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Tales of Our Own

The Main Rhetoric-performative Tropes of the Pro-immigrant and Immigrant-made
Discourses in Finland

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Abstract:

Immigration remains among the most salient topics in the socio-political debate in a dynamically transforming Europe, which is reflected in the scholarly interest in the theme. However, as this thesis argues, the attention paid to anti-immigration and pro-immigration poles of the debate is not equal and the agency of immigrants in providing knowledge on the issue pertaining to them directly is relatively neglected in academia.

“Tales of Our Own” strives to explore the characteristics of pro-immigration and immigrant-made discourses and investigate their relationships with the dominant hostile narratives around immigration emerging in the context of the current populist upsurge. The thesis conceptualizes populism as an antagonizing mode of articulation that provides a stylistic framework for arguments inciting the process of othering. Immigrants in these circumstances constitute perfect ‘Others’, excluded through many novel narratives guising straightforward xenophobia under the mask of neoliberal values. Exploring an underdeveloped discursive frontier with regard for its authorship contributes to the study of the immigrant response and substantial argumentation in the debate. Moreover, it follows the objective of *reclaiming immigration* as it recuperates the voices of the very actors of it – those ‘on the move’.

Finland is introduced as a specific case study for this research. Investigating its political climate, self-perception, and international reputation allows for an additional inquest into the studied discourse’s role in contesting the hegemonic narratives about the country. The way the hosting state and society are presented in the examined data subjects the notion of Finnish exceptionalism to scrutiny.

The thesis applies a Rhetoric Performative Analysis of contents published around the Finnish parliamentary elections of 2015, 2019, and 2023 in Migrant Tales – an online, immigrant-led blog community. This method is highly advantageous for the study of antagonisms, as it is interested in the logic of equivalence (belonging) and exclusion manifested in rhetorical practices such as the use of tropology (figurative language). Drawing from Postfoundational Discourse Analysis, it assumes that the frontiers are formulated in a struggle to colonize the recurring discursive signifiers with certain meanings.

The dissertation discovers that the pro-immigration discourse is highly politicized and carries a solid agenda while remaining interactive with the competing anti-immigration narratives. The immigrants are narrated as experts of their own struggle, while Finland is narrated in a bi-polar manner, both as their cherished home and as a place of exclusion and suffering. The analysis demonstrates how the debate on immigration and, more specifically, its participants contest the notion of Finnish exceptionalism on one hand and yearn for its upkeeping, on the other.

Table of contents

1	Introduction	5
1.1	Research objectives	5
1.2	Research questions and hypotheses	7
2	Theoretical background	10
2.1	Situating polarization: populism as a tool-concept	10
2.2	Immigration: a perfect outlet for populist agendas	12
2.3	Populism in a neoliberal disguise: a progressive conservativeness	16
2.4	Femonationalism, homonationalism and welfare chauvinism	18
3	Case study: Finland	23
3.1	Introduction: exceptionalism put to the test	23
3.2	The anti-immigration frontier of the Finnish politics	24
3.3	The land of harmful immigration and blue-eyed toletards?	29
3.4	Nordicness, Finnishness and colonial innocence	31
4	Methodology and data	36
4.1	Rhetoric-Performative Analysis: genesis and the core ideas	36
4.2	Vocabulary and application	38
4.3	Application of the method in the context of this thesis	42
4.4	About the source and data: Migrant Tales	44
4.5	Extracting and coding: Voyant Tools and Content Analysis	47
4.6	Ethical assumptions and my position vis-à-vis the topic and data	48
5	Analysis	50
5.1	Introduction to the analytical segments	50
5.2	Year 2015	50
5.2.1	General description of the blog contents	50
5.2.2	The immigrant self-narratives: <i>'Us' in Finland</i>	52
5.2.3	The narratives of Finland and Finnishness: <i>Finland to 'us'</i>	56
5.2.4	Prominent tropes: <i>Two Finlands</i>	59
5.3	Year 2019	60

5.3.1	General description of the blog contents	60
5.3.2	The immigrant self-narratives: <i>We are here</i>	62
5.3.3	The narratives of Finland and Finnishness: <i>It could also be better</i>	66
5.3.4	Prominent tropes: <i>Disappointed but not surprised</i>	69
5.4	Year 2023	71
5.4.1	General description of the blog contents	71
5.4.2	The immigrant self-narratives: <i>What doesn't kill you makes you stronger</i>	73
5.4.3	The narratives of Finland and Finnishness: <i>A wise tale of exceptionalism</i>	76
5.4.4	Prominent tropes: <i>No evil can last 100 years</i>	79
6	Discussion	82
6.1	Characteristics of the underexplored discourse	82
6.2	Rhetoric-performative articulations of immigrants and Finland	87
6.3	Contested exceptionalism	91
6.4	Reviewing hypotheses	92
6.5	Further avenues for the research	93
7	Conclusions	95
	References	98

Table of Figures and Tables

Figure 1.	Support for parties in Parliamentary Elections 2015 and 2011.	26
Figure 2.	Support for parties in Parliamentary Elections 2011, 2015 and 2019.	27
Figure 3.	The results of the 2023 Parliamentary Elections of Finland.	28
Table 1.	The data corpus.	47
Figure 4.	Word cloud of the data from 2015 representing the most-mentioned phrases.	51
Figure 5.	Word cloud of the data from 2019 representing the most-mentioned phrases.	61
Figure 6.	Word cloud of the data from 2023 representing the most-mentioned phrases.	71
Table 2.	Selected quotes from 2023 juxtaposed with the self- rhetoric and performative practices present therein.	74

1 Introduction

1.1 Research objectives

This research aims to examine discourses created by immigrants and supporting immigrants' interests in Finland in the context of the current anti-immigration populist transformations (e.g. Kirchik, 2019, Palonen & Sundell, 2021; Ylä-Anttila et al., 2019). It employs a rhetoric-performative analytical framework (Palonen, 2018a; 2018b; 2018c), which enables the exploration of the meaning-making narratives of the immigrant self and of the host society. This way, it ultimately extracts the discourse characteristics and examines its relation to the dominant hostile narratives on immigration.

Another relationship that is under investigation here is that of the studied discourse and the mainstream perceptions of Finland. By its country-specific approach, the thesis strives to scrutinize the idea of Finnish exceptionalism (e.g., Strang et al., 2021; Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2012) through the given lenses.

Scholars unanimously distinguish immigration as one of the engines for the right-wing populists' momentum in Europe sparked in the mid-2010s (e.g., Duina & Carson, 2020; Akbaba, 2018; Guglielmi, 2018) and as a continually politicized social phenomenon (Ylä-Anttila et al., 2019). Immigration in essence assumes an encounter of a host with an incomer, and thus it facilitates the production of a political 'Other'. Hence the research on the political mobilization around the international mobility is among the most crucial fields in studying today's social polarization and antagonisms within (ECPS, n.d.a).

The scholarly attention is largely directed toward studying the roles and agenda of political parties (e.g. Davis & Deole, 2017; Mjelde, 2020; van Spanje, 2011) and media hubs (e.g. Conzo et al., 2021; Ylä-Anttila et al., 2019; Schneider-Strawczynski & Valette, 2022) opposing immigration. At the same time, apart from minor exceptions (Keskinen, 2022; Hoegarts et al., 2022, Squire et al., 2021), there is not enough space in the academia devoted to the study of the discursive agency of the immigrant and pro-immigrant environment, especially in the context that I present.

The immigration debate is not however embodied exclusively by the anti-immigration populist articulations. Even though researching them is very much

needed to understand the immigration issue's contribution to the political climate of Europe, as well as to comprehend the consequences of the employed narratives, I believe that the *anti*-immigration side is simply not the only side that the researchers should look at. Instead, I suggest, it is worth attempting to reveal rhetorical practices present in the *pro*-immigration and immigrant-*made* sources as well.

This thesis aims to examine the position of that (agency-wise) neglected frontier in relation to existing, hegemonic discourses on immigration, as well as to detect new modes of articulations present therein, as this frontier is by no means passive. Building on the term 'reclaiming migration' introduced by Vicki Squire, together with Nina Perkowski, Dallal Stevens, and Nick Vaughan-Williams (2021) in the context of the 'migrant crisis' of 2015 and 2016, I propose that the objective is to *reclaim immigration*, and thus to bring the perspective of those 'on the move' to the fore of the debate that concerns them directly.

The thesis will derive from the analysis of the content published in the Migrant Tales blog, an online platform integrating a "community that debates some of the salient issues facing immigrants and minorities in Finland and elsewhere" [Migrant Tales, n.d.]. The platform's vision is to promote the immigrant cause and to "be a voice for those whose views and situation are understood poorly and heard faintly by the media, politicians, and the public" (Migrant Tales, n.d.). By studying the blog, I wish to verify whether the pro-immigrant discourse involves appropriation or promotion of the voice of migrant minorities, whether there is room for migrants to adopt a position, and how the mechanisms of polarization and othering are distributed in the pro-inclusive sources.

Even though the field under study is quite broad, this work suggests taking new perspectives into scholarly consideration, both content-wise (authorship of studied discourses implies amplification of suppressed voices) and methodology-wise. I do recognize that the interpretative character of the research within RPA as well as the volume of this work limit the possibilities to exhaust the topic fully. Nevertheless, I hope it marks a valuable contribution to the study of immigrant discourses in Finland and to the arguments for the importance of reclaiming immigration (Squire et al., 2021) by the immigrants themselves.

I begin the dissertation by bringing the immigration-polarization connection closer, as well as approximating the notion of populism and its novel manifestations within what Duina and Carson (2020) conceptualize as progressive conservativeness. The phenomena I take a closer look at include welfare chauvinism (Keskinen et al., 2016; Pyrhönen, 2013, 2015), femonationalism (Farris, 2019) and homonationalism (e.g. Puar, 2017 [2007]; Spierings, 2021). Followingly, I position Finland as a peculiar case study for this research. I introduce the dynamics of the anti-immigration upsurge in the country (e.g. Bauvois, 2019) and juxtapose it with the ideas of its exceptionalism (Keskinen, 2013; Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2012).

After developing the theoretical and contextual assumptions in Chapters 2 and 3, I move on to describing the value of the Rhetoric-Performative Analysis (RPA) method for this specific research. RPA is one of the branches of the Postfoundational Discourse Analysis (PDA/IDA), rich in frameworks facilitating the study of othering and polarization and often applied in studying populism (see e.g. Palonen, 2019; Salojärvi et al., 2023). In Chapter 4, I explain RPA's genesis, basic vocabulary, and application. I then bring up the relevance of the studied source, as well as specify the data set and the way it is organized more closely. Additionally, before commencing the analysis, I briefly position myself ethically vis-à-vis the research. I then duly proceed with the analysis and ultimately open a discussion attempting to answer the research questions and verify the hypotheses.

1.2 Research questions and hypotheses

The study is three-fold, meaning that it explores three core research directions. The first one pertains to the pro-immigration discourse characteristics and its relationship with the strategies and narratives of the competing frontier. The second direction allows to examine rhetoric-performative articulations of both immigrant selves and host society, and the third one assumes a closer focus on evaluating the notion of Finnish exceptionalism.

My first RQ (1) is: *What are the characteristics of the pro-immigrant and immigrant-made discourses in Finland and how do they correlate with existing populist narratives around immigration?*

By answering it, I intend to develop an understanding of the discursive field on immigration and related issues authored by immigrants themselves. I wish to discover what are the recurring signifiers and tropes therein, as well as to observe how the focus of blog contents is distributed among the sectors of life (social/political/economic/cultural, etc.). Additionally, I pay attention as to whether there are any dynamics in the discourse depending on the periodic differentiation of the studied data extracts. Lastly, I verify the discourse's relationship with the competing (anti-immigrant) discourses that I previously introduce in the theory and case study sections.

