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# Performing 'us' and 'other': Intersectional analyses of right-wing populist media

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## Abstract

Finland and Sweden share the ideal of a Nordic welfare state, with gender equality as a central tenet. In both countries, right-wing populist parties have gained prominence in mainstream politics. Despite similar political agendas at the moment, these parties have different political histories, and different modes of expressing their anti-immigration pleas. In this comparative study, we examine how the distinction between 'us' and the 'other' is performed intersectionally in terms of gender, social class, ethnicity and 'race', and sexuality. For this purpose, we examine empirical material collected from the party newspapers of the Finns Party and the Sweden Democrats, because their content most closely reflects the ideological tenets of these parties. The chosen timeline stretches from 2007 until 2014 and entails the qualitative close reading of 16 issues of each newspaper. We evidence the dynamic between the intersectional analysis that fleshes out the reproduction of categories of difference, and the comparative analysis with its interest in temporal change and the resulting convergence between the two parties' ideologies. We conclude that, although the Finns Party previously had a more pronounced anti-elitist rhetoric and resorted to class-based antagonism as a means to garner electoral support, it subsequently moved closer to the anti-immigration agenda around issues of protecting national identity and the welfare state that has characterised the political

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platform of the Sweden Democrats over the past decade. This temporal awareness allowed us to document the Sweden Democrats' ideological consistency over the examined timeframe, emphasising the party's quest to rebuild the (Swedish) 'people's home' and to exclude the racialised Muslim 'other'.

### **Keywords**

close reading, Finland, intersectionality, right-wing populism, Sweden

## **Introduction**

Contemporary scholarship on right-wing populism focuses on the multiple identity constructions that articulate the native 'us' pitched against the migrant 'other' in populist rhetoric (Wodak, 2015). While ethnicity and racialisation are broadly discussed in research focusing on Northern Europe, more recent efforts evidence the intersections of ethnicity and 'race' with other 'categories of difference' (Crenshaw, 1989; Walby et al., 2012), such as gender and sexuality (Keskinen, 2013; Lähdesmäki and Saresma, 2014; Meret, 2015; Mulinari and Neergaard, 2014; Norocel, 2013; Petterson, 2017; Sager and Mulinari, 2018; Towns et al., 2014). These studies underline the complex interdependence between views on culture and nation, ethnicity, 'race', migration, social class, gender, and sexuality in populist reasoning. Nevertheless, mainstream political science scholarship theorising right-wing populism mainly acknowledges the disproportionate presence of men among these parties' rank-and-file and their supporters, thereby 'constantly disregard[ing] the importance of gender and interrelated axes of social structuring in the ideological constructions of identity' (Norocel, 2013: 34). Gender-blindness reifies a system of power relations that ignores the importance of analysing gendered hierarchies in social relations (Maiguashca, 2019).

To understand populist reasoning and its impact on culture, politics, and society, it is crucial to broaden the investigation to the meaning-making processes in which ethnicity, racialisation, and gender intersect other categories of difference and axes of power hierarchy. We identify two main reasons for such an approach. First, the ideologies of right-wing populist parties are underpinned by gendered and racialised constructions of national identity. Feminist research on nationalism has persuasively revealed the multi-layered engagement of women in national or ethnic identity constructions (Norocel, 2013; Towns et al., 2014; Yuval-Davis, 1997). In nationalist discourses, white (preferably blonde and blue-eyed) women are represented either as national symbols (such as the Finnish maiden in Finland, or Mother Svea in Sweden) or as more concrete carriers and transmitters of the nation's genetic lineage and cultural traditions. This raises the issue of racialisation in relation to reproduction. Second, our analysis concentrates on populist manifestations in two countries – Finland and Sweden – that are often presented as homogeneous epitomes of the 'women-friendly' Nordic welfare model, a specific context that brings added value to wider European comparisons (Wodak, 2015). The welfare systems in Finland and Sweden, constructed during a time when they were relatively racially homogeneous, strove to strengthen and broaden women's position and role in society more than elsewhere across Europe. Even today, this welfare model enjoys strong support in both countries. Consequently, while decrying the 'decline of

the welfare state' and claiming to represent the interests of 'ordinary' Finns or Swedes against the threat represented by allegedly uncontrolled migration, the two populist parties, despite their notably different ideological trajectories, are faced with the same pressure of living up to the gender equality ideals that are intimately tied to the Nordic welfare model (Kantola and Lombardo, 2019; Keskinen, 2013; Lähdesmäki and Saresma, 2014, 2019; Norocel, 2013, 2016b, 2017; Pettersson, 2017; Saresma, 2018). This notwithstanding, both parties approach issues of gender equality as a *fait accompli*, and deem themselves to be its most suitable defenders (for similar developments elsewhere, see Farris, 2017), although the Finns Party and Sweden Democrats draw on rather different premises in their gender politics.

This article aims to evidence the dynamic between the intersectional analysis that fleshes out the reproduction of categories of difference, and the comparative analysis with its interest in temporal change and the resulting convergence between the two parties' ideologies. As such, the research questions are: "How are the intersections between ethnicity and 'race', gender, and other categories of difference, such as social class, religion, and sexuality, articulated in the two party-affiliated newspapers in Finland and Sweden?"; "What kinds of subtle similarities and discrete differences pertain to the identity constructions of 'us' and 'other' in these newspapers?"; and "How do these change within the timeframe of our study?"

