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Old patterns on new clothes? Populism and political scandals in the Nordic countries

Abstract

The paper analyses political scandals connected to the contemporary populist parties of Denmark, Finland and Sweden. The dramaturgies of these scandals repeat the general patterns of political scandals identified in previous studies, but they also share special characteristics that make them a specific type of neo-populist scandal. The starting point of the typical neo-populist scandal occurs due to the moral transgression of a member of a populist movement, usually through the use of unacceptable language or behaviour; insulting non-native inhabitants or other minorities within the population. However, provocation and playing the role of the underdog are common strategies employed by populists, and a populist movement may even benefit a scandal, though the consequences of the scandal depend on the life phase of the movement and on the status of the member involved in the scandal. The moral transgressions and political consequences of neo-populist scandals may serve as an indicator of the condition liberal democracy enjoys but also reveal contextual differences in particular societies and their moral order.

Keywords

populism, political scandal, Nordic countries, scandalogy, 21st century, liberal democracy, moral order

Introduction

Political scandals have become a popular research topic among political sociologists and media scholars in the 21st century, so much so that the approach has begun to be called 'scandalogy' (see Brenton, 2013: 863).[i] The obvious forces driving the topic are the visible increase in political scandals from the late 20th century onwards, and increased theorisation following John B. Thompson's seminal work *Political Scandal* (2000). Scandalogy has become established especially in the Anglo-American context, where scandals are made public more often than in many other political and media environments (Garrard, 2006: 22). However, political scandals and their study have recently spread to cover almost the whole globe (see Tumber and Waisbord, 2004), even into the Nordic countries that were thought to be almost a 'scandal-free zone' until the late 20th century (see Allern et al., 2012: 29).

During this era of political scandals, populist movements have gained great success in Europe. Populism is a slippery concept and can mean different things (Canovan, 1999: 3; Taggart, 2000: 1). However, in modern democracies, populism most often refers to political movements and parties using antagonistic 'populist rhetoric' against political and economic elites or against groups other than the 'native inhabitants' of the nation state by appealing to 'the people' (see Mudde, 2004: 543). Contemporary European populist movements have also been called neo-populist to mark them out from previous forms of populism (Taggart, 2000; Mazzoleni et al., 2003). Although left-wing populist movements have raised their heads in Greece and Spain, for example, most movements – such as Front National in France, Lega Nord in Italy and FPÖ in Austria – can be classified as right-wing radicals promoting a 'nativist' ideology that emphasises the status of native inhabitants and sees immigrants as threats to alleged national homogeneity (see Mudde, 2007: 19).

As provocation and the transgressions of norms are essential to their rhetoric, neo-populist movements have generally exploited public rallies and tactically attacked media to attract media

attention (Mazzoleni, 2008: 55-57; Müller 2016). Wodak (2013: 32-33) has called 'the right-wing populist perpetuum mobile' a dynamic in which right-wing populists can 'set the agenda and distract the media from other important news' with their public provocations and norm violations. According to Wodak, right-wing populist movements also exploit public scandals for these purposes: she has analysed the communication strategies Austrian FPÖ has employed in such situations. Nevertheless, scandalogy has not paid great attention to neo-populist political scandals, and no systematic comparative analyses of scandals linked to European neo-populist parties have been conducted.

This study analyses political scandals linked to the 21st century's populist, radical, right-wing parties in the Nordic countries. The aim is to explore whether it is possible to discern a specific scandal type that is somehow different from the acknowledged political scandal categories (RQ1). In general, the study examines what norm transgressions in the scandals linked to the neo-populist movements in multiparty democracies, like the Nordic countries, can tell us about more general social transformations (RQ2). The analysis begins by mapping political scandals connected to the most popular populist parties in Denmark, Sweden and Finland between 2005 and 2015. The dramaturgy of one scandal from each country is then qualitatively analysed. However, first the Nordic context and the general dramaturgy of political scandal are presented in more detail.

Populism in the Nordic context

This study focuses on scandals connected to contemporary populist political parties in three Nordic countries (see Table 1): Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti, DF), The Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset, PS) and Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna, SD). Both DF and PS were established in 1995 from the remnants of the successful populist parties of the 1970s. They entered their political arenas as minor populist movements, but during the 21st century they have become established political players: DF assisted the conservative governments of Denmark between 2001

and 2011, and has also done so since the 2015 general election, when it became the second largest party. PS was a minor player before the 'big bang elections' of 2011 (Arter, 2012), when it became the third largest. In the 2015 elections, PS lost votes but came second, joining the governing cabinet for the first time in its history. The story of SD is different; although it has been established since 1988 and gained 12.9 percent of the vote in the Swedish general election of 2014, it has been excluded from political decision-making due to its National Socialist movement background (see Baas, 2014). However, the party's popularity has continued to increase. According to opinion polls almost 20 percent of Swedish voters supported it in 2016.

