Who are you, the people?

Constructing the people in MV-lehti's refugee coverage

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Abstract

One of the cornerstones of right-wing populist websites is their challenge to traditional mainstream media to give voice to "the people". In Finland, one of the best known of these websites is *MV-lehti* [*WTF-Magazine*], which claims to exist for this reason. In this article, I investigate how *MV-lehti* constructs the people, in particular in texts about refugees. I approach the research data by using the concepts of right-wing populist rhetoric. The results show that, in *MV-lehti*, the people is a constructed and politicised concept reflecting ideas of ethnonationalism and antidemocratic values, illustrating the connection between uncivility, racism, and populism.

Keywords: the people, right-wing populist online publication, ethnonationalism, right-wing populist rhetoric, refugee coverage

Introduction

In recent years, a societal confrontation relating to immigration and refugees has been reflected in the Finnish media, for example, in increasing online publications strongly criticising professionally edited journalistic news media (Reunanen, 2018). A crucial principle for these websites is their declaration that they represent the people, allegedly contrary to mainstream media, which are said to betray the people and report mostly for the ruling elite (e.g., Esser et al., 2017; Fawzi, 2018; Krämer, 2018; Nord & Strömbäck, 2003). This argument is especially common among populist movements, which appeal to "ordinary citizens" and object to "elites" and the societal values they represent (e.g., Canovan, 1999; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2017). For populists, a distinctive vision is presenting these elites as a corrupt group opposing the people's general will (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

At the centre of this article is a nationally well-known Finnish-language website titled *MV-lehti* [*WTF-magazine*], which is known for its anti-immigrant approach and for attacking the mainstream media (Noppari & Hiltunen, 2018; Reunanen, 2018). It claims that it works "100% for the people" and exists as "a special publication of the Finnish free press, which 'tolerants' [those who advocate multiculturalism] do not

admit reading".[1] Thus, this website encompasses the symbolic characters of populism, accounting for a populist communication style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Noppari and her colleagues (Noppari & Hiltunen, 2018; Noppari et al., 2019) conceptualise Finnish mainstream media-challenging websites as populist counter-media, exemplifying a divided society with a virtuous people and corrupted elite. Moreover, it is common for these websites to share a conservative and anti-immigrant agenda (Reunanen, 2018). Despite their comparable content and style, a clear definition for these websites has not yet become established in academic research. In Sweden, for example, websites built on criticism of the mainstream media (e.g., *Fria Tider*, *Avpixlat*, and *Nyheter Idag*) are described as anti-immigrant alternative media (Holt, 2016a, 2016b). In Norway and Denmark, these outlets (e.g., the Norwegian *Document* and the Danish *Den Korte Avis*) are viewed as immigration-critical alternative media (Nygaard, 2019), and in Germany, they are seen as a pseudo-press phenomenon that pose as established press organisations and imitate the appearances of professional media (Brinkschulte & Frischlich, 2018).

In the field of journalism studies, this research explores the transitioning boundaries of journalism in an online environment. The aim is to contribute to the discussion on the elements of journalism (e.g., Deuze & Witschge, 2018; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014) by investigating an online publication that, on the one hand, depends on journalistic media, but on the other, contests them (Tuomola, 2018). For these purposes, in this study, I examine right-wing populist publicity related to journalism involving the public debate on refugees. Hence, the focus is on a rhetorical style of a right-wing populist publication – which can be defined as rude and racist – in contrast to journalistic style (e.g., Wodak, 2015).