We suggest that, during the analysed timeline (2007–2014), there is a clear ideological transformation of these parties, as they become increasingly similar. To map out this ideological convergence, which remains relatively understudied, we focus on the development of the official political line as expressed by the party newspapers: *Perussuomalainen* for the Finns Party, and *SD-Kuriren* for the Sweden Democrats. In total, we analysed 16 issues of each newspaper. We chose to analyse the party newspapers rather than other related media because their content most closely reflects the ideological tenets of these parties. The social media articulation of populist ideologies, including the transnational networking of right-wing populist mobilisation connecting misogyny and white supremacy, is well documented (Hatakka, 2019; Horsti and Nikunen, 2013; Nikunen, 2015; Pettersson, 2020). In contrast, this article focuses on party newspapers, and enriches our understanding of the intersections between categories of difference in, and transformation of, the official party rhetoric of the Finns Party in comparison to that of the Sweden Democrats that have not previously been studied systematically.

The article is organised into five sections. First, we introduce the two parties, and explain their development against their respective societal contexts. We then present the conceptual framework, and after that we detail the selection of empirical material and the methodological choices. In the following section, we analyse the performative construction of 'us' and 'other' from an intersectional perspective. The analysis is further detailed by identifying several thematic categories, which are discussed in relation to the intersecting categories of 'us' and 'other'. We then contextualise the findings, discussing the similarities and differences between these identity constructions in the two cases, and considering the strengths and complexities offered by intersectional analyses. The conclusion integrates our findings into the wider scholarship, and indicates possible avenues for further research.

## Right-wing populist parties in Finland and Sweden

The Finns Party (*Perussuomalaiset/ Sannfinländarna*) was established in 1995 on the foundations of a moribund agrarian populist party. Polling close to 18 per cent in the 2015 elections, after its major political breakthrough in 2011, the party joined the right-wing government coalition. For a while, this seemed to have a rather negative impact on its support (Kantola and Lombardo, 2019: 1112). Despite having undergone a dramatic leadership change, in the 2019 elections the party achieved a similar result. As the Finns Party has gathered politicians with diverse interests and views, scholars have identified two significant factions: the agrarian conservatives and the radical anti-immigration wing (Jungar, 2016; Mickelsson, 2011; Norocel, 2016a; Palonen and Saresma, 2017; Pernaa and Railo, 2012; Pettersson, 2020; Pyrhönen, 2015; Ylä-Anttila and Ylä-Anttila, 2015). Ideologically, the older faction gathered around former chairman Timo Soini (1997–2017), and combined moral conservatism, left-wing social and income distribution politics, and strong populist anti-establishment appeal, critical of the political consensus dominating Finnish political culture (Saresma, 2017). The moral conservatism of this faction was underpinned by a narrow definition of the nuclear family, traditional gender roles, and opposition to marriage and adoption rights for same-sex couples. Immigration was not a prevalent theme for this faction. The other faction, led by the current leader Jussi Halla-aho, is decidedly right wing and focuses on opposing multiculturalism and migration, liberal urban values, and climate-change ‘hysteria’. This double-edged agenda has caused tensions within the party (Pettersson, 2020). In our opinion, an ideological shift has taken place, as the latter faction gained prominence over the former, which culminated in the 2017 dramatic change of party chair.

The Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*) was founded in 1988 through a merger of several neo-Nazi organisations and groups belonging to the white power movement (Hellström, 2016: 39; Jungar and Jupskås, 2014: 221). Since the mid-1990s, the party has gradually abandoned its outright racist stance and extremist views. This ideological whitewashing allowed the party to gain a foothold in mainstream politics. In the 2014 elections, the party became the third largest in Swedish politics, polling close to 13 per cent. The support for the party increased in the 2018 elections, to 17.5 per cent, consolidating its position as the country’s third largest party.

While vehemently critical of the political establishment, the Sweden Democrats attempt to present itself as the legitimate representative of the Swedish native majority, walking the thin line between radical anti-immigration appeals, and outright extremist racist stances. Upon closer inspection, however, researchers find evidence of a certain paradox in how the Sweden Democrats articulate the distinctive identities of native Swedes, and their immediate ‘others’ (Elgenius and Rydgren, 2019; Hellström, 2016; Mulinari and Neergaard, 2014; Norocel, 2013, 2016b; Towns et al., 2014). The party claims to be defending a Swedish national identity construction that rests on social-conservative foundations within the welfare state (such as the emphasis on traditional family values, and the denunciation of emancipatory feminist politics); this is nonetheless underpinned by a discourse that instrumentally integrates both gender equality and, at times, even some rights for same-sex couples into Swedish identity.

Despite the rather different historical legacies and national specificity of these two parties, several researchers have argued that, at a wider regional level, the Finns Party and the Sweden Democrats are part of a Nordic ‘right-wing populist party family’, characterised by social conservatism, authoritarian tendencies, and socio-economic centrism in the context of a strong welfare state (Jungar, 2016; Jungar and Jupskås, 2014; Ylä-Anttila and Ylä-Anttila, 2015). To date, however, research into the right-wing populist ideological constructions of national identities has mainly concentrated on analyses of either the Finns Party (see Keskinen, 2013, 2016; Lähdesmäki and Saresma, 2014; Pettersson, 2020; Saresma, 2017), or the Sweden Democrats (see Elgenius and Rydgren, 2019; Mulinari and Neergaard, 2014; Norocel, 2013, 2016b, 2017; Towns et al., 2014). There are not many studies comparing these constructions in Finland and Sweden, and they usually display a rather narrow focus on the matter. Some of these studies focus, for instance, on the ideological dilemmas manifest in political blogging (Pettersson, 2017, 2020; Sakki and Pettersson, 2016), national identity constructions (Pyrhönen, 2015), or the construction of white masculinities in the discourses of the two parties (Norocel et al., 2020). Some previous studies have explored the complex linkages between gender equality, women’s rights, and populism (Askola, 2017; Mulinari and Neergaard, 2014; Sager and Mulinari, 2018), albeit not comparatively.