Table 1. The contemporary Nordic populist parties in Denmark, Finland and Sweden

	Established	**Into parliament (votes % / seats)**	**Leaders**	**Votes % / seats in parliament**	**Government / opposition**
Danish People's Party (DF)	1995 (Danish Progress Party 1972)	1998 (7.4% /13)	Kristian Thulesen Dahl (2012-) Pia Kjærsgaard (1995-2012)	21.1% / 37 (2015)	Assisting government 2001-2011 and 2015-
Finns Party (PS)	1995 (Finnish Rural Party 1959)	1995 (1% / 1)	Jussi Halla-aho (2017) Timo Soini (1996-)	17.7% / 38 (2015)	Opposition, government in 2015-2017
Sweden Democrats (SD	1988	2010 (5.7% / 20)	Jimmie Åkesson (2005-) Mikael Jansson (1995-2005)	12.9% / 49 (2014)	Opposition, cordon sanitaire

The Nordic countries are typical representatives of consensual multiparty democracies based on the welfare state model. According to Paloheimo (2012: 329), this explains why populist parties have been successful for a long time in such countries; the consensual establishment is easily labelled a 'corrupt elite' by populists. However, populism in the Nordic countries has not been regarded as being as offensive in style as in Southern and Eastern European countries where politics is traditionally more confrontational (Widfeldt, 2010: 179). According to the European Social Survey (ESS), the supporters of the Nordic populist parties are quite different to extremist populist

movements, because they rely on a democratic society and want to be integrated into it (Mesežnikov et al., 2008; Paloheimo, 2012: 337).

Nevertheless, the Nordic parties did not garner larger success until they promoted intensive criticism of immigration in the 1990s and especially the 21st century. Thus, even if there are different domestic emphases, nationalistic approaches and criticism of immigration have been central issues in the programmes and public rhetoric of all three parties, linking them to other radical right-wing parties in Europe (cf. Jungar and Jupskås, 2014).

In all three countries, the success of populist parties has challenged traditional consensus politics and made the previously quite stable Nordic party system more contentious (Arter, 2012). In Sweden, SD's success in the 2014 general election broke the traditional division of right- and left-wing alliances, leading to a centre-left minority government unable to function without collaboration from the right-wing alliance – both traditional blocks refused to collaborate with SD. In Denmark DF has assisted conservative minority governments in the 21st century and promoted strict immigration policies with no 'true' governmental responsibility. The success of PS in the 2011 elections caused trouble in Finland because the party did not want to join the cabinet, even though it was asked. The resulting 'rainbow government' – a mixture of left- and right-wing parties – was unable to collaborate. After the 2015 general election, PS joined a conservative coalition in government, but in 2017 the party was split when Jussi Halla-aho was elected as its party leader. Since then, PS has continued in opposition as a clearly radical right-wing party.

Mediated political scandal

Thompson (2000: 60-61) defines modern political scandals as mediated events, which are not only reported but also fuelled by media activity. Thus, the marketisation and liberalisation of the media are seen as primary reasons for the increase in mediatised political scandals (Lull and Hinerman, 1997). Unsurprisingly then, political scandals have become more common in media environments

where politicians and political institutions seek greater media publicity and media companies and journalists compete with each other for scoops, resulting in scandals becoming a modern form of witch-hunting: 'media hunts' (Allern and Pollack, 2012: 22).

Political scandals are always distinct cases and their implications vary depending on their historical, political and cultural contexts. However, there is an almost unanimous view among scholars that there is always, as Thompson (2000: 13) stated, a transgression of norms, values or moral codes at stake in political scandal.[ii] Essentially, this transgression receives significant public attention through the media, which makes political scandals mediated events (Thompson, 2000: 30-31, 60-61). Political scandals can be linked to public institutions, although most scandals and media hunts are centred on public figures, i.e. politicians, public officials or celebrities (Garrard, 2006: 18).

Thompson (2000: 120-123) defined three main types of political scandal: sexual, financial and power scandals – the categories most political scandals are classified under. However, Thompson's scandal types remain quite general classifications, thus, new typologies of scandal have been added in recent years. Ekström and Johansson (2008: 62), for example, emphasised the central role of mediatised talk 'for modern political scandals as well as their origins, dynamics and dramatisation', calling such scandals 'talk scandals'. Allern et al. (2012: 36) have also made a more nuanced categorisation according to the type of norm transgression that occurs in a specific political scandal, including: 'offences in economic affairs', 'offences concerning other laws and regulation', 'the abuse of power', 'unacceptable talk', 'unacceptable personal behaviour' and 'other or mixed types'.

