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## Exploiting the Discursive Opportunity of the Euro Crisis: The Rise of The Finns Party

Ylä-Anttila, Matti Tuomas

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# European Populism in the Shadow of the Great Recession

Edited by  
Hanspeter Kriesi and Takis S. Pappas

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## Chapter Four

# Exploiting the Discursive Opportunity of the Euro Crisis: The Rise of the Finns Party

*Tuomas Ylä-Anttila and Tuukka Ylä-Anttila*

For the two decades preceding the economic crisis of 2009, the Finnish party system was notably stable, dominated by ‘The Big Three’: Social Democrats, the Centre Party (formerly Agrarian League) and the moderate-right National Coalition. The populist Finns Party (*Perussuomalaiset*, PS)<sup>1</sup> made some progress, but remained marginal until the crisis election of 2011, where their vote share skyrocketed (up to 19.1 per cent from 4.1 per cent in 2007) and became the largest opposition party, illustrated in Figure 4.1. In this chapter we examine the role of the euro crisis in the rise of the PS, and argue that between 2007 and 2013 the party exploited the crisis discourse by moving from their agrarian populist roots towards radical right populism.

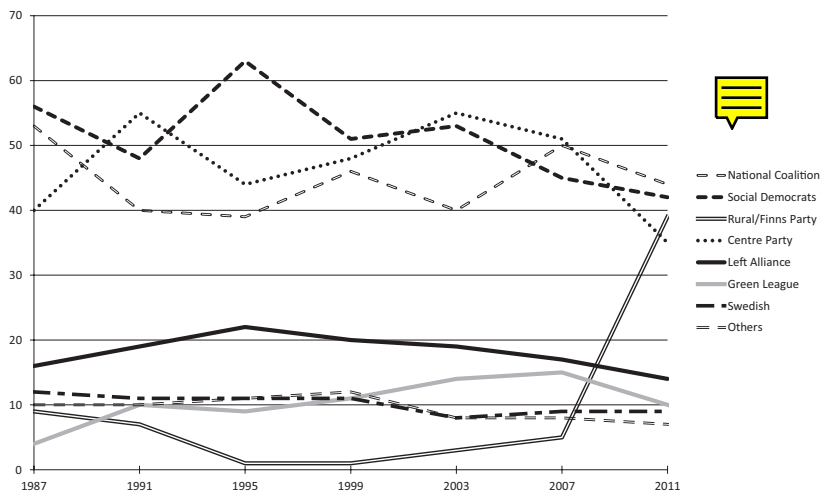
Considering populism as a ‘thin-centred’ ideology that is combined with complimentary ideologies to form a complete ideological base (Mudde 2004, 544), in line with this volume’s premises, we will argue that in The PS’s ideology 2007–13, 1) the populist defence of the common people against corrupt elites is combined with 2) a left-populist defence of the welfare state against market-led policies promoted by elites and 3) increasingly, a nationalist defence of the sovereignty and unity of the Finnish people against immigration and federalist tendencies of the European Union (EU), typical of radical right populism (*see* Saukkonen 2003). In 2007, these themes hardly resonated with the general campaign debate, but in 2011, fuel for populist anti-corruption talk and nationalist EU-criticism was abundant. A political crisis following a national corruption scandal implicating the established parties, and the economic crisis of the Eurozone that required Finnish taxpayer money to bail out Ireland, Portugal and Greece, were served to the PS on a silver platter. We will argue that the discursive opportunities (Koopmans and Olzak 2004) brought on by the economic crisis, and the party’s willingness to exploit them, have been crucial to their success.

Simultaneously with making EU critique a central part of their discourse, the party also accommodated a new, rising anti-immigration movement, originating from web discussion forums and blogs (*see* also Arter 2012). The integration of this new group of party members and supporters was done by downplaying

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1. *Perussuomalaiset*, previously often translated as the True Finns, Ordinary Finns or Basic Finns, adopted the official English name ‘The Finns’ in August 2011, after receiving international media attention (HS 21 August 2011). The prefix ‘perus’ refers to fundamental ordinariness as a virtue, similarly to expressions such as ‘down to earth’ or ‘straightforward’.

Figure 4.1: Parliament seats won, 1987–2011



the left-populist defence of the poor (ideological tenet two) and emphasising nationalist, anti-immigrant and anti-EU elements of the party ideology (tenet three). The left-populist rhetoric emphasising the distress of the underprivileged had been typical of the party's predecessor, the Finnish Rural Party (, SMP), moderately successful in the 1970s and 1980s (Helander, ed. 1971). However, the party seems to be moving further away from its SMP roots and towards radical right populism. Defence of the welfare state is still an important part of their ideology, but it is now phrased in a more nationalist tone, as welfare chauvinism: in order to save the welfare state, immigrants must be excluded and payments to the EU, especially the countries in need of bailouts, must be rejected.