The second RQ (2) pertains at large to the research method itself: *How are both immigrants and the host society articulated (performatively and rhetorically) in the studied discourse?*

By having verified who is the actor and articulator of the main narratives in the studied discourse, who constitutes the frontier, and what are the main means of articulation, it is easier to observe, whether the pro-immigrant sources such as the one under study contribute to enhancing justice and representation or reproduce antagonisms themselves. The RQ (2) examines the scale of the immigrant agency in defining the meaning of recurring signifiers. It verifies the way immigrant selves are articulated in the blog and checks what does a vision of “[s]peaking for Others” (Migrant Tales, n.d.) mean in practice. Ultimately, it allows to gain a better understanding of how the host society is perceived by immigrants, which is particularly significant for this research.

Additionally, by answering the RQ (2) I hope to contribute to the further application of the RPA method and expand a novel academic perspective in conducting a discourse analysis, which is explored in more detail in the methodological section.

Having explored the rhetoric-performative strategies, namely the ways immigrants themselves, Finland, and Finnish people are articulated in the studied discourse, it is then interesting to see, how these discoveries relate to the existing national branding of Finland as ‘exceptionally good’ (Strang et al., 2021). Therefore, the RQ (3) focuses on the links between identified focuses, concepts, and findings, demonstrating their imbrications with the country's impeccable reputation: *How do discovered tropes and narratives contest (or contribute to) the notion of Finnish exceptionalism?*

My hypotheses prior to commencing the research were relatively ambiguous, as I relied fully on finding the answers through the analysis and attempted it without major prejudices about what I might discover. However, I can openly state that I expected to solidify some of my pre-existent ideas about the discourse under study.

First of all, these ideas included the notion, that the discourse on migration floats outside of the typically bipolar right-left political spectrum. Migration is operationalized politically regardless of the larger ideological stance of the operators and anti-immigration sentiments can occur both in conservative and more liberal narratives (Duina & Carson, 2020). In times of democratic hegemony and the international endeavours to upkeep the liberal values in Europe¹, the extent to which such sentiments are spread is even at times a deciding factor of a given party's position on the ideological axis.

Furthermore, I anticipated to discover the underrepresentation of immigrant voices in the debate on migration among the main issues pointed out in the pro-immigrant discourses as condemnable. From initial observations, it seemed an important element of the criticism towards the mainstream epistemic sources, such as media outlets, public institutions, and party politics. In the view of such circumstances, the medium under study performs itself as an alternative platform for sharing the silenced opinions. My thesis verifies this self-narrative and its characteristics.

Thirdly, I hypothesized that ethnicity, gender, and religion are recurring subjects in the examined discourse, and that they are inherent to the topic of immigration regardless of the narrators' stance on it. It is not revealing nor exploratory to claim that discussion on racism and xenophobia is co-fuelled and parallel to the debate around immigration, but it might be compelling to see how both discursive sides' arguments are built around the three categories indeed.

Finally, I assumed that the current immigration debate and a response to it, present in the pro-immigrant and immigrant-made discourses, are factors contributing to Nordic/Finnish exceptionalism and homogeneity being contested.

¹ See eg.: Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, 2012. ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/treaty/char_2012/oj

2 Theoretical background

2.1 Situating polarization: populism as a tool-concept

The rise of populism has become one of the trends on which political science research is currently strongly focused (see e. g. Brubaker, 2020; Anastasiou, 2020; Alekseev, 2021). Due to the intensified observation of this phenomenon, the need to define and redefine the term ‘populism’ has also increased. There is no consensus among scholars as to what populism really is, but there are strong similarities present in attempts to describe its features, the most important of which is the contrast between the politically represented ‘us’ and the politically threatening ‘them’.

A couple of constructive approaches to the notion of populism can be distinguished especially, one exploring it as a thin ideology (Mudde, 2017), the other as a political logic (Laclau, 1996, 2005), or yet another, claiming it is rather a style (Canovan, 1981, 1982, 1999; Moffitt, 2016). According to Moffitt (2016), the three constitutive features of populism as a style are: *appeal to ‘the people’ versus ‘the elite’* or those represented by ‘the elite’ (the aforementioned juxtaposing; representing the supposed voice of the people and the search for a political ‘Other’); *‘bad manners’* (going beyond accepted norms of political practice [or transgressiveness, as in Aiolfi, 2022]); and *crisis, breakdown or threat* (creating a narrative in which the citizen feels threatened and seeks protection that only the narrator can provide) (Moffitt, 2016, p. 16).

Along with the scientific development of the concept of populism and debates whether its style can actually mark its content (see e.g., Ylä-Anttila et al., 2019, p. 1), the recognition of the populist discourses’ span has grown beyond mere politics, lurking into socio-cultural spheres as well. The antagonizing and polarizing aspects of populism have been noticed outside of classically understood political fields such as party politics, and the schemes explored have been understood to be applicable in much wider contexts, beyond the right-left spectrum. An example of such research is the study of populist discursive style present in countermedia, in the analysis conducted by Ylä-Anttila, Bauvois, and Pyrhönen (2019), whereby the similarities between populist agendas in parliament and those coming from the alternative media hubs are immense.

The contextual and performative nature of the phenomenon (Moffitt, 2016), integrated with the post-foundational rhetoric focus of forerunning populism scholars such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985), is constituting a novel approach. This approach builds on the idea that ‘the political’ goes beyond the ‘politics’, as in fact it penetrates all the spheres of social life. Hence, populist techniques are employed elsewhere, beyond the plenary chambers. Emilia Palonen frames this view applied in studying political dimensions of culture as ‘cultural populism’ (Palonen, 2018a, p. 232; Palonen & Kovala, 2018, p. 16).

Certain political associations of populism have led many to ask why populism is mentioned at all in a case where classically political communication is not under analysis. Palonen’s approach proves however, that theorizing populism has helped a lot with equipping the research of increasing polarization of any fields with new vocabulary and schemes that make the globally ongoing antagonizing mechanisms easier to comprehend and study. Therefore, I would like to start with situating populism in my thesis as a tool-concept helpful in analysing nodal points of the discourses I am interested in.

In addition to its current relevance, I believe it is a term conducive to understand my approach to studying immigration as a field consistent of antagonizing and polarizing elements, inherent in populism. That is the precise basis on which I introduce the concept at all, at the same time omitting its long and complicated history and variations. However, while acknowledging those very variations, I would like to devote a couple of paragraphs to define it once, briefly, clearly, and concisely. I find it necessary to agree on its framework in this thesis, before introducing its reciprocal relation with the issue of immigration, and before we can move on to applying it in any further discussion.

“In so far as populism is a mode of articulation, it exists also outside traditional party politics and gets entangled with other meaning making, affective ties, symbols and identifications” (Palonen, 2018a, p. 231). A specific *mode of articulation* seems to be a slightly vague definition, while at the same time it highlights the broad potential of the term. Its vagueness and struggle with defining it, according to Laclau (2005, p. 17) only mirrors the fluidity of the discourses in general, which in turn reflects the ambiguity of social reality.

What is then specific about populism? Namely, its entanglement with polarization, politicization, and generation of counter-discourses (Palonen, 2018a, p. 232; Ylä-Anttila et al., 2019). Perceiving populism as a mode of articulation expands the Moffitt's (2016) stylistic approach. At the same time, it builds up on and systematizes the ideas of Ernesto Laclau (2005), who believes populism is a logic of constructing 'the political', and its elements are present in any communitarian spaces, even those not collectively imagined as political. It refers to the practices that are deepening bipolar character of discourses and provides with (as well as uses) a certain affective framework for shaping the antagonisms and juxtaposing poles of cultures, societies, and politics. By its interest in forming the belonging in-groups (such as 'the people') and ostracized out-groups (such as 'the elite'), it brings attention to meaning-making processes in all kinds of discourses through elements such as *exclusion*, *equivalence*, or *difference* (Ibid., p. 129-164).

In sum, populism is a mode of articulation that assumes discursive production of antagonisms. More on the role of populist articulation manifested through rhetoric and performative acts will be presented in the methodological chapter of this thesis. However, it was crucial to highlight the purpose of its usage in this dissertation as the tool helping to conceptualize and examine the characteristics, expression, and roots of the ever-present polarization. Moreover, the term is emergent in the studied discourse. In the following subchapter, I move on to its tight relationship with the issue of immigration, which is the main concern of this work.

2.2 Immigration: a perfect outlet for populist agendas

According to the Glossary on Migration compiled by the International Organization for Migration of the United Nations (Sironi et al., 2019, p. 103) immigration is primarily understood as "the act of moving into a country other than one's country of nationality or usual residence, so that the country of destination effectively becomes his or her new country of usual residence". The term itself is relatively broad and does not determine the goal of such a movement in further detail nor presupposes whether the act is voluntary or coerced. It can be related to either seeking employment and economic advancement (ECPS, n.d.b) or seeking asylum and refuge (Farny, 2016). All in all, the objective of immigration is usually to improve the standard of life and better the opportunities one has (Achieme, 2019).

Even though the economic aspect seems to have been one of the most prominent in the research and the dilemmas that policymakers have encountered throughout the years (ECPS, n.d.b), with the increase of the global movement, immigration turned into a highly securitized issue.

Farny (2016, p. 1), building on the thoughts of the Copenhagen School of Security, refers to the securitization of migration as a phenomenon of creating discursive uniformity between migration and security, meaning the topic of migration becoming strictly security-related and thus constituting a threat or danger to internal safety of a state. State, however, according to the Copenhagen School's ideas, is not the exclusive referent object for security, and security can be viewed through the lenses of five distinct categories: the military, economic, environmental, societal, and political.

Farny highlights that the contexts for securitization of migration differ across the 'Western' world, in the US the main indirect spark being the 9/11 attacks, and in Europe the formation of the EU and Schengen agreement (Ibid., p. 1-2, 6).

Nevertheless, she notices that the formal and legislative implications of securitization are similar in both contexts and include more restrictive immigration and asylum policies, new surveillance and control devices, and tighter external border controls. Moreover, the resemblance is present in the same ways immigration is exploited as a motor for politics of fear, creating the atmosphere of crisis (just like in Moffitt's features of populism, 2016) with the prominence of the language of danger, crime, and illegality (see also: Ylä-Anttila et al., 2019, p. 3; Akbaba, 2018, p. 209).

Finally, Farny (2016, p. 1, 6-7) develops a thesis that securitization reinforces a racist discourse, categorizing migrants as a potential security threat. The racial dimension is inherent in the debate over immigration and both racism and xenophobia drive anti-immigrant sentiments, as ethnic origin, race, and cultural differences are brought up as distinctive factors between the arriving and hosting populations (ECPS, n.d.b.).

Maggie Ibrahim (2005, p. 163) claims even more directly, that based on the circulating discourses on immigration and selective dehumanizing language, securitization of migration is "racism's most modern form". Adding to it a particular disdain for the Muslim, black, and brown incomers (Farris, 2017; Achiume, 2019; Mau, 2010; Benveniste et al., 2017), one can see that distinct race and culture of the

immigrants stand out as the factors legitimizing the political disregard and violence against them.

The importance of the ethnicity of the immigrants for the anti-immigrant agenda has been noticed also in the recent research on the striking differences in the portrayal of the Ukrainian refugees in comparison to the refugees from Africa and Asia, and the concept of a 'good refugee', namely a white one (Bauvois, 2022). 'Goodness' of immigrants and their general worth is at the same time also decided by their home country's past relations with Europe and ability to abide by the Occidental cultural modes, including the religious practices (Benveniste et al., 2017, p. 55-62).

On top of the securitization, immigration has become a highly politicized issue (Ylä-Anttila et al., 2019) and is believed to be one of the core factors of the right-wing populism's rise in the mid-2010s. The nativist upsurge is often attributed directly to the 'migration crisis' or 'refugee crisis' in the years 2015 and 2016, when over two million of asylum seekers arrived in Europe mostly from the Middle East and Africa. Such development challenged and overwhelmed the systems of reception and raised new questions about the legality of the international mobility (Kirchick, 2019).

