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Author(s): Ojala, Markus; Kaasik-Krogerus, Sigrid; Pantti, Mervi

Title: Presidential speeches and the online politics of belonging : Affective-discursive positions toward refugees in Finland and Estonia

Year: 2019

Version: Accepted version (Final draft)

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Please cite the original version:

Ojala, M., Kaasik-Krogerus, S., & Pantti, M. (2019). Presidential speeches and the online politics of belonging : Affective-discursive positions toward refugees in Finland and Estonia. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 22(2), 164-179. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549418823059>

This is the authors' accepted manuscript whose final version appears in the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549418823059>.

Presidential speeches and the online politics of belonging: Affective-discursive positions towards refugees in Finland and Estonia

Markus Ojala, University of Helsinki, markus.ojala@helsinki.fi

Sigrid Kaasik-Krogerus, University of Jyväskylä, sigrid.s.kaasik-krogerus@jyu.fi

Mervi Pantti, University of Helsinki, mervi.pantti@helsinki.fi

Abstract

The so-called 'refugee crisis' has added urgency to the social dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in European societies. This study explores how emotions figure in this politics of belonging by studying their discursive mobilization in Finnish and Estonian public debates on asylum seekers. Focusing on presidential speeches addressing the refugee issue, on one hand, and their reception by online commenters on popular tabloid news sites, on the other, the comparative analysis highlights both similarities and differences in how emotional expressions are employed in these two countries with very different experiences in taking refugees. Despite employing common discursive elements in their speeches, the diverging national contexts prompted the two presidents to emphasise contrasting emotional positions: the insecure Finn, threatened by abusive asylum seekers, and the compassionate Estonian, capable of identifying with the plight of refugees. In contrast, the reactions to speeches by Finnish and Estonian citizens on tabloid news sites demonstrated highly converging emotional positions. Online comments in both countries revealed deep anger and distrust of political elites among tabloid news audiences, articulating a complex relationship with the nation as a divided and exclusive political community.

Keywords

Belonging, emotions, European refugee crisis, immigration, elites, populism

Introduction

Issues of belonging and non-belonging have increasingly characterized the European

political landscape in recent years. The so-called ‘European refugee crisis’ saw over 1.2 million migrants and refugees arriving in Europe in 2015, and polls indicate that immigration has since been the most pressing concern in the minds of European citizens (Eurobarometer, 2016a). In tandem, a combination of anti-immigrant and anti-elite populism has risen markedly. Far-right political parties have made significant gains in several EU countries (Inglehart and Norris 2016), and both the Brexit referendum and the US presidential election in 2016 demonstrated how politically consequential the anger towards elites and immigrants may turn out to be. Moreover, with various counter-media sites gaining ground and aggressively disseminating their narratives of immigrants threatening the nation and of corrupt elites that have abandoned ‘the people’, traditional mainstream parties have been increasingly put on the defensive. In these struggles over immigration and the political legitimacy of governments, ‘the politics of belonging’ (Yuval-Davis, 2006) is gaining a new sense of urgency. Not only must governing elites negotiate with the people over the limits of solidarity and care towards asylum seekers as ‘outsiders’, they also need to secure their own position as legitimate representatives of the people.

The present study examines the politics of belonging in Finland and Estonia within this context of anti-immigrant and anti-elite populism. We explore how the position of Finns and Estonians towards asylum seekers is negotiated in mediated interaction between the political elite and non-elite audiences by analysing presidential speeches and their reception on popular tabloid news sites in the two countries. In contrasting two modes of public discourse – presidential speeches and audience online commentary – our aim is to shed light on the dual nature of the politics of belonging in the ‘refugee crisis’. Political elites hold the power to represent ‘the nation’ and articulate conditions in which asylum seekers are worthy of ‘our’ care, whilst simultaneously negotiating their own position as legitimate representatives of ‘the people’ as it is being called into question by popular anti-elite and anti-immigrant rhetoric. Our analytical focus in these struggles over belonging is on affective-discursive practices (Wetherell et al., 2015). We observe, specifically, how emotions are employed by presidents and online commentators in attempts to influence public reactions to the ‘refugee crisis’ and to legitimise a certain interpretation of the nation.