Scandalogy has demonstrated that mediatised political scandals follow similar cycles, although their starting points, main themes, actors, durations, the volume of media attention and the consequences vary (see Thompson, 2000: 24, 72-77; Garrard, 2006; Jenssen and Fladmoe, 2012: 60-62). Initially, the media reveals the transgression of a norm, for example, through the result of investigative journalism, something coming to light by accident or an intentional leak to harm a political

opponent. The accumulation of media attention then accelerates and the scandal follows market-driven media logic in living a life of its own. However, it is important to note that similar affairs are sometimes scandalized but sometimes not by the media (Entman, 2012).

The target of a media hunt will habitually try to deny the incident, but often new evidence appears, refuelling the scandal. The consequences of the 'second-order transgression' may often be more serious than the original transgression (Ekström and Johansson, 2008: 71). Thus, the cycle of the scandal is spun from denials to new revelations until narrative closure is reached or the media audience becomes jaded. There might also appear a 'counter cycle' in which contradictory evidence is presented (Jennsen and Fladmoe, 2012: 65-66). However, the scandal does not usually end until the accused confesses or an official conclusion is delivered by a court of justice or an investigative committee. Political scandals do not necessarily affect political party success, but the consequences of political scandal have mostly been negative for individuals who have been the targets of media hunts (Von Sikorski, 2014: 186).

The cyclical dramaturgy of a mediated political scandal applies to sexual, financial and power scandals. It also fits the fourth scandal type 'talk scandals' as defined by Ekström and Johansson (2008). However, they indicate that, according to Thompson, the norm transgression is committed behind closed doors and only become news after the media's revelation, although many contemporary scandals start in and are produced by the media. Ekström and Johansson (2008: 62) call these scandals 'talk scandals', because they highlight the significance of mediatised talk in the 'origins, dynamics and dramatization' of modern political scandal. They separate 'first-order talk scandals', in which the talk itself constitutes a scandal, from second-order talk scandals, in which public statements about the ongoing scandal 'are assigned an aura of scandal'. In addition, they analyse how 'staged talk' is used in the media's dramatisation of different scandal types (Ekström and Johansson, 2008: 62).

Different political scandals have received increased research interest during the 21st century (see Thompson, 2000; Tumber and Waisbord, 2004; Garrard, 2006; Entman, 2012; Downey and Stanyer, 2013). Several studies on political scandals have also been conducted in the Nordic countries (e.g. Ekström and Johansson, 2008; Jacobsson and Löfmarck, 2008; Juntunen and Väliverronen, 2010; Allern and Pollack, 2012; Kantola and Vesa, 2013; Isotalus and Almonkari, 2014; Jenssen, 2014; Pollack, 2015). However, the specific relationship between contemporary populist movements and mediatised political scandals has been indicated but not systematically explored.

Political scandals in Denmark, Finland and Sweden 2005–2015

The study first mapped the political scandals that the most successful populist parties confronted in Denmark, Finland and Sweden between 2005 and 2015, meaning scandals connected to DF, PS and SD, respectively. Different media archives – national, press, audio-visual – and internet search engines were employed to map the scandals by using the search words: scandal, affair, sensation and the parties and the name of the political figures involved. Native research assistants with good track records in politics and media studies were hired to guarantee the reliability of material search.[iii]

A definition of political scandal as a specific affair of moral transgression made public by the media was used to separate scandals from other sensationalist media events such as rumours or gossip (cf. Thompson, 2000: 25-27). The scale of the event is important here. There might be several media sensations connected to populist parties, but not all are scandals. To become a scandal, a sensation has to continue for several days so that its cyclical dramaturgy can be constructed by the media. Therefore, Allern et al. (2012: 31) have separated 'national scandals' from minor affairs, meaning scandals are reported by at least two nationwide media sources for more than five days and have

usually been explicitly discussed as scandalous in their domestic contexts. The same categorisation is adopted in this study too.

Political scandals are quite recent phenomena in the Nordic countries. Scandals began to appear more often during the 1970s and 1980s, but it was not until the 21st century that they became common in Nordic media coverage. During this century's first decade, Sweden had 34 political scandals, while 20 occurred in both Denmark and Finland, meaning at least two to three major scandals per year in each country (Allern et al., 2012: 29–35). Thus, the amount of scandals has multiplied and the consequences for the individuals involved are more serious than before (e.g. Blach-Ørsten, 2011; Kantola, 2011). The follow-up study by Allern and Pollack (2016: 154) shows a significant increase in the amount of Norwegian national political scandals during the 2010s, although Sweden only shows a small increase. That result is similar to this article's study of national political scandals in Denmark, Sweden and Finland between 2005 and 2015, which indicates that the amount of scandals in these three countries has not increased much in the past five years, even though the causes and norm transgressions have altered (see Table 2).