This chapter proceeds chronologically. We focus first on the 2007 parliamentary and 2008 municipal elections before the euro crisis, followed by an analysis of the implications for the crisis on Finland. Next, we study the 2011 landslide elections at the height of the crisis and the 2012 post-breakthrough municipal elections. The presentation is based on a qualitative content analysis of the electoral manifestos for the 2007, 2008, 2011 and 2012 parliamentary and municipal elections, along with pre-election issues of the party newspaper, *Perussuomalainen* (The True Finn), read alongside key statistics about the Finnish economy. As the parliamentary elections were held in March 2007 and April 2011, we selected the newspaper issues published since the beginning of the election year until the election, two for 2007 and six for 2011, consistent with the importance of the 2011 elections for the party. For the municipal elections of October 2008 and October 2012, we selected two pre-election issues for each. Additionally, for a glimpse into the future, we look at 2013 issues of the party youth organisation's newspaper *Rahvas* (The Common People) and briefly review the party's performance in the 2014 European elections.

### **Pre-crisis populism 2007–08: Peripheral and struggling**

The campaign for the 2007 parliamentary elections was, in a word, dull. That, at least, is the conclusion of two major reports on the elections (Pernaa, Niemi and Pitkänen 2007; Borg and Paloheimo 2009). Since the start, polls predicted that the governing coalition would easily renew its mandate (Moring and Mykkänen 2009: 28), and differences in opinion between the three biggest parties were mild (Borg and Paloheimo 2009: 19). Television coverage focused on the leaders of the ‘Big Three’ – the Centre Party, the Social Democrats and the National Coalition – and in the last TV debates the three leaders even openly stated that they had already said everything they had to say several times over (Pernaa 2007: 25). In this context, the PS got little media coverage and very little chance to influence the political agenda. However, the speaking skills of the party chairman (since 1997) Timo Soini, as well as his opinions which differed from the consensus of the Big Three, were positively noted by commentators (Saarikko 2007: 66).

Reading the manifesto, it is apparent that the 2007 PS campaign was based on a populist view of democracy (e.g. Canovan 1999, Mudde 2004, Taggart 2004). The manifesto speaks not of democracy (*demokratia*) but *kansanvalta*, literally ‘rule by the people’, starting with its title ‘For justice, well-being and rule by the people!’ (*Oikeudenmukaisuuden, hyvinvoinnin ja kansanvallan puolesta!*). The ‘people’ whom the party sets out to defend refers to ‘the ordinary people’, especially ‘the most forgotten ones: the elderly, the disabled and the homeless’. With this focus on the most downtrodden, the party positions itself at the margin, reinforced by calls for the marginalised to ‘protest so they can feel it!’ A boxed text in the party newspaper asserts that ‘the heartless policies of the government weaken the basic security of people with small and medium incomes, pensioners, families with children, the sick, the handicapped, the unemployed, the precarious workers, students and single parents’, and exclaims in large bold typeface: ‘YOUR social security is in danger!’ The orientation is to secure the votes of the most disadvantaged and incite protest from the margins of society – an attitude that later changes markedly.

#### **‘Corrupt cognac drinkers’**

Notably, much more colourful language is used to describe those whom the party is opposed to – the elite – than is used to define ‘the people’. Two elite groups are singled out in particular: politicians and bureaucrats on the one hand, and business elites on the other. The political elite is described as ‘old parties’, ‘the other parties’, ‘the big parties’ or ‘the ruling parties’. Particularly targeted is the Centre Party, from which the predecessor of the PS, the SMP split off in 1959. This implies that the main voter base targeted at this point is lower and lower middle class conservative voters in the countryside and small towns. According to the manifesto, the old parties are ‘cheating the pensioners’ like they ‘cheated the students’, their representatives ‘raised their own salaries’ and voted to ‘lower the taxes on the rich’. They are ‘the parties in power who only remember the

rich, the stock option predators and the EU big spenders'. They are teamed up with 'EU and domestic bureaucracy', and their policies support the second elite group, business elites, described as 'big money', 'rentiers, machine millionaires and cognac drinkers'. At this stage, the elites targeted are mainly national, even though the EU also gets its share of blame.

### **'Away with poverty!'**

The populist discourse of the party in 2007 is supported by a left-wing economic discourse. Most stories in the party newspaper, including editorials, columns of the party leadership as well as quotations of parliamentary speeches by their three MPs, focus on economic justice issues. Headings include: 'Away with poverty', 'Where does Finland's money go?' and 'Child poverty is a national disgrace'. Party chairman Timo Soini is quoted as demanding that tax policy be the main theme of public debate leading up to the elections: 'I shall demand a change in the current line of overtaxing work and favouring lazy capital gains'.

At times, the left-wing rhetoric even uses terms that were common currency of the Finnish Communist Party in the 1970s: 'In many things, including income distribution, Finland has become an ultra-capitalist exploitation society. Examples are corporate executives' exorbitant stock options and excessive salaries'. This is, again, clearly in the tradition of the party's predecessor, SMP, and dovetails with the party's description of its enemies, the elites, examined above.