The populist style establishes a central binary between "us" and "them" – an in-group and an out-group (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mudde, 2004). In most definitions of populism, there is an idea of a homogenous group of people, an authentic majority in-group that is opposed to out-groups (e.g., Fawzi, 2018; Krämer, 2018; Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2017; Wodak, 2015). The in-group shares common values, traditions, institutions, and ways of living (Krämer, 2018; Pelinka, 2013; Wodak, 2015), and these are vital to the discursive construction of national identities (e.g., Wodak, 2015). Accordingly, the central binary is underpinned by racism, which nowadays resides in the ways some groups of people profit from the systematic exclusion and subordination of other groups (Kundnani, 2007) when the cultural norms, values, traditions, and lifestyles of the others appear problematic, instead of their physical appearance (Lentin & Titley, 2011). Finally, uncivility occurs in a right-wing populist style that values attention and provocation over politeness and political correctness, simplicity over complexity, and first-hand experience over expert knowledge (Hokka & Nelimarkka, 2020).

Since 2015, when over 1.3 million refugees and migrants arrived in Europe, the public debate – especially in the digital environment, including in Finland – has been strongly polarised with two dissenting stances: The "immigration critics" resist asylum seekers and refugees, while the "tolerants" advocate multiculturalism, and where anti-immigrant visions attack supportive contentions, and vice versa (Nikunen & Pantti, 2018; see also Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016). Thus, polarising approaches have reshaped the definition of the people as a concept when dissenting views have collided (Nikunen, 2019; see also Berry et al., 2016).

This article focuses on news texts from the above-mentioned Finnish-language right-wing populist website, *MV-lehti*, and I investigate how the people are constructed, especially in the refugee coverage, with the following research question:

• How is "the people" constructed in *MV-lehti* texts utilising strategies of right-wing populist rhetoric?

In the next section, I introduce the key ideas of this article, which relate populism and the people. Then I introduce concepts from right-wing populist rhetoric that I unpack in the analysis. Following this, I focus on the criteria for belonging to a nation.

Populism and the people

At the core of this study is an argument proposed by populists that their group represents "ordinary, decent people" who are overridden by "arrogant elites, corrupt politicians, and strident minorities" (Canovan, 1999: 5). This standpoint is supported by Cas Mudde's (2004: 543) definition of populism as an ideology that separates society into two antagonistic groups – "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" – arguing that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people. According to Mudde (2004: 546), the people as depicted by populists are essentially a constructed and mythical subset of the whole population, an "imagined community" like the "nation" of the nationalists. Therefore, it is crucial to profoundly delve into the conceptual construction of the people and analyse its meanings in right-wing populist rhetoric.

According to Chantal Mouffe (2005), the concept of the people is constructed within political discourses in mythic, nativist terms, and this is problematic. In Europe, the end of the adversarial mode of politics has created a situation in which right-wing populist demagogues exploit the fears and resentments of those citizens who feel that they have been left frustrated, abandoned, and with no future prospects (Mouffe, 2005). These people blame the elites for their distress, using them as scapegoats for engineering multiculturalism to spread out to Europe without real popular discussion. This approach gives the concept of the people an anti-immigrant nuance, as Mouffe (2005: 69) shows her concern about its current "xenophobic character, and the fact that in all cases immigrants are presented as a threat to the identity of the people". As Wodak (2015) argues, our identities are inherently tied to nationalistic, religious, and ethnic categories, where national identity implies similar emotional dispositions, stances, attitudes, and behavioural conventions that are shared collectively (see also Wodak et al., 2009).

Strategies of right-wing populist rhetoric

For the purposes of this article, it is justifiable to utilise the concepts of right-wing populist rhetoric (Wodak, 2015) as a research instrument for an in-depth text analysis. As Wodak (2015) notes, when drawing apparent boundaries between "us" and "them" in exclusionary rhetoric, language is used to determine similarities and differences. In this research, rhetoric can be approached as discursive practices, which draw on and reproduce the comprehensive structures of a discourse (De Cleen, 2015; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Right-wing populist rhetoric combines both style and content in its propaganda (Wodak, 2015). Below, I briefly list principal concepts and strategies of

this rhetoric, leaning on Wodak's (2015) ideas. Later, I utilise these concepts in the analysis.