Table 2. National political scandals in Denmark, Finland and Sweden 2005–2015

Type of norm transgression	**Denmark**	**Finland**	**Sweden**	**Total**
Economic	5	3	10	18
Breaking laws or regulations	3	1	7	11
Abuse of power	2	5	2	9
Unacceptable talk	-	7	3	10
Unacceptable personal behaviour	4	6	4	14
Other or mixed types	5	2	5	12
Total	19	24	31	74
Scandals linked to populist parties	**1**	**8**	**6**	**15**

There were 74 national political scandals in Denmark, Finland and Sweden between 2005 and 2015 (before October 2015); 31 took place in Sweden, 24 in Finland and 19 in Denmark. Norm transgressions varied between the countries, indicating contextual differences in political and

cultural norms. 'Traditional' causes of political scandal, i.e. misuses of power or finances, were common in all countries, but, compared to previous decades, a clear pattern of scandal concerning unacceptable talk or behaviour has developed during the 21st century (cf. Allern and Pollack, 2016: 157). In fact, the increase in these kinds of scandals explains the total increase in political scandals in Finland and Sweden during the 21st century.

In all countries, at least one national scandal was linked to a domestic populist party. In Sweden one fifth of the national scandals were linked to SD; in Finland a third concerned PS; in Denmark, only one national scandal – the Morten Messerschmidt affair in 2007 – was connected to DF. However, Denmark had 14 political scandals that did not fulfil the requirements of a national scandal of which 11 were linked to DF – ten concerned unacceptable talk or behaviour and six were specifically about racist or discriminatory statements. Thus, it seems that the threshold for these affairs becoming national scandals is, for some reason, higher in Denmark.

The increase in 'talk scandals' was especially explicit in Finland. Since almost all scandals linked to PS have been caused by unacceptable talk or behaviour, it is justifiable to argue that the party's modern popularity has radically changed scandal coverage. Most of the scandals were linked to MPs from PS – Jussi Halla-aho, Teuvo Hakkarainen, Olli Immonen and James Hirvisaari – who have published anti-immigration and anti-multiculturalism writings in social media or flirted with Nazi gestures or met radical members of the National Socialist movement. Halla-aho was condemned by the Finnish justice system for demagogy and attacking freedom of worship in 2012. Hirvisaari was dismissed from PS for misconduct (posing with a neo-Nazi in Finnish parliament) in 2013. Hakkarainen was condemned in court at the beginning of 2017, and Immonen has been reprimanded by his party. Halla-aho is currently a MEP – elected with the second largest number of votes in Finland's 2014 European Parliamentary Election and aspires to the leadership of the party in June 2017.

In Sweden, only two national scandals were connected to SD before 2012, but in 2012 and 2013 SD was connected to several scandals resulting from unacceptable talk or behaviour. The most notable of these was the 'iron bar scandal' in 2012, however, the 'racist scandal' and 'Avpixlat-scandal', in which popular paper *Expressen* revealed the previously anonymous racist writings of several SD members, brought SD a large amount of negative attention in 2013. In Sweden, 'talk scandals' became common after 2010 when SD entered parliament. Furthermore, in addition to national scandals during the 2010s there have been more than ten minor sensations a year linked to SD.

Three scandals linked to the Nordic populist parties

One scandal from each country was selected for a more detailed qualitative analysis: the 'Morten Messerschmidt affair' from Denmark, the 'iron bar scandal' from Sweden, and the 'Olli Immonen affair' from Finland. The Danish and Swedish examples have been the most prominent scandals so far connected to these domestic populist parties. Immonen's case is not the most notable scandal in the history of PS because Halla-aho's court case experienced several phases between 2008 and 2012. However, compared to the complex and long-lasting Halla-aho case, the Immonen affair constitutes a clearer example of a mediatised political scandal offering considerable empirical material. Thus, even if not the most prominent scandal, it has been among the most prominent scandals linked to PS. All the selected scandals resulted in several hundred press articles, tens of discussions on television and radio news, several chat show interviews and an unknowable number of social media comments made over a one- or two-month period. However, the analysis here focuses on the main narratives of the scandals traced by the media outlets most prominent in a particular scandal as there is no space for a more detailed analysis.

The dramaturgies of the three scandals are analysed next through Thompson's (2000: 73) categorisation of scandal phases – pre-scandal, scandal proper, culmination and aftermath – and the scandal theories presented in previous sections. The emphasis is on the norm transgression of the

scandal in question and its relationship to a particular social context. The underlying presumption here is that the norm transgressions of political scandals may reveal ongoing social value transformations on a more general level (cf. Lull and Hinerman, 1997).