Social justice is also focused on in the manifesto. It opens with a defence of the 'traditional Nordic welfare state model', with social and health services guaranteed for every citizen. The Nordic model is contrasted with an 'Anglo-Saxon' liberal view of a minimal state, which is purportedly pushed by the political elite under EU command:

[...] it is wrong that a broad and functioning Finnish model of welfare state is being cut back due to various EU-led strategies [...] Accepting poverty and exclusion as normal phenomena represents an Anglo-Saxon tradition of thought, in which the most important function of the state is only to guarantee the free functioning of markets.

Additionally, the manifesto demands better care for the elderly and pensioners, and particularly state support for those taking care of elderly family members at home and war veterans.

### **'Minimal EU'**

The third main ideological tenet, nationalism, has been present in the party ideology since the beginning. It has become more important in the recent years, however, we will argue. In the 2007 manifesto, the unity and identity of the Finnish nation is already a typical justification for policies, including critique of the EU, which threatens the sovereignty of the Finnish people. The party has never advocated



leaving the EU at once, but rather pressed to discard any federalist plans, restrict expansion and demanded that the union interfere in national legislation as little as possible – all in all advocating a ‘minimal EU’.

Finland’s influence in the union has only declined. The only thing that has substantially increased is Finland’s membership fee [...] we support any and all propositions to reduce the EU’s influence on issues of its member countries. (p. 11)

This call for sovereignty<sup>2</sup> is present in the party newspaper too, but comes clearly second to economic issues. Anti-immigration opinion gets relatively little space in 2007. The summary of the electoral manifesto merely states:

Finland must carry its share of the world’s crises and receive refugees – to the extent that resources permit. Therefore, Finland must fast-track the refusal of unwarranted claims for asylum so that resources can be directed to helping real refugees, and so that attitudes towards refugees would not tighten unnecessarily.

More hostile arguments on immigration are brewing in the margins of these more careful statements, however. Towards the end of the manifesto it is stated that ‘large-scale immigration’ might ‘threaten original Finnish culture’ (p.20). The demands of the party’s newly established youth organisation include ‘valorisation of national culture – no to multiculturalism!’ Ex-boxer and wrestler Tony Halme had already been elected MP in 2003 on a strongly anti-immigrant protest campaign, and this rhetoric will later become more central to the party’s argumentation.

### **‘Poverty populism’ wins 4–5 per cent of the vote**

In sum, the 2007 PS was populist, rooting for the ‘common sense’ of the ‘common people’ to fight oppression by corrupt elites. This was combined with left-wing rhetoric, defending the Nordic welfare state model, resisting poverty and advocating redistributive tax policy. Nationalist discourse is there, but appears to play second fiddle.

In the 2007 election, the party achieved 4.1 per cent of the vote and five out of 200 parliamentary seats. This was already a success for the party, as the previous parliamentary elections of 2003 had left them with only 1.6 per cent. It was noted as a victory both by the party itself, with leader Soini citing ‘a historical breakthrough’ in *Perussuomalainen* 3/2007, and by researchers (Borg and Paloheimo 2009: 19). With only five seats, however, the party’s influence was marginal.

Despite the growth slump of late 2008, the economic crisis was nowhere to be found in the fall 2008 municipal electoral manifesto of the party. On the contrary, the manifesto celebrates ‘fast economic growth’ and ‘good economic standing’,

2. The party tends to use the less formal term ‘*itseäänäämis-oikeus*’, literally ‘the right to self-rule’.

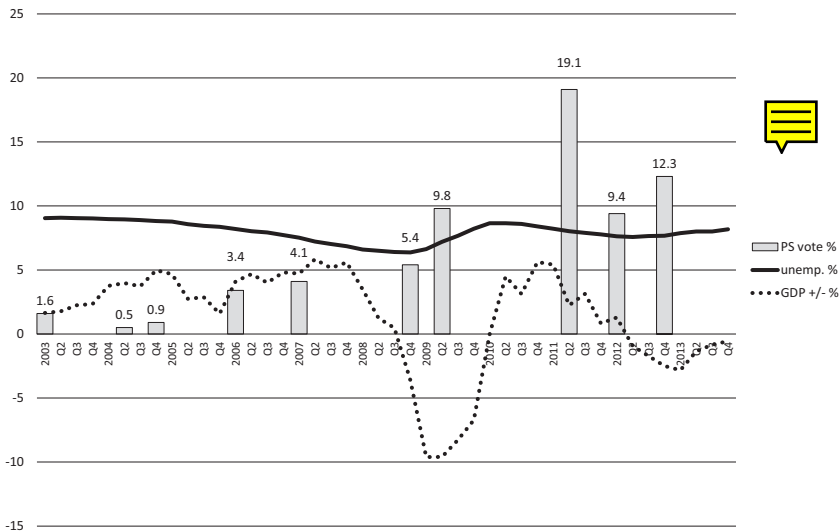
which make the ‘ever-expanding poverty and exclusion’, which runs alongside it, all the more lamentable. Some media accounts even claimed the party had taken a left-populist turn (Yle 6 October 2008). The results saw the party continue their gradual rise in success, receiving 5.4 per cent of the vote. Although party leader Soini received the second-most votes nationally for any candidate of any party, PS activists claimed the result ‘demonstrates we are not a one-man show’ (Yle 26 October 2008).