The two northern EU member states provide a fruitful context for comparative analysis about the impact of the ‘crisis’ on public discourse due to the significant differences in their positions as destination countries for refugees. Over 32,000 asylum seekers entered Finland in 2015 alone (the fourth largest number among EU members in proportion to overall population), while Estonia received only 225 asylum applications over the course of that year. Despite this divergence, arriving refugees were a hotly-debated topic in both countries in the latter half of 2015 and early 2016. This

comparative setting allows us to observe, first, how the public debates in Finland and Estonia are influenced by their diverging realities and political contexts and, second, how contextual differences notwithstanding similar discourses and emotional positions concerning the ‘crisis’ travel and gain traction across European countries. The study therefore reinforces our understanding of what may be common to pan-European refugee debates and to what extent the research should focus on national specificities.

We begin by outlining the theoretical framework of the study that focuses on the role of emotions in the public discourse and political rhetoric. Subsequently, we introduce the national contexts of public debate on the refugee issue in Finland and Estonia, emphasising how these inform the particular expressions and arguments used to characterize asylum seekers. After describing the study’s material and methods, we examine the respective roles and purposes of the two presidents in these national debates in terms of how their speeches mobilize emotions and construct emotional positions in relation to the ‘refugee crisis’. We then examine online commentary of the speeches on tabloid news sites, assessing to what extent non-elite audiences accepted and/or rejected these positions. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings for the politics of belonging in the European ‘refugee crisis’.

Emotions and the public politics of belonging

As European governments have responded to the rising number of asylum seekers by restricting the passage of refugees to their countries and by tightening the conditions of asylum, discourses of belonging have been invoked as a means of justifying the acknowledgement or denial of rights to protection and care. In this ‘politics of belonging’ (e.g. Yuval-Davis, 2006; Leitner, 2012), some subjects are constructed as threatening and others as vulnerable and worthy of our care. Our aim is to contribute to this research by exploring how elite and popular emotional expressions enact inclusion and exclusion in the context of the ‘refugee crisis’.

While belonging is commonly understood as a deeply affective attachment, a sense of being ‘safe’ and ‘at home’ (Yuval-Davis, 2006), less attention has been devoted to the discursive role of emotions in the politics of belonging (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016). It is well known, however, that emotions are routinely used in public discourse to form communities while excluding other social groups (e.g. Ahmed, 2004; Skeggs, 2004; Tyler, 2006). An examination of the politics of belonging, then, benefits from examining the use of emotional language as an important resource that constructs ‘relations of proximity and distance, affiliation and detachment, and inclusion and exclusion’ (Wetherell et al., 2015: 58; see also Wetherell, 2013). Emotions, then, are not only mobilizing as research on social movements have shown (e.g. Goodwin, Jasper

and Polletta, 2001; Staiger, Cvetkovich, and Reynolds, 2010) but are strategically mobilized by a variety of actors (Wetherell, 2013). The public display of emotions can be mobilized in constructive ways to create communities of solidarity, but negative emotions such as fear and disgust are commonly mobilized to create hostility and divisions among groups (e.g. Ahmed 2004; Lyman 2004).

Scholars of political communication have shown that politicians often employ emotions strategically in their rhetoric to sway political attitudes and gain public support for their policies (e.g. Brader, 2006; de Castella and McGarty, 2011; Erisen and Villalobos, 2014). Exerting power through emotional appeals is about suggesting and legitimizing certain emotional reactions, as well as inviting audiences to adopt certain emotional positions towards other groups. For instance, in his analysis of George W. Bush's speeches following 9/11, Loseke (2009) found that the US president not only elicited sympathy for the victims but also invoked fear, anger and hate towards the terrorists and invited Americans to feel national pride and patriotism in order to rally the nation behind a war on terror. It is certainly not the case, however, that audiences readily adopt the emotional positions advanced by political elites. The interpretation of messages, including their emotional cues, is dependent on the personal experiences of audience members, as well as on their pre-existing beliefs and attitudes about immigration as a phenomenon. Moreover, people regularly oppose the powerful and may not accept the proffered subject positions and corresponding emotions (Burkitt, 2005).

In media and communication research, the Habermasian emphasis on rational-critical arguments has been complemented by the recognition that emotion inevitably shapes and fuels public discourse on political and social issues (e.g. Pantti and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011; Papacharissi, 2015). Less educated and non-elite audiences, in particular, have often been argued to favour media content that appeals to emotions (McKee, 2005). However, here we focus less on the role of the media and journalism in regulating public emotions, and more on citizens' own ability to express and invoke emotions through the means of online communication. In this activity, the medium (an online tabloid news site) provides a public platform that gathers an 'affective public' (Papacharissi, 2015) and facilitates citizen-to-citizen communication around the refugee issue.