With the 'crisis', the question of "ethnic purity and socio-cultural cohesion" became "threatened by an allegedly unintegrated and racialised migrant Other" (Norocel & Pettersson, 2022, p. 432) to a bigger extent than ever. Since then, immigration merged into the political debate on the continent for good, constituting its inherent point of disagreement between various fractions. What can be drawn from such a political state of matter is that immigration began serving as one of the engines for constant polarization of the public sphere and therein circulating opinions. A stance on immigration might have started to reflect a broader political position on the increasingly ambiguous liberal-conservative spectrum. While the 'left' and 'right' division loses its historical continuity, immigration tends to be a factor facilitating the current execution of this categorization (Duina & Carson, 2020, p. 15-16).

I argue that the nature of a phenomenon based on the encounter with a certain 'Other' creates a perfect environment for populist agendas to surface. Coming back to Moffitt's (2016) populist features – the 'us' vs 'them' narrative is in this case easily constructed around the exclusion-belonging nexus. The belonging in-group in this case is constructed by the 'Finnish people' while the excluded out-group contains

both immigrants and the pro-immigration elites, who are complicit to the ‘bad things’ happening. These elites are the political opponents of the anti-immigration side, more directly framed as the liberal ‘useful idiots’ who let the ‘danger’ in for the sake of naïve tolerance (Ylä-Anttila et al., 2019, p. 3).

In sum, in such rhetoric, there are two foes, the foreign enemies (immigrants) and the internal enemies (liberals) (Pyrhönen, 2015, p. 143; Ylä-Anttila et al., 2019, p. 3-7), against whom the only weapon is actively countering immigration. On the other hand, the ‘crisis’ and ‘threat’ (Moffitt, 2016) are fuelled by the fear of otherness. Their incitement provides a space for further scapegoating of the immigrants. At the same time, it builds a platform for the promotion of the anti-immigrant ‘heroes’ who are ready to ‘fight the danger’.

Squire et al. in their book “Reclaiming Migration: Voices from Europe’s ‘Migrant Crisis’” (2021) criticize the very narrative of a ‘crisis’ present in the discourses around immigration and disclose it as a twisted practice of creating an opportunity for and by political leaders to react to a threat, which they exaggerate themselves. That is precisely a populist endeavour – presenting oneself as the ‘saviour’ from the very fear that one mongers.

In such ‘threatening’ circumstances, the ‘bad manners’ (Moffitt, 2016) or ‘transgressiveness’ (Aiolfi, 2022) are legitimized, as they are employed in relation to the individuals and groups framed as less-deserving or even less-human. The glaring politics of fear and hatred are justified by the need to protect ‘the European identity’ and values (Akbaba, 2018, p. 199-200; 205-206). All in all, in populist discourses, an immigrant is often marked as the non-compatible alien, *distinct, and thus dangerous* to the ‘true’ people.

What is crucial to emphasize here is that the discourses employed by anti-immigrant populist agents are not accidental, and the use of specific language in political communication is aware and purposeful (Di Piazza & Soare, 2022). I argue that this fact constitutes another reason why the populist expression of the anti-immigration stance actively contributes to polarization and reinforcing the antagonisms in society.

Anti-immigrant populism has been on the rise for more than a decade now, but it does undergo modifications. Even though the populist agenda on immigration is largely racialized and visibly tinted with ethno-nationalism (e.g., Brubaker, 2017;

2020) and therefore mostly associated with the political radical right, the non-Western immigrants are in fact in a precarious position of being excluded by the whole of the Western society, as the liberal values are continually reiterated against them as well (Duina & Carson, 2020). The importance of race is pushed slightly to the background at the expense of promoting the hegemony of the Western understanding of gender and religion. This means that anti-immigration sentiments are more and more likely to occur also in countries with more liberal reputations and where nationalist narratives are relatively less prevalent than elsewhere (Ibid., p. 4-8).

The spread and transformation of populist anti-immigration stances opens possibilities for their more frequent articulations across Europe, including the Nordics and what is particularly important for this thesis – Finland. In the following section, I will investigate the current politically correct and seemingly progressive ‘tricks’ that attempt to disguise or ‘soften’ xenophobia present in populist narratives through its argumentation built on concepts such as feminism or human rights.

2.3 Populism in a neoliberal disguise: a progressive conservativeness

Even though racism is inherent in the anti-immigration discourses and the distinctive ethnicity of immigrants is one of the pillars for their exclusion within the European nation-states, the othering rhetoric has undergone a major transformation in recent years and shifted its focus to the issues related to the discrepancies between the host’s and incomer’s values, identity, and culture.

Benveniste et al. (2017, p. 58) formulate it as a change of narrative trends within the political far-right, departing from biological to cultural racism. Religion, gender relations, and cultural practices have gained momentum in the populist argumentation against immigrants, making for points that are not ‘inherent’ in a human being the same way skin colour is, but are rather acquired, and thus ‘better’ to discriminate against. Some go as far as calling the set of religious beliefs and values an ‘ideology’, not only opposing the ‘Western’ standards but also willing to demolish and replace them (Duina & Carson, 2020, p. 13).

At the same time, this rhetoric, quite paradoxically, contains criticism of the others’ intolerance and backwardness in comparison to European favour for equality, inclusivity, and open-mindedness. Considering that this shift happened along with

the growth of the popular support for neoliberal values and freedoms, one may conclude that, in order to uphold electoral support, even the most conservative far-right leaders must have adjusted to the politically correct line of reasoning.

Traditionally far right or fascist leitmotifs have stepped aside in favour of advocating for the rights of internal minorities (e. g. LGBTQ+), distinguishing a sense of community over than devotion to the state, and even cultivating the Jewish roots of Europe (Farris, 2017, p. 57). In a result, the political landscape has been enriched by a new hybrid of progressiveness and conservativeness. This could not have happened without exploiting the historically liberal positions on matters different than immigration, often pertaining to internal affairs. For the rejection of the “*others* coming from outside the country” is largely combined with an “open and inclusive mindset on the domestic front” (Duina & Carson, 2020, p. 6). But how exactly does that *racism in disguise* work, and how is the anti-immigrant agenda legitimized in a progressive manner?

According to Francesco Duina and Dylan Carson (2020) there are two sources that modern anti-immigrant narratives draw from. First, they are fueled by nationalism and a need to maintain the unity of ‘imagined communities’ built on secularism, equality, and sovereignty (Duina & Carson, 2020, p. 7, as in: Anderson, 1983; Greenfeld, 2016). The European obsession with ‘citizenship’ and ‘nation-states’ is present in the way political leaders articulate the problem of immigrant incompatibility. Being for example French, German or Finnish becomes a foremost identity. Once one is a citizen, one becomes in a sense more human and certainly deserves more rights and freedoms (Ibid.; see also: Arendt, 1951).

The culturally racist logic is equally essentialist to biological racism, as these two categories cannot be so easily separated, if we consider race a “cultural construct” (Benveniste et al., 2017, p. 53). What is important in this study’s context is that it puts the human right to global mobility in a contested place and locates immigrants in a precarious position, by ascribing value to them based on the piece of land they are formally assigned to. Integration is in this logic dependent on the immigrants’ cultural adjustment, or naturalization.

This devotion to citizenship is directly related to the second source, namely the longstanding idea of European superiority (Duina & Carson, 2020, p. 7). The

tendency to hierarchical positioning of immigrants according to their place of origin, as well as mongering the fear of extinction and replacement² derives from the reproduction of the colonial thought, according to which anything of ‘the civilized Occident’ is superior to ‘the barbaric Orient’ (Said, 1978).

Hence, for instance, the argumentation directed against Muslim immigrants is often based on Islam being ‘less worthy’ than Christianity or even Judaism, because it had less relevance and followers in the historical context of the continent (Duina & Carson, 2020, p. 10). Interestingly, the political dimension of Christianity is often omitted in this particular rhetoric, as it may contradict the progressive narrative that populists intend to adapt and prove to overlap with the very ideas that they ‘fight’ against. It demonstrates the flexibility of the populist agendas depending on the audience and circumstances and a decrease of ideological devotion at the cost of the ‘real enemy’.

2.4 Femonationalism, homonationalism and welfare chauvinism

Anti-immigration populists have been noticed by Duina and Carson (2020, p. 7) to exploit especially the set of four values that have historically been a part of progressive political programs, namely gender equality, gay rights, religious freedom, and provision of generous social services. The economic and gender-related aspects have been particularly important in the narratives employed in Finland (Pyrhönen, 2013; Andersen et al., 2015), therefore it is worth taking a look at the novel concepts of femo- (Farris, 2017) and homonationalism (Puar, 2017 [2007]; Aldrin Salskov, 2020; Spierings, 2021), as well as welfare chauvinism (Keskinen et al., 2016; Pyrhönen, 2013). I believe that introducing these terms allows one to understand the warped ways the anti-immigration narratives are utilized in an environment with a relatively ‘liberal’ political climate.

Feminism and the struggle for women’s rights have taken so many shapes by their selective approach to the categories ‘worth defending and advocating’ that, as

² The idea, according to which the incoming populations will replace the host populations due to their intensified reproductive tendencies (Saarinen & Koskinen, 2022). For more, search for: Great Replacement Theory. E. g., booklet prepared by the National Immigration Forum - <https://immigrationforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Replacement-Theory-Explainer-1122.pdf>.

Andreassen & Lettinga (2011, p. 28-30) note, it has become a floating signifier³, absorbing endless meanings. The feminist discourses have been appropriated and utilized as political agendas also by populist actors, and the construction of anti-immigration discourse forms a vital example of such appropriation.

This phenomenon is conceptualized in Sara Farris's (2017) seminal work on *femonationalism*, where she describes the ways women's rights are exploited to support racist and nationalist views in the current political landscape. Farris highlights the fact that the idea of populism constitutes rather a container, and a formal framework for ideas, characterized by its dichotomizing character. She argues that it serves as a style and rhetorical device to construct claims, while femonationalism is more about the content of such claims, and thus "femonationalism is not populism" (Ibid., p. 57). The connection lies in the femonationalist narratives being articulated in a populist manner and therefore, mostly by populist figures. Femonationalism occurs when a "xenophobic agenda" is being advanced by resorting to a "gender equality lexicon" (Ibid.).

In the context of immigration, femonationalism appears within the portrayals of foreign understanding of gender relationships as backward and oppressive, as well as insinuations of allegedly criminal tendencies of immigrant men towards women in general, resulting from incorrigibly high sex drive and their cultural depreciation of 'the other sex'. It includes, for instance, narratives of Muslim women being oppressed by having to dress in a certain manner or the claims that sexual violence perpetrators in Europe are mostly black or brown men (see e.g., Andersen et al., 2015, Keskinen, 2013).

Such theories support the 'immigrant's incompatibility' argument of anti-immigration advocates, as well as facilitate the possibilities of creating the crisis, breakdown, or threat (Moffitt, 2016) atmosphere. What makes such discourses appealing to the electoral audiences is that they are pushed forward by referring to the Western/European values of gender equality and respect for women's rights (e.g., Keskinen, 2013, p. 227). By expressing them in a populist, performative manner, therein present omissions and simplifications, for example as to the diversity of

3 For more about the concept of an empty and floating signifier, see Chapter 4.

gender identities, the occurrence of sexual crimes between the ‘true citizens’, or the freedom and agency in religious expression, lose its significance.

As European identity’s foundation is historically based to a large extent on religious values, specifically Christianity (Brague, 2009), it would be expected that the conservatives might use that sort of argumentation in opposition to the immigration from Islamic-majority countries. However, in times of increased secularization⁴, the right wing is forced to depart from such a reasoning line and employ stances that might to some extent go against the very Christian ideals. One example is the preoccupation with the rights of LGBTQ+ communities and again, appropriating them in a simplified, populist manner, to promote racist agendas through references to the European ‘open-mindedness’ and ‘tolerance’ in opposition to non-Western ‘intolerance’ and ‘close-mindedness’ (e.g., Duina & Carson, 2020, p. 9-10). This phenomenon is in turn conceptualized as *homonationalism* (Puar, 2017 [2007]; Aldrin Salskov, 2020; Spierings, 2021).