We intend to contribute to this growing field of research by means of a nuanced comparative cultural study, which analyses the identity constructions of ‘us’ and ‘other’ at the intersection of several categories of difference (gender, social class, ethnicity and ‘race’, religion, and sexuality). Our research design is also motivated by the fact that, although today these parties share many similar ideological tenets, their different historical backgrounds vary to the extent that it is even questioned whether the Finns Party under Timo Soini’s leadership should be labelled a right-wing populist party (Palonen and Saresma, 2017). However, they both relate to the societal context of the ‘women-friendly’ welfare model that characterises these two Nordic countries. In addition, our research is interdisciplinary, employing in our analysis of the political rhetoric a qualitative method originating in literary studies alongside the perspective of performative intersectionality originating in gender studies, and relying on a strong contextual cultural understanding to explain the similarities and differences between these two Nordic case studies.

## Theoretical and conceptual background

Populism is an ambivalent notion due to its terminological vagueness and ideological plurality, and is contingent upon the various cultural, historical, and political contexts in which it is studied (Jansen, 2011: 78–81; Mudde, 2007: 11–31). In Europe, the term populism usually has negative connotations: the populist appeal is concomitantly black-and-white yet diffuse; it shuns difference, offers simplified explanations, and unites by means of strong exclusions. Some scholars have emphasised the importance of rhetoric for populism (Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2013; Vainikkala, 2015; Wodak, 2015): rhetoric constructs and mobilises populist movements – among which, political parties are of interest here – and is thus aesthetic and performative (Moffitt, 2016). Populist rhetoric is often described as relying on affective and metaphorical language, polarisation, simplification, and stereotyping (Laclau, 2005; Norocel, 2013; Thévenot, 2011). A common

denominator among the otherwise diverse parties is that they all refer to ‘the people’ as a point of reference: populism can only be defined by the articulation of a ‘discourse of the people’ (Elgenius and Rydgren, 2019; Hellström, 2016; Mudde, 2007). In populist rhetoric, the people as a concept – whether understood as ordinary people separate from the ruling elites, or as members of an ethnically and racially defined national community distinct from other communities in the country – is extremely flexible and changes according to contingent rhetorical aims (Moffitt, 2016). Nevertheless, the concept is built upon an antagonism that separates ‘us’ (the people) from ‘others’ with the help of discrete identity criteria determining the contours of the people and those who are excluded from it, based on either ethnicity or class (Hellström, 2016; Wiberg, 2011), as well as gender and sexuality (Lähdesmäki and Saresma, 2014, 2019; Norocel, 2013).

Intersectionality, then, enables us to flesh out the interdependence between categories of gender, social class, ethnicity, ‘race’, and sexuality that are constitutive of simultaneous and mutually shaping systems of difference and inequality (Crenshaw, 1989; Karkulehto et al., 2012; Walby et al., 2012). Put simply, ethnicity and ‘race’ consolidate national identity by distinguishing between a homogeneous ‘people’ – who inhabit a territory for a period of time long enough to develop a sense of cultural distinctiveness, by means of particular customs and traditions – and an unfamiliar ‘other’. Whiteness, manifested here mainly as ethnic homogeneity, rests on a traditional understanding of the family as a social institution that reproduces – physically and symbolically – the ‘people’. This alleged ethnic homogeneity builds on the racialisation of the ‘other’, while positioning intrinsic whiteness as the normative category. In our analysis, we understand racialisation and, more specifically, whiteness as a process that enables racial domination (Norocel et al., 2020: 429). The traditional family is in turn ruled by heterosexual norms concerning the hierarchical gender binary, which posits men’s primacy and sexuality and confirms the conception and rearing of offspring as the exclusive prerogative of a relationship between a man and a woman (Yuval-Davis, 1997). Intersectionality highlights how different identity categories are (hierarchically) interrelated. It explains the continuously mutating relationship between gender and other categories; this brings forth an imperative to understand the workings of intersectional differences as performative.

Performativity is understood here as the constant reiteration of expressions that constitute and confirm one’s identity (for instance, one’s gender identity is construed through the reiteration of certain culturally marked meanings whereby an individual becomes intelligible as female or male) (Butler, 1995, 2004; thus somewhat different from Moffitt, 2016). Employing the concept of performative intersectionality (Karkulehto et al., 2012), we strive to cross-pollinate theoretical constructions specific to the disciplines in which we are based – cultural studies, political science, and gender and literary studies – in acknowledging the centrality of ‘race’ and gender in intertwining power structures, politics, and representations of national identity (Crenshaw, 1989; Yuval-Davis, 1997). Performative intersectionality requires an interdisciplinary research perspective that enables transgression of the division into structural, political, and representational intersectionality that Crenshaw (1989) originally discusses. Here, performative intersectionality is operationalised as a tool to analyse how the positions of power – that is, whiteness and masculinity – intersect in the production and circulation of the subordinate racialised and gendered ‘others’.

## Material and method

Right-wing populist parties and their political claims are commonly dealt with in both broadsheet and tabloid media from various angles and in diverse discursive contexts. However, it is the parties' own media that enable the framing they themselves prefer to deliver. In official party newspapers, besides the articulation of the party's ideological tenets, even personalised opinion pieces are carefully curated to support the official party line. This differs from the use of social media accounts by various party members, which are communication channels that emphasise individualised agency and self-representation. As such, the parties' own presentations of their agendas and their internal ideological assessments and clarifications are best expressed in these newspapers, wherein they can explain their ideological tenets and core political endeavours at length. This takes place especially during elections, which can be easily recognised from the increased length of the newspapers and the type of articles included in them (Norocel, 2013: 89). These newspapers thus function as a platform via which the ideological meaning of, and the distinction between, 'us' and 'others' are articulated through language. In addition, these newspapers serve a dual purpose: to strengthen political solidarity among the party's rank-and-file, and to attract electoral supporters among the wider public who might share the same concerns as the party, thereby consolidating the position of right-wing populist parties in national politics. Indeed, both *Perussuomalainen* and *SD-Kuriren* have published extended election issues, in which they present their party's political agenda. In addition, key party figures and candidates gave tangible consistency and a 'voice' to these matters in various articles and advertisements. The newspapers include a wide variety of texts, typically authored by the party's parliamentary representatives, key members of the central organisations and local sections of the parties, and editors of the party newspapers. As well as print versions, the party newspapers are also available online – both *Perussuomalainen* and *SD-Kuriren* since 2004. In the timeframe of this study, *Perussuomalainen* has published between 12 and 16 issues per year, while *SD-Kuriren* has produced 10 to 11 issues per year.