Previous research suggests that dominant political and news discourses on asylum seekers emphasize the need to control their entry (Horsti, 2007; Matthews and Brown, 2011). Representations of asylum seekers are often hostile or ambivalent, alternating between objects of fear and pity (Harrison, 2016; Nightingale, Quayle and Muldoon, 2017; Silveira, 2016). Those in positions of power employ ambivalence as a discursive device because it efficiently 'maintains the status quo whilst legitimizing structural

inequality' (Nightingale, Quayle and Muldoon, 2017). In other words, prejudice and hostility can be softened by expressions of sympathy and emphasizing economical necessities. In their public appearances, political leaders tend to draw on already available discourses, reflecting and shaping existing sentiments and identities, sometimes bringing together competing narratives (Edwards and Herder, 2012; Stuckey, 1991).

The politics of 'refugee crisis' in Finland and Estonia

Both Finland and Estonia have experienced a resurgence of nationalist populism in recent years. The Finns Party, a socially conservative, Eurosceptic and nationalist party whose members have connections to far-right groups, made significant gains nationally in Finland's 2011 parliamentary election and entered the government as the second-biggest party after the 2015 election. In Estonia, the Conservative People's Party, established in 2012 as a merger between the agrarian centrist party People's Union of Estonia and the nationalist pressure group Estonian Patriotic Movement, entered the Estonian parliament in 2015 with 8.1% of the vote and has been gaining in popularity ever since. Despite these advances, traditional mainstream parties still control the government in both countries and tend to promote liberal-internationalist and market-oriented policies.

In Finland, political and media attention on the 'refugee crisis' began to heighten in late July 2015, when the number of asylum seekers arriving in the country rapidly increased. By the end of the year, more than 32,000 people had applied for asylum in Finland (Eurostat, 2016). This represents a considerable increase, given that around 40,000 refugees in total had moved to Finland in the previous four decades. Surveys show that citizen opinion turned increasingly negative towards immigration around this time (Eurobarometer, 2016b). As a result, the government became the focus of heavy anti-immigrant criticism in various online forums as it, at first, seemed unable to 'stem the tide'. The extent of anti-immigrant mobilisation, including street patrols by far-right groups, acts of violence against refugee centres and a torrent of hate speech against liberal politicians, activists and journalists, was unprecedented. In early 2016, the centre-right coalition government, which includes the nationalist-populist Finns party, implemented a series of reforms on existing asylum rules, with the explicit aim of making Finland a 'less attractive' destination for refugees (Pellander, 2016).

As a country of net emigration since regaining independence in 1991 until 2014, Estonia represents a very different context, with only 225 migrants seeking asylum there in 2015 (Eurostat, 2016). Following intensive political debate, the Estonian government committed to receiving 550 asylum seekers as part of the EU relocation

programme. Despite these relatively small numbers (in comparison, Finland has committed to receiving 3200 asylum seekers under the same programme), the ‘refugee crisis’ became a heated political issue also in Estonia, which has had a conservative refugee policy for the last twenty years (Veebel, 2015). In autumn 2015, immigration from outside the EU raised negative feelings in 81% of Estonians (Eurobarometer, 2015). With the actual number of asylum seekers being so low, anti-refugee sentiments and general panic about uncontrolled migration are mostly raised in Estonian political debate by citing examples from elsewhere in Europe. Finland, in particular, is often presented as a warning of what could happen if there was to be a sudden influx of asylum seekers.

In sum, political elites in Finland and Estonia responded to the ‘refugee crisis’ in a political climate marked by aggressive anti-immigrant attitudes and rising anti-elite populism. It should be noted that pro-refugee activism and anti-racist demonstrations were also present in the public spheres of both countries. However, while pro-refugee groups concentrated on practical assistance to asylum seekers and denouncing racist backlashes against them, public criticism directed at policymakers was largely articulated by those opposed to immigration, with the simple demand for the government to ‘close the borders’ dominating the popular online forums at the time. In this context of heavily politicised asylum debate, the presidents commented on the asylum policy in public in the presence of an increasingly aggressive anti-immigrant and anti-elite popular opposition.

The study

The study proceeded in two phases. First, we examined major public speeches by the Finnish and Estonian presidents in 2015 and 2016 that focused on the refugee issue. In both countries, the decision-making power of the president is highly restricted and presidents commonly avoid interfering on matters of domestic politics at the level of specific legislative measures. It is considered inappropriate for presidents to directly criticize government decisions or official policy. These limitations notwithstanding, presidents are widely considered as ‘value leaders’ precisely because they are seen to be above the dirty game of politics. As such, they are expected to address social and political questions from a moral, ‘non-political’, standpoint, articulating the ‘right thing to do’. As a result, major presidential speeches can be understood as providing ‘motivational cues’ (Bucy, 2000) for how citizens should act and feel.