Right-wing populist rhetoric divides the world into "us" and "them" by constructing simplistic dichotomies and a "positive self- and negative other presentation" (Wodak 2015: 67). A positive self-presentation can emerge when attempting to turn blame into credit, for example, when claiming to save the country from danger, such as migrants or terrorists. Negative other presentation, in turn, can be utilised for an exclusionary purpose when defining "others" who do not belong to "us". Scapegoating refers to constructing culprits and enemies – that is, "others" – to blame for current woes by emphasising traditional stereotypes and images of the "enemy" (Wodak, 2015). Scapegoating stems from the right-wing populist demand for simple answers to all the fears and complexity that multiculturalism, foreigners, and elites may cause (Pelinka, 2013; Wodak, 2015). In addition, conspiracy theories strengthen the difference between "us" and "them" as being the discursive constructions of fear. Right-wing populism also correlates with anti-intellectualism, with its appeals to "common sense" and "traditional and conservative values" – elements that can be linked to aggressive exclusionary rhetoric (Wodak, 2015: 22).

A typical justification strategy of right-wing populist ideology is claiming victimhood by victim–perpetrator reversal and blaming the victim. This suggests that the victims are transformed into powerful perpetrators, and vice versa, as the victims must be held accountable for their terrible fate and deserved "punishment" (Wodak, 2015). Wodak refers to van Dijk (1992), who also identifies "denying" as a part of a general defence or justification strategy when accused of being racist. Denial can be actualised, for example, by mitigations or using euphemisms when describing one's own negative actions. Justifications can involve different types of denial, such as "counter-attack" when attacking the accusation and accuser or "moral evaluation", which involves legitimising one's own actions according to the national values (Wodak, 2015). Finally, the strategy of normalisation refers to powerful actors who frame their actions as reasonable and normal by naturalising them. This practice evolves from the right-wing populist idea of a homogeneous people, defined by blood-related criteria, and of a heartland that must be protected against dangerous outsiders (Wodak, 2015).

Belonging to a nation

Right-wing populists define the people by nativist criteria (Wodak, 2015). Mudde (2004) remarks that the step from the nation to the people is easily taken, and many nationalism scholars have defined a nation as a constructed concept rather than a natural phenomenon (e.g., Anderson, 2017). In this article, I utilise the concept of ethnic nationalism, which has been described as primitive and emotional in nature, focused on ethnicity by blood and belonging (Kohn, 1944; Tamir, 2019). Ethnonationalism builds on a sense of belonging to a "community of the blood", that is, to a people that share a single identity, with a common language, religion, and history, and shared ancestors (McCrone, 1998; see also Banton, 1983; Eriksen, 1993; Kellas, 1991). This means that, for example, no one can become a Finn simply by adopting Finnish cultural habits. In right-wing populism, a nationalistic ideology draws on the exclusion of "the others": Access to national identity or membership in the nation would only be allowed by heritage or ancestry (De

Cleen, 2012; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Reinemann et al., 2017; Wodak, 2015). Therefore, the multicultural state poses a threat to ethnic nationalism, as multiculturalism is not based on common ethnicity or shared identity and culture (Kellas, 1991).

Data and method

The online publication *MV-lehti*, currently *Uusi MV-lehti* [*New WTF-magazine*], was founded in 2014 by Finnish celebrity Ilja Janitskin, who lived in Barcelona at the time. Janitskin first became known as an ice hockey player and later as a chief editor of a glossy magazine, *Absolute,* which was published only once but achieved significant fame in Finland. In October 2018, Janitskin was convicted and sentenced to prison for 22 months for 16 crimes, including aggravated defamation, confidentiality crimes, and inciting negative attitudes against ethnic groups. In February 2020, the verdict was not yet probated, as Janitskin had taken his case to the court of appeal; before the appeal was complete, on 7 February 2020, Janitskin died of cancer at the age of 42. *MV-lehti* can be categorised as belonging to the type of online publication that typically extract news material from the web, editing it in such a way that it becomes biased and distorted; at the same time, such publications criticise professionally produced journalistic media (Reunanen, 2018). On the website, the publication describes its function as that of a "nationalist, independent, anti-globalist, and patriotic news service".[2] Typically, *MV-lehti* uses mainstream media as a source; it gives rewritten news headlines and lead paragraphs, flavours text with its comments, reframes information to fit its anti-immigrant agenda, and aims to give new meaning to content (Ylä-Anttila, 2017). In addition, *MV-lehti* publishes articles from other populist websites and various fringe extreme organisations, posts from arbitrary bloggers, Facebook status updates, and much more. Overall, although *MV-lehti* does not adhere to any specific political party, the procedure of the publication can be approached as political in terms of definite subjects and agendas, such as anti-immigration (Noppari & Hiltunen, 2018).