Thompson (2000: 73) has demonstrated that political scandals include usually 'a pre-scandal phase' during which the foundations of the scandal are laid. All three scandals dealt with here also contained pre-scandal phases: In Denmark, a pre-phase appeared when several Danish newspapers, such as *Jyllands-Posten*, *Information* and *Kristeligt Dagblad*, stated on 20 April 2007 that Messerschmidt and other DF party members had made racist remarks, which had then been reported to the police. In Finland, the MP Olli Immonen published a Facebook photo in June 2015, showing him posing with convicted neo-Nazis in a commemoration of Eugen Schauman, a nationalist anarchist who murdered Governor General Nikolai Bobrikov in 1904 during Tsarist rule. According to *Ilta-Sanomat*, because of the incident 'The PS parliamentary group leader asks Olli Immonen to be more careful' (18 June 2015). In Sweden, all members of SD linked to the 'iron bar scandal' had caused minor sensations before as a result of them making insulting statements or behaving in ways designed to insult others. However, the actual scandal played out in the press eighteen months later the actual events, which occurred on June 2010 – even if comedian Soran Ismail publicly commented on the incident at the time.

The norm transgression in all three scandals was caused by unacceptable talk or behaviour (Allern et al., 2012: 36), but 'the scandal proper phases' started because of different events the media started to frame as scandals (cf. Thompson, 2000: 74). In Denmark the scandal began when the popular paper *BT* published an article titled 'Hyldede Hitler i Tivoli' on 27 April, describing Messerschmidt as giving a Hitler salute, shouting 'Sieg Heil' and singing Nazi songs in a restaurant, Grøften,, in Copenhagen's Tivoli, on 13 April. In Finland, the scandal started on 25 July after the leading daily of Finland, *Helsingin Sanomat*, published an article about Immonen's Facebook update from 24 July, that 'shocked some opposition MP's' with its militant nationalist

rhetoric. According to the article, Immonen responded to criticism by writing a Facebook update that he 'will not yield an inch in his line of defending nationalist Finland'. In Sweden, the scandal burst into life on 13 November 2012, when popular paper *Expressen* published an article in which a witness from 2010 claimed that three leading SD politicians – Erik Almqvist, Kent Ekeroth and Christian Westling – had insulted comedian Soran Ismail and other people with sexist and racist comments on Stockholm's street. They also had taken iron bars from scaffolding to 'protect themselves against a drunken gangster' – as they explained – but also behaved aggressively against other people.

The dramaturgies then followed the typical model of political scandal in which all the targets of the scandals first denied the incident. However, the media immediately published evidence to support their claims, causing 'second order norm transgression' in which the targets were shown to be liars (Thompson, 2000: 74-75; Ekström and Johansson, 2008: 71). For example, a former member of the Danish parliament, Torben Lund (Social Democrats), verified the Tivoli incident in *BT* (24 April 2007). In the same article, Messerschmidt explains that 'he did not mean it seriously', but 'he did it to provoke Lund'. In other dailies on the very same day, *Jyllands-Posten* and *Politiken*, Messerschmidt admitted singing German songs but denied the Nazi accusations.

In Sweden, Almqvist denied the accusations immediately, but during the next three days, *Expressen* published video clips that demonstrated indisputably that Almqvist, among others, had claimed that Ismail is 'hostile to Sweden', 'does not belong to Sweden' and argues 'like a cunt'. He also called a woman 'a little whore' when she tried to calm the situation. The videos had been shot by Ekeroth on his mobile phone – it is unknown how they were leaked to the paper. In turn, Immonen's statement was recorded from Facebook, where he wrote that he is 'dreaming of a strong, brave nation that will defeat this nightmare called multiculturalism' and that he has a 'strong belief in his fellow fighters' who 'will fight until the end for their homeland and one true Finnish nation'. In the Finnish Broadcasting Company's interview on 26 July, the former leader of the populist Finnish

Rural Party (a predecessor of PS) from the 1980s, Pekka Vennamo, draws a parallel between the militant rhetoric of Immonen and Anders Behring Breivik, the Norwegian mass murderer.

The scandals were hotly debated in mainstream popular and prestige media, creating overwhelming publicity over which there was no control. In particular, the popular press was keen to push the scandals, whereas public service broadcasters did not cover the scandals as eagerly, even though they reported them. The 'dramatis personae' (Thompson, 2000: 77) of the scandals were, of course, the individuals whose actions were the objects of the scandal, but also those who commented and disapproved of the actions in public. In all cases, the rival politicians and parties gave very critical statements about populist politicians' insults. The leaders and members of their own parties also criticized the behaviour, but they were not as unambiguously negative as other politicians and experts. It was also common that the incidents were vaguely commented on by the protagonists' own party – as it was in Finland, where the Immonen affair was mostly commented on by the parliamentary group leader Sampo Terho, who emphasised that 'Immonen presented his own opinions, not those of PS'.