We selected three speeches by Sauli Niinistö: at a meeting of Finnish ambassadors on 25 August 2015; in a televised New Year’s address to the nation on 1 January 2016; and at the opening of the Finnish parliamentary session on 3 February 2016. We also

selected three speeches by Toomas Hendrik Ilves: opening the Estonian parliamentary session on 14 September 2015; a televised New Year's greeting to the nation on 31 December 2015; and a speech on Estonian Independence Day (24 February 2016). All of these speeches addressed the 'refugee crisis' at length and were covered by the national news media in their respective countries.

The selected speeches were subjected to close reading to reveal any invocation of emotional reactions toward refugees and asylum seekers. Methodologically, we drew upon the claim that emotion and affect are entangled with discourse (Wetherell, 2013, 2015; McConville et al., 2016). The study of affective-discursive practices hence focuses on culturally available forms of meaning making, through which some emotions are legitimized and emotional identities and communities are reproduced. Accordingly, we observed the speeches as texts that, through the use of emotional language cues and rhetorical devices such as metaphors and framing (i.e. presenting the issue from a certain viewpoint), reproduce the nation as a certain emotionally charged collective identity when talking about refugees. Analysing the rhetoric of the two presidents, we examined what kind of emotional positions they offered to their citizens and the kind of affective community they constructed around the refugee crisis.

Second, we examined how those addressed by the presidents negotiated their own emotional positions in the 'refugee crisis'. We were specifically interested in comparing presidential discourses on asylum seekers with those of 'popular masses', in contrast to highly-educated elite groups. Therefore, we focused on the comment sections of two online tabloid news sites when analysing audience reactions to the presidents' speeches. *Iltä-Sanomat* is Finland's most popular evening tabloid, whereas *Õhtuleht* is Estonia's only daily national tabloid, and the websites of both papers are among the top five news sites nationally according to Alexa rankings. Unlike traditional quality broadsheets that cater primarily to an elite readership, *Iltä-Sanomat* and *Õhtuleht* target the less highly educated, offering a mix of news and entertainment content and often sensationalist headlines. Rather than encouraging detached and intellectual criticism, their political coverage tends to build on simplistic juxtapositions, appeal to anti-elitist attitudes and prompt strong reactions, including moral condemnation, outrage and patriotism. As extensions of their print content, iltasanomat.fi and ohtuleht.ee can be expected to attract a distinctly non-elite audience for speeches on the refugee situation.

In Finland, iltasanomat.fi published 34 individual reports of the three speeches by Niinistö (including video recordings and transcripts of the speeches), of which 25 addressed the theme of refugees and asylum seekers. These reports yielded a total of 3763 online comments by Finnish readers. The first 50 postings in the comment thread of each article, beginning from the earliest entry, were included in the analysis, resulting

in a total of 1250 individual comments. In Estonia, ohtuleht.ee published 18 articles on Ilves' speeches (including transcripts), of which 15 addressed immigration, with 692 online comments. All comments posted on ohtuleht.ee were included in the analysis.

Following an analysis of how the presidents used emotional language and rhetorical devices in their speeches, we conducted a close reading of the online discussions. Paying close attention to the use of metaphors, framing and other rhetorical devices, as well as to explicit expressions of opinion and emotion, we categorized comments according to their invocation of fear, anger or sympathy towards refugees and immigrants. However, it became clear from the outset that citizens' responses often invited readers to adopt emotional positions towards a much wider range of groups and individuals than the original speeches. We therefore included these further objects of fear, anger and sympathy in the analysis, adding new categories of objects as they were observed.

It should be noted that the two online tabloid newspapers had an important role in mediating the presidents' speeches. The sites operated as agenda-setters, drawing their readers' attention to the presidents' speeches in the first place, and as framers, emphasising specific parts of the speeches – particularly those addressing the refugee issue – over others and representing them in certain ways. They operated also as gatekeepers by reporting the reactions of other elite actors – mostly politicians and experts – to the speeches. Thus, online commenters often reacted not so much to the (unmediated) speeches themselves but on the media representations and (mediated) elite commentaries on those speeches. However, because our interest was in studying the invocation of emotions towards refugees and others in online commentary, the role of the publications in mediating (and shaping) elite messages to their audiences was of lesser interest. In fact, only a small part of the collected online posts explicitly commented on the presidents' speeches, and most expressed views on the refugee issue in a more general manner. We therefore approached the role of the online news sites primarily as platforms that facilitated the readers' commentary on asylum policy and their associated affective-discursive practices.