Despite its media-referential title and resemblance to a news site, *MV-lehti* has intentionally opted to stay out of the auspices of conventional regulatory bodies of journalism. It is neither affiliated with the Council of Mass Media[3] nor committed to advancing the ethical principles defined in guidelines for journalists (MV-lehti, 2018), unlike almost every media outlet in Finland. Thus, in this sense, *MV-lehti* is not a journalistic news medium. In previous research, the definition of counter-media has referred to publications that endeavour to challenge or contest traditional journalism and publicity (Downey & Fenton, 2003). This provides a premise to examine *MV-lehti* as a reactive publication outlet that both depends on journalistic media and contests them (Tuomola, 2018). In addition, the importance of focusing on this publication stems from two factors. First, the website was prominently popular at the time the collected data were published (Ylä-Anttila, 2017). For example, the news coverage on the crimes of asylum seekers brought approximately 800,000 daily visitors to the website, temporarily outpacing every regional media website (Noppari & Hiltunen, 2018). Second, referring to the public debate on refugees in Finland, *MV-lehti* promised to respond to the citizens' need to know by approaching the topic from perspectives that mainstream media do not cover at all, or do so only from a one-sided standpoint, according to *MV-lehti* (Tuomola, 2018).

The data in this work consist of online articles published in *MV-lehti* about two news cases from autumn 2016. Table 1 shows how the research material was divided between two cases regarding the timeframe and number of articles.

Table 1 *Studied material from MV-lehti*

	Case 1 Station Square	Case 2 Otanmäki	Total
Timeframe	17 Sep.–31 Dec. 2016	11 Sep.–31 Dec. 2016	
N	68	42	110

Comments: The data consist of the full text material of online stories, including headlines, lead paragraphs, and body texts.

The data were collected by going through the entire Open Access archive of *MV-lehti*, covering the two cases in any referential manner, from the first published report to the last one in 2016. By the end of 2016, Case 1 had 68 stories, of which the first was published on 17 September 2016. Case 2 was covered in 42 articles, where the first appeared on 11 September 2016. The data consist of the full text material of online stories, including headlines, lead paragraphs, and body texts. The images were not included in the analysis, as in this research, I found the rhetorical strategies to be primarily linked with textual material.

Both examined news cases are related to the European refugee crisis, which I understand to have started during 2014–2015 and resulted in a large number of people seeking asylum in Europe from the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia. In 2016, the number of refugees had already peaked in Finland; local people had had one year to adjust to a new situation in which asylum seekers were located all over the country in accommodation centres. In addition, *MV-lehti*'s major popularity arose in 2015–2016, as evidenced by the headlines being clicked most often at that time (Nieminen, 2018).

Case 1 refers to a violent altercation that took place at the Station Square in the centre of Helsinki in September 2016. A Finnish man, aged 28, was walking through the square with a friend during a neo-Nazi group's demonstration. The man stopped in front of the demonstrators, who belonged to the National Resistance Movement. He called them names and spat on the ground, with the result that he was kicked in the chest by one of the activists. The man fell down and hit his head, sustaining serious injuries; he died in the hospital six days later. At the trial, the jury considered whether the death was caused explicitly by violence, and the demonstrator was sentenced to prison for two years for aggravated assault.