Our data gathering and analysis were undertaken in two steps. First, we collected three issues of each newspaper preceding and one in the aftermath of the national parliamentary elections (2007 and 2011 in Finland, and 2010 and 2014 in Sweden) and the EU Parliamentary elections (2009 and 2014), totalling 16 issues of *Perussuomalainen*, and 16 of *SD-Kuriren*. Due to their proximity to elections, in these issues the political programmes of the respective parties were clearly outlined, and the construction and positioning of identities within the parties' discourses, as well the definitions of 'us' and 'other', were clearly discernible. Second, the selected issues were carefully read to identify all articles that dealt with gender, as part of both the Nordic welfare model and the intersectional construction of 'us' and 'other'. Gender was initially chosen as a primary analytical category but, bearing in mind its dynamic intersection with other identity categories, we repeatedly re-read the texts, also paying attention to how ethnicity and 'race' are discussed in relation to gender, as well as references to social class, religion, and sexuality. As performative intersectionality emphasises the ongoing process of co-production of identity categories within the webs of power and subordination (Karkulehto et al., 2012), we did not classify the material rigidly; rather, we left it open for contextual



interpretation and hermeneutic re-interpretation, understanding meaning-making as a continuous process, including for us as researchers. At this stage, in addition to identifying the above-mentioned intersectional identity categories in the texts, sets of key conceptions, main topics of discussion, recurring themes and tropes, and other lexical constructions related to them were identified in both newspapers, and the preliminary findings were discussed within the research team, to adjust and clarify the analytical focus. The conceptions, topics, themes, and tropes are discussed in detail below.

Altogether, 130 texts from the party newspapers formed the empirical basis of the study. These texts (50 from *Perussuomalainen*, and 80 from *SD-Kuriren*) were analysed by employing a qualitative close reading. This approach employs a broad category of interpretative explorations that enable researchers to carry out detailed analyses of phenomena at semantic, structural, representational, and socio-cultural levels. This methodological approach originates in literary studies, where it is associated with New Criticism (DuBois, 2003: 2); in this context, close reading entails the ‘mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view to deeper understanding of its meanings’ (Brummett, 2010: 3). It has been subsequently employed in the social sciences (Gallop, 2007: 183–184), wherein the context surrounding the analysed empirical material is also considered. Close reading entails an interpretative and hermeneutically-oriented analysis of empirical material with the intent of providing a critical understanding of the meaning, power, and functioning of the collected data from a given theoretical standpoint. We employed close reading to shed light on the performative intersectionality at work in the construction of differences in right-wing populist rhetoric.

In our approach, we made use of a comparative reading of the empirical material so as to flesh out the similarities and discrete differences between our chosen cases. The close reading was conducted as interactive teamwork in which the remarks and interpretations of the articulations in the material were constantly discussed and jointly structured into meaningful units. Members of the research team read all the texts to identify the similarities and differences in the articulation of identities and positions, while others scrutinised these articulations in context in order to deepen the interpretation of the intersectional meaning-making process. We regularly compared our findings, and returned to reading the empirical data, following the core idea of a hermeneutic interpretation process, and discussed the validity of our interpretations in the respective textual, discursive, and social contexts. Clearly, our interpretation process was influenced by our own identity positions within the examined contexts. Although our research team shares many similar positions – all of us being white, highly educated European scholars approaching our topic from the point of view of intersectional feminism – we are also different in terms of nationality, gender, sexuality, cultural background, family status, mother tongue, and disciplinary identity. As such, the research process entailed reflexivity towards our own interpretations and negotiation of a common viewpoint.

From our close reading, we discerned several gender-related concepts that were used in the construction of ‘us’ and ‘other’ in our empirical data. This resulted in the identification of three core themes – equality, welfare state, and traditional values (as a discrete cue for religious affiliation) – through which the construction of ‘us’ and ‘other’ took place. Although we present the results of our analysis in a thematic manner, these themes are fluid and frequently overlap in the analysed data.

## Analysis of empirical data

### *The performative constructions of 'us' and 'other' in Perussuomalainen*

In the analysed empirical material, the identity constructions of 'us' and 'other' appear to be tightly interwoven and interdependent, perhaps unsurprisingly since the concept of 'us' can crystallise only in relation to some exterior 'other'. In the Finnish case, the populist black-and-white antithetic distinction between 'us' and 'other' stands out clearly in the pages of *Perussuomalainen*. A recurring trope emphasises antagonism between the privileged and underprivileged, tapping into the party's support among disgruntled working-class Finns (Jungar, 2016; Pyrhönen, 2015; Suhonen, 2013; Ylä-Anttila and Ylä-Anttila, 2015). In addition to the working class, this antagonism is reflected in the repeated appeals to other underprivileged groups, such as 'the elderly', 'single parents', and 'students', as the genuine and hard-working (Finnish) people who support the Finnish welfare state. At the other extreme, the elite 'others' are those 'stinking rich' in the cities, who are obsessed with acquiring profit at any cost, and ruthlessly exploit common Finns (*Perussuomalainen*, issue 1/2007: 13, issue 2/2007: 11, issue 4/2007: 6). It is precisely these notably gender-neutral 'ordinary Finns' whom the Finns Party proclaims to speak for and defend, although their agenda is presented as a wider national project 'for the good of all people throughout the country' (*Perussuomalainen*, issue 1/2007: 3).

