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# Confrontational yet submissive: Calculated ambivalence and populist parties' strategies of responding to racism accusations in the media

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**Niko Hatakka**

University of Turku, Finland

**Mari K Niemi**

University of Turku, Finland

**Matti Välimäki**

University of Turku, Finland

## Abstract

This article provides an analysis and typology of the discursive strategies nationalist-populist anti-immigration parties use when responding to racism accusations in mainstream news. The typology is based on a three-party comparative analysis of statements given in national public service media by the representatives of three electorally successful Northwestern European populist parties – the UK Independence Party, the Finns Party and the Sweden Democrats. When responding to racism accusations, populist parties use both submissive and confrontational sets of discursive strategies in varying combinations to communicate an ambivalent attitude towards racism. This ambivalence is communicated both on the level of an individual speaker utilizing several strategies and on the level of multiple speakers communicating contradictory messages. The comparative analysis suggests that country-specific contexts, and the statuses of both the persons under accusation and the responders giving statements, affect to what extent responses to racism accusations tend to be confrontational.

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## Corresponding author:

Mari K Niemi, University of Strathclyde, 38 Westclyffe Street 3/3, Glasgow G41 2EE, UK.

Email: [makani@utu.fi](mailto:makani@utu.fi); [mari.katriina.niemi@utu.fi](mailto:mari.katriina.niemi@utu.fi)

## Keywords

Calculated ambivalence, discursive strategies, Finns Party, journalism, media, political discourse analysis, populism, populist parties, racism, racism denial, Sweden Democrats, UK Independence Party

## Introduction

Nationalist-populist anti-immigration parties have made notable gains across Europe in recent elections. Their demands for stricter immigration control – and especially their members' controversial views on immigrants, asylum seekers and ethnic minorities – have time and again gained publicity and created allegations of racism (e.g. Hatakka, 2016; Hellström et al., 2012). For anti-immigration populist parties trying to solidify their position, running a gauntlet of mediated public scrutiny and criticism is nearly unavoidable. To a large extent, this is because the rhetoric used often clashes with the prevailing liberal-democratic and non-racist political cultures of post-war Europe (Judt, 2007: 775–776; Van Dijk, 1993: 59–60).

Political movements, including populist parties, are involved in a constant mediated discursive negotiation over their role, image and acceptability in society (Hall, 1982; Thompson, 1995). If a political party wishes to become a legitimate actor in a Western parliamentary system, it is forced to deny its affiliation with prejudice and racism in the public. This hinders anti-immigration parties' ability to cater without restraint to their constituencies' immigration-related grievances. Therefore, as described in this study, when dealing with racism accusations cast by journalists and political adversaries, populist anti-immigration parties aim to adapt their communication to appease larger publics and moderate supporters while still striving to maintain the credibility of their core anti-immigration policy.

This study systematically analyses and compares how three electorally successful Northwestern European nationalist-populist parties – the UK Independence Party (UKIP), the Finns Party<sup>1</sup> (Perussuomalaiset, PS) and the Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna, SD) – have discursively managed racism accusations in the public sphere. The objective of the research is to provide a typology of populist strategies of conveying ambivalence towards racism in the public sphere and to contribute to the discussion on the relationship of populist rhetoric, its journalistic scrutiny and populist parties' legitimacy and prerequisites for parliamentary participation.

## Discursive damage control and racism denials

Although the latest rise of populist parties in Europe has made the debate on anti-immigration movements' racist features more salient, racism and its denial in political speech is by no means a novel field of research. The expression of discriminative views of others coupled with discursive strategies that present these views as 'not racist' has been described as 'new' or 'modern' racism (Augoustinos and Every, 2010; Barker, 1981). These forms of racism denial contrast with the straightforward approach of 'old-fashioned racism' that offered a less ambiguous line in terms of its xenophobic agenda

(Barker, 1981; Every and Augoustinos, 2007: 412, 413, 426; Walker, 2001: 25–28). In the 1980s and early 1990s, Teun Van Dijk (1984, 1987, 1992) conceptualized ways racism and prejudice have been structured and denied by various actors and communicated in the media. Since then, scholars have analysed, for example, right-wing populist parties' media strategies related to affiliation with racism (e.g. Wodak, 2013, 2015) and the ways political actors have responded to racism accusations and discursively denied such claims (e.g. Goodman and Johnson, 2013; Johnson and Goodman, 2013; see also Hansson, 2015; Reyes, 2011; Verkuyten, 2013).