Fear, anger and empathy in the presidential rhetoric on refugees

Europe cannot withstand uncontrolled migration for much longer. Our values will give way if our capacity to cope is exceeded. It is alleged that most, if not almost all, measures that might be taken to control the process are in breach of international rights and agreements. The result is that we cannot do what many people consider necessary. (Niinistö, 2016b.)

In his speeches, President Sauli Niinistö made a thinly-veiled case for increasingly illiberal asylum policies in response to the growing number of refugees in Finland. Elected in 2012 as the candidate of the right-wing National Coalition Party, which after the spring 2015 parliamentary elections joined a multi-party centre-right coalition government, Niinistö lent indirect public support to the government's policy of making the Finnish asylum system increasingly repressive. This policy included controversial decisions to tighten asylum criteria and to introduce a series of legislative measures to reduce the rights of asylum seekers with the explicit aim of making the country a 'less attractive' destination. While refraining from commenting on individual policy measures, Niinistö hence contributed to the intense domestic debate on refugees by implicitly arguing against those in opposition to the government, mostly left-wing and green parties, civil society groups and legal scholars who had questioned the ethics, legality and constitutionality of the government's response to the crisis. Against these 'humanitarian' voices, Niinistö adopted a discourse about the nation's sovereign right to defy international agreements when necessary, echoing the rhetoric of nationalist-populist parties and groups.

As Europeans, we should understand that the migration from the East to the West and from the South to the North is a challenge we have to face together. Let's not mislead ourselves with thoughts that we can detach ourselves from all this. I wouldn't advise anyone to be left by themselves in our Europe, especially in this corner here. (Ilves, 2015b.)

In contrast to Niinistö's argument for an increasingly restrictive asylum policy, Ilves' speeches can be read as a justification of Estonia's participation in the relocation and resettlement plan for asylum seekers inside the EU. Accordingly, in the context of Estonian asylum policy debate, Ilves supported the official position of the government. In opposition to those, like Conservative People's Party, claiming that Estonia should refuse to take part in European 'burden-sharing' on the grounds that it conflicts with Estonian national interests, Ilves emphasized that Estonia has benefited enormously from Western integration and could not go it alone when faced with the less appealing aspects of growing interdependence. Moreover, by alluding to Estonia's vulnerable position next to Russia and exploiting Estonians' fear of being left on its own by the West (cf. Ojala and Kaasik-Krogerus, 2016), Ilves further reinforced his case for Estonia's international cooperation.

The two presidents thus articulated diverging political positions regarding asylum policies as they were being pursued in their national contexts. These diverging motives were also reflected in their invocation of emotions towards refugees. Three primary emotional positions could be distinguished in the speeches: fear, anger and empathy.

All three were present in both the presidents' rhetoric, but Niinistö and Ilves employed them in a highly contrasting manner.

Inviting his audiences to adopt positions of fear and anger towards asylum seekers was fundamental to President Niinistö's illiberal response to the refugee crisis. First, he promoted fear by anxiety-invoking rhetoric. Niinistö described the situation facing Europe and Finland as 'unprecedented' (2016a) and referred to 'uncontrolled migration' and a 'flow of peoples' (2016b). By employing an archaic Finnish word for large-scale migration, *kansainvaellus*, ('migration of peoples'), Niinistö (2016b) even invoked a historical allegory of the pre-medieval Migration Period (*Völkerwanderung*) associated in popular narratives with the 'barbarian invasions' of the west by peoples from the east. In addition, his invocation of fear involved the identification of those 'valued objects' that are threatened by refugees (cf. Burkitt, 2005: 682). Warning his listeners that 'among those heading for Europe there are some who have mischief in mind' (Niinistö, 2015), and that 'some have a terrorist background, and some do evil of other kinds' (Niinistö, 2016a), Niinistö appealed to the value of security while reproducing the widespread association of immigrants with crime and disorder in political and media discourse (Matthews and Brown, 2011; Holmes and Castañeda, 2016). Moreover, he asserted that 'immigration can never mean that our core values – democracy, equality and human rights – are questioned' (Niinistö, 2016a) and warned that 'our values will give way if our capacity to cope is exceeded' (Niinistö, 2016b). In evoking the asylum seeker as a threat to 'our' values, he spoke to the audience's 'ontological insecurity' (Skey, 2014), the fear of losing a certain way of life, cultural homogeneity and national identity (cf. Skilling, 2012).