Homonationalism carries similar implications as femonationalism but relates to the danger that immigrant (and more precisely Islamic) intolerance may pose to the gay populations of Europe. It largely ignores the existence of LGBTQ+ groups within the diasporas and imposes an essentialist view on all non-Western immigrants being potentially homophobic (Puar, 2017 [2007]). Promoting homonationalist slogans is another strategy that allows populists to fish for the electorate that would not otherwise support the conservative political groups. Therefore, traditionally left-wing belief is reiterated to suit the racist but not homophobic discourses.

What Duina and Carson (2020, p. 6; drawing from ideas of Ruth Wodak) notice, however, is that often such narratives are purely opportunistic and strategical, without much ideological devotion. Hence, homonationalism is at times exploited as a device of electoral leverage rather than promoted as an actual belief. All in all, as concluded by Niels Spierings (2021, p. 179-180), homonationalism, whose nationalist dimension is clouded with its support of sexual liberalism, is among the most

⁴ Here the term secularization is used to mark the declining significance of religion and its institutions.

important additional ideological attitudes that advance the populist anti-immigration stances.

The last of these additional ideological attitudes which I would like to refer to, and which pertains for a change to the economic aspect of immigration, is the so-called welfare chauvinism, meaning the restriction of social benefits provided by state only to the 'worthy' or 'deserving' individuals (Keskinen et al., 2019, p. 1, 7, 10). This worth and deservingness is in the studied context manifestly dictated by citizenship status. Suvi Keskinen, Ov Cristian Norocel, and Martin Bak Jørgensen (2016) relate this phenomenon directly to the issue of racism. "It has become more legitimate than ever to claim that welfare benefits should be reserved for certain groups alone, notably those considered 'natives' and bearing a self-evident right to belong to the nation, and to develop policies on such bases" (Keskinen et al., 2016, p. 2).

Welfare chauvinist narratives promote the social benefits traditionally present in the political program of the left. At the same time, they intend to limit their distribution based on racial/nativist premises disguised by self-victimization of the autochthonous people, who are being deprived from the 'goods' and 'cultural rights' that they are entitled to as natives (Pyrhönen, 2013). The welfare chauvinist assumptions are strictly related to national sentiments also because they bring back faith in the ancestral welfare state (Palonen & Sunnercrantz, 2021, p. 166-170), and therefore have affective power in awakening nostalgia.

Additionally, welfare chauvinism is present in the way immigrant labour is portrayed. It also happens through the belief in white-exclusive entitlement to wealth (Keskinen, 2023, p. 265). The immigrant is not supposed to seize the capital that belongs to the 'true' people, and therefore the job market should not be as open to the non-natives.

The 'job-stealing immigrant' narrative is continually claiming new forms and shapes, too. This leads to the creation of precarious and exploitable labour of the incomers, who work in positions that they are over-qualified for, are paid lower wages, and are subject to legal difficulties with commencing new employment (Ibid., p. 173).

However, this does not stop the anti-immigrant populists from using the occurring challenges as an argument against the very people who are challenged. Again, the vicious circle is mobilized – the crisis is fuelled, and the fear is mongered, so there can be somebody to blame and somebody else to 'react and save'.

Even though welfare chauvinism does not exploit liberal ideological values to the same extent as femonationalism and homonationalism, it has become particularly malicious, as it mobilizes a group traditionally supporting socialist causes and aims at the ‘working class’, at the same time departing from typically ‘right’ stances in the economic areas as well (Pyrhönen, 2013). And, as Palonen and Sunnercrantz note (2021, p. 170), welfare chauvinism makes up for another explanation “how neoliberalism and anti-immigration can get entangled in populist meaning-making”.

In summary, populism is a mode of articulation employed vastly in anti-immigration discourses, while anti-immigration narratives are the sustaining force of populist agendas. These two phenomena are thus deeply intertwined, even though having separate functions, populism being a formal container for the anti-immigration content. The tight set that they make up for constitutes an important driving factor of current processes of polarization that employ tactics such as femonationalism, homonationalism, or welfare chauvinism. Studying them might facilitate the understanding of how meanings are made in the political and social spheres.

There are many practices of advancing the anti-immigration agenda in a more politically correct manner. The instances presented in this chapter may belong to the most prominent ones, but they do not exhaust their scope. There is much more to be said about the operationalization of gender, religion, or the concepts of values such as democracy and liberalism in promotion of truly xenophobic ideas. The volume of this work and its specific goals suggest however, that it is more reasonable to move onto a case study, where some of these narratives might be demonstrated.

3 Case study: Finland

3.1 Introduction: exceptionalism put to the test

The new dynamics and hot spots of the political climate considered above, influenced largely by immigration, occur everywhere across the modern ‘Western world’, but their detailed underpinnings and scale depend a lot on the regional and country-specific contexts (see e. g. Herkman, 2017, p. 470-474). The need to disguise certain rhetoric may be motivated by different reasons and those reasons often lie in the given state’s political trends, history, socio-cultural circumstances, position in the international organizations, and so on. Finland serves in this thesis as an example of a European country, where the described phenomena are observed but coexist with common counter-narratives of exceptionalism.

On one hand, Finland was straightforwardly listed among the most racist countries in the reports compiled respectively in the years 2018 and 2023 by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2018; 2023). The scholarly interest in anti-immigration and racist agendas in Finland is, however, reinforced also by historically liberal stance of Finnish epistemological elites, such as the mainstream media and authorities, as well as by the fact of hitherto “relatively strong norms of tolerance and anti-racism” (Pyrhönen, 2013, p. 98). I mention it to acknowledge that the existence of antagonisms suggests the agency of two discursive frontiers, both anti-immigration and pro-immigration. The second frontier has not gained similar attention, though, which is one of the problems this thesis aims to address in the bigger picture.

This chapter, however, discusses the Finnish populist discourses on immigration within the first frontier and juxtaposes them with the circulating ideas of innocence and distinctiveness of the Nordic region and the state itself. It does so by first looking at the current political climate regarding immigration in Finland. It moves to a detailed focus on the political parties’ landscape during the last three parliamentary elections of 2015, 2019 and 2023, constituting the periods under study in this thesis. After that, it explores the contextual dimension of Finnish exceptionalism and considers the neo-colonial and colonial legacies present therein.

3.2 The anti-immigration frontier of the Finnish politics

Palonen and Sunnercrantz (2021, p. 170) position *the immigrants* and *Nordic people* as two directly opposite frontiers of Nordic⁵ populism. Juha Herkman (2017, 2018) has similarly distinguished immigration as a common denominator of populism in the twenty-first century Norden. He notes that on the political scenes of each of the major Nordic countries, there is at least one prominent anti-immigration populist group with significant popular support (Herkman, 2017, p. 478-479).

The parties recognized as populist in the region are primarily associated with nationalist, xenophobic, and racist discourses, and strongly oppose ideas such as multiculturalism. This derives i.a. from the nostalgic myth of the Nordic nation-states' homogeneity and its historical continuity. Such a myth is particularly prominent in the Nordics due to its peripheral status in relation to the rest of the continent and thus its allegedly limited participation in some of the major historical developments such as colonialism, as well as more contemporary processes of globalization (Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2012, p. 1-4; Keskinen et al., 2009). The uncontested reproduction of the myth, however, demonstrates a certain neglect for remarkable differences in the Nordic countries' immigrant populations and politics.

In Finland, the anti-immigration narratives as such have been adopted not only by small and relatively insignificant political hubs such as the *Blue Reform* or the *Seven Star Movement*. They have penetrated more mainstream discourses mostly through the agency of the Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset, PS) (Bauvois, 2019). PS has been gaining more and more support since 2011, when the group collected enough electoral espousal to be given a proposal to join the cabinet, which, nevertheless, was rejected. Since the year 2015, however, when the Finns joined the conservative coalition, they had been constituting an important element of the opposition.

Even though it is the year 2011 that may be marked as the beginning of the vivid anti-immigration momentum in the Finnish debate as it constitutes the point in time correlating with the first significant success of the Perussuomalaiset (e.g., Bauvois, 2019), considerations of this thesis begin with the look into year 2015. As already mentioned in the context of populist upsurge, in 2015 Europe was preoccupied with a

⁵ In this context: Finnish, Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish.

‘migrant/refugee crisis’ (e.g., Kirchik, 2019), caused inter alia by the wars haunting the Middle East and North Africa, especially Syria, Libya, and Iraq. In the years 2015-2017, Finland processed 30,890 asylum applications resulting from the said ‘crisis’ (Eurostat, 2024).

Even though the ‘crisis’ narrative was at first relating exclusively to the influx of asylum seekers and refugees, it was soon translated into the rhetoric of disdain towards immigration in general, particularly towards the mobility from the countries of the Islamic majority. In the meantime, the jihadist networks began developing and Europe saw more and more radical Islamist terrorism in the ‘deadly period’ of 2014-2018.

Never before have there been so many jihadi terrorist plots in Europe as in the period between 2014 and 2018. Never before have so many plots gone undetected and resulted in attacks. Never before have so many Europeans been killed in jihadi terrorist attacks. More people have died from jihadi terrorism in Europe between 2014 and 2018 (at least 345) than in the previous 20 years (at least 267) (Nesser 2019, p. 15).

It is indeed significant, as the two separate phenomena, immigration and terrorism, became rhetorically aligned by the populist actors across the continent. The *immigrant-terrorist* argumentation began to blossom in the anti-immigration and anti-refugee narratives (see e.g., Walczak & Lampas, 2020).

In 2015 particularly, the world was struck by the attacks on the Charlie Hebdo editorial office in Paris. The satirical magazine’s headquarters were stormed by those avenging the ridicule of the Islamic prophet Muhammad present on the paper’s pages. The series of mass shootings claimed the lives of 17 people, including mostly the journalists and staff of the magazine. The attack brought about a wave of concern but also ignited a renewed fierceness in European Islamophobia (see e.g., Petrikowski, 2015).

Finland managed to shape the primary integration policy relatively well (MIPEX, 2015), but in a long run, the immigrant capacity to integrate is vastly equalled with their employability. Immigrant inclusion has clearly socioeconomic dimension and is dictated by their relationship with labour (Masoud et al., 2021). Continuous unwillingness to hire people of a certain ethnic background, pointed as one of the most prevalent factors of Finnish racism (Eid in: Teivainen, 2023), proves that

Finland was not free from the xenophobic narratives spreading across the continent. The grievances caused by the imposed regulations regarding the immigration policies and the considerations of the immigrant labour were also reflected directly in the politics.

In the parliamentary elections of 2015, with official voting day taking place on the 19th of April, an openly anti-immigration and Euro-skeptic Finns Party won the second largest share of the seats in the Finnish Parliament, entering it with 38 MPs.

Support for parties in Parliamentary elections 2015 and 2011

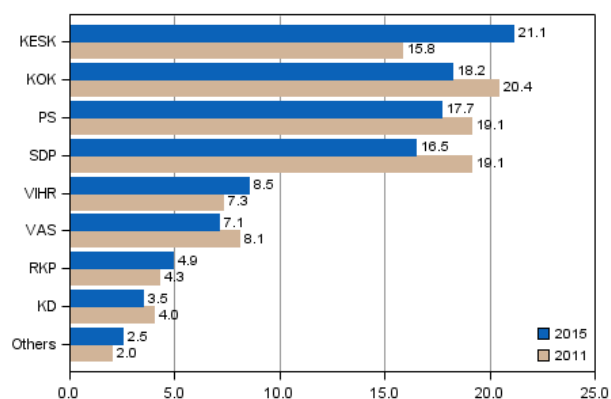


Figure 1. Support for parties in Parliamentary elections 2015 and 2011. Source: Official Statistics of Finland (OSF).

Measured by the number of votes, the Finns Party came third. The group got 17.6 percent of all the votes cast, following the Centre Party of Finland (21.1 percent) and the National Coalition Party (18.2 percent) (OSF, 2015).