Case 2 includes articles about a Finnish man who was killed by two asylum seekers in a small village called Otanmäki in northeast Finland, where the Iraqi asylum seekers were staying at an accommodation centre. In September 2016, they encountered a 52-year-old man on his way home from a bar, robbed him, and then beat him to death. The two men were convicted and sentenced to prison.

The Station Square case evoked a significant public debate on political violence and racism in Finland. The media coverage was substantial, and many politicians commented on the topic. In addition, President Sauli Niinistö condemned the case and declared racism as a crime in Finland (Pilke, 2016). The case was also noticed overseas; after the man's death, more than 15,000 people gathered in Helsinki to protest against racism

and violence (Bloomberg, 2016; The Guardian, 2016). The Otanmäki case also gained publicity at the time and affected the decision to close the accommodation centre in Otanmäki (STT, 2017). Moreover, it is a fruitful counterpart to the Station Square case; for those who resisted immigration, it offered a cautionary tale of the consequences of multiculturalism.

The comparability of the Station Square and Otanmäki cases emerges in the wide public debate that their media coverage provoked. Several frontline politicians juxtaposed the cases; for example, then Prime Minister Juha Sipilä and Foreign Minister Timo Soini condemned the violence of the cases in the same context (MTV Uutiset, 2016; Sipilä, 2016). This approach encountered strong criticism when the opponents argued that the defendants of the cases – the neo-Nazis and asylum seekers – were not comparable with each other (Kansan Uutiset, 2016).

The data were examined in three phases using critical, in-depth reading. First, I investigated how Finns and Finnish citizens were discussed in the news texts, and based on these perceptions, I considered who explicitly belonged to "us" and who was envisioned as "them" from *MV-lehti*'s perspective. Second, I examined what values were prominently linked to *MV-lehti*'s presentations of in-groups and out-groups. Third, I scrutinised the findings of the first and second phases by utilising Wodak's (2015) concepts of right-wing populist rhetoric as an analysing instrument. These concepts and strategies were discussed above in the section on the strategies of right-wing populist rhetoric. By exploiting the ideas of these strategies, I categorise the final findings into three functional patterns that emerged from readings of the data. They illustrate the principal criteria of belonging to "us" – the in-group, that is – and how the people is constructed in *MV-lehti*'s texts.

Findings: The ethnonationalist people of *MV-lehti*

I divided the three functional patterns of the people in *MV-lehti* into the following categories: 1) strengthening the national identity, 2) creating exclusion and fear, and 3) justifying one's own ideology. Next, I delve into these patterns in detail.

Strengthening the national identity

The most detailed attribute, which exemplified who belongs to the people in *MV-lehti*, was a clear distinction between the in-group and out-group. The right-wing populist rhetoric in this data divide the world into us and them, good and bad, and insiders and outsiders (Wodak, 2015: 67; see also Fawzi, 2018; Krämer, 2018; Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2017). In *MV-lehti*, the people are declared to speak for "the nation" and "the Finns", defending those on the street against both "those up there" and "the Barbarians" (Wodak, 2015: 21; see also Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2004). A blogger quoted in *MV-lehti* (2016, September 20-c) explicitly states who belongs to "us" and to "them" by writing, "The 'refugee kids' were allowed to demonstrate in Tampere with no interference – in contrast to native Finns", simultaneously calling out how unfairly the "native Finns" are treated and suggesting that refugees receive special treatment. By calling the in-group "native Finns", the blogger depicts Finns as a homogeneous group sharing an anti-immigrant worldview, eliding "the others", whom

MV-lehti refers to by such terms as hypocrites, troublemakers, drug addicts, criminals, drunkards, liars, and ceremonial clowns. This is done despite the fact that these "others" belong to "the Finns" as well. These defaming nicknames are examples of right-wing populist rhetorical strategies of counterattack and negative other presentation (Wodak, 2015; see also Van Dijk, 1992) when wanting the opposition to be perceived as bad people to emphasise the goodness of "our" people. I return to these two strategies in the next subsection.