**An economic crisis, buffered**

Was Finland hit hard by the economic crisis, which began globally in full effect after the fall of Lehman Brothers in September 2008? Looking at the first indicator of an economic crisis used in this volume, Figure 4.2 shows that the dip in GDP growth in 2009 was dramatic, deeper than in any other country studied here, including the countries that experienced the worst crisis overall, such as Greece and Ireland (see also Figures 1.1–1.3 in the introduction). This is due to the fact that the Finnish economy is heavily dependent on cyclical export industries, producing investment goods such as paper mills and mining machinery, for which demand drops sharply when a global crisis hits. During this crisis, Finnish industrial exports slowed down more than in any other OECD country (Rouvinen and Ylä-Anttila 2010: 11).

However, looking at our second crisis indicator, the rise in unemployment caused by the GDP drop was less severe than elsewhere. In fact, average

Figure 4.2: Finns Party (PS) vote share, unemployment rate (12-month moving average) and GDP growth rate (compared to same quarter of previous year) (2003–13)



unemployment for the pre-crisis period (2001 Q1–2008 Q3) is slightly higher than for the crisis years (2008 Q4–2013 Q2)! The first explanation for this stability of the job market is that there was a widespread understanding among big businesses that recovery would be quick (EK 2014). This belief proved to be justified at first; by the end of 2010 GDP growth had been restored to the relatively high pre-crisis level of 5 per cent per annum, even if only briefly, before the second phase of the crisis in 2011. Secondly, the age structure of the Finnish population is strongly tilted towards the currently retiring generation, especially compared to Southern European countries. Businesses foreseeing the effect of the retirement boom were less likely to begin mass layoffs, fearing that in the near future when growth would pick up again, they were to face competition for scarce labour resources.

Turning to our third indicator of an economic crisis, the level of sovereign debt did rise as a consequence of the crisis, but the starting level, 33.9 per cent of GDP in 2008 (Eurostat 2014), was very low. In fact, the rise in debt during the first years of the crisis was due to a conscious decision of the government to engage in deficit spending to stimulate the economy and to provide welfare benefits for those hit by the downturn, something that it could well afford at this stage (Alho 2010).

Taken together, the stability of the job market and the enduring capacity of the state to provide welfare benefits, buffered the impact of the economic crisis on Finnish voters. Therefore, the rise of populism in the Finnish case cannot be explained by the concrete effects of the economic crisis: rising unemployment and decreased capacity of the state to provide safety nets.

However, as Figure 4.2 shows, the PS's success does strikingly coincide with the crisis. Even though the party's 9.8 per cent result in the European Parliamentary elections 2009 was a significant success, it did not yet have much to do with the euro, and was very much a personal triumph of party leader Soini, the only candidate of the party to win a seat. The global economic downturn of 2009 had not yet resulted in much trouble for the common currency and thus did not attract attention to the PS's EU critique (Pernaa 2012b: 20). It was the revelation in early 2010 that Greece was on the brink of bankruptcy that did.

### **Crisis populism 2011: A right-wing success**

The rise of populism was not a direct consequence of the economic crisis on Finnish voters. Rather, it was a consequence of a combination of a national political crisis and the discursive opportunity generated by the economic crisis elsewhere in Europe. These two most important political topics of the campaign spoke directly to two of the PS ideology's main tenets, populism and nationalism. First, their populist claim that the political elite is corrupt gained resonance with an election funding scandal implicating all major parties in 2008–11 (Kantola, Vesa and Hakala 2011). Second, their anti-EU nationalism was well served by the euro crisis, which dominated Finnish media during the campaign. Additionally, the party's nationalist rhetoric expanded towards a more overt anti-immigration stance, with new members of the party crucial for starting a debate

on immigration. Content analyses show that these three issues were the most reported in the media before the election (Pernaa 2012a, 2012b).

First, the political crisis began when, during 2008, it was gradually revealed that a group of businessmen had funded the campaigns of certain business-friendly politicians, who had then supported permits for specific property development plans, including a shopping centre and a snowmobile factory. Even taxpayer money had been channelled through the state-owned gambling monopoly to fund the Centre Party's campaign. Several claims against Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen were investigated but he was not charged, eventually resigning for 'personal reasons' in 2010. Party loyalty in the 2011 elections was exceptionally low. Some 40 per cent of voters reported voting for a different party than before. Over half of PS voters stated that the election funding scandal affected their vote 'to some extent' or 'significantly' (Väliverronen 2011: 142). The Centre Party was hit hardest. A total of 72 per cent of survey respondents said that their view of the party had changed for the worse. The Centre Party was also the biggest loser of the elections, crashing from 24.7 per cent to 15.8 per cent. The PS, in contrast, was granted the opportunity to push its discourse of integrity against 'corrupt mainstream parties'. A total of 30 per cent of respondents said their view of the PS had changed for the better, the largest number for any party (Mattila and Sundberg 2012: 235–238). The scandal provided them an exceptional public confirmation for their thesis of the mainstream parties being 'corrupt', enabling them to represent 'the honest common people'. These findings of media content analyses and voter surveys strongly suggest that the situation can be characterised as a political crisis. This despite the fact that the general indicators used in this book to characterise political crises – electoral volatility, trust in parliament and satisfaction with democracy – do not place Finland in crisis territory. The crisis may not have been as severe as in Hungary or Greece. But in the Finnish context characterised by an exceptionally stable party system and persistently high trust in parliament, it was interpreted as a severe crisis by the media, the voters, and the PS, which used it as a campaign weapon, as we will show below.