The year 2019 saw an overturn in the Finnish parliament's structure compared to the years 2011 and 2015. On April 14th, the people voted so diversely that neither of the groups received more than 20 percent of the votes and the three biggest parties won extraordinarily close portions of the vote cast. The most significant change was observable in the defeat of the Centre Party, which lost 18 seats in favour of the Social Democrats, which gained 6 of them, concluding the election with 40 MPs in total (17.7 percent of the votes). Both the Green League and Left Alliance did better than in the preceding years, winning respectively 20 (11.5 percent) and 16 (8.2 percent) seats in the Finnish Parliament. Such an outcome led to the formation of a government coalition consisting of the Social Democratic Party, Centre Party, Green League, Left Alliance, and Swedish People's Party.

Even though the Finns Party and the National Coalition, the parties previously constituting the government together with the Centre (until 2017), ended up in the opposition, in 2019 both registered one additional MP, receiving 39 (17.5 percent) and 38 (17.0 percent) parliamentary seats respectively. Despite the groups having not entered the government, the results show, that the popular support they managed to ignite in their political campaigns was indeed high and placed them in the second and third places in the electoral race, near the victors.

The internal crisis in Perussuomalaiset began in 2017, when Jussi Halla-aho was appointed party leader and the other governmental coalition leaders refused to maintain cooperation with him. As a result, the government collapsed, and the party was split into two factions, Blue Reform and The Finns. Therefore, compared to the opinion polls from the years 2017 and 2018, the shattered support for the destabilized anti-immigration Finns grew back largely in 2019, gaining renewed momentum.

Support for parties in Parliamentary elections 2011, 2015 and 2019

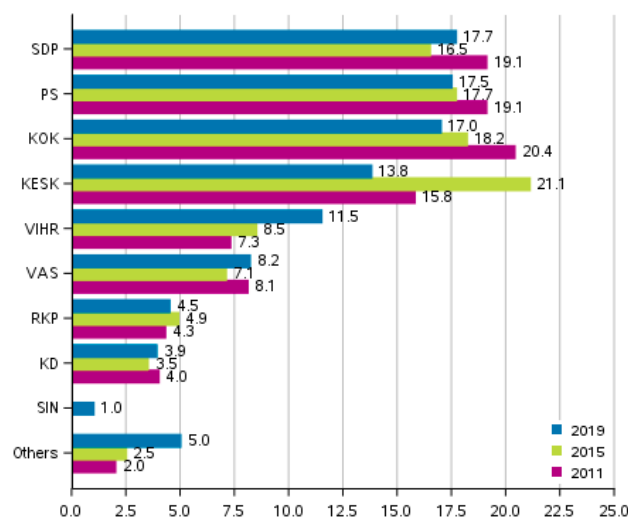


Figure 2. Support for parties in Parliamentary elections 2011, 2015 and 2019. Source: Official Statistics of Finland (OSF).

Media and researchers (see e.g. Virki & Liffey, Reuters, 2019; Mäkelä, 2019) attempted an explanation of the increased support for the Finns Party with the occurrence of the Oulu sexual violence scandal. At the end of 2018, eight foreign-born men, having arrived in Finland either as refugees or asylum seekers, were convicted for crimes such as grooming and rape on girls younger than 15. Throughout the investigation, lasting still in the early months of 2019, the number of suspects totalled 29. The offenders at times abused the same children, which additionally suggested the gang character of the crime.

In response, the City of Oulu had temporarily banned refugees or asylum seekers from entering the schools and daycare facilities (YLE, 2019). The Finnish state authorities unanimously condemned the crimes and expressed their concerns by introducing a stricter approach toward immigration policies (Mäkelä, 2019). Furthermore, the parliament immediately expedited three legislative projects: one aiming to heighten penalties for child sexual abuse, another bolstering the police's capacity to handle individuals' personal data, and a third proposing the revocation of Finnish citizenship from naturalized immigrants found guilty of specific crimes (Teivainen, 2019).

Voting for the parliamentary elections of 2023 was held primarily on April 2nd. Once again, the three most successful parties gained similar portions of the vote cast – the National Coalition winning with 20.8 percent, the Finns in the second place with 20.1 percent of votes, and the Social Democrats on the last step of the podium, gaining 19.9 percent of the popular support. As a result, the parties received respectively 48, 46, and 43 seats, all of them performing better than our years prior. The support for the Centre Party, the Green League, and the Left Alliance, on the other hand, decreased from the 2019 elections (OSF, 2023).

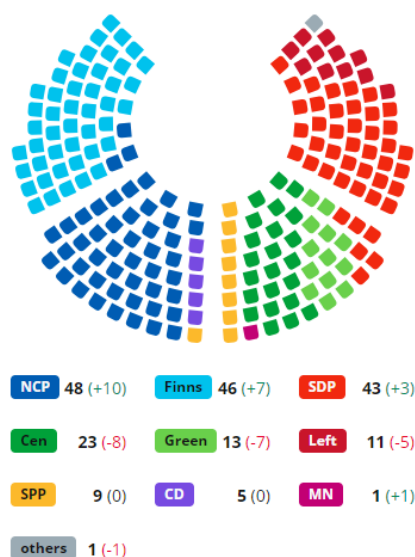


Figure 3. The results of the 2023 Parliamentary Elections of Finland. Source: Result Service, vaalit.yle.fi.

Soon after the results were announced, the international media erupted with speculations about the possibility of the more extreme reiterations of the political ‘right’ entering back onto the Finnish political stage (see e.g., Euronews, Reuters, Al Jazeera, France24, all 2023). They were not wrong, as Petteri Orpo’s government

formed after 2023 by the National Coalition included the Finns, the Swedish People's Party, and the Christian Democrats, at the same time placing the Social Democratic Party (SDP) at the head of the opposition.

Even though the most urgent themes to address in the preceding years included the security issues, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, war in Ukraine, and thus Finland's accession to NATO, the controversy around the decision to form the government that includes the Finns Party was drawn from its explicit nationalistic, anti-immigration and Euro-skeptic stance. The need to conduct changes in the economic policies introduced previously by the SDP, however, prevailed. Interestingly, in the year 2023, the final distribution of members in the Finnish Parliament between the opposition and the government added up to precisely 100 and 100 seats on each side.

The emergence of such a political landscape divided the political reality into clear 'for' and 'against' blocks. However, the debate on immigration became increasingly polarized already during the electoral campaign, as Perussuomalaiset based their program precisely on more restrictions directed toward non-natives, while implementing vividly populist rhetoric in the pre-election period by using visual and verbal communication recognized as racist (see e.g., Mac Dougall, 2023). The PS's electoral slogan read: *Pelasta Suomi!* meaning: *Save Finland!*

The PS's popular advancement is additionally visible in the result of the first round of the recent (2024) presidential elections in Finland, when the former Finns' leader Jussi Halla-aho was third most-voted politician, with 19 percent of support. Halla-aho has not only been thought to have nativist tendencies but has been even framed as fascist, sparking some media controversies across the country (see e. g. Teivainen, 2024).

3.3 The land of harmful immigration and blue-eyed toletards?

Besides the anti-immigration sentiments, the Finns Party's current populist attitude's content is based on Euro-skepticism and a 'fairly secular nationalism' (Saarinen & Koskinen, 2022, p. 9), meaning a general departure from religiously motivated argumentation for the sake of more 'liberal' approaches, such as promotion of sexual freedom and women's rights (Keskinen, 2018) or welfare chauvinism (Palonen &

Sunnercrantz, 2021; Pyrhönen, 2013) – the narrative devices observed more broadly in the previous chapter.

The politicians associated with the Finns Party, including those in the ministerial positions notably resort to nativist and racist theories in order to advance their anti-immigration arguments. Among them, there is a Great Replacement Theory⁶, and more precisely, its Finnish reiteration – *väestönvaihto* (Teivainen, 2023), that serves to promote the claims of alleged replacement of the scarce Finnish population with immigrants, particularly African ones.

The liberal elites that support immigration are framed by the right-wing populists in Finland with terms referring to blindness and naivety. Among them one can distinguish for instance ‘toletards’ – tolerant retards, or, in Finnish, *suvakit* (Ylä-Anttila et al., 2019, p. 3), and *kukkahattutäti* – “a lady in a flower hat”, a sexist nickname referring to feminists supporting immigration, and therefore “the defenders of multiculturalism, notably educated women in powerful positions” (Keskinen, 2013, p. 229). The term *sinisilmäinen*, literally translated to *blue-eyed* and used idiomatically to call a person naïve, is employed in those discourses in a clearly racialized manner, an example being: “We mustn’t be so blue-eyed that soon we won’t be blue-eyed” (Teivainen, 2023).

Next to the blue-eyedness and replacement conspiracies, one can find another Finnish compound word – *haittamaahanmuutto*, signifying directly a ‘harmful immigration’ (see e. g. Vitikainen, 2019, p. 5).

All in all, there is no doubt that immigration is one of the most argued issues in the Finnish public sphere and one of its most polarizing elements. It penetrates the political discourses, but also the daily life of people living in Finland, both Finnish and non-Finnish. As evidence, we can observe its growing importance in media and arts, including the film industry.

In 2017, the documentary titled “The Boiling Point” by Elina Hirvonen was screened across the country in an action that was supposed to initiate the dialogue between the two poles. The film “even-handedly lets people from all viewpoints have their say” (Marten, 2017), by featuring a wide range of perspectives, from those formulated by

⁶ See: footnote no. 1.

most radical anti-immigrant demonstrators to those who seek asylum in Finland themselves. It is one of many reactions to the increasing importance of the topic and active exacerbation of the discussion regarding it.

In the meantime, due to ongoing debates and growing anti-immigration sentiments, the Nordic region's branding as exceptional is being challenged. Researchers such as Magdalena Domeradzka (2023), Cathrine Thorleifsson (2019), or Danielle Lee Tomson (2020) examine the 'end of exceptionalism' discourses based on the example of dystopic images of immigrant-tolerant Sweden, the country considered the 'leader' and 'trend-setter' among the Nordics. I argue, however, that the exceptionalism of the entire region, including Finland, is being currently contested not necessarily by the growing immigration rate itself but through the neo-colonialist practices exercised in the significant political discourses about immigrants. But before advancing the argument against the 'colonial innocence' of Finland (Keskinen, 2019), it is necessary to take a brief look into the genesis of the extraordinariness within the 'Nordicness'.

3.4 Nordicness, Finnishness and colonial innocence

The first of the factors that is often distinguished as contributing to the distinctiveness of the region is the skilful implementation of the welfare state and social democratic principles. Jensen and van Kersbergen (2017) draw attention to the history of the final emergence of the welfare state in the Nordics in an interesting way, using terminology related to the birth of a monster sewn together from various patches. One of these patches, or so-called *Goldilocks' conditions*, that occurred in the region a little less than 100 years ago, apart from the relatively low degree of corruption, the unique massive inflow of women to the labour market, a significantly low level of unemployment, and the moderately-interventionist state apparatus, is the emergence of significant social movements (Jensen & van Kersbergen, 2017, p. 70-72).

Developing labour movements, which operated on the basis of a cross-class coalition, were strong enough to influence the government but limited enough to have to cooperate with its other constituencies. This means that in order to be universally accepted, the demands of the labour unions had to be extended to the whole of society. Thus, in the case of Norden, these movements could not simply remain classic workers' activism manifestations but were expected to transform into

something bigger. They became a Frankenstein, made up of various representatives of society, willing to be engaged in the creation of the perfect living conditions, providing happiness and progress (Ibid.). They evolved to the dimension of People's Movement and alternatively – to Social Democracy, whose agency became hegemonic in the region and ultimately conditioned its relatively high social cohesion (Rom-Jensen, 2022).

Henrik Stenius (1997), on the other hand, tries to show a certain correlation between the homogeneity of social democrats, whose ideas stand at the Nordic foundations of a society devoid of inequality and injustice and the Lutheran Church's influence across the region. He claims that through equalizing values promoted by the Church's engagement in the political and social life, the variety of visions has been limited, creating the so-called one-norm society. One that ideally consists of conformist, inclusive, law-abiding, and hardworking people (Ibid.).

Both the implementation of the welfare state and the hegemony of the Lutheran Church are among the answers to the question about the origin of Nordicness, as they are studied in an attempt at a historical interpretation of the emergence of a distinct region called Norden. However, narratives around Nordicness are growing in number and breadth, especially that the importance of the aforementioned factors is a matter of the past.