In this study, we refer to the framing and rhetorical packaging of potentially harmful public accusations as damage control. Instead of assuming that populist parties base their discursive strategies solely on the purpose of image repair or that they merely try to cater to their more extreme voters, we assume that they are simultaneously doing both. Political discourse analysis is a critical enterprise that scrutinizes the reproduction of political power, power abuse or domination through political discourse. In our study, not only are the actors directly involved with institutional politics, but more importantly, their actions (texts, talk) have political functions and implications. However, after the particular properties of political contexts have been considered, political discourse analysis is in many respects like any other form of discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 1997). In analysing populist parties' damage control strategies, we combine Van Dijk's (2008: 122) understanding on persuasive strategies with the goal of saving face or keeping up appearances and Benoit's (2015: 13, 28) typology of image repair: how, when blamed of wrongdoing, the accused produce a message that attempts to repair their image. Furthermore, we draw upon Wodak's (2013, 2015) ideas on populist parties trying to cater to their voters by entangling themselves in public racism accusations.

The literature on the strategies of image repair, crisis communication and racism denial suggests that building a defence against accusations draws upon a variety of discursive forms, dedicated ultimately to denying the accusations and providing justifications and excuses for actions that create controversy (Benoit, 2015: 13, 15; Coombs, 2012: 20, 29, 30; Van Dijk, 1992: 91–93). The aim of these strategies is to convey to the audience that the defendant has not breached any socio-cultural norms (Van Dijk, 1992: 89). But for populist parties, a categorical and unequivocal divorce from controversial accusations is not always politically desirable. While becoming labelled as racist includes undeniable risks for the party, racism-related media scandals can serve other strategic purposes: they can be used for gaining publicity for these parties' agendas and for legitimating them in the eyes of potential anti-immigration constituencies (Wodak, 2013: 32–33, 2015: 19–20).

Different individuals and audiences can have different values and beliefs, meaning a message designed for one audience can diminish the speaker's standing with another audience (Benoit, 2015: 13–14, 123). Therefore, when dealing with potentially damaging accusations, the communicator must either prioritize between audiences or implement a communication strategy that caters to all important audiences (Benoit, 1997: 178). In the case of populist parties, statements that are perceived as stigmatizing and racist by the mainstream media and political opponents may be welcomed as honest and straightforward talk by some of the parties' supporters (Hatakka, 2016). Anti-immigration and far-right populism have adopted a number of discursive strategies for maintaining a

balance between appearing not to be breaching liberal-democratic values while not alienating more extreme supporters. Some characteristics of this phenomenon have been described, for example, as ‘doublespeak’ (Feldman and Jackson, 2014) or ‘calculated ambivalence’ (Wodak, 2015).

Ruth Wodak (2003) has used the term calculated ambivalence to describe a populist discursive strategy of discussing controversial issues ‘in a way that allows for possible ambiguous interpretations and is open for at least two opposite meanings’ (p. 142; see also Wodak, 2013, 2015). Conveying a double-message is vital for populist parties in being able to extend the limits of what kind of political rhetoric is acceptable and thus enable the normalization and institutionalization of racism in the public sphere (Engel and Wodak, 2013). Previous research on anti-immigration populist parties’ discursive strategies of calculated ambivalence and racism denial has been built upon single parties’ or individual party leaders’ discourses (e.g. Goodman and Johnson, 2013; Wodak, 2013). The aim of this study is to extend the analytical scope from individual speech acts and single-country contexts to a systematic comparative analysis between three countries, three parties and a wide variety of party representatives during a time-span of several years.

## Contextual framework

The study brings together three Northwestern European nationalist-populist parties that have gained popularity during 2010–2015, have been active in advocating policies limiting immigration and have faced public allegations of racism. There are notable differences between European populist parties especially in terms of ideological preferences and policy agendas (Aalberg et al., 2017; Mudde, 2007: 41–52; Vlastimil and Pinková, 2015). The selected parties needed to be similar enough in their immigration policy preferences and history of facing public accusations of xenophobia to justify the comparison, but different enough in their backgrounds, parliamentary representation and level of legitimacy to facilitate fruitful comparative analysis. The policy agendas of PS, SD and UKIP differ, for example, in social and foreign policy, but their success and vision of immigration policy derive from a combination of nationalism, value conservatism, anti-immigration and anti-establishment stances, willingness to put ‘own’ people first and broad dissatisfaction with established parties (Borg, 2012: 201–203; Ford and Goodwin, 2014a: 282; Rydgren and Ruth, 2013; Sannerstedt, 2014). The parties garner support from both left and right (Borg, 2012; Ford and Goodwin, 2014b; Oskarson and Demker, 2015), meaning they cannot direct their communication to a single homogeneous constituency.