Another means to describe the native 'us' in the Finnish empirical material is to intersect the idea of antagonism between the privileged and underprivileged with appeals to the past. This is achieved by evidencing among ordinary Finns the 'veterans [men who fought] in our wars' and 'the women [who fought] on the home front', and the hardworking 'peasants and crofters' who are the base of the country (*Perussuomalainen*, issue 2/2007: 3, issue 6/2009: 20, issue 7/2009: 16, issue 7/2014: 21). The class dimension in the construction and mobilisation of Finnish veterans is foregrounded in the empirical material through blaming the elites for ignoring their sacrifice. The hard-won Finnish independence, along with the welfare state that was painstakingly built after the Second World War, are deemed to be at risk of being sold cheaply, as politicians and 'international large-scale businessmen and extreme capitalists' (*Perussuomalainen*, issue 1/2007: 10) worship money and willingly submit to the 'tyranny of the European Union' (*Perussuomalainen*, issue 1/2007: 10), and the 'opulent option hunters, and extravagant spenders in the EU' (*Perussuomalainen*, issue 1/2007: 13). Even the Finns Party chair, Soini, describes in his column the elite 'others' as 'option speculators, the big money men, the homeland and EU bureaucrats, the machine millionaires and the cognac drinkers' (*Perussuomalainen*, issue 2/2007: 3).

This notwithstanding, the distinction between the common people and the elites is frequently blurred in *Perussuomalainen* by the implicit understanding that this class-based antagonism is nonetheless subordinated to a wider identity construction: that of the Finnish nation and their homeland. Consequently, the political project of the Finns Party is not to 'pit Finns against each other, rather to enable both well-paid and low-income, both pensioners and students, to feel they are in the same boat, heading for a democratic and equitable society' (*Perussuomalainen*, issue 1/2007: 13). Performing homogeneity

in the name of the Finnish nation, with gender equality as an essential part of Finnish self-understanding (Lähdesmäki and Saresma, 2014), presupposes dispelling all kinds of gender differences. A case in point is the performative intersectionality of the Finnish veteran. Indeed, the collective effort of the Second World War, during which Finland fought two bitter wars against the Soviet Union, has been consistently celebrated as a critical reconciliation point, marking the end of the polarisation between the conservative centre-right ‘Whites’ and the radical-left ‘Reds’ in the Finnish Civil War of 1918. The figure of the veteran is used in *Perussuomalainen* with a dual purpose: to muffle gender inequality – by emphasising the efforts of both men *and* women in the war – and, later, to consolidate national solidarity against Muslim ‘others’.

In this context, the importance of gender and social class as identity categories is downplayed, while a stronger emphasis is put on ethnicity, ‘race’, and religion as defining categories of difference between ‘us’ and the migrant ‘others’ (Keskinen, 2013; Lähdesmäki and Saresma, 2014, 2019). If welcoming migrants and embracing multiculturalism is initially criticised as a short-sighted strategy (*Perussuomalainen*, issue 1/2007: 13), while the Halla-aho faction consolidated its position in the party, this is replaced with appeals for an increasingly restrictive stance on the matter. Migrants are portrayed as an economic strain on the welfare state and bearers of Islamic religious extremism, and the party demands, for instance, that Syrian refugees be helped locally in the Middle East, while simultaneously demanding drastic cuts in Finnish development aid (*Perussuomalainen*, issue 3/2014: 9, issue 6/2014: 20, issue 7/2014: 14–15).

The themes of equality (nonetheless not specified as gender equality), the welfare state, and traditional values, which we have identified in the Finnish empirical data, are blended together, and condition one another when describing the relationship between the men and women constituting the Finnish ‘us’. Gender equality is proclaimed an inseparable part of the Finnish welfare system, and feminist politics are deemed unnecessary (see also, Keskinen, 2013; Pettersson, 2017; Sakki and Pettersson, 2016). The type of equality defining the inner native core actually reproduces the essentialist ‘natural complementarity’ between men and women within the traditional Finnish family – acknowledging the importance of both parents in family matters, albeit with a clear division of roles based upon Lutheran teachings – at the level of the whole nation (Norocel et al., 2020; Pettersson, 2017). Consequently, the constant stating of rank-and-file party members’ marital status, the regular column by a Lutheran priest in the newspaper along with abundant biblical references, and an insistence on the complementarity of the party’s women’s organisation to the wider party structures suggest that the Finns Party aims to portray itself as a constitutive part of the identity construct of the (Lutheran) ‘us’ (Finns) (*Perussuomalainen*, issue 4/2007: 10, elections issue /2011: 10, issue 4/2011: 10–12).

On the other hand, traditional values appear to trump equality as the defining theme for the native ‘us’. There is an explicit resistance to legally acknowledging forms of marriage and parenthood that are not narrowly based on the traditional (Finnish) family. Most distinctive is opposing the adoption of children within same-sex couples – to ensure that parental rights are guaranteed to both partners. Such a possibility is described as an inherent threat to the rights of the biological parents, particularly positing a dangerous challenge to the father’s rights to his progeny (*Perussuomalainen*, issue 6/2009: 11). Procreation in general is a very sensitive topic, and the party’s youth organisation argues

that infertility treatments, as welfare services, should be exclusively restricted to (Finnish) heterosexual couples (*Perussuomalainen*, issue 1/2007: 16). The strong emphasis on ‘equality for all’ and the simultaneous denial of any power imbalance between men and women, which was prevalent in the analysed material, changed over time. During Soini’s chairmanship, the gender question was largely ignored, and the rhetoric was strikingly gender neutral, even when addressing such groups as single parents and ‘those taking care of close relatives’, although the majority of these are women.