Being Nordic is no longer only a geographically distinguishing feature, a result of historical coincidences, or even a determinant of a set of sociopolitical strategies. The Nordic narratives have evolved to a scale of labelling and branding processes (Strang, Marjanen & Hilson, 2021). Associations brought about by the term 'Nordic' are nearly extreme. Over the years they have navigated between utopian visions of a paradise where inequality is non-existent, the economy thrives and everything is *cool*, and a dystopian perception of *socialist hellholes* with dehumanized societies, over-taxation, and bland homogeneity (Rom-Jensen, 2022).

At the end of the 19th century, Norden was still just a rustic periphery, the Old World, which, however, quickly turned into a new, one might say – modern, dimension. This sudden boom began right after the Great Depression in the late 1920s and early 1930s, from which the region recovered remarkably quickly compared to the rest of the world (Ibid.).

The United States played a significantly large role in recognizing the role of Norden and its innovative ideas. In 1936, American author Marquis Childs, published a book titled *Sweden: The Middle Way*. The journalist described Sweden as exemplary in creating an optimal compromise between the policies of the capitalist West and the authoritarian tendencies of the communist East. Sweden, the eternal representative of Nordics due to its industrial, welfare, and diplomatic domination, has become a symbol of pragmatism, democracy, culture, progress, and modernity.

The Nordic region began to be seen as cutting-edge. Scandinavia appeared as a land of free enterprise, defined by modern industry. On top of that, the post-war sexual liberation, spread of the dual-breadwinner family model, and increasing involvement of women in public life remained not without significance.

The next stages of the evolution of the Nordics' perception and narratives were observed after 2008, when Norden once again returned from the economic crisis with redoubled strength (Rom-Jensen et al., 2022). This time, its reputation has been largely determined by works of culture, art, architecture, cuisine, fashion, and design. And this is why Nordicness is today seen additionally as a peculiar aesthetic, exceptional not only politically or socially, but also culturally (Strang et al., 2021, p. 5-7).

The idea of Nordic exceptionalism is ubiquitous in yet another historical category: colonialism. Norden is mentioned extremely rarely in the context of exploitation of overseas (and not only) regions, and when it is, the narrative is usually such that the conquering Swedes or Danes were rather 'gentle colonizers' (Naum & Nordin, 2013, p. 10), more considerate of the human tragedy.

On top of that, the North positions itself as a de-globalized, remote corner of Europe that had little political influence at that time. Overall, the accusations of imperial activity in the Nordics throughout the history met either with denial or attempts to justify it with the arguments of pressing economic reasons and the then-need to emerge on the international arena through active participation in world politics (Ibid., p. 4).

The dimensions such as inter-Nordic colonization, as well as the colonization of the Sápmi region, namely the lands belonging to indigenous *Sámi* people, currently divided between Finland, Sweden, Russia, and Norway (see e. g. Hoegaerts et al.,

2022; Toivanen, 2019), have been neglected for years (Neumann, 2014). This blind reproduction of the belief in colonial exceptionalism present in the region has been conceptualized as white or colonial ‘innocence’ (Keskinen, 2019). Finland seems to be a particularly interesting case in that regard, as it strongly renounces its participation in colonialism, and presents itself more as its victim, oppressed by Sweden and Russia for centuries (e.g., Hoegaerts et al., 2022).

In addition to its Nordic self-perception of ‘development contributor’, ‘human rights advocate’ and ‘model exporter’ (Strang et al., 2021), Finland annually tops the world rankings for the best places to live in the world, becoming a shining example of the most open and good-doing country. However, while on the one hand it boasts splendid victories in the measurements conducted for the Good Country Index⁷ or World Happiness Report⁸, on the other, it is disgraced i.a. by the results of the two EU “Being Black in the EU” reports, coming out of them as the most racist of the respectively 12 and 13 countries in the study (FRA, 2018; 2023).

What is strikingly apparent in discourses on Nordic and Finnish colonialism is the reduction of the imperialist thought to the idea of possessions of overseas colonies, while completely omitting the contemporary faces of the phenomenon, such as the racialization of the ‘Other’ (Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2012, p. 3-5). As argued by Mulinari et al. (2009, p. 6-8) the colonial classifications are at the core of the policies of Nordic welfare states and are implemented through highly racialized politics of exclusion.

The racialization of the immigrants and the reproducing of the power relations based on the ethnic differentiation, situated in the centre of populist anti-immigration narratives present in Finland, are thus nothing but colonial and neo-colonial practices. Therefore, contesting the Nordic and Finnish exceptionalism lies also in noticing the colonial thought hidden in the anti-immigration discourses that are often underpinned with reproduced colonial power imbalance on the axis of gender, ethnicity, and class (e.g., Keskinen, 2013).

Moreover, colonial practices can have a passive side, equally condemnable, characterized by a lack of direct criticism against colonialism. Suvi Keskinen (2019)

⁷ The Good Country Index, <https://index.goodcountry.org/>.

⁸ The World Happiness Report, <https://worldhappiness.report/>.

frames the phenomenon as ‘colonial complicity’ and claims it to be an alternative engine for the promotion of imperial thought. Tendayi Achiume (2019, p. 1539-1547), on the other hand, notices that subscribing to neo-colonial ideas does not lay exclusively in the fact of historical exploitation of a foreign land but is contained also within the possibility of participation in the world’s politics and assuming a position on the ‘winner’s’ side of the global power structure. That might be an interesting observation in the context of Finland’s high relevance in international organizations, including the humanitarian sector, and might also pose another challenge to its exceptional character.

To say the least, Finnish exceptionalism is multifaceted. It has been conditioned by the historical, cultural, and sociopolitical nuances over the years, as well as by the national and regional branding practices. Yet, it is exposed to contestation in practice. This exposure is resulting from, among others, denial of the colonial past and the current traces of neocolonialism, present i.a. in the populist anti-immigration discourses. The analysis will verify whether there are any implications on the idea of exceptionalism arising from the migrant-made discourses, too.

4 Methodology and data

4.1 Rhetoric-Performative Analysis: genesis and the core ideas

In order to examine the phenomena under study and answer the questions that bother me, it is necessary to examine a fragment of the discourse. Therefore, I would like to start with explaining what the understanding of the term 'discourse' for this work is.

Admittedly, as proposed by Glynos et al. (2009, p. 5), discourse is not only texts/practices/regime of practices, but it evolves into virtually everything that acts as a carrier of signification and that is a space for ontological reflections. The studied discursive fields can, in fact, be anything, as they pertain to all dimensions of social reality, combining both linguistic and extra-linguistic aspects of the world (Palonen & Sundell, 2019, p. 2-3).

Ernesto Laclau (1996), however, imposes a technical limit on the discourse, as he claims that without even a temporary unity of its constitutive elements, the discourse as an entity would be completely elusive for study. What in fact is a motivational factor to employ any kind of discourse analysis approach is that the fields can be somehow captured and distinguished from each other. Even when the borderlines of discourses are blurry, and there is ongoing contingency between them, the possibility of a signification is a system, and the possibility of a system is the possibility of its limits (Laclau, 1996, p. 36-40). The elements that occur across the boundaries of the system are not merely different, because the differences also exist among the elements contained in these systems and are the source of the unique identity of each of them. A limit arises when an element is inequivalent to others and thus is excluded from the systemic community (Laclau, 1985, 1996, 2005). Understanding discourse in this way, one is able to study its formation and analyse why certain elements are in the system and some outside it.

Moreover, Laclau claims these exclusions, equivalencies, and differences constitute the necessary elements of political reality. In his recurring idea that "there is only politics where there are frontiers" (Laclau, p. 160), he stresses the ubiquity of the affective investment in a dichotomy between 'us' and 'them', a phenomenon whose relevance is being noticed in all the fields of social science (see: Palonen, 2019).

Therefore, it can be said that Laclau's theory is tailored to study antagonisms and othering, which I intend to do in this dissertation.

But what makes the discourses capturable and fixed? And how to identify the most important discursive 'moments' (see e.g., Mouffe, 2016) of social reality? All the factors that facilitate the process of identifying and recognizing the discourses constitute the material worth subjecting to analysis. Discovering them is precisely the main goal at the core of the Ideology and Discourse Analysis (IDA) or, to highlight its anti-essential character, the Post-foundational Discourse Analysis (PDA).

IDA/PDA is a method formulated on Laclau's and Mouffe's (1985) discourse theory (Palonen & Sundell, 2019) and assumptions on meaning-making processes happening through a struggle for hegemony (discursive dominance) and a social/human tendency to formulate frontiers. I view it as a toolkit containing theories and vocabularies helping with understanding the most important elements of socio-political reality, including the ways the identities and meanings are constructed. Moreover, it does not strip the researcher of the possibility to detect areas for the analysis and interpret them creatively, but it provides a certain framework that facilitates the process of finding what might be worth observing.

Emilia Palonen develops and promotes one of the more specific IDA's branches, namely the Rhetoric-Performative Analysis (RPA) (Palonen, 2018c; 2018b; 2018c; 2019). RPA, built on the PDA's shoulders, is the precise method that I am going to employ in this work. What makes it special among other approaches within this methodological field is that it dives deeper into the conclusion, that each discursive element has a rhetorical potential (to convey something) and a performative potential (to act out something). It focuses on Laclau's emphasis on the presence of rhetorical tropes in the discourses, at the same time taking a perspective that the meaning-making is embedded with affective ties just as persuasive rhetoric in the common understanding is (Palonen, 2019, p. 180-182).

In this approach, the tropological character of the rhetoric and its association with persuasiveness do not exclude each other, but rather intertwine. Tropology is a science that is generally concerned with the figurative use of language, and as proponents of IDA and PDA have noted, the transformations of meanings articulated in socio-political reality are often present in these figurative articulations (Laclau,

2005). RPA is also one of the strongest continuities of the rhetorical turn in social sciences happening in the 1980s, which was caused by the growing interest in rhetorical devices, including tropes, employed in societal phenomena (see: Kaplan, 2010; Finlayson, 2004).

As already established, the question that arises from the approach to discourse's nature as contingent and fluid is of the means to grasp the discursive fields in order to be able to examine them. The tool for this temporary fixation of discourses lies in recognizing the discourse's nodal points among its elements (Palonen & Sundell, 2019, p. 5). And this is what RPA facilitates by its focus on identifying the discourse's articulatory pieces such as rhetoric and performance.

Articulation is a manifestation of "an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 112), it is "any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified [...]. The practice of articulation consists in the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning" (Ibid., p. 112-113).

This means, that in order to take up an identity of a nodal point, an element needs to be articulated. It needs to be expressed to be able to exist and produce meaning in a phenomenal world. This expression can be a matter of materializing itself in speech, image, action, and any other rhetorical practice that would help in the momentary grounding of the discourse (DeLuca, 1999). These processes of materializing and expressing the meanings are what we call articulation (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 105; DeLuca, 1999).

Thanks to the assumptions of the Rhetoric-Performative Analysis, one is able to examine the points of articulation in the discourses, verify the way they are shaped in competing discourses, and thus determine their significance for forming the frontiers in society. And what needs to be highlighted once again, one of the articulations' direct outcomes are antagonisms (DeLuca, 1999, p. 336-338). This is precisely what I intend to research in the studied body of data.

4.2 Vocabulary and application

The IDA's interest in the logics of difference, equivalence, and exclusion, and therefore in antagonisms and frontiers, is reflected in the extent, to which these ideas

are employed in the populism theories and studies. Considering the previously developed relationship between immigration and the rise of populism, my choice is not accidental. I wish to detect whether antagonizing rhetorical tropes occur in the discourse I study, what exactly fixes the discourse I study, and how this discourse corresponds with other competing meaning-making fields. Moreover, I want to find answers to my research questions not only through the identification of the rhetoric-performative articulations but through exploring their content. I do that both by sharing the understanding of the discourse, rhetoric, and articulation with the proponents of Laclau's legacy in academia, and by utilizing certain vocabulary operationalized in the field.