Second, Niinistö resorted to the invocation of anger towards asylum seekers to justify increasingly restrictive immigration policies. In his address to the Parliament on 3 February 2016, Niinistö (2016b) claimed that 'the flow of immigration into Europe and Finland, is largely a case of migration of peoples rather than a flight from immediate danger'. Directing attention to the economic motives of those seeking asylum and emphasizing their separation from those 'truly' in need of protection has obviously formed part of official Western immigration policy and policy discourse in recent decades, attempting to delegitimize many asylum seekers as 'fake' or 'illegal' migrants (Harrison, 2016; Matthews and Brown, 2011). Presenting asylum seekers as abusers of financial services effectively constructs the citizens of the host nation as victims. In this respect, a key moment in Niinistö's New Year's address was his claim that 'we have been naïve' (2016a). Evoking an image of well-intentioned and blue-eyed Finns whose hospitality and generosity have been exploited by opportunistic others, Niinistö encouraged a feeling of anger towards asylum seekers.

In contrast to Niinistö's emphasis on 'protective' national and European policies against the potential threats and abuses of asylum seekers, Ilves' liberal-internationalist perspective constructed a position of compassion and solidarity for Estonian citizens. Ilves highlighted 'kindness, helpfulness and hospitality' as key values of Estonians and claimed that 'goodness and generosity are the things that keep us together' (2015b). Notably, his rhetoric was based on personal experiences and reflections, presenting himself as a son of refugees who, as a child, did not fully understand his parents' stories about fleeing, and for whom it is still difficult to understand the trauma caused by 'fleeing from home and sailing over the sea in small boats' (Ilves, 2015a). Ilves (2016) also invited Estonians to adopt the identity of refugees or migrants, referring to the 70,000 refugees that fled the country during World War II and to the hundreds of thousands of eastern Europeans who have moved to Western Europe in recent decades. In this context, sympathy for refugees was encouraged by allusions to the discrimination and negative stereotyping faced by eastern Europeans abroad, such as the 'Polish plumber' and the 'Estonian criminal'. Equating these with the stereotype of a 'Syrian terrorist', Ilves condemned prejudices against asylum seekers while assuring that those who 'have escaped the war will not threaten Estonian security'.

Notably, even as the two presidents invoked emotions that supported their overall arguments, their speeches also contained contradictory elements that seemed to undermine their message. Despite explicitly condemning the dissemination of rumours and fear-mongering about asylum seekers, Ilves also spoke of the need to keep 'criminals' and 'terrorists' out (2015a), described Europe as 'threatened by an unseen flow of war refugees' (ibid.) and characterized the refugees' cultural background as very different from 'ours' (Ilves, 2016). For his part, Niinistö (2016b) seemingly balanced the rhetoric invoking fear and anger with affirmations that Finland and Europe would help those in 'gravest distress'. He also condemned racist discourse and recent violent acts against asylum seekers in Finland, thus discounting hate as a legitimate emotion (Niinistö, 2016a). Yet because these contradicting emotional positions were not supported by the overall arguments of the speeches, they necessarily remained secondary to those that were more in tune with the presidents' political purposes.

Nevertheless, the co-existence in both presidents' speeches of discursive devices that induced fear and anger towards refugees with those invoking compassion and solidarity illustrates how political rhetoric is typically laden with myriad emotional language cues, and how the emotional message often becomes entangled and ambivalent (Benski and Langman, 2013; Loseke, 2009). This owes in part to the aspiration of political leaders to bring together, and co-opt, diverse audiences, to bridge political and ideological divides and to please as many groups as possible (Edwards and Herder, 2012). To be successful in this regard, the two presidents drew from broader Western

discourses on immigration and asylum, weaving a somewhat inconsistent narrative that spoke to several audiences and in which people with divergent political attitudes could find a position that seemed attractive. Connecting with a large heterogeneous audience may also often require the deployment of various emotional registers.

Online tabloid readers' reactions to presidential speeches

The analysis of online tabloid readers' comments revealed two primary argumentative purposes. First, commenters followed the agenda set by the presidents (and the press reporting on the speech) by commenting on the refugee issue and articulating a preferred national and European attitude towards asylum seekers. Second, in addition to analysing and opining on the asylum seekers, online commenters focused their message on the conduct of national and European political leaders, thus suggesting how other readers should position themselves with regard to decision-makers. Correspondingly, online commenters also invoked emotions to construct political positions towards both refugees and political elites.