The main differences between the parties lie in their historical background and levels of representation and legitimacy. Whereas PS was founded on the ruins of Finnish centre-leftist rural-agrarian populism and UKIP was established to campaign for the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union (EU), SD was originally built on the foundations of Swedish extreme-right subcultures with neo-Nazi affiliations (Hayton, 2010: 27; Nordensvard and Ketola, 2014: 366; Ruostetsaari, 2011; Widfeldt, 2008: 266–268). SD has campaigned more directly against immigration, multiculturalism and Islam, whereas PS and UKIP have had broader agendas with nevertheless restrictive

immigration policy goals distinct from more moderate political rivals (Ford and Goodwin, 2014b; Nordensvard and Ketola, 2014).

PS and SD have been able to gain significant representation in their national parliaments in the 2010s, but the first-past-the-post system has denied UKIP's significant parliamentary representation despite the party's popularity. While PS and UKIP have generally been accepted as participants in public debate in the media (Cushion et al., 2015; Pernaa and Railo, 2012), Swedish mainstream media have been relatively hostile towards SD because of the party's background and perceived ideology. Despite the party having undergone a somewhat successful process of renewal and normalization since the mid-1990s, Swedish parliamentary parties still distance themselves from cooperating with SD (Hellström and Nilsson, 2010; Hellström et al., 2012; Widfeldt, 2008, 2015).

## Research materials and methods

The empirical analysis on the populist parties' damage control strategies in the media was based on the reporting of three national broadcasting companies: the *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)*, *Sveriges Television AB (SVT)* and *Yleisradio (YLE)*.

Public service media were selected to provide comparability between the three countries. The selected media have similar journalistic and societal tasks, they are publicly owned and funded by licence fees and they base their reporting on impartiality, objectivity, diversity and reliability (BBC, 2014a; SVT, 2014d, 2015c; YLE, 2014a, 2014b).

BBC, YLE and SVT are actively dissuaded from political or market-driven journalistic biases often associated with privately funded media, and they are well trusted by their audiences. The public service media also cater to a socio-economically diverse readership, and their online news sites are among the most visited news sites in their countries (BBC, 2014a, 2014b; KIA-index, 2015; SVT, 2014d, 2015c; YLE, 2013a, 2014c). These characteristics make public service media content suitable for analysing populist communication strategies on a mainstream platform and in a journalistic genre that encourage the parties to target their communication to both political opponents and potential supporters.

The research material was collected from the following online news sites: BBC News Online ([bbc.co.uk/news](http://bbc.co.uk/news)), YLE Uutiset ([yle.fi/uutiset](http://yle.fi/uutiset)) and SVT Nyheter ([svt.se/nyheter](http://svt.se/nyheter)). The stories were collected from the news sites' online archives by using the names of the parties in combination with the following keywords: 'immigration', 'racism', 'racist' and 'xenophobia'. However, due to the negative connotations of those words, their explicit use in news stories is sometimes avoided (Van Dijk, 1992: 93). To capture the full extent of the coverage, a snowball method was implemented and a number of stories were collected via additional word searches and links attached to other news articles.

The articles were gathered from 1 January 2010 to 31 August 2015. The considerably long period of nearly 6 years was selected to eliminate the distorting effect of individual scandals. Also as media coverage on populist parties' actions is known to be particularly exacting if the parties attain significant electoral success or are otherwise about to challenge a country's political status quo (Stewart et al., 2003: 222–223), the research period was designed to accommodate the three parties' rise from relatively humble players to serious contenders in their national party political systems and public spheres, leading up

to PS' rise to Finnish government in the late spring of 2015. Since the turn of the decade, the selected parties have doubled or even tripled their support in national and European Parliament (EP) elections.

The news stories were selected based on the following criteria:

1. The story appeared in textual form on the online news page of the BBC, YLE or SVT between 1 January 2010 and 31 August 2015.
2. UKIP, PS or SD was mentioned.
3. Accusations of racism or xenophobia were explicitly or implicitly present.
4. A representative of the party responded to the accusations and was quoted.