Second, the European economic crisis and bailouts dominated headlines in 2010–11 (Pernaa 2012b: 21–22). Whereas The PS had been fiercely critical of the EU since day one, the theme had lacked salience. However, the revelation that Greece's economy would need EU support, a proposition that would have to be accepted by the Finnish parliament, instantly made the issue top priority. Mainstream parties were tied to their commitment to the EU project (Railo 2012: 231), whereas the populist contenders, in opposition, had no such burden, and could denounce any aid to foreign countries. This position enjoyed broad support from the Finnish electorate (Pernaa 2012b: 20–22). The media dominance of the euro crisis (Railo and Välimäki 2012a: 35–36) was reflected in voting: it was quoted as the most significant issue by voters (Borg 2012b: 246), particularly for PS voters.

Third, the immigration debate was largely started by PS candidates, especially the councilman and blogger Jussi Halla-aho, a fierce critic of multiculturalism. Among the issues debated were the public costs of refugee policy, cultural

integration and urban segregation, immigrant criminality and Roma travellers. Immigration was the most reported issue in Helsingin Sanomat, the largest daily newspaper, in early 2011 (Railo and Välimäki 2012a: 35–38). The issue was seen as ‘owned’ (Petrocik 1996) by the PS, with their candidates seen as competent on the issue (Railo and Välimäki 2012b: 132). However, it was also one of the most divisive and controversial issues, with several candidates accused of racism.

The fourth major campaign issue was the rise of the PS itself. The media eagerly reported on the party’s rise in opinion polls, promising the most interesting elections in years, giving the party a publicity boost and spurring the phenomenon onwards (Railo and Välimäki 2012b: 127–130). This intensified after the polls of summer 2010 indicated over 10 per cent for the rising party, as the Greece bailout furor was raging (Perna 2012b: 21).

In the PS manifesto 2011, ‘*Best suited for a Finn*’ (*Suomalaiselle sopivin*, PS 2011), the first thing to note is its length of sixty-seven pages. It is clearly not written only for voters, but also for party activists themselves: to define, specify and record the growing party’s ideology in detail. Populism is clearly the main tenet of this manifesto. While populism in 2007 was implicit, the 2011 manifesto offers a precise definition for the word. The PS is now a self-proclaimed populist party: ‘The Finns Party is for a populist model of democracy, which means one based on the will of the people, instead of an elitist, that is, bureaucratic model of democracy’. (p.6)

The PS is in favour of a populist model of democracy, which means one based on the will of the people, instead of an elitist, that is, bureaucratic model of democracy. (p.6)

The ‘populist view of democracy’ is defined at length – it is evident that Vesa-Matti Saarakkala, leading the manifesto working group, holds a BA in politics, and party chairman Timo Soini obtained his MA in politics with a dissertation on populism. The party agrees with the scholarly view that populism is combined with other elements: ‘Populism is not a global ideology like socialism and capitalism, but always bound to a particular culture and national character’ (p.7). In the 2011 manifesto, it is most clearly intertwined with nationalism.

### **‘Democracy needs a nation’**

In 2007, the PS’s flavour of populism was mostly seasoned by what we have called the second tenet of their ideology – a left-wing social justice discourse – denouncing ‘heartless policies’ towards the poor, while ‘the people’, defended by the party, were equated with the disadvantaged. This placed the party at the margins. In 2011, this left-wing discourse is moderated, and what we have described as the third tenet of its ideology, nationalism, is now tightly connected to the populist core. This permits the party to portray itself as the defender of not only the poor, but the entire Finnish people.

What the party opposes now are not only the national elites, but increasingly other nations: the Greek and the Portuguese who have allegedly mismanaged

their finances and do not ‘deserve’ the Finnish bailout money, as well as immigrants who do not ‘deserve’ Finnish jobs or social security, and whose presence is incompatible with the idea of the Finnish people deciding about its own affairs.

