiar with in the context of the Finns Party – thus continues in the parliamentary plenary sitting.

Framing hate speech

The hate speech discussions are often framed and coupled with different forms of freedom of speech discussions. As so they also attach themselves to a larger discussion about Western values as con-

trusted with the values of the ‘others’ – those perceived or constructed as not us. The most common other is the immigrant or the asylum seeker. Nevertheless, this other is not the one discussed or communicated with and he remains merely as an object. The discussion instead becomes framed as it would happen between two (political) extremes: a larger discursive frame of two extremes which became prominent in 2015. This creates the possibility of the idea that the problems related to hate speech can and should be solved through encounters, negotiations and communications. This frame was particularly visible in the parliamentary plenary sitting and not maintained mainly by the representatives of the Finns Party.

While hate speech has historically been connected to malicious and aggressive speech towards ethnic, sexual, linguistic, and religious minorities, this connotation becomes loosened and effectively hate speech as concept becomes ‘emptied’ from its history and its connotation with racism and or even becomes, in terms of Laclau (2005), a floating signifier, which avoids strict definition and rather works as a line where the ‘borderwork’ is done. As such it also becomes a rhetorical trope and a tool (especially in political and politicized contexts) which further obscures the matter discussed and moves the line of what is considered as racism – as when moved under hate speech, these matters can be set against the notion of freedom of speech and it can be questioned what kind of limitations we then ought to have for the spoken or written word. Moreover, the way the concept of hate speech is used, mainly but not only, by the representatives of the Finns Party, enables it becoming a double threat: either the limits of hate speech are malleable and negotiable or a political party and its members can be read as the target of hate speech and they can accuse that the ‘stamp of racist’ is used against them when they use the kind of rhetoric that border on hate speech and racism.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I examined the concept of hate speech in the public discussions in Finland. I focused especially on how it has been used by the members of the Finns Party. Through this examination, two ways of using the concept by the members of The Finns party become of interest: the first is the way hate speech is redefined by the members of the Party. The second, connected to the first, is the way members of the Finns Party tend to victimize the Finns Party and its members as the target of hate speech. Both of these ways of using hate speech appeared frequently and in different platforms. I furthermore argued that this is a rhetorical move on the part of the Finns Party, made possible by larger discourses of freedom of speech, two extremes and the need for communication and encounters.

NOTES

¹ The archive can be found at: <https://www.suomenuutiset.fi/lehtiarkisto/>

² https://www.eduskunta.fi/FI/vaski/PoytakirjaAsiakohta/Documents/PTK_50+2015+2.pdf

³ In the 2011 parliamentary elections the party already received 19.1 percent of the votes.

⁴ It is good to note that the politics of the Finns Party tend to traditionally lean more towards left than right with regard to the support of the public sector and the welfare state (Rahkonen 2010).

⁵ While there are no laws in Finland which would define and furthermore prohibit hate speech per se, there are laws against ethnic agitation and disturbance of religious worship (Pöyhtäri, Haara & Raittila 2013)

⁶ The first conviction was assigned in 2009 when Halla-aho was found guilty for disturbing religious worship by the Helsinki district court. Halla-aho filed a complaint about the conviction and the case was taken to the high court, where Halla-aho was convicted for both for ethnic agitation and disturbing religious worship.

⁷ Nykänen (2016) connects ‘immigration criticism’ to the anti-immigrant wing of the Finns Party and describes it as a way of thinking where nationalism, economic concerns, dislike of Islam and criticism towards immigration come together.

⁸ This commentary, as the other comments, commentaries, quotes, and statements from the data used in this paper, have been translated from Finnish into English by the author.

⁹ A systematic distinction is seldom made between immigrants and asylum seekers in the discussions.

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