Mirroring the growing importance of the anti-immigration agenda as the Halla-aho faction amassed more power in the party, in the analysed material the figure of oppressed (genderless), poor (Finnish) people gives way to the idea that there is a need to discuss gender equality in the context of immigration because this equality is allegedly threatened by a foreign ‘other’ through misguided multicultural policies (Askola, 2017).

### *The performative constructions of ‘us’ and ‘other’ in SD-Kuriren*

In the Swedish case, in the pages of *SD-Kuriren* too, the antagonistic black-and-white differentiation between ‘us’ and ‘other’ is clearly contoured, albeit in a different key. A recurring trope in the analysed material is the imperative to restore to its former glory the Swedish welfare system, also known as the (Swedish) ‘people’s home’ (*folkhem*), which hinged on the idea of a collective effort by the (implicitly homogeneous) Swedish people to engineer a model equalitarian society (Norocel, 2016b: 375–376, 2017: 95–96). *SD-Kuriren* demanded the return to a homogeneous society built on ‘common values’, a mark of welfare chauvinism in a nostalgic key (for a detailed discussion, see Elgenius and Rydgren, 2019; Norocel, 2013, 2016b, 2017). The slogan ‘give us back Sweden!’ epitomises the party’s claim to be a responsible political force – in stark contrast to the political establishment, both left and right, which is deemed to have misused its position of power – and the sole defender of Swedish national identity, at a time of growing ethnic diversity in the country. Trying to divert attention from the party’s neo-Nazi origins, the Sweden Democrats claim instead to have a solid ‘cultural nationalist foundation with social-conservative elements’. Put simply, the party wants to be perceived as a true ‘friend of Sweden’, defender of the (Swedish) ‘people’s home’ (*SD-Kuriren*, issue 82/2009: 10, issue 85/2010: 7, issue 86/2010: 3; 6, issue 112–113/2014: 18–27). The performative intersectionality of the ‘people’s home’ is articulated by means of ethnicity and ‘race’ as key identity categories, which fuse together the themes of equality, the welfare state, and traditional values. More clearly, the ‘uncontrolled immigration’ of the past couple of decades, as *SD-Kuriren* labels it, posits a deadly threat to the ‘proud welfare society’, which was built on the foundations of a common Swedish culture and shared traditions and values. Particular anxiety surrounds the figure of the (non-European) racialised Muslim ‘other’. It is worth noting that religion is employed here as a category of difference inasmuch as it identifies the ‘other’ as Muslim. Lutheran Christianity is not in itself a defining aspect of the native ‘us’; rather, it is a constitutive part of ‘Swedish culture’ and ‘Swedish traditions’, confirming the strong secular attitudes in Swedish society (*SD-Kuriren*, issue 86/2010: 2–4, issue 87(elections issue)/2010: 3–5; 10; 12).

The other identity categories – namely, social class and gender – seem to lend support to a polarised construction of the Swedish ‘us’, as distinct from the Muslim ‘other’. The two categories are nevertheless given different weight during the process of identity construction. For example, the opposition between ‘the people’ and ‘elites’ is not so much a class-based antagonism as a means to underline the ethnic and ‘racial’ particularity of the natives, an aspect indicative of the party’s decidedly right-wing leaning (Elgenius and Rydgren, 2019; Mulinari and Neergaard, 2014; Norocel, 2013, 2016b, 2017). It also draws on the concept of ‘internal enemies’ – academics, ‘green-leftist politicians’ and ‘pro-migration activists’, who supposedly open up the borders too widely (for the Finnish context, see Ylä-Anttila et al., 2019: 3–4; it is noteworthy here that, as they aptly suggest, this discourse has gained prominence in the Finns Party discourse mainly since 2015, although it was strikingly absent before, as described above). Indeed, the Swedish elites – ‘multiculturalists, Sweden-haters, EU-federalists’ (*SD-Kuriren*, issue 87/2010: 5) – are repeatedly accused of failing to safeguard the ‘people’s home’, betraying the needs and interests of ‘common Swedes’, and instead willingly submitting to the demands of migrants and remote EU institutions. These elites are criticised, among other things, for: ensuring equal access to welfare provision for both natives and migrants, which is depicted as placing a serious financial strain on the Swedish welfare system, impacting negatively upon the most vulnerable among natives: pensioners, children, and the unemployed; enforcing non-discriminatory and affirmative action policies, which are described as actively discriminating against Swedish natives by giving ‘their jobs’ to ‘immigrants’; and promoting cultural accommodation policies, which are portrayed as aggression against Sweden’s Christian cultural heritage that invites cultural clashes, Islamic religious radicalism, and honour killings (*SD-Kuriren*, issue 81/2009: 6, issue 85/2010: 4; 7; 16, issue 86/2010: 3, issue 110/2014: 6, issue 112–113/2014: 18–27, issue 114/2014: 12–13).

Gender – as an identity category – unlike social class, plays a key role in separating the native ‘us’ from the ‘other’, in the sense of consolidating the trope of progressive and ‘gender-equal Swedes’ versus violently backward and patriarchal ‘others’ (Mulinari and Neergaard, 2014; Norocel, 2013, 2017; Sager and Mulinari, 2018; Towns et al., 2014). Gender equality is regarded in the pages of *SD-Kuriren* as a cherished value within the safe enclosure of ‘people’s homes’, and Muslim ‘mass migration’ is described in the Swedish empirical material as a direct threat to the Swedish way of life, bringing with it honour killings, female genital mutilation, religiously sanctioned violence against women, gang rapes, and homophobia (*SD-Kuriren*, issue 80/2009: 13, issue 82/2009: 9; 13, issue 85/2010: 3; 19, issue 87/2010: 10, issue 111/2014: 3, issue 112–113/2014: 18–27). Gender equality in this context is more than the cornerstone of Swedish society, it becomes a sign of visionary progressiveness and moral superiority, which we interpret as the right-wing populist take on the widely shared idea in Sweden of the country being an international ‘moral superpower’.