The Finns Party wants to defend the popular sovereignty of Finns, which means that the people and the people only, which constitutes its own nation, separate from other nations, has an eternal and unlimited right to always freely and independently decide about all of its own issues. (p.7)

In the principles section of the manifesto, the key concept is ‘*kansanvalta*’. As already pointed out, this literally means ‘rule by the people’. The party prefers the term to ‘*demokratia*’, perhaps because of the possibility to use it interchangeably with ‘populism’. As in the Finnish language, the word ‘*kansa*’ refers to both ‘people’ and ‘nation’, the concept of ‘*kansanvalta*’ enables the party to portray nationalism as necessary for true democracy. Their nationalist conception of democracy is ‘rule by the nation’ just as much as ‘rule by the people’. The nation is equivalent to the people, which must be the sovereign ruler – there can be no democracy other than nationalist populist democracy. This is consistent with Mudde’s (2007: 19) notion of nativism – the belief that the state primarily ‘belongs’ to its native group – as a core concept of ‘populist radical right’ parties. Mudde also notes that ‘[t]he step from ‘the nation’ to ‘the people’ is easily taken, and the distinction between the two is often far from clear’ (2004: 549). In Finnish, this is all the more true. The nation-people of the PS’s populism is a ‘community’ with ‘shared values and norms’. ‘Community is very much based on shared values and norms, which allow for the development of community into a society...Democracy is rule by the people, and is not possible without a nation’.

Both other nations, with their distinctive national cultures, and the domestic political elite, are posited as ‘constitutive outsiders’ or ‘others’ to this sovereign nation-people (e.g. Laclau 2005: 73–83). ‘Certain original ingredients, such as language, customs, art, conceptions of justice, nature, myths and beliefs affect the identity of each nation. These are unique to each nation, which exactly makes for diversity and richness’ (p.8).

This is a typical argument of the contemporary radical right, whether labelled ‘ethno-pluralism’ (Spektorowski 2003), ‘identitarianism’ (Betz and Johnson 2004), ‘cultural racism’ (Wren 2001) or ‘differentialist racism’ (Taguieff 1993). It opposes immigration and multiculturalism by arguing that a plurality of cultures is best preserved by preventing them from mixing. Instead of the category of ‘race’ of traditional racism, the concept of ‘culture’ is used, but cultures are defined similarly to races, as separate and monolithic natural entities. The right of other cultures to exist is acknowledged, but mixing of cultures denied. This makes it possible to defend exclusionary policy by a seemingly ‘liberal’ justification, diversity of cultures.

### **‘Cheaters and liars of the Eurozone’**

The principle of nationalist populism is also used to ground the party’s opposition to the EU. In their populist version of democracy, based on the ‘general will’ of a nation-people, democratic governance on a European scale is impossible.

To assume that the EU could develop into a system of popular rule [...] we would also need to assume that Europeans could in the long run become a unified people. The Finns Party believes this to be utter madness. (p.32)

The EU is illegitimate because it is supranational, not ‘international’. On this basis, the party does not advocate dismantling the EU, but strongly limiting its competencies.

The Finns Party advocates cooperation between governments of independent nation-states. Our ultimate goal is to regain power from the EU back to nation-states. [...] We want a better EU through having less EU. (p.32)

Regarding the euro crisis, the manifesto is indirect and formal and does not mention Greece or Portugal, likely because it does not seem to be addressed to the voters, but rather to the party organisation itself. In other party communication, however, the euro crisis is everywhere. Chairman Soini demands on TV that Finland ‘must stop shoveling money under the palm trees’ in Southern Europe, a phrase that begins a life of its own. In his blog entry titled ‘Greece’, he writes: ‘You lied and cheated to get into the Eurozone [...] You knew you were cheating. What does it tell about the EU if they, indeed, did not notice?’ Vice-chair Saarakkala links the more abstract criticism of EU democracy with the Union’s current financial problems:

Democracy can never be supranational, which means that the EU is always anti-democratic. This has led, especially in the countries using the Euro, to the final erosion of political morality, because in the EU system, those who should be responsible for their decisions are not. Instead, the innocent, like the Finns, are made to pay for the silliness of the others.

This rhetoric fell on fertile ground. Voter surveys showed that the euro crisis was the most important issue for voters (Borg 2012b: 246), especially PS voters. Exploiting the discursive opportunity created by the Euro crisis was crucial to their success in 2011.

### **‘Somali welfare parasites’**

The categorisation of ‘populist radical right’ has been debatable in the case of the PS (Arter 2010; Koivulaakso, Brunila and Andersson 2012). However, an anti-immigration bloc entered the PS in full effect for the 2011 elections

and plays an ever larger role, lending more credence to such a classification. The immigration-focused politicians tend also to take notably right-wing (libertarian) economic stances (Ylä-Anttila 2012).

The central figure of the anti-immigration politicians is blogger Jussi Halla-Aho, who had already been a candidate (without party membership) in 2007, but did not get exposure in party materials. After fame in mainstream media in 2008 as the main critic of immigration policy, he joined the party and got to publish his own piece in the party paper. His rhetoric here is very careful compared to some of his blog remarks, the latter including suggestions that Somali immigrants come to Finland to ‘casually rob passers-by’ and ‘to live as welfare parasites’ – for which he was convicted for racist agitation in 2009. He and other new party members belong to nationalist organisations such as Suomen Sisu, which opposes the ‘unnatural mixing of peoples’ (Suomen Sisu principles 2006).