The active role of the media and certain journalists cannot be devalued in the course of the scandals, making the media a central actor in them (Thompson, 2000: 82-84; Allern and Pollack, 2012: 19-22). In Denmark, *BT*'s political editor Helle Ib, Editor-in-Chief Arne Ullum and journalist Jacob Heinel Jensen were especially active participants, and in Finland, *Helsingin Sanomat* actively discussed the affair with the help of several journalists, but the political editor of the tabloid *Ilta-Sanomat*, Mika Koskinen, specialised in the topic.

During the scandals, the targets and their supporters also promoted a 'counter-cycle' to oppose the critical voices of the mainstream media (cf. Jenssen and Fladmoe, 2012: 65-66). In his press release on 29 April, Messerschmidt, for example, accused *BT* of 'a media hunt'. In Finland, the party leader, Soini, commented on the Immonen affair for first time in the popular paper *Ilta-Sanomat* on

27 July, stressing that 'PS's parliamentary group would manage the issue'. Immonen's supporters defended his arguments and blamed the media and its commentators for being far too liberal and yet prejudiced against PS in social media discussion forums (Herkman and Matikainen, 2016). When the scandals continued, some party colleagues even supported the scandalised individuals; for example, the party leader Pia Kjærsgaard announced her support for Messerschmidt in *Politiken* on 1 May.

However, in all the scandals 'culmination phases' were met and the political careers of the scandal targets faced serious consequences (Thompson, 2000: 75). Messerschmidt announced his intention to resign from DF and become an independent MP on 29 April, Immonen did not join the party conference on 8-9 August and announced that he was to resign from PS's parliamentary group for two months on 26 August, and Almqvist, Ekeroth and Westling resigned from SD's party organs between 14 and 16 November. Almqvist finally resigned from parliament in December 2012. The resignations were extensively reported in all the major media of the countries.

However, the 'aftermaths' were played out after the high dramas of scandals had been passed (Thompson, 2000: 76). For example, on 4 May *BT* admitted that although other facts had been verified it was unsure if Messerschmidt had shouted 'Sieg Heil'. After this revelation some other papers, for example *Avisen* and *Jyllands-Posten,* started to discuss *BT* critically as 'a hunter'. Messerschmidt returned to DF's parliamentary group on 24 May, and the party instigated a court case against *BT* on 2 June 2007. The case opened at the City Court of Copenhagen on 4 February 2009. After three weeks, Messerschmidt won the case, which argued he had not sung Nazi songs or saluted Hitler in Tivoli, even though he raised his arm to 'heil' and made a 'Hitler moustache' with his fingers. Ullum and Jensen from *BT* were ordered to pay fines and compensation. On 7 June 2009, Messerschmidt was elected to the European Parliament with the second highest number of personal votes in Denmark's EU election history. The 'scandal proper' phase lasted about six weeks, but the aftermath of the scandal continued until the court proceedings of February 2009.

In Sweden, the aftermath of the scandal was seen on 28 November, when the party's MP Lars Isovaara claimed in public that an immigrant had stolen his bag while he was outside Parliament house. In reality – as was reported two days later – he had been drunk and was thrown out of a pub after making racist comments, had crashed his wheelchair and lost his bag in the accident. The revelation again fuelled a media debate over 'the true nature of SD'. The scandal lasted about one month and faded out in early December with opinion polls showing increased support for SD.

The Immonen affair faded out for a month after he had announced his temporary resignation. However, an aftermath occurred when PS's spokesperson Matti Putkonen, who supported Immonen during the scandal, published in his briefing on 26 August 'a blacklist' of persons – politicians, journalists and experts – who had fuelled the 'media hunt' against Immonen. The list was published by *Ilta-Sanomat* on the same day as an article in which the former leader of the Social Democratic Party, Eero Heinäluoma, commented that he was proud to be on the list. Thus, the same kinds of dramaturgies, starting points, actors and consequences can be found in all three scandals (see Table 3).