The use of these criteria resulted in the following numbers of articles: 47 on SD, 40 on UKIP and 58 on PS. The sample excluded a large number of articles in which the parties' allegedly racist characteristics were covered or analysed but in which no party representative was quoted commenting on the allegations.

The method for the study was thematic qualitative text analysis, which is a type-building and category-based approach (see, for example, Kuckartz, 2014: 68–87) aiming to compress and summarize data. The main analytical focus was on the discursive damage control strategies used to respond to racism accusations. The assessing and comparing of the damage control strategies used were conducted via a mixed deductive–inductive method exploring the frequency of analytical thematic categories in populist-party representatives' quoted statements in online news items. The strategies were regarded as coherent clusters of semantic and rhetoric moves in text passages with which the party representatives aim to bring forth different and category-specific explanations of the accusations. Each party representative's set of quotes was studied and coded separately. The analysis assessed the recurring thematic categories of responses to racism accusations to determine discursive and rhetorical strategies utilized by the persons quoted. The strategy-categorizations were partially derived from existing theories on discursive racism denial (Van Dijk, 1992, 1993, 2008), image repair and crisis communication (Benoit, 2015; Coombs and Holladay, 2012) and populist parties' media strategies related to affiliation with racism (Wodak, 2015; Wodak et al., 2013). However, existing categorizations had to be adapted and combined during the research process to better accommodate the context of populist parties responding to racism accusations.

As crisis communication and image repair studies focus on the necessity of ridding negative accusations as a premise, they somewhat disregard that for some actors – such as anti-immigration populist parties – controversial accusations could in some cases be beneficial. Studies on the relationship of populist parties and the media have suggested that populist parties use racism-related media scandals not only for gaining publicity for their agendas but also for legitimating themselves in the eyes of potential anti-immigration constituencies. Wodak (2013: 32–33, 2015: 19–20) has argued that the controversial utterances of populist anti-immigration parties can be intentional and follow a repeated pattern she refers to as the 'right-wing populist perpetuum mobile'. This includes provoking the media and political opponents by violating publicly accepted norms. As Wodak's analysis focuses mainly on how populist parties are using the 'perpetuum mobile' for their advantage, it somewhat downplays the downsides of being stigmatized

with racism. Our typology takes into consideration the populist parties' necessity to *both* appease and challenge public pressure related to their affiliation with racism. This was analytically done by clustering found damage control strategies into two larger sets of strategies based on an estimation of whether the strategies aim to appease or challenge the pressure of mediated racism accusations.

The comparison between the parties and clusters of strategies used played an important role in the analysis. Therefore, variables describing the contexts of the accusations, the stature of the actors under accusation and of the responders were also implemented in the coding of the news materials. Intercoder reliability scores for all coding were .94 for percent agreement (Holsti, 1969: 140) and .86 for Cohen's Kappa.<sup>2</sup> As the coding related to the application of different damage control strategies necessitated more interpretation, reliability scores for strategy-related codes were .86 and .70.

## Damage control strategies

In our data, the vast majority of racism accusations concerned party members' controversial statements or actions (111 occurrences) that were most often made on social media platforms. Journalists also scrutinized the parties' past or current connections with extreme-right movements or organizations (20), and furthermore, the parties were challenged for their ideological content, policies and party platforms (20). The contexts for the racism accusations were relatively similar from one party to another, a significant difference being that – compared to the other two parties – SD was scrutinized more often for its members' affiliation with extremist movements due to the party's past.

Racism accusations were most often responded to by the party leaders (68 occurrences), or by party secretaries, parliamentary group leaders and press officers (43). On slightly fewer occasions, responses were given by the persons under accusation (34), by local party figures and youth league representatives (28), or by Members of Parliament (MPs) and Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) (25). All three parties had relatively similar ratios of responders – except that significantly more MPs were interviewed in the case of PS, whereas SD's and UKIP's responders were proportionally more often party press officers. Due to the voting system in the United Kingdom, UKIP does not have significant representation in the national parliament, but SD already had 20 MPs in 2010 and 49 after the parliamentary elections of 2014. Therefore, SD's tendency of giving interviews regarding racism accusations mainly by the party leader and press officers can be regarded a strategic choice.