According to *MV-lehti*, the people strengthen their national identity explicitly by defending "us" against "them"; the articles highlight team spirit and give an impression of taking care of their own. For example, after the Otanmäki case, the Finland First Movement organised a demonstration called the Kajaani Citizens' Safety First, located near the crime scene "where this invader [refugee] brutally killed a local man" (MV-lehti, 2016, September 12). *MV-lehti* reports that people from all over the country had travelled to this small village "to support the locals". A friend of the middle-aged Finnish victim describes him as "almost the most peaceful man who lived in the village", and a reader who sent a message to the editorial board relates that the victim was the father of his childhood friend, "a beloved member of the community". Through the familiarisation and portrayal of the victim as a humble and harmless man, which he undoubtedly was, he came to represent the homogeneous people as a whole, attaching favourable attributes to them and inviting all other ordinary people to identify with him.

Social cohesion is strengthened among the people in *MV-lehti* by turning against the ruling elite and decision makers (Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017*)*, whom they find partly responsible for the Otanmäki homicide. *MV-lehti* (2016, September 16) reported on a songwriter who had uploaded a song on YouTube for a victim "executed by the Muslims" and "whose blood is on the decision makers' hands". People were angry and disillusioned with politicians who did not express their public condolences for the victim in Otanmäki. *MV-lehti* (2016, September 24) also wrote about a woman who had commented in the "Close the Border" and "Finland First" Facebook groups that, in contrast to the Otanmäki incident, a minute of silence was observed for the Station Square victim, not only in parliament but also in several events around the country. The people juxtaposed these cases as equivalent; only "the others" took a different form. In Otanmäki, "the others" were the Muslims and decision makers, while in Station Square, they were the politicians and "tolerants" – that is, from *MV-lehti*'s perspective, the people who advocate multiculturalism. As Wodak (2015) notes, the others can be the elites, but they can also be refugees or asylum seekers, as populism is defined as a relational concept between the people and the others, where the others can assume a different significance according to the context (see also Mudde, 2004).

A distinctive feature for strengthening national identity is emphasising conservative values and morals (Wodak, 2015; Wodak et al., 2009). People talked about the Otanmäki victim as an "ordinary citizen, a father, and a recent grandfather, a Finnish man"; such characterisations imply typical conservative values and patriotic citizenship. Conservative values are underpinned by common sense, which Wodak (2015; see also Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017) stated is also a symptom of right-wing populist rhetoric, supporting anti-intellectualism with its simplistic explanations and solutions. For example, blogger Junes Lokka[4] writes, "Apparently, decision makers, journalists, the judiciary, police, and other authorities cannot digest the fact that this crime [the Otanmäki case]

would have been avoided if these people had not been let into our country" (MV-lehti, 2016, December 17). In this quotation, Lokka implicitly appeals to common sense when proposing as a fact that closing borders for asylum seekers is a simple way of preventing crimes in Finland, as if crimes were never committed by native Finns. By this argument, he insinuates that the ruling elite is incapable of understanding even this effortless common sense, which is required for such a crucial procedure in making decisions.

Creating exclusion and fear

Right-wing populist rhetoric is distinguished by creating fear and exclusion, which have become more common when speaking of strangers who "threaten" the nation and the country (Canovan, 1999; Wodak, 2015). Likewise, in *MV-lehti*, the construction of the people benefits from such discursive strategies as negative other presentations, counterattack, and victim–perpetrator reversal, when they discredit and blame the victim and opposition (Wodak, 2015). For example, in the Station Square case, the victim is repeatedly portrayed in a bad light, as he represented "the wrong side", confronting the demonstrators' nationalistic agenda with anti-racist ideas. As the victim was also known to have written a comment on the Jewish people in an arbitrary Facebook post with no thoughtful meaning (MV-lehti, 2016, September 20-b), people called him "an anti-Semite who was kicked by an ideological brother", "an anarchist drug addict", and "a martyr of tolerants". Therefore, the essential function of attacking the counterparty is to exclude those with contradictory ideas that threaten "the real people" and their truth.