Such radical positions are not present in official party material. However, the theme of restricting immigration occupies significantly more space in 2011, as anti-immigration candidates have joined the party. Vesa-Matti Saarakkala chairs the party’s manifesto committee but is also one of the signatories of an unofficial anti-immigration manifesto and a ‘resignation from the ideology of multiculturalism’, signed by thirteen PS candidates. Many candidates not previously identified with anti-immigration opinions have now begun to talk about the issue. Ten of the forty candidates presented in the election issue of the party newspaper list immigration as one of their main themes. The long-time editor of the paper now laments:

The Greens and the Swedish People’s Party are the main culprits for the fact that we now get 26,000 immigrants every year to generate wealth (for the rich). Taxpayers’ money is spent on uniting immigrant families, even for their plane tickets. The poor of our own country have been forgotten and their constitutional rights trampled on.

The party’s five parliamentarians issued a statement to the media asserting that ‘Finland must not become the place to store asylum seekers whose applications have been deemed unfounded by other countries’, adding that ‘in the recent weeks and days big crowds of such asylum seekers have entered Finland.. A news-like item in the paper cites a prison guard saying that ‘Finnish prisons are no deterrent for foreign thieves, part of whom openly brag that a Finnish prison is like a five-star hotel in their own country’. Another story presents a model immigrant whom the party warmly welcomes to Finland: Igor is Ingrian (from the area that Finland lost to Russia in the Second World War), has a Finnish surname and Finnish roots, and is presented as clearly fitting Finland culturally. He is also a small entrepreneur who works hard ‘but still can’t even afford a car and only makes 1,000–1,500 euros per month’.

We have argued that there is a shift from populism ‘thickened’ by a left-wing social justice discourse to populism ‘thickened’ by anti-EU and anti-immigration nationalism within the PS. It must be noted that the left-wing discourse has not disappeared completely. A major section of the 2011 manifesto calls for the upkeep of



a ‘traditional Nordic welfare state’ with no major privatisations or cuts (pp.11–12). This is to defend the least well off and support income equality, but also to support ‘the unity of the people’ (pp.46–47). However, living on benefits should not be allowed and the propensity for work should always be rewarded (p.22). ‘Ordinary Finns’ stand against ‘big capital and international finance’ (p.44):

The Finns Party believes that big capital and international finance must pay for the financial crisis, not ordinary Finns. [...] We must look into the possibility to employ taxes on financial transactions, currency transactions, banks and credit institutions. (pp.44–45)

Despite their 2011 landslide victory, the party excluded itself from government negotiations by sticking to its policy of unconditionally rejecting any euro bailouts. This position was untenable for the mainstream parties committed to EU cooperation, leading to a rainbow coalition of Conservatives and Social Democrats with four smaller parties, dubbed the ‘six-pack’.

## 2012–14 and beyond

Even though PS voters are more focused on the party leader than other voters (Kestilä-Kekkonen and Söderlund 2014), in the presidential elections 2012 Soini, as PS candidate, failed to muster support even remotely comparable to the party’s recent success. He only received 9.4 per cent. As presidential elections are naturally candidate-focused, neither the protest against the ‘old parties’, nor opposition to EU or immigration were on the agenda here. Moderate right-wing candidate Sauli Niinistö carried the election by a wide margin, predictable after his narrow loss six years before.

A similar story can be told about the municipal elections of October 2012, where the discussion largely revolved around issues of an administrative and economic nature, lacking any serious potential for large-scale protest. The PS tried to play the anti-EU card again. Their manifesto depicts an old car, number plate FIN-12, representing Finland. Its roof is stacked with boxes, a burden weighing it down, labelled ‘developmental aid’, ‘euro bailouts’, ‘Greece loans’, ‘EU membership fees’, and ‘Green directives’. The party accused previous governments of ‘committing Finland to saving foreign big banks’ and assert that ‘to fund these obligations, the government is cutting funding for municipalities’. The PS, in contrast, is for local democracy and local identities: ‘The foundation of a municipality is a home region, where its people want to live and work’. The party obtained 12.3 per cent, not much when compared to the 19.1 per cent in the general election, but still a significant increase from their previous municipal result of 5.4 per cent. EU-critique proved difficult to exploit at the local level.

A look at the party youth newspaper shows a move further towards the right, now also in terms of economic policy. For example, in March 2013, the youth chairman Simon Elo writes that ‘the Finns Party youth must drive a tax rebellion into the party!’ This ‘tax rebellion’ refers to ‘redefining’ the welfare state by ‘cutting public

spending where we can’, lowering corporate tax, and ‘gradually lowering taxes for the middle class’. This, he states, would ‘fit our national-liberalist economic policy perfectly’. For April 2013, they invited libertarian youth politician Henri Heikkinen as columnist, advocating a decentralisation of the school system to help top achievers to succeed.