Table 3. Dramaturgies of the three scandals

	Pre-phase	**Starting point**	**Actors**	**Consequences (short term)**	**Consequences (long term)**
Messerschmidt affair (2007)	Playing with Nazi gestures and insulting a fellow MP	Nazi-salute and songs in Tivoli made public by *BT*	Messerschmidt, *BT*, other media, other politicians, experts, Messerschmidt's supporters	Resignation from DF's Parliamentary Group	Winning the court case (2009), MEP (2009, 2014)
Iron bar scandal (2012)	Insulting people with racist and sexist comments, armed with iron bars (2010)	2010 events made public by *Expressen* video clips (2012)	Almqvist, Ekeroth, Westling, *Expressen*, other media, other politicians, SD's supporters	Resignation from party organs (Almqvist from the party)	Ekeroth MP (2010), Almqvist out of politics, Westling a member of SD
Immonen affair (2015)	Posing with neo-Nazis at a nationalist event	Facebook updates using nationalist rhetoric against multiculturalism	Immonen, *Helsingin Sanomat*, other media, other politicians, PS' supporters	Resignation from PS's Parliamentary Group	Resignation ended after two months, MP (2015)

A pattern of neo-populist scandal

According to our quantitative mapping and qualitative case analyses, a clear pattern of a 'neo-populist scandal' can be defined. The neo-populist scandal: 1) features a contemporary populist movement; 2) is caused by the unacceptable talk or behaviour of a member of a populist party; 3) transgresses common moral standards by insulting immigrants or other minorities on purpose; 4) is constructed by mainstream liberal media and politicians; 5) results in a 'counter cycle' on social media against the mainstream media's articles, which is created by supporters of the populist politician; 6) often results in legal repercussions or clearing committee; but 7) has differing consequences depending on the life phase of the populist movement and the status of the individual politicians involved.

Neo-populist scandals can be considered a specific type of 'talk scandal' as they usually, but not always, originate from derogatory or insulting utterances made in public or reported utterances (some neo-populist scandals originate from unacceptable behaviour rather than from talk). However, there are special characteristics within neo-populist scandals that differentiate them from ordinary talk scandals. One of them is that neo-populist scandals often begin due to the intentional provocation of populist politicians as they transgress moral codes by expressing nativism, xenophobia, racism or homophobia. Thus, it is not just news media activity but the purposeful talk or behaviour of a populist actor published him or herself in social media that creates a scandal.

Another dimension differentiating neo-populist scandals from talk scandals is that the risk of legal consequences in talk scandals is 'virtually nonexistent' (Ekström and Johansson, 2008: 64), but common in neo-populist scandals. As most Western democracies forbid demagogy and hate speech against ethnic, religious or sexual minorities by law, court cases featuring neo-populist scandals are relatively common, as was seen in the case studies analysed here.

However, even if insults are made on purpose, there is hardly any deeper communication strategy behind the neo-populist scandals in the Nordic context (cf. Mazzoleni, 2008: 55-57). The insulting statements and gestures are targeted to appeal to like-minded peer groups and sometimes made when drunk. Therefore, the public condemnation and scandal often come as a surprise to the persons involved. Even though populists mean what they say or write, they have not planned the consequences of their action. Thus, 'the right-wing populist perpetuum mobile' defined by Wodak (2013: 33; 2015: 19-20) as a dynamic in which right-wing populists can set the media agenda through public provocations and norm violations, does not mirror all scandals linked to contemporary right-wing populist movements. This is also why the term 'neo-populist scandal' describes the phenomenon on a more general level.

Some populist politicians – such as Donald Trump, Geert Wilders and Jörg Haider – have successfully employed 'the right-wing populist perpetuum mobile' in their campaigns (e.g. Kreis, 2017), but in the Nordic countries, the backgrounds of populist parties, except SD, derive from traditional anti-elite protest movements. These parties have quite recently adopted nativist and anti-immigration rhetoric in their agenda to gain more success, and PS, for example, turned from being a social political protest movement to becoming a radical right-wing party not earlier than during the 2010s (Jungar, 2016). SD, in turn, has tried to leave behind its National Socialist background, use considered language and extend its agenda towards social issues to gain a status as a normal political party (Baas, 2014). Thus, even if Nordic populist parties are quite similar to European radical right-wing populist parties in their nationalist and xenophobic message, they have to 'tone down' this agenda to become successful on a broad scale (Widfeldt, 2010). This is especially true if they have gained a foothold in parliament or even in a governing cabinet (see Wodak, 2013: 29).

Thus, the political consequences of a scandal vary according to the life phase and status of the populist movement, becoming more serious if the movement has achieved an established phase reminiscent of more mainstream political parties (cf. Stewart et al., 2003: 219-224). However, when

the movement is still in its 'insurgent phase', the scandal target may even increase his or her popularity among supporters (usually, the people involved in neo-populist scandals are male). This is because the politicians and their supporters share the same views regarding the xenophobic or racist opinions expressed. In the supporters' minds, the target was right and the media hunt represents a corrupt elite and their excessively liberal opinions.

Conclusions

In all three Nordic countries included in the study, mediated political scandals have become more frequent during the 21st century, and so-called 'talk scandals' have become more common during the 2010s in Finland and Sweden. This can be explained with reference to the increased popularity of the domestic populist parties, PS and SD, whose members made insulting or discriminatory comments about various minority groups, especially against immigrants. In Denmark, only one national political scandal was linked to a domestic populist party, DF, between 2005 and 2015. However, several minor scandals were caused by the unacceptable comments of DF members. One third of all national political scandals in Denmark, Finland and Sweden were caused by unacceptable talk or behaviour and one fifth of them were linked to domestic populist parties.