Another strategy of right-wing populist rhetoric is creating distrust of those who do not belong to the people – to "us" – by constructing scapegoats to blame strangers for the hardships we experience (Pelinka, 2013; Wodak, 2015). *MV-lehti* indicates this practice, for example, by quoting the agitator Arre Kougappi's Facebook post (MV-lehti, 2016, September 20-a): Kougappi agitates his followers by blaming "tolerants" for "representing the evil and creating mayhem and destruction all over the world", telling them how the Iraqis had adopted the Station Square victim as their defender. He inflames hatred by explicitly naming the adversaries – the people who advocate multiculturalism and immigration – who must be condemned; otherwise, the ordinary Finns, who do not accept contemporary politics and the leaking borders, will increasingly encounter aggression by immigrants. Thus, the writer claims that letting refugees enter the country will directly lead to oppression of the common people.

Negative other presentation also requires positive self-presentation for its reverse side to strengthen its effectiveness (Van Dijk, 1992; Wodak, 2015). *MV-lehti* (2016, November 14), for example, presented the people emphasising their own integrity and virtuousness by praising how the members of the street-patrol movement Soldiers of Odin[5] brought candles to the grave of the Otanmäki victim. The victim was described as "a deceased Finnish war hero", referring to a typical definition for men who died in the Winter War or in Continuation War during World War II in Finland. Similarly, the defendant in the Station Square assault was defined as a "liked, reliable, and respected person both inside the organisation and generally in the nationalist movement", as he had been awarded the title of Activist of 2015. He was also reported to show integrity by surrendering to police after hearing about the victim's death. As a member of the National Resistance Movement[6] wrote, "in the movement, he is known as a diligent and

reliable comrade whom everybody likes" (MV-lehti, 2016, October 5). These statements give an impression of a decent citizen, while endeavouring to minimise the point that he stands accused of manslaughter due to perpetrating aggravated assault. The National Resistance Movement is depicted in a respectful light, although it glamorises Nazi ideology and supports resistance, for example, of "multiculturalism, Islam, immigration, race mixing, drugs, homosexuality, membership in the European Union, and Zionism [translated]" (Kansallinen Vastarinta, n.d.).

Justifying one's own ideology

The third element of constructing the people in *MV-lehti* was justification of one's own ideology, especially using the strategy of naturalising (Wodak, 2015). In both news cases, the people present a nationalistic, violent, and racist worldview as naturally appealing to patriotism and being "a native Finn". In a democratic state, the law makes violence and racism illegitimate, but still, in the Station Square case, for example, a reader who submitted a post to *MV-lehti* does not criticise the violent act, but instead, marvels at what would happen if the coroner found out that the activist's kick to the victim's chest was not the ultimate cause of death, even though the mainstream media had already publicly portrayed the defendant as guilty (MV-lehti, 2016, September 18). The reader implies that it is acceptable to react to criticism with violence and blames the media for reporting the incident irresponsibly. In *MV-lehti*, the people seem to share a worldview based on their own rules that are distinct from those of mainstream society. Thus, despite his antidemocratic stance, it was justifiable for the Station Square defendant to claim his democratic rights from the establishment of legal protection and release from custody while awaiting trial.

One's own ideology is also justified by the strategy of denial (Van Dijk, 1992; Wodak, 2015). For example, *MV-lehti* (2016, December 17) quotes Lokka's blog commentary, which states that "the world will not be cured by accommodating illiterate people from developing countries in Finland and offering them legal aid when they decide to torture and rape local people", giving the impression that turning our back on those in need of help would be justifiable because they would not appreciate such aid in any case. Thus, he suggests, "we do not have a responsibility to provide for incomers who are not even refugees but a vague group of people who are not wanted even in their home country". Here, an implicit strategy of denying that asylum seekers truly need help is evident; this group is framed as a suspicious crowd, and Lokka insinuates that the individuals belonging to it are defective or bad, as they do not have any other reason for seeking asylum than that they do not fit into their home country either. Denying the need for help of oppressed people signifies the practice of dehumanising asylum seekers and refugees by denying their human features so that it will be easier to resist them and defend one's own privileged status (Esses et al., 2013).