In our analysis, we specified eight principal types of discursive damage control strategies: *distancing in action* (61 occurrences), *distancing in rhetoric* (54), *justifying* (43), *reversing* (41), *excusing* (36), *denying* (20), *avoiding* (13) and *apologizing* (13) (for detailed elaboration of the strategies' discursive contents, see subsequent sections). All of the strategies ultimately try to convey the message that the party is not racist, but some strategies assign less accountability to the party than others. We further categorized the eight different strategies to the blocks of *confrontational* (117 occurrences) and *submissive* strategies (164) to illustrate the rationale of calculated ambivalence; how populist parties attempt to appease racism concerns while simultaneously trying to appeal to voters who are more resonant to extreme rhetoric. The division to confrontational and



submissive strategies was based on whether the responders communicated that the party could be attributed to responsibility or accountability for the phenomenon causing the accusations.

## **Confrontational strategies**

Confrontational strategies communicated that there was no controversy or crisis and that the party had done nothing wrong. These strategies consisted of reversing accusations, justifying statements or actions, denying the factuality of the accusations and avoiding answering to accusations. By using confrontational strategies to respond to racism accusations, the parties categorically did not take responsibility for their party's alleged association with racism and tried to convey the message that the party should not be held accountable for incidents causing controversy. In this study's context, the underlying functions of confrontational strategies can be assumed to be the strengthening of an oppositional alternative political identity and appealing to voters who prefer tough stances on immigration (see Hatakka, 2016).

Overall, confrontational strategies were used proportionally more in contexts in which the parties were accused of being racist without singling out particular statements, actions or party platforms as evidence. The use of confrontational strategies had a positive relationship with the importance of the persons subject to the accusation; especially, high-ranking party members were defended with confrontational strategies. When low-level party actors, such as local council members or youth league representatives, were accused of racist statements or actions, confrontational strategies were used in only 24% of the cases. If the person accused was an MP, MEP or another national-level politician, the percentage rose to 60, and in the rarer cases of the party leader being accused, confrontational strategies were used almost 9 times out of 10. PS used proportionally the most confrontational damage control strategies of the three parties (Table 1). This can be explained by PS' relatively legitimate position both in the Finnish parliamentary system and in the public sphere (Pernaa and Railo, 2012), which has provided the party with more leeway in discursively negotiating the party's relationship with racism. Also because PS has had significant parliamentary presentation since 2011, the accusations targeting the party were in comparison more often based on MPs' anti-immigration actions or statements.

### *Justifying statements and actions*

Van Dijk (2008: 127) defines justification in racism denials as follows: 'the act is not denied, but it is denied that it was negative, and explicitly asserted that it was justified'. In this category, we included cases in which party representatives suggested that a comment or an action creating controversy was, in fact, factual, objective, truthful or otherwise acceptable. By defending the people and statements causing the controversies, justification strategies aimed to challenge the journalistic framing of the action or statement as an infringement of social norms.

Justifications were relatively often used in an ambiguous combination of criticizing party members' word choices but agreeing with the content. For example, when a UKIP



**Table 1.** Use of confrontational damage control strategies.

Confrontational strategies	Total occurrences	Total % <sup>a</sup> (N=281)	PS % (n=113)	UKIP % (n=99)	SD % (n=67)
Justifying statements or actions	43	15.3	22.1	8.1	11.9
Reversing accusations	41	14.6	20.4	13.1	7.5
Denying completely	20	7.1	5.3	12.1	3
Avoiding answering	13	4.6	8.8	1.0	3
Total	117	41.6	56.6	34.3	25.4

PS: Perussuomalaiset; UKIP: UK Independence Party; SD: Sverigedemokraterna.

<sup>a</sup>Percentage when compared to number of all strategies used.

MEP referred to countries receiving development aid as ‘Bongo Bongo Land’, the party chair Nigel Farage was reported to have tweeted, ‘Godfrey 100% right over foreign aid budget but pleased he’s apologized over the wrong language he used’ (BBC, 2013b). Justifications were also used independently of other strategies. In 2013, Timo Soini was forced to reply to accusations originating from the nomination of one of his party’s MPs as the chair of *Suomen Sisä*, an organization with a reputation of promoting xenophobic ideas and for being a home of far-right extremists. Soini was said to have refused to comment on the MP’s nomination but sought to give the impression that there was nothing peculiar about the nomination: ‘Sometimes people get nominated as – the chair of a hunting club. This is one non-governmental organization among others’ (YLE, 2013c).

Likewise in Sweden, when SD party leader Jimmie Åkesson was asked whether Markus Wiechel – a person with two court convictions related to hate speech – could represent the party in parliament, Åkesson replied, ‘Wiechel has been convicted of writing on his blog’ and that Åkesson did not ‘consider that serious enough that he couldn’t represent the party’ (SVT, 2012b).