One of the most important thoughts behind Laclau's theories is the developed idea of hegemony and the struggle to obtain it. Hegemony primarily taken from Marx's ideas referred to class dominance in mainstream socio-politics. The working class needed to overthrow the current bourgeoisie hegemon and install itself in its dominant, decisive position in relation to society at large. However, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) expanded the concept's application to any discourses, within which there are competing frontiers. Any project, movement, or struggle which is antagonistic to 'the hegemon' in any given field may become a part of the *hegemonic struggle* (Ibid.).

Each existent signifier (an element with the ability to constitute meaning; a means for expressing the signified information – for example a word, a concept, an act, a person) is appropriated and fought over by varying discursive fields, which are attempting to 'colonize the meaning' (see e.g., Howarth, 2015). For example, anti-immigrant movements struggle to obtain hegemony over the term 'immigration', intending to equip it with a negative connotation, while pro-immigrant movements struggle to obtain hegemony over that signifier by ascribing positive features to it. The term 'immigration' becomes emptied in the process of the struggle for its 'true' meaning and affective dominance. The situation highlights the fact that at the same time and in the same space, one signifier might signify different things for different actors, and carry completely polarized associations for the opposite frontiers of the discourses.

In this way, we follow up with another important concept to the Postfoundational Discourse Analysis, namely an empty signifier: an articulated element, whose meaning is different for different actors. Empty signifier is a signifier that becomes

merely a container for meanings, not constituting a meaning in itself, “a signifier without signified” (Laclau, 1996, p. 36).

In some cases, the meaning is rapidly changing in dynamic contextual settings and then we can also discuss the floating nature of signifiers. The floating signifier’s meaning is changing for the same actors, continually, with new discursive developments. For example, the affective tie and meaning burden of the term ‘protest’ in the anti-immigration discourse might float depending on what kind of protests are happening at a given time and in given space, in which the discourse is formulated. If on Monday there is a pro-immigrant protest happening in Helsinki, while on Tuesday one is held there against the immigrants, the word ‘protest’ will mark/connotate two different meanings on those two different days for the same anti-immigrant activist living in Finland.

Both empty and floating signifiers feed on a variety of repetitions (articulating the same element multiple times) and reiterations (configuring the meaning of the element through i.a. repeating it) (Laclau, 1996). Repetitions are in principio rhetorical devices prominent in political discourses (Lazarov & Zlateva, 2012), and therefore offer an interesting avenue to follow when disclosing the political message.

When it comes to concepts that are even more specific to the Rhetoric-Performative Analysis, all of those I am going to seek are precisely the rhetorical devices used in articulatory practices. Scholars often resort to extracting devices such as the principal duet of metonymy and metaphor (see e. g. Raphael, 2016, Amanda, 2018; Cabrejas-Peñuelas, 2020) popularized during the linguistic (or more specifically – rhetoric) turn by philosophers Roman Jakobson and Jacques Lacan (Grigg, 2009, p. 151-152).

Metaphor is a linguistic tool marking the similarity between two things, while metonymy implies contiguity between them, both using non-literal expressions based on comparisons and associations. In my analysis, however, I focus mainly on the three tropological categories suggested by Laclau, namely paradiastole, catachresis, and synecdoche (see e.g. Palonen, n.d., manuscript; Kraniauskas, 2014), indeed deriving from assumptions on metaphors and metonymies but offering the potential for more concrete exemplification. Those can be in general defined as figures of speech (not limited to verbal speech!), and therefore tropes, forming the constitutive

elements of a certain rhetoric, the study of which can facilitate the analysis of meaning-making processes in discourses.

Paradiastole was particularly appreciated by Quentin Skinner (2007), who defined it as the practice of redescribing vices as virtues. As elaborated by Emilia Palonen (n.d., manuscript), it is a rhetorical move, where a term is substituted by another term that is generally considered contradictory, implying a change in the normative content or usage. In this way, one element can be simultaneously described as e.g. courageous by one side of the political narrative and arrogant by the other. A politician who uses a lot of jokes in his speech might be narrated as a vicious clown by his opponent and re-described as a funny and relatable leader by his follower.

It is not surprising that Skinner was puzzled by the transformations of the articulation of ideas depending on who is speaking and what goal is pursued with the speech, considering his fascination with the concept of context. In paradiastole, he sought a significant essence for political narratives, as this rhetorical device, according to him, had the power to change the moral and affective charges carried by the concepts (Palonen, n.d., manuscript).

Paradiastole is strongly associated with the classical understanding of rhetoric because it assumes an element of persuasion, and thus indicates that elements of narration (i.e. speech or action) can demonstrate an agency in achieving political goals. To summarize its characteristics, I will use Finlayson's (2022) quote: "paradiastole means 'redescription'. It is about changing the picture we have of something so that we change our judgment of it".

Tropes such as paradiastole or, the next mentioned one, catachresis, have deeper meaning for the relationship between discourse elements (Laclau, 2005, p. 12, 71). Catachresis has been defined in many ways, but the main similarity with the paradiastole is that its usage is motivated by intentional choice/change of a narrative in order to imply another meaning. For Laclau, it was interesting how through catachrestic language one crosses categorical boundaries, because there otherwise would be no suitable word (as in Black, 1962; Fontanier, 1977 [orig. 19821-30]). For example, a chair has 'legs', but they are not real legs.

According to Clogan (1997), catachresis can also be referred to as the replacement of a word with a more ambiguous and euphemistic synonym, e.g. saying "jobseeker"

instead of “unemployed”. It constitutes another tool that has the potential to adjust meanings in discourses.

The last rhetorical trope I would like to mention is synecdoche. Synecdoche occurs when one component or element of a concept or phenomenon is used to describe or represent the whole of it. A very simple example of a synecdoche is the term ‘White House’ used to describe the whole U.S. government. While studying specific discourses, it is extremely interesting to verify which articulations have become synecdochic due to, for example, their repetitiveness in given contexts.

It is equally captivating to find examples of reverse synecdoches when behind the usage of a wide concept, there is only one element of it truly meant (e. g. in the case of anti-immigrant rhetoric, Muslims become a reverse synecdoche). In academic research, van de Sande (2020) has analysed the synecdochic representations of different social movements such as the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement. He argues that Laclau's use of the concept of synecdoche may help in identifying different forms of political representation that are implied in the social movements’ practices (Ibid., p. 398).

IDA’s vocabulary together with the tropes mentioned above offer innovative lenses to view social and political phenomena. Rhetoric is crucial to the discourse theory (Kaplan, 2010) and makes a way for reading the discursive articulation in an interesting way. Hence, I believe, that taking these assumptions into account will make the analysis present in this work more compelling and will contribute to the development of this deeply theoretical method in practice.

4.3 Application of the method in the context of this thesis

The Rhetoric-Performative Analysis (RPA) has been used before in various contexts, but it only recently began to crystallize into a separate method, distinct from, among others, the rhetoric political analysis (as in e. g. Glynos, et al., 2009).

Emilia Palonen has used it to study the political agency of urban spaces in Hungary (2019) and the varieties of Finnish populism (Palonen & Saaremaa, 2017), while Claire Gilray (2021) explored rhetoric-performative tropes in New Zealand’s response to COVID-19. Recently, at the University of Helsinki, it is also applied in audio-visual studies, and only last year (2023) Virpi Salojärvi, Emilia Palonen, Laura

Horsmanheimo & Roosa-Maria Kylli published an article applying a rhetoric-performative multimodal analysis of the polarising far-right YouTube campaign videos in Finland. Hopefully, this thesis will foster enrichment of this method's usage scope and position it as a novel analytical perspective on societally important issues.

The subject of analysis is a pro-immigrant and largely immigrant-made blog medium with a wide range of activities. Its scope and publicity point out its relevance as a representative source for this research. The media hereby subjected to the study is Migrant Tales, an online website describing itself as: "a blog community that debates some of the salient issues facing immigrants and minorities in Finland and elsewhere" and "aims to be a voice for those whose views and situation are understood poorly and heard faintly by the media, politicians, and the public" (Migrant Tales, n.d.).

I believe it is indeed most relevant to apply RPA in the study that operationalizes media content as the research data. As noticed by Mary Talbot (2007), even though media is one of the texts most frequently subjected to analysis and it is done in various ways by multiple scientific disciplines, one common thing in approaching it is the discourse analytical lens. She points out the creation of social meanings happening in media, as society is greatly affected by the media discourses that largely replaced older institutions as the "primary source" of understanding the world and constituting realities (Ibid., p. 9, also: Valaskivi, 2022, p. 164, 166-168). Additionally, the shift towards social media and user-made media makes the boundary between life online and offline vaguer and more contested. The communities existing through media tend to mirror the real-life communities (see e.g., Amarasingam, 2023).

Media acts as both structure and agent for and within discourses (Marsden & Savigny, 2009), carries a signifying power (Hall, 1997), and, considering the above, acts as a prevalent element of reality. It is inseparable from the ever-intertwined *social* and *political*, in which Laclau and other IDA scholars place their interest.

On top of the above, as marked by Cas Mudde (2007, p. 248–253), media exhibit a 'populist logic', creating a framework for populist agendas to surface, and therefore are prone and contributory to antagonisms, recurring in my argumentation.

According to Mudde, media may and do employ personalization, emotionalization, and anti-establishment attitude, which testifies to their significance for building

frontiers in discourses. What fuels them is attention (Valaskivi, 2022) that can be generated and maintained through the affective rhetoric-performative practices.

The blog character of the studied media content makes use of RPA even more beneficial for this research. Zafiropoulos and Vrana (2010) have systematized the many definitions of the blog, from which it can be extracted that the blogs are low-threshold online platforms for recording one's thoughts on a particular topic in the form of posts with marked publication time. Their content varies a lot, as it may be created by professionals sharing their specialized knowledge on a certain topic, as well as by grassroots level users, who simply want to publish their personal diaries. However, what is particular about blogs is that they are strongly opinionated. Nowadays blogging characteristics often resemble journalism, but remain separate from it, leaving way more space for subjectivity and opinion voicing (Ibid., p. 18-20).

Zafiropoulos and Vrana in their research focus in particular on political blogging (Ibid., 23-24), which puts an emphasis on the incentive the blog has to participate in political meaning-making. Thus, considering the high authorship agency of blogs and an intentionally ideologized (in the sense of conveying ideas strongly/persuasively) character of publications' content therein, looking for rhetorical tropes employed in the blog may prove a fruitful endeavour. Moreover, as formulated by Fairclough (1995), a framework for the content, namely its language and form, is a part of the content and conditions the meaning alongside the content itself, hence the choice to analyse the blog, once again, is not accidental.

4.4 About the source and data: Migrant Tales

The Migrant Tales blog was started in the year 2007 and soon after acquired an ISSN number 2669-8919, having started to function as a publicly issued medium. Migrant Tales is edited by Enrique Tessieri in cooperation with associate editors W. Che, Yahya Rouissi, and Ahti Tolvanen. Most of the texts published on daily basis are authored by Tessieri, while the co-editors are preoccupied with the side project, for example, Ahti Tolvanen is involved currently in the project 'Finnish-Russian Border Quicksand' pertaining to the crisis on the Finnish-Russian border, and Yahya Rouissi coordinates 'Tales From Europe' – an extension of Migrant Tales blog activity to different European contexts.

However, it needs to be stated that more than 300 authors, mostly representing immigrant minorities in Finland, have published their texts in the blog since 2007, in which case their content was not modified by Tessieri or any other editor prior publishing (Tessieri, personal communication, 18 December 2023). On top of that, Migrant Tales re-posts external social media entries, blog entries, statements and documents, providing a platform for expression to more diverse authors, including ‘grass-root’ migrant communities.

Enrique Tessieri is an Argentine-born anthropologist, researcher, journalist, and columnist. He specializes in issues related to immigration and emigration. He publishes mostly in Finnish and English, his Finnish roots come from his mother’s side. Tessieri has worked in Finland e.g. at Siirtolaisinstituut and Otava University. He has written articles and columns for several Finnish magazines and newspapers, such as *Suomen kuvalehti*, *Uusisuomi*, and *Apu*. He has also worked as a liaison with the Finnish embassy in Argentina and as a press correspondent in Columbia, Argentina, Italy, and Spain. Tessieri has taken a firm stand on the Finnish immigration debate. He has compared Finland's situation with other countries and shown both desirable and undesirable operating models within the state. Tessieri, among other public activities, has been commenting on the rise of right-wing populism in Finland (Mäkelä, 2012).