Conclusions

The results of this study indicate that *MV-lehti* constructs the people as a politicised subset of the whole population, consistent with Mudde's (2004) definition of the concept as constructed by populists. In the analysis, the people as a construction (Mudde, 2004;

Mouffe, 2005) emerges in three functional patterns adhering strongly to Wodak's (2015) conceptual and empirical observations of right-wing populist rhetoric. As the data consist only of topics related to the European refugee crisis – and *MV-lehti* already has an anti-immigrant agenda (Reunanen, 2018) – it is possible that the chosen emphasis may affect the results, underlining the people's xenophobic stance. In addition, a broader sample of news cases could have perhaps offered alternative features for the people. However, this research shows that the right-wing populist agenda, anti-immigrant stance, and impolite style materialise in discursive practices that *MV-lehti* utilises in its debate on refugees. By dismantling the right-wing populist rhetoric, this effort reveals these strategies and style in a Finnish-language publication, which reflect ethnonationalist, anti-immigrant, and antidemocratic methods that have also been identified elsewhere.

In *MV-lehti*, the people is constructed by drawing on the distinction between "us" and "them", the "pure people" and "the corrupt elite" (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mudde, 2004), excluding "the others", who do not belong to "our nation" and "our country" (Canovan, 1999; De Cleen, 2012; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Reinemann et al., 2017; Wodak, 2015). The exclusion of "the others" is premised on fear of strangers – that is, refugees and asylum seekers – which constructs the people in a xenophobic and anti-immigrant light (Mouffe, 2005; Wodak, 2013). The people in *MV-lehti* does not represent the whole population of Finnish people, nor the ones who could be comprised as "the ordinary people". Conversely, the people are depicted as angry, hostile, favourable to violence, and looking for a culprit for their distress (Pelinka, 2013; Wodak, 2015), trusting in only an exclusive group of people who share the same racist and anti-elite worldview (Wodak, 2015). To conclude, the people in *MV-lehti* dissociate themselves from democratic values and society, creating an antagonistic reality with independent rules and moralities. It is justifiable to argue that, in *MV-lehti*, the people are a politicised construction aiming to undermine democracy and the constitutional state.

Funding

Notes

1. Translated from a banner on MV-lehti's earlier website (retrieved December 1, 2018, from www.mvlehti.net). All subsequent quotations and references to MV-lehti's articles have been translated as well.
2. Retrieved May 20, 2020, from https://mvlehti.net/mv-lehti/
3. The Council of Mass Media is a self-regulating committee run by publishers and journalists in the field of mass communication with the task of interpreting good professional practice and defending freedom of speech and the press.
4. Lokka is a Finnish anti-immigrant activist; according to a biography he has published, he was born in Morocco and moved to Finland in 2005 (Lokka, 2017). He has been a council member of the Oulu city council since 2017 (Karppinen, 2017), and in 2019, he became an independent candidate for both the Finnish and European parliamentary elections, but he was not elected (Neihum, 2019).
5. The Soldiers of Odin group has an ideological background in the extreme nationalism of the twentieth century, and it enjoyed political support from the True Finns – a national-populist parliamentary party (Nikunen & Hokka, 2021) – before the party broke up in 2018.
6. The National Resistance Movement was founded in 2008 as an equivalent to its Swedish counterpart (Nikunen & Hokka, 2021). In September 2018, the movement was forbidden by order of the court of appeal. The movement appealed to the supreme court, but the appeal was dismissed in October 2020.

Salla Tuomola

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