### Reversing accusations

In this category, we included cases in which party representatives tried to re-direct blame by presenting counter-accusations, for example, stating that their parties were pigeon-holed by rival parties, the media or the establishment. In previous studies, the phenomenon has been titled ‘victimization’ and ‘competitive victimhood’ (Sullivan et al., 2012; Van Dijk, 1993: 93, 2005: 739; Wodak, 2013: 32–33, 2015: 19–20). These strategies should also be understood as being not ‘forms of social defense, but part of a strategy of (counter-) attack’ (Van Dijk, 2008: 128; see also Benoit, 2015: 28–29; Coombs, 2012: 36).

The responders often argued that there was a disproportionate and a discriminatory media spotlight targeting their party. This was done, for example, by describing the accusations as a ‘witch-hunt’ (BBC, 2014h, 2014f) and by claiming that the accusations derive from the media’s and other parties’ biased ‘agenda’ (SVT, 2014b) or ‘extreme left hatred’ (BBC, 2014d) that ultimately undermines freedom of speech ‘by dictating what

kinds of opinions can be presented' (YLE, 2015). Reversing accusations could also take the form of downplaying or banter. For example, when PS party leader Timo Soini was asked to comment on why he did not sufficiently condemn his party's 'racist features' during his interview on foreign television, he replied, 'It seems to be very hard [for the competitors that] Soini gets invited to debate on BBC's Hardtalk' (YLE, 2013b).

### *Denying accusations and avoiding answering*

Accusations were rarely claimed to be false or fraudulent. However, in all cases in which the parties were accused of racism without a referral to an actual statement or action, the accusations were easily dismissed by pointing to the lack of supporting evidence and rhetorically undermining the accusations, for example, as 'unsound' or 'outrageous' (YLE, 2011a; BBC, 2015a).

Responders also evaded accountability by avoiding giving clear-cut answers to the accusations and questions. This strategy was applied in various rhetoric moves: dismissing journalist's question (e.g. 'I won't consider this now', SVT, 2014a), addressing the question by giving an explanation for why comments are not given (e.g. 'I think it's up to the members' committee to deal with this. I don't have to take a stand on it', SVT, 2015a), replying by claiming that the issue has been dealt with or addressed sufficiently already and that there is no need to further address the situation (e.g. 'I say nothing besides what our group leadership in the parliament has stated. I agree with that statement and have full confidence in those who have made that statement', SVT, 2013), sidestepping the accusation and the journalist's question by answering to something else (e.g. PS party leader Timo Soini, who used this strategy the most, often positioned himself as a guarantee of a moderate party ideology: 'I don't accept any kind of oppression or hate', YLE, 2012a; see Van Dijk, 1992: 89).

This approach proposed that if the leader of the party was not racist, the party could not be racist either. Similarly, there were cases in which representatives belonging to ethnic minorities used themselves as examples in arguing that having been accepted as representatives, the parties could not be considered racist (BBC, 2013a, 2014d).

### **Submissive strategies**

In *submissive strategies*, the parties admitted that some social norms had been breached and that party members' controversial statements were, to some extent, blameworthy or deserving of sanction. By employing these strategies, the parties acknowledged their responsibility and accountability to varying extents but tried to alleviate their situation by distancing the party from the underlying accusations in rhetoric, by referring to or carrying out disciplinary action and by giving contextual and circumstantial excuses trying to mitigate the severity of the accusations. The function of submissive strategies was to highlight the party's negative attitude towards xenophobia and to alleviate possible harmful consequences of being affiliated with racism.

SD's strategies of responding to racism accusations were overall proportionally most submissive, claiming more responsibility over the party's relationship with racism

**Table 2.** Use of submissive damage control strategies.

Submissive strategies	Occurrences	Total % <sup>a</sup> (N=281)	PS % (n=113)	UKIP % (n=99)	SD % (n=67)
Distancing by action	61	21.7	16.8	17.2	37.3
Distancing by rhetoric	54	19.2	16.8	25.3	14.9
Giving excuses for statements or actions	36	12.8	9.7	11.1	20.9
Apologizing	13	4.6	0.0	12.1	1.5
Total	164	58.4	43.4	65.7	74.6

PS: Perussuomalaiset; UKIP: UK Independence Party; SD: Sverigedemokraterna.

<sup>a</sup>Percentage when compared to number of all strategies used.