In Finland, President Niinistö's invocation of fear and anger towards asylum seekers seemed to resonate well with online tabloid audiences. The general thrust of online reactions was overwhelmingly anti-immigration. Finnish commenters reproduced discourses that demonstrated strong anxiety about 'the refugee problem', articulating fears that the 'avalanche of immigrants' will 'destroy' both Finland and Europe if not stopped in time. They also invoked fears based on the cultural otherness of refugees: that 'their' divergent customs, inferior moral standards and inability to adapt will inevitably endanger both the Finnish 'social system' and 'our' way of life. Moreover, Niinistö's allusion to the 'bad intentions' of some refugees had strong emotional currency among commenters who constructed the archetypal asylum seeker as a young male Arab posing a direct threat, especially to Finnish women. Aside from fear, commenters also invoked anger towards the asylum seekers by suggesting that Finns are being exploited by 'economic migrants'. Rather than being genuinely endangered, those who make it to Finland were looking to improve their personal living standards, and 'we' were being forced to provide for 'their' living.

In contrast to Niinistö, President Ilves had little success among Estonian online tabloid readers in attempting to promote solidarity for refugees. As in Finland, Estonian commenters invoked fear rather than compassion towards refugees. Wars in the Middle East and 'Islamist terrorism' inspired commenters to associate refugees with 'soldiers of Allah', 'bombers', 'ISIS' and 'robbers and murderers', so constructing immigration as an immediate threat to national and European security. More abstract fears were also invoked through rhetoric alluding to the large number of refugees, including metaphors

like ‘masses’ and ‘hordes’. These informed daunting future scenarios, including millions of people transferred to Europe, military conflicts and the elimination of the white race by ‘African and Arab scroungers’ who take over Europe, set their own laws and feel no guilt when ‘cutting off somebody’s head’. In this way, the threat of immigration acquired an existential dimension, invoking a sense of insecurity about the viability of national identity and European or Western civilization (cf. Holmes and Castañeda, 2016). Aside from fear, Estonians also expressed anger towards refugees in terms that echoed the Finnish debates. They referred, for instance, to ‘comfort refugees’ and ‘economic immigrants’ who want to live at the expense of Estonians and ‘get everything just like that’. Commenters also claimed that refugees cannot be in need of help, as they throw away food and demand money instead, wear designer clothes and carry up-to-date phones. However, the practical absence of asylum seekers in Estonia meant that any such invocation of anger generally lacked concrete local examples and therefore had to cite experiences and ‘news’ from other European countries.

Aside from its anti-immigrant slant, online commentary on the presidents’ speeches in both Estonia and Finland had a strong anti-elite character. Commenters invoked anger that was directed at national and European political elites. To some extent this resentment derived from the fear of immigration and other xenophobic sentiments. It was directed at decision-makers who were failing to ‘protect’ the populations from the external threat posed by asylum seekers. For instance, one Finnish commenter condemned the prime minister and the government for ‘not having the guts to make decisions [i.e. closing borders] even though everyone understands that we need them’. Commenters also directed their anger at the EU and other member states for violating the principles of the Dublin agreement by allowing refugees to seek asylum outside the first country of entry.

The most articulate expressions of condemnation targeted the perceived injustice of government policy that treats refugees and asylum seekers as ‘deserving’ victims while dismissing the social and economic distress of the poor, the unemployed, pensioners, workers and other purportedly precarious groups in society. In Finland, recent deterioration in the terms and conditions of employment, along with cuts (or planned cuts) in social services, unemployment benefits and other entitlements were frequently cited by commenters as evidence that the government cares more about foreign refugees than about ordinary Finns. As one commenter argued: ‘There is plenty of compassion and money for the refugees’. Claiming that ‘the Finns are in second place’, the commenter advanced a rhetorical question: ‘What kind of state does not prioritize looking after its own people?’ In Estonia, national and European elites were similarly presented as disinterested in ordinary people’s wellbeing and therefore as responsible for the citizens’ alienation from the state. Estonian commenters also expressed anger at

the present political leadership, who, they believed, hide information, tell lies, mislead the people, ignore their problems and treat them like trash. These comments articulated diminished legitimacy of political institutions as well as a general sense of loss of agency: although dissatisfied, people expressed inability to influence national leaders and decision-makers.

In sum, the invocation of anger by online tabloid readers in both Finland and Estonia boiled down to a repudiation of elites and to an outcry that the government and the EU are not listening to the people (cf. Burkitt, 2005). As much as this rhetoric appeared to derive from a xenophobic fear of immigrants, it also communicated a shared sense of injustice about the economic, political and social inequalities in both societies. As a flipside to this invocation of anger towards elites, popular commentary invited readers to feel compassion towards their disenfranchised compatriots by suggesting that the people—especially the poor, the elderly and the vulnerable—were being excluded from the polity and treated as second-class citizens. At the same time, this positioned the reader in opposition to the elites, constructing them as an illegitimate ‘other’, a ‘foreign’ element within.