Although gender equality is presented as a constitutive attribute of the native ‘us’, when compared to the Muslim ‘other’, feminism and emancipatory politics in general are deemed unnecessary, if not outright dangerous to the traditional Swedish family (Norocel, 2013, 2016b; Pettersson, 2017; Sakki and Pettersson, 2016; Towns et al., 2014). In turn, the party’s view of gender equality rests on a specific interpretation of

'difference feminism', which provides an essentialist understanding of the differences between men and women as 'natural' and thus requiring a differentiation of men and women's roles in society. This naturalised distinction is most clearly at work in positioning the nuclear family, consisting of a (preponderantly) male breadwinner and a woman 'choosing to be a stay-at-home mother', as a defining feature of Swedish identity. This reverberates with the Sweden Democrat's commitment to ensure 'a child's right to a mother and a father', thereby conflicting with women's extensive abortion rights. The party consequently describes abortion both as women's failure towards their families, and as a betrayal of their duty towards the Swedish nation. It also opposes equal marriage rights and even more so adoption rights for same-sex couples (*SD-Kuriren*, issue 80/2009: 2; 13, election issue/2009: 2, issue 82/2009: 2; 15, issue 110/2014: 20, issue 112–113/2014: 14; 17).

### *Similarities and differences between the two cases*

There are several common traits in the manner of constructing national identities in the Finnish and Swedish cases, particularly in the broad strokes of what marks the distinction between the native 'us' and the menacing 'others'. Both *Perussuomalainen* and *SD-Kuriren* proclaim their attachment to national identity construction and defence of their homeland, tying these tightly to the institutions of the nuclear family, heterosexual marriage, and biological parenthood. In this context, the welfare state becomes an inextricable component in cementing the internal and exclusive solidarity among the native 'us', while Christianity further consolidates the discrete distinction between the true builders and rightful owners of the welfare state and the 'other'. In the Finns Party case, this 'other', before Halla-aho's leadership, was the economic and administrative elite: politicians, businesspeople, option hunters, and EU bureaucrats, whereas for the Sweden Democrats, the other is more specifically the racialised Muslim migrant. In a sense, however, the slogan 'home, religion, and fatherland' sums up the populist rhetoric in both Finland and Sweden, although these aspects are given different weights in the construction of their respective national identities.

Taking a closer look at the differences between the two cases, we argue that they manifest in the distinct ways in which the 'us' is performed in opposition to the 'other', rather than in the presence of diverging themes. More clearly, in *Perussuomalainen* the main identity trope is that of the Finnish national independence that was successfully defended through war. This idealises the veterans and lends legitimacy to the Finns Party, which claims to be the only political force defending the veterans' place within the Finnish welfare state. Women are also included among the veterans (having been responsible for the 'home front'), a position we attribute to the Finns Party's attempt to address gender equality by dismissing it as a non-issue – in the Finnish empirical material it simply means complementarity between Finnish women and men. In relation to this, the country's agricultural past and the legacy of Lutheran Christianity as the state religion are presented as essential aspects of the Finnish 'us'. Religion and traditional values are themes that gain salience over the examined timeline; the discussion about multiculturalism and religious diversity is initially more cautious and moderate than in Sweden, but later it becomes increasingly xenophobic, eventually depicting racialised Muslim

migrants as a potential threat to Finnish identity. These developments reflect the struggle for supremacy between the two factions within the Finns Party, with the right-wing anti-immigration faction strengthening and advancing its positions over the period analysed. Although our empirical material coincides with the time when the party was led by Soini, who emphasised economic equality and traditional values instead of migration, we can trace how the anti-immigration faction was already gradually gaining a foothold in the newspaper after the electoral victory of 2011. In the aftermath of those elections, the party received substantial subsidies for communication, and *Perussuomalainen* recruited a new editor-in-chief, Matias Turkkila, who was the founder of the anti-immigration Internet platform *Hommaforum*, a member of the nationalist organisation *Suomen Sisä*, and the campaign manager of Jussi Halla-aho (YLE, 2012). After his recruitment, the anti-immigration discourse in the party newspaper, previously almost non-existent, grew in prominence.

In contrast, in *SD-Kuriren* the most important trope is that of rebuilding the (Swedish) ‘people’s home’ for its rightful owners: the Swedish people. The Sweden Democrats claim political legitimacy as defenders of an idealised and sanitised version of the ‘people’s home’, unhesitatingly identifying racialised Muslim migrants as the absolute ‘others’, the single most important threat to Swedish identity. Proclaiming Swedish cultural superiority over the ‘other’ is an example of thinly veiled xenophobic rhetoric, an attempt by the Sweden Democrats to address the persistent accusations of racism that have followed the party ever since its foundation. In *SD-Kuriren*, women’s rights and gender equality issues are decisively more salient than in the pages of *Perussuomalainen*. This is perhaps the most striking difference between the two newspapers. In *Perussuomalainen*, the theme of equality is discussed not as gender equality, but rather in terms of wealth distribution and social justice among Finns. As such, the emphasis is on the demarcation lines between ‘us’ and ‘other’ that separate the urban from the rural, the economically well-off from the deprived, and the EU elite from common Finns, whereas gender is seldom mentioned, and ‘race’ is discussed even less.