(Table 2). Compared to the other parties, SD took strident steps to represent itself as a non-racist party. This can be explained by the party's low level of legitimacy in the Swedish parliamentary system and the public sphere (Hellström and Nilsson 2010; Hellström et al., 2012), making the party's need for legitimacy more urgent. The finding is in accordance with situational crisis communication theory pointing to a history of similar crises and a bad reputation likely increasing the stakeholder's attribution of crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2012: 36, 38, 39).

Overall, more professional responders closer to the party core (party leader, party secretary, parliamentary group leader and communications officers) were more active in using submissive strategies when compared to other actors. However, PS and its party core deployed less submissive strategies even when commenting on statements and actions by minor party figures. SD's central party organization held most control over the party's statements (64% of responders belonged to the party core) when compared to PS (54%) and UKIP (52 %). Both the high levels of submissive strategy use and control over communication within SD can be seen as at least a partial consequence of the party's 2012 declaration of zero tolerance towards racism (see Widfeldt, 2015: 207).

### *Distancing in action and in rhetoric*

Distancing in action included referring to practical disciplinary actions targeting party members that had caused accusations of racism. Our interpretation is that the strategy aimed to normalize the situation by providing evidence for taking corrective action (see Benoit, 1997: 181, 2015: 26; Coombs, 2012: 29). Distancing in action was communicated by referring to a range of possible, upcoming or already carried out disciplinary measures. The referred actions ranged from mild to severe: 'the case will be thoroughly investigated' (SVT, 2014c), 'Ms Atkinson would be "spoken to" and "reprimanded"' (BBC, 2014e), 'we will put him on notice' (YLE, 2011c) or 'the outcome will be his suspension' (YLE, 2012b).

The message was that similar events would not take place in the future. In 9 out of 10 cases in which disciplinary actions were taken or referred to, the disciplined person was either a local politician or a youth league

representative: low-level members of lesser significance were therefore often used as scapegoats that were sacrificed on the altar of image repair. When MPs or MEPs were being accused of similar actions or statements, the parties were significantly less inclined to use disciplinary measures. In these cases, the parties preferred to use rhetorical distancing, excusing or one of the four confrontational strategies.

Distancing in rhetoric involved party representatives admitting that party members' controversial actions were blameworthy, but that the persons behind the controversies 'didn't represent the party' or that the statements 'were not in accordance with the party's communication strategy' (e.g. SVT, 2012a).

For example, when a UKIP council candidate tweeted and claimed that Islam was 'evil', Nigel Farage combined a political lexicon ('inconsistent with being a member') with colloquial informality ('the bloke') in, 'I've never heard of the bloke until last night -- Clearly his attitude and views are entirely inconsistent with being a member of UKIP' (BBC, 2014h).

Intra-party criticism of controversial statements was often offered as a sign of the party's official rejection of racism. Especially in cases when disciplinary measures were taken against low-level party representatives, the responders applied highly dismissive or nearly mortifying (Benoit, 2015: 26) rhetoric. For example, SD's stand-in party leader Mattias Karlsson described SD's youth league representatives with extremist connections as 'half-fascist, self-righteous, young angry men with Napoleon complexes' (SVT, 2015b).

### *Excusing statements and actions*

The category of giving excuses included cases in which the blame for a criticized statement or act was discursively placed on the circumstances of the incident or misunderstood motivation for action. Such strategies included representatives attempting to explain away the incident, regardless of whether they themselves approved or disapproved of the actions or statements that had caused the controversy. The idea behind this strategy was to appeal to the audience's empathy, asking for them to understand the rationale behind the party members' actions and reduce or diminish the offensiveness of the event by referring to lack of control over the incident, pointing out special circumstances or provocation, and claiming lack of intent to do harm (see Benoit, 2015: 24–25, 28, 29; Coombs, 2012: 36, 40; Van Dijk, 2008: 128).

Providing excuses was often combined in situations when the parties needed to explain why a statement or an action would not require carrying out direct disciplinary action. For example, in the so-called 'iron pipe scandal', three SD members had a verbal argument on the street with a man with an immigrant background. The event was filmed, and the three men were seen picking up metal pipes. Jimmie Åkesson described the involved MPs' behaviour as 'stupid' and 'not rational' and offered several mitigating excuses, explaining that the 'situation was stressful' and the men were even 'afraid for their safety' (SVT, 2012a). Providing excuses also included cases of intention denial (Van Dijk, 1992: 91–92, 2008: 124–125), that is, claiming controversial statements were misunderstood and were never meant to be taken literally. This was most often done by explaining allegedly racist statements as 'plain kidding' (YLE, 2011b) or 'inappropriate joking' (BBC, 2015b).