The increase of all kinds of political scandals in the Nordic countries can be explained by changes throughout media and political cultures. In Hallin and Mancini's (2004) seminal categorisation of politics and media systems, Nordic countries represent the 'Democratic Corporatist' model alongside such North and Central European countries as the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland and Austria – all confronting successful right-wing populist parties. However, Hallin and Mancini (2004: 251-252) conclude their analysis by saying that the degree of variation among nation states has diminished over time, meaning a change in European media systems 'toward the Liberal Model that prevails in its purest form in North America'. The media in the Nordic countries have also significantly commercialised over recent decades, meaning fewer partisan connections, greater

financial challenges to public service broadcasting and increased competition from market-driven content, making political scandals frequent events in Nordic countries as well (Allern et al., 2012: 33-34).

Obviously, scandals linked to the domestic populist parties have become more common as these movements have gained success in the 21st century and become more established in their political fields. Populists tend to attack seats of power and financial elites, thus, for them, the abuse-of-power scandals and financial scandals often demonstrate the corruption of the established elites and therefore help to increase their popularity. As populists feel that they are disdained by the mainstream media, they promote their views and strengthen their group identities in social media, meaning journalistic media cannot act as a gatekeeper for them (e.g. Sakki and Pettersson, 2016; Herkman and Matikainen, 2016; Hatakka et al., 2017). Hence, scandals linked to populists in the Nordic countries caused by unacceptable talk or by unacceptable behaviour are often made visible via social media.

Norm transgression arises when the conservative and even aggressive and derogatory statements of populist politicians collide with the liberal 'power-bloc' represented by the news media and mainstream parties and cause moral debates amongst the population. As such, the increase of neo-populist scandals indicates a challenge to liberal democracies and their moral order. The constitutional protection of minority rights has always confronted the democratic promise of majority rule in liberal democracies, but populism has highlighted this struggle by exploiting majority rule to attack pluralism and the protection of the rights of minorities (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012: 17). This confrontation has been especially striking in the Nordic countries, in which the welfare state system enjoys strong support and articulations of populism have been historically tied to welfare state ideology (Herkman, 2017).

The different subjects causing scandals in our case studies – fascism or neo-Nazism in Denmark, racism and sexism in Sweden and nativism in Finland – can be seen as sharing various aspects, but may also indicate contextual differences in moral systems. The remarkably lower amount of national neo-populist scandals in Denmark compared to Finland and Sweden, for example, can be explained by cultural differences in moral order, claiming that Danes are more 'tolerant' and therefore do not make scandal based on politicians' actions and words as eagerly as in other Nordic cultures. However, another explanation might be the different 'life phases' of the Nordic populist parties; DF has been a successful party in Denmark for so long that it has an established position and its media attention has been normalised (cf. Stewart et al., 2003: 223). Politically, the strict immigration policy DF promotes has become mainstream, thus Danish media does not make DF the subject of scandal as eagerly as it may have once done. In Sweden and in Finland the domestic populist parties and their agendas are less normalized and thus more likely to be the subject of moralising and the target of scandal.

This study focused on consensus multiparty democracies in Nordic countries that have a liberal media which is active in making scandal out of the provocative behaviour and words of right-wing populists. In addition, Nordic mainstream parties criticise nationalist populism, creating the necessary antagonistic political environment for scandals (cf. Entman, 2012). Similar scandals have appeared in other 'Democratic Corporatist' countries such as the Benelux-countries, Austria and Switzerland that have comparable media and political systems and neo-populist movements: the Dutch populist politician Geert Wilders compared the *Quran* to Hitler's *Mein Kampf* in 2007, the prohibition of minarets in Switzerland was promoted by the Swiss People's Party in 2012, and Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) leader, Jörg Heider (1950–2008), was often accused of Nazi sympathies – just to mention a few instances of controversy that have received international attention. These scandals may serve as an indicator of the positive conditions that liberal democracy enjoys but they also reveal contextual differences in societies and their moral orders.

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[i] The first international conference of scandalogy was arranged 7-8 April 2016 in Bamberg, Germany.

[ii] Entman (2012) does not deny that debates about morality would not be essential regarding scandals. However, he questions the central role of mediated scandals as moral adjusters of democracy, which is something some scandal researchers have claimed (e.g. Lull and Hinerman, 1997).

[iii] Anonymized (University of Copenhagen) gathered the material in Denmark, Anonymized (University of Helsinki) in Finland and Anonymized (Stockholm University) in Sweden.

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