In contrast to *Perussuomalainen*’s apparent gender-neutrality, in *SD-Kuriren* equality means explicitly and solely gender equality, a shared Swedish value that is allegedly threatened by the racialised Muslim migrant ‘others’. The discussion of women’s rights and feminism, almost absent in *Perussuomalainen*, is vivid in *SD-Kuriren*; the rights of Swedish women are described as being in need of protection from the threat posed by Islamisation, and feminism provokes reactions of explicit suspicion and attack (see also Farris, 2017). This is starkly different from *Perussuomalainen*, in which feminism as a subject was only brought into the discussion by the rising right-wing faction of the party after 2014 (see Askola, 2017; Saresma, 2018). Interestingly, under the reign of Halla-aho, *Perussuomalainen* has adopted a more radicalised take on gender issues and feminism, more akin to *SD-Kuriren*, expressing an anti-feminist and homophobic agenda to the extent that gender politics has indeed become a bone of contention in the most recent developments within the party.

Through the biological and cultural reproduction of the nation, women are depicted as an essential part of Swedish national identity construction, separating the morally superior natives from the retrogressive and patriarchal Muslim ‘other’. This does not, however, entail improving women’s rights in Swedish society. On the contrary, since gender

equality is confirmed as a deep-rooted value of the (Swedish) ‘people’s home’, all further feminist emancipatory efforts may only endanger the already achieved equality between the genders, which is understood as a relation of strict complementarity. Unlike the Finnish case, in the pages of *SD-Kuriren* religion becomes important as a means to individualise the ‘other’ as Muslim, and thus racially and ethnically different from native Swedes, rather than a category of difference in its own right, being amalgamated into the generic category of traditional Swedish values and customs.

While both newspapers perform populism through their polarising and simplifying rhetoric, the label ‘right wing’ or ‘radical right’ does not easily describe the Finns Party during Soini’s chairmanship, as we have demonstrated. Rather, the Finns Party clearly continued the ideological line of the party upon whose ruins it was founded: the Finnish Rural Party (*Suomen maaseudun puolue/ Finlands landsbygdsparti*), which represented the interests of farmers and low-income agricultural workers. Consequently, in the pages of *Perussuomalainen*, anti-immigration tropes become visible only in the aftermath of the 2011 elections. There might have been more differences than similarities in the rhetoric of the two newspapers in the past. During the analysed timeframe, however, these differences were being replaced by growing similarities in how both *Perussuomalainen* and *SD-Kuriren* constructed Muslim migrants as harbingers of Islamisation and women’s oppression by means of femonationalist discourses, while concomitantly attacking feminist endeavours to further gender equality as signs of betraying the native ‘us’ from within (Askola, 2017; Farris, 2017; Sager and Mulinari, 2018).

## Conclusion

Our study emphasises the core role played by party newspapers in understanding the identity construction of the native ‘us’, and its antagonistic relation to ‘others’ within the political rhetoric of two increasingly right-wing Nordic populist parties. Paying attention to the temporal aspect, we demonstrated the ideological transformation that the Finns Party has undergone as the radical right-wing anti-immigration faction gradually gained prominence in the party. The polarisation of ‘us’ and ‘them’ in *Perussuomalainen* during the analysed period differs significantly from the current state. During Soini’s chairmanship, the official party discourse emphasised the distinction between ‘us’, the (Finnish) people, and the ‘others’, the rich and distant elite. As Halla-aho gradually gained control over the party, the ‘other’ increasingly became defined as the racialised migrant (Pettersson, 2020; Saresma, 2018; Ylä-Anttila et al., 2019). We can conclude that, although the Finns Party previously employed a more pronounced anti-elitist rhetoric and resorted to class-based antagonism as a means to garner electoral support, it subsequently moved closer to the anti-immigration agenda around issues of protecting national identity and the welfare state, which have characterised the political platform of the Sweden Democrats over the past decade.

This temporal awareness allowed us to document the Sweden Democrats’ ideological consistency over the examined timeline, with *SD-Kuriren* emphasising the party’s quest to rebuild the (Swedish) ‘people’s home’ and to exclude the racialised Muslim ‘other’ (Elgenius and Rydgren, 2019; Mulinari and Neergaard, 2014; Norocel, 2013, 2016b) Another conclusion concerns *SD-Kuriren*’s contribution, from its position of



party newspaper, to the consolidation of an increasingly negative stance on migration in Swedish society. Indeed, in reaction to the country's inability to singlehandedly address the 2015 humanitarian refugee crisis, most of the established political parties, with few exceptions, have adopted restrictive stances on migration issues, moving close to the positions taken by the Sweden Democrats on the matter. Some right-wing parties have even argued for the promotion of 'Swedish values' as a necessary social adhesive and have started openly discussing the possibility of forming a governing coalition with the Sweden Democrats. It seems the *SD-Kuriren* has served as yet another medium for the ideological normalisation of the Sweden Democrats (see Norocel, 2017; Norocel et al., 2020).


Another conclusion is that employing performative intersectionality has enabled us to disentangle the various categories of difference that underpin the right-wing populist conception of the collective 'us', generically labelled as 'the people'. As such, we can evidence the dynamic relations between these categories. This was particularly useful in the Finnish case, in which gender was not the most explicit intersectional category, as discussed above. Adding a comparative perspective to our intersectional analysis thus allowed us to flesh out the thematic similarities and discrete differences between these identity constructions in Finland and Sweden. In this manner, we are contributing to the growing scholarship examining right-wing populism in Northern Europe from a gender perspective (Askola, 2017; Kantola and Lombardo, 2019; Meret, 2015; Mulinari and Neergaard, 2014; Norocel, 2013, 2016b, 2017; Pettersson, 2017; Sager and Mulinari, 2018; Saresma, 2018; Towns et al., 2014), and nuancing feminist engagements with populist scholarship (Farris, 2017; Maignashca, 2019). With this in mind, further research is needed to flesh out the different patterns of exclusive solidarity at work in right-wing populist discourses across Europe, which privilege certain forms of exclusionary intersectional identity expression.

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