The party have also founded a think tank, ‘*Suomen Perusta*’ (Foundation for Finland), with Simo Grönroos as its manager – a 29-year old member of the nationalist organisation *Suomen Sisä*, supporter of the anti-multiculturalist MP Jussi Halla-aho, and a fan of United States Republican politicians Ron Paul and Patrick Buchanan, according to his website. The think tank produced a report in February 2014 advocating privatisation of municipal services, in contrast with the mainstream party policy. The report also called to stop all developmental aid and ‘humanitarian immigration’ and for drastic cuts of social benefits, particularly for two groups: immigrants and drug abusers. Socially conservative, economically libertarian – this seems to be the way forward for the new generation of the party. And the youth wing is gaining support from current members of parliament. In February 2014, Teuvo Hakkarainen, an older MP known for racist remarks, somewhat surprisingly revealed his own suggestions for public-sector cutbacks. ‘The public sector will burst like a toad filled with water’, he claimed, demanding that ‘[it] must be cut back with a heavy hand, cut the administration, cut the bureaucracy’ (Verkkouutiset 27 February 2014). The party’s two MEPs elected in 2014, Jussi Halla-aho and Sampo Terho, both represent the party’s right wing, also regarding economic policy. After negotiations, they joined the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR), known as the group of the Conservative Party of the United Kingdom, together with the MEPs of the Danish People’s Party (DFP).

The party owes its success in 2011 largely to floating voters (Arter and Kestilä-Kekkonen 2014), creating a difficult starting point for lasting support (Borg 2012a: 209). Indeed, its poll success has declined in anticipation of the April 2015 general election (HS 18 August 2014), but it still is the third largest party in the polls. For the time being, the party seems to have established its position as a mainstream player (Arter and Kestilä-Kekkonen 2014), catering to a populist constituency that had long existed (Kestilä 2006).

### **Conclusion: Populism can exploit crisis discourse**

We have argued that the PS ideology can be analysed via three tenets: 1) the populist defence of the common people against corrupt elites, 2) a left-populist defence of the welfare state against market-led policies promoted by EU and national elites and 3) a nationalist defence of the sovereignty and unity of the Finnish people against federalist tendencies of the EU and immigration. Populist democracy, or ‘*kansanvalta*’ (rule by the people), as the party calls it, takes as its input the unfiltered general will of the common people, who know in their hearts what is right. Politics is a matter of morality and conscience, of right and wrong, not of administration and bureaucracy. According to the PS, for this general will

to emerge, the democratic unit needs to be consistent with the nation. Constitutive outsiders ('others') such as immigrants and elites, both domestic and European, must be excluded, or democracy cannot function.

The focus of the party, however, has turned from the second tenet above (social justice) to the third (national sovereignty and unity). The party has shifted from opposing the domestic elite – which was the bread and butter of SMP, the PS's predecessor (1959–95) – to opposing foreign threats, namely the EU and immigration. This also means that the definition of 'the people' has shifted from the disadvantaged to all (ethnic) Finns. While Mudde (2004, 549) correctly observes that '[t]oday, populism is again mainly associated with the (radical) right', because of the conflation of the 'people' of populism with the nation; we have argued that until the economic crisis, the PS's 'people' was largely based on class. However, the move from agrarian populism of the periphery towards radical right populism helped the party to gain massively at a time of political and moral crisis – with the established parties accused of corruption and Southern EU countries accused of immoral economic policy. This brings the PS ideology more in line with the mainstream of current European radical right populist parties and brings it out of the margins, facilitating its more widespread success. Indeed, it is converging with the other Nordic populist parties, despite its agrarian populist roots, as argued by Jungar and Jupskås (2014).

To conclude, looking at economic indicators, the crisis hit Finland's economy hard particularly due to the composition of its industry, but due to other structural factors (the population's age structure and the state's strong economy), it was not reflected dramatically in the everyday lives of Finns. Despite this, the Finnish polity witnessed an unprecedented populist success. This was fuelled by the discursive opportunity the crisis offered for blaming other EU countries on moral and economic grounds.

Thus, the first guiding hypothesis (H1) of this volume, that economic crisis intensifies populism-*qua*-discourse, gains support in the Finnish case, but only with very specific qualifications: it was not the state of the Finnish economy but the broader European situation that served populist success, by way of creating discursive opportunities. As for the second hypothesis (H2), that political crises also intensify populism, we must again add additional qualifiers: the Finnish populist mobilisation was indeed partly a reaction to a corruption scandal. Nevertheless, in the context of a remarkably stable polity, even a political crisis deemed as severe by the media, academia, parties and voters, might not be visible in simple indicators of volatility or trust. The third hypothesis (H3), of a combination of economic and political crises being particularly conducive for populism, is also supported by our results, but again with the country-specific qualifications outlined above. As for populists toning down their populism when in power (H4), the Finnish case does not apply, since the only party that can be identified as populist has always been in opposition.

These findings suggest that simple structural explanations and indicators only go so far in explaining populism – cultural and economic specificities are equally important. It is interpretations of crisis that matter, not just crisis in numbers.

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