In short, expressions of anger tended to create a sharp distinction between ‘the people’ and the elite as its ‘other’. Within this populist dichotomy (e.g., Laclau, 2005), the position of political leaders is necessarily precarious; leaders can be seen either as ‘siding with the people’ and taking care of them or as antithetical to their will, interests and way of life. In this regard, President Niinistö appears to have been partially successful in speaking to the attitudes and feelings of anti-immigrant audiences. While some online commenters denounced the president as one of ‘those’ untrustworthy politicians, others praised him for ‘speaking the truth’ to Finnish decision-makers and for representing the ‘voice of reason’ among political elites that have proved either naïve, misinformed or incompetent regarding the ‘refugee problem’. Among Estonian online commenters, President Ilves’ rhetoric was far less positively received. When Ilves attempted to invoke sympathy for refugees by emphasizing his own immigrant background, it effectively backfired, rendering him a ‘foreigner’ in his own country. Commenters made fun of his manners and behaviour (sits on the table, chews gum, wears a bow tie) and of moral issues related to his third marriage, as well as his supposed English dialect while speaking Estonian. Far from accepting Ilves’ reconstruction of Estonians as a nation of immigrants, the tabloid readership effectively cast the president himself as an ‘other’—someone whose elitist and ‘foreign’ manners justified his discursive exclusion from the nation.

Conclusion: Contested emotions and the politics of belonging

As Yuval-Davis (2006) has noted, belonging is usually taken for granted and becomes politicized only when under threat. By analysing the complex and contradictory articulation of emotions around the ‘refugee crisis’ in both elite and popular discourse, our aim has been to shed light on the discursive role of emotions in the politics of belonging. Our findings here indicate that, for all their political differences, Presidents Niinistö and Ilves articulated belonging to the nation in much the same terms. For these two heads of state, the nation is a political community in which fear, suspicion and anger are warranted, but whose members must refrain from hate and violence, demonstrating pragmatic compassion towards vulnerable outsiders. Within this constructed nation, citizens are accepted as legitimate members of the community on the condition that they act within the affective-discursive rules set by the elite.

Tabloid newspaper readers expressed belonging in highly divergent terms. In these popular accounts, the nation appeared divided into ‘the people’ and ‘an elite’, offering two possible articulations of the politics of belonging. On the one hand, the nation was equated with ‘the people’, and the elites were accepted as its members only to the extent that they realize the will of ‘the people’ and protect it from the threat of outsiders. On the other hand, popular audiences questioned their own belonging as legitimate members of the community, evoking the identity of ‘second-class citizen’, overlooked by the elite and the rest of the nation. While this sense of disenfranchisement failed to amount to an expression of solidarity with refugees, it certainly articulated an experience of living in a highly unequal and exclusive political community.

In its exploration of popular antipathy to elites as part of complex struggles about belonging to the nation, this study underlines the need to take seriously anti-immigrant discourses (cf. Skey, 2014). Rather than dismissing them as racist xenophobes, liberal internationalist elites (including scholars) ought to pay closer attention to the sense of exclusion among these less-educated and often anti-immigrant populations. Following the deterioration of living standards and social security in the aftermath of an economic crisis and years of austerity, a popular sense of suspicion, powerlessness, frustration and anger at the elites finds a convenient channel in the ‘refugee crisis’, and popular online news sites offer an opportunity for citizens to express themselves politically (cf. Pantti and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011).

Finally, despite the starkly diverging realities of Finland and Estonia as destinations for asylum seekers, the tabloid audiences’ anti-immigrant discourses manifested strong similarities. As a result, the two presidents had varying success in finding acceptance among their non-elite audiences. Niinistö demonstrated an astute capacity to align with ‘the people’, successfully channelling public fear and anger about asylum seekers against liberal internationalism and humanitarianism. In contrast, Ilves’ efforts in

Estonia to defend these principles were met with popular questioning of his legitimacy as ‘the people’s president’. The comparative approach of this study, therefore, indicates that common anti-elite and anti-immigrant discourses at the European level may be more influential in shaping national refugee debates than the actual number of asylum seekers in a given country. The strength of this anti-immigrant sentiment effectively restricts the capacity of pro-refugee politicians to gain traction with non-elite audiences. Similar studies on other countries may further illuminate the significance of national particularities vis-à-vis pan-European commonalities in the current refugee debate.

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