## Apologizing

Populist party representatives answered to racism accusations only rarely by providing apologies, asking directly for forgiveness, or expressing regret. Apologies were given only by the party leader or the person under accusation. Wodak (2013: 32–33) has claimed that apologies are vital for populist parties to remain unscathed after provoking the media into covering their scandalous statements. Our data suggest that apologies contribute to only a minor part of the submissive strategies populist parties utilize to appease the larger public. Additionally, apologies are also strongly bound to culture: UKIP was the only party to actually apologize (e.g. ‘I deeply regret the words I used and am incredibly sorry’, BBC, 2014g); no representative from PS and only one from SD apologized.

Even in the cases when apologies were given, the responders very rarely accepted full responsibility (see Coombs, 2012: 36) for the events causing controversy. More often the apologies were insincere or ambivalent ‘quasi-apologies’ (see Wodak, 2013: 32–33, 2015: 19–20). For example, when Nigel Farage faced widespread criticism of his statements regarding people’s preference of English neighbours over Romanians, he gave a conditional apology stating, ‘If I gave the impression in that interview that I was discriminating against Romanians, then I apologize certainly for that’ (BBC, 2014c).

## Discussion

Based on an analysis of three nationalist-populist parties’ statements given in national broadcast companies’ news, we conceptualized a twofold categorization of populist sets of strategies used in responding to racism accusations in the public sphere. In order to solidify their position and broaden their electoral appeal while not losing their constituencies wishing to strictly limit immigration, populist anti-immigration parties try to cater to audiences ranging from political opponents to moderate and extreme supporters. In this pursuit, when facing accusations of racism in the mainstream media, populist parties utilize *submissive damage control strategies* to appease the larger public and *confrontational damage control strategies* to cater to voters who are more resonant to extreme rhetoric on immigration. Comparative analysis of the data suggests that a populist party enjoying a comparatively legitimate position in its national context can utilize more confrontational communication strategies in responding to racism accusations.

According to our findings, populist parties apply calculated ambivalence on two different levels that together facilitate the sustaining of an ambiguous relationship with racism. On one level, ambivalence can be found in individuals’ responses to racism accusations; in one-fifth of the cases, submissive and confrontational strategies were used simultaneously. For example, a response starting as a submissive distancing or an apology could turn out to become a confrontational justification or an accusation reversal. The second level of communicating a party’s relationship with prejudice extends beyond individual speech acts. On the collective level of calculated ambivalence, different party representatives use differing types of responses to the same cases. Especially actors that do not belong to the party core tend to be less submissive in their responses to accusations.

Regardless of the individual responders' motives for strategy selection, individual speakers can be considered an important part of the parties' larger strategic mosaic of communicating what the parties stand for. Having voices that are 'not in accordance with the party line' can prove extremely beneficial for anti-immigration parties in keeping more extreme rhetoric salient without the party core being strongly affiliated with racism.

Remaining ambiguous in response to racism accusations is essential for the anti-immigration parties' pursuit of stretching established norms of debate on immigration and marketing anti-immigration readings of social reality and electorally viable policies. Providing analytical tools for revealing how this communicational ambivalence is created and upheld is vital for understanding the rise and normalization of nationalist anti-immigration populism. Further research on the resonance, effectiveness, countering and reporting of the populist discursive strategies discussed in this article is needed and encouraged across different media-, country- and party-contexts.

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### Notes

1. The Finns Party was formerly known as the True Finns Party. The party changed its English name in 2011.
2. Two coders participated in the final stage of the coding. For the intercoder reliability tests, the second coder analysed a randomized sub-sample of 30 articles. For a closer description of the methodology and the coding process, a full coding protocol can be obtained from the authors.

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### Author biographies

Niko Hatakka is a Doctoral Researcher at the Centre for Parliamentary Studies at the University of Turku, Finland. His research focuses on right-wing populist online counterpublics and their interaction with institutional politics and political journalism.

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Mari K Niemi (DSocSc) is a Senior Researcher at the University of Turku and a visiting scholar at the University of Strathclyde. Her research interests include political communication and political history, populism and political leadership.

Matti Välimäki is a Doctoral Candidate at the Centre for Parliamentary Studies at the University of Turku. His research focuses on the historical development of political parties' immigration policy outlooks and public discussion on immigration and immigrants.