Tessieri is also a chairperson for the NoHateFinland.org, a 2018-established NGO striving “to tackle and eradicate hate crime and all forms of discrimination in Finland such as anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, Afrophobia, misogyny and other forms of social exclusion through education and training, seminars, events, conferences (...)” (Migrant Tales, n.d.). Statements of the organization are often published on the Migrant Tales blog.

Migrant Tales editorial board highlights the fact that “[o]pinions expressed on this blog are our own” (Ibid.). It does not disguise its clear pro-immigrant and anti-racist stand and it remains active in sharing reports regarding racism and xenophobia published in Europe, with a focus on Finland, as well as art pieces promoting the immigrant cause.

Migrant Tales is also a member of the European Network Against Racism (ENAR) and UNITED for Intercultural Action. Tessieri was elected a member of the ENAR

board in the years 2016-2019. Together with ENAR, the blog has promoted various side initiatives advancing its anti-racist message, example being the recent documentary by refugee journalist Sandra Alloush *#makeracismhistory* “*In Your Eyes*” created in cooperation with Tessieri.

Another prominent action taken by Migrant Tales next to regular publishing activity is media monitoring. For instance, in the year 2015, the Finnish media were constantly examined by the Migrant Tales editors and associates, and regularly reported on. Similarly in the year 2022, between August and October, the monitoring was intensified. As the authors state, this kind of endeavour is “vital in a country where racialized minorities are grossly underrepresented in newsrooms” (Migrant Tales, n.d.).

Currently, the articles are posted nearly daily, tackling political issues that might be important to Finland’s immigrants and minorities in general. They are garnished with visuals, such as screenshots, cartoons, or photos. Moreover, there is an ongoing discussion under many of them in the comment sections⁹, as well as in Migrant Tales’ social media channels, particularly in Facebook. In the years 2019-2020, 8 episodes of Migrant Tales Podcast were published on the Soundcloud platform.

Taking all of this into consideration, it is impossible to examine the entirety of the contents published since 2007 (the number of only the written posts exceeds 5000) in the scope of this thesis, and I need to limit the data body significantly. Since the heated debates around the immigration topic occur primarily around the period of political formations and transformations, I hereby analyse the corpus of texts published entirely in English in the ‘Migrant Tales’ in 3 specific periods surrounding the past three consecutive parliamentary elections in Finland: 2015, 2019 and 2023. Elections spark new dynamics in social attitudes towards immigration (see e.g. Beasley & Joslyn, 2001; Mudde, 2014; Lönnqvist, et al., 2018), and electorate campaigns together with the reactions they ignite constitute an affective field worth taking a look at (see e.g., Grüning & Schubert, 2022).

All the above-mentioned elections took place in April; however, I anticipated finding interesting content also in periods shortly preceding and following the elections

⁹ Each written blog post opens a forum, where comments are submitted as ‘thoughts’.

themselves. Therefore, from the years 2015 and 2019, I examine the material published during 5 weeks around the time of the election, locating the election week in the center. From the year 2023, I examine the entire month of April and half of March, as the number of texts was significantly lower then, and the website had been down for around 2 weeks, due to intensified hacker attacks. The total corpus of data consists of 102 written blog posts in the English language. The data set is visible in the table below:

Table 1. The data corpus.

Year	2015	2019	2023
Publications' dates	30.03 - 03.05	25.03 - 28.04	13.03 - 30.04
Number of publications	44	37	21

When systematizing the data, each blog post has been marked with its publication date in the following manner: [year_month_day], for example [2023_04_03]. I label the quotes with such date markings in order to situate them in a relationship to each parliamentary elections' location on a timeline. I believe such a practice facilitates the recognition of additional discourse dynamics. Direct quotations are scribed in italic font.

4.5 Extracting and coding: Voyant Tools and Content Analysis

102 texts constitute a fairly representative but therefore relatively large body of data for qualitative, discourse analytical research. Thus, in order to organize them and detect any thematic threads and hints that might be of interest to this research, I processed them with Voyant Tools software.

Voyant Tools is an online data-handling platform, that allows one to see links between concepts and wordily dynamics through various program elements, such as word clouds, recurring sequences, word maps, nets, collocates, density, trends, and more. Thanks to Voyant, I managed to establish codes and interesting categories for the analysis, which facilitated the process of extracting the crucial themes and tropes.

This process resembled topic modelling, if understood as “the simple assumption that if certain words occur together in the same documents, those words are related in meaning, and such clusters of words represent thematic »topics of texts«” (Ylä-

Anttila et al., 2020, p. 5). Even though such approach might be seen as somewhat simplistic and limiting the perception of complex relationships between phrases and significance of their intertextual contexts, when applied as merely a tool to navigate through large body of data, it works “surprisingly well in detecting the general thematic topics of texts” (Ibid.).

All in all, the use of computational method here is strictly dedicated to detecting interesting directions of research, rather than actively complementing the discourse analytical approach. This work is majorly concerned with qualitative analysis within the framework previously approximated in this chapter. However, the data representativeness, reproducibility and quantifiability that such ‘distant reading’ approach offers (e.g. Ylä-Anttila et al., 2019, p. 2) is not without positive effects on decisive and cognitive processes accompanying the close reading interpretation.

In turn, the operationalization of Voyant Tools facilitates the recognition and organization of the contents. Before commencing the proper RPA, I believe it is necessary to make the themes present in the data conversant, especially due to the complex character of the blog. The sole presence of the topics in the discourse and their role and meaning in the discourse are deeply and thoroughly intertwined. The analysis will therefore contain a brief content presentation, as well.

4.6 Ethical assumptions and my position vis-à-vis the topic and data

Finally, before commencing the analysis, I would like to mention my position vis-à-vis the topic, as well as present the ethical assumptions that accompany this research. The field of my scientific interests is largely related to intercultural encounters, decolonization, the awakening of populism, and the mechanisms of polarization, radicalization, alienation, and antagonization in politics and society. In addition, as an adherent of the Nordic region and a student of the Nordic path of the European and Nordic Studies Master’s Program, I aim to develop my interest in the issues of alleged homogeneity and exceptionalism of the states of the Fennoscandian Peninsula, as well as the position of Nordic countries in international relations, and socio-political meaning-making in the global scope. Admittedly, I also wish for my academic work to contribute to a better understanding of aspects whose increased comprehension has the potential to eliminate or minimize hate and xenophobia.

Moreover, I immigrated to Finland myself, from Poland. Internal European migration, even though not racialized to the same extent as migration between continents, has its own dynamics and does not remain without significance in the anti-immigration narratives.

Taking the above into consideration, I intended to pursue a topic that would combine my position, interests, and goals, while at the same time tackling a relevant issue, currently important both politically and socially. I believe that studying the other side of the immigration discourse can better the general understanding of immigrants as the agents within the struggle, and not only as subjects to be talked about.

However, even though I aim to be objective in the research, I am clearly not free from my own beliefs, which consist largely of anti-racist and pro-equity thoughts. Therefore, my subjective position intertwines with a need for ethical considerations in this research.

I strive to formulate my thesis in a cross-culturally aware manner (see: Franzke et al., 2020), as it involves subjects and actors from diverse national and cultural backgrounds. It means, that this work follows the principle of ‘ethical pluralism’ (Ibid.), and thus acknowledges the legitimacy of specific local norms, practices, etc., rejecting the idea of unchallenged universalism of values. From that follows, that I reject ideas of definite *right* or *wrong*. Instead of deciding what is black or white, I look at the grey areas and consider the diversity of norms and positions of different actors towards the topic, not deciding which one is uncontestedly ‘correct’.

I firmly believe in the definition of research as “the quest for knowledge obtained through systematic study and thinking, observation and experimentation” and its “motivation to increase our understanding of ourselves and the world in which we live” (ALLEA, 2017, p. 3). Therefore, I want to once again highlight that I approached my data not without any expectations but without prior prejudices of what should be found therein. The conclusions I draw are applicable only in relation to the examined discourse, as I hope to avoid harmful generalizations. Moreover, the used methodology implies that the analysis will be at large interpretative, which is important to remember when reading the deductions made.

5 Analysis

5.1 Introduction to the analytical segments

In this chapter, I proceed with the analysis of the data. The three following subchapters are categorized by the year of the publication. Each of the subchapters is additionally divided into four segments.

The first segments pertain to the data substance, they cover the general description of themes found in the analysed materials and, as aforementioned, are shaped in line with a brief content presentation supported by topic modelling employed with a help of the Voyant Tools. The following parts, on the other hand, apply the rhetoric-performative perspective on the narratives present therein. Each second segment concerns the self-rhetoric and self-performance of immigrants, while the third ones relate to the shape of discourses on Finland and Finnishness. The concluding parts contain further discovered tropes, relationships with the theoretical concepts, and an attempt at preliminary assumptions as to the research findings.

5.2 Year 2015

5.2.1 General description of the blog contents

The Finns Party is central to the editorial endeavours of the Migrant Tales in the year 2015. In the studied body of data, containing textual materials posted in 44 blog entries between March 30th and May 3rd, the PS's narratives and the party actors surface as the main interests and targets of criticism.

Even though the contents present in the first data set pertain to a variety of topics; the most prominent activity relates to promoting anti-racist agendas as opposed to the discourses formulated mostly by the Finns Party. The interest in party politics is quite high in all the studied material, however the year 2015 strikes with the bluntness in mentioning names and party associations that *are hazardous to migrants, minorities, Finns and Finland* [2015_04_19].

In the time shortly preceding the election, we can observe increased political agitation with explicit statements present in the blog, such as *don't vote for these anti-immigration candidates* [2015_04_18], where the names of most xenophobic

In the substance of the anti-racist agenda promoted in the Migrant Tales, there is argumentation against the immigration restrictions depending on ethnic and national backgrounds, a call for social inclusion and reducing white privilege (*Defining white Finnish privilege* series), or the idea of the first- and second-class citizenship. The entries promote the effective organization of minorities against the populist upsurge and tackle the dangers of racism and scapegoating.

Both the terrorist attacks and the refugee crisis of 2015 are mentioned in several contexts. Especially the latter aspect is written about in a manner of empathizing with the victims of life-threatening mobility in the Mediterranean Sea [2015_05_02] and condemning the so-called ‘fortress Europe’ policies [2015_05_03]. The Migrants’ Rights Network is in 2015 quoted by Migrant Tales precisely for this purpose.

Among other interesting contents published in 2015, there is a column contesting the whiteness of the religious images of Jesus [2015_05_01], a blog post written by a disabled person about the concepts of rejection and discrimination [2015_04_30], several Facebook re-posts presenting the immigrants’ personal experience with racist encounters, as well as artistic expressions, including a poem.

In the following subchapters, I will look more closely at those recurring themes, searching for traces of self-performance and rhetoric, as well as the representations of Finland and Finnishness within the Europeanness and Nordicness. First, I will focus on how the Migrant Tales’ authors position themselves as agents of possible change *within* the society they *co-create*. Second, I will investigate the narratives *about* the society which serves as a certain framework for this agency. Lastly, I will summarize the noteworthy tropes present in the studied discourse and begin to mark their relationships with formerly introduced concepts.

5.2.2 The immigrant self-narratives: ‘Us’ in Finland

The narrators of the Migrant Tales in 2015 articulate themselves in line with three rhetoric-performative threads: *precarious identity*, *agency in change*, and *a part of the society*. The first thread represents a vast criticism towards racism and the social divide caused by it, as well as the problematic nature of certain categorizations that immigrants are subject to, the second one contains a ‘call for action’ issued to

mobilize immigrant environments to act upon their struggle, and finally, the third thread represents immigrants as an integral part of the Finnish society.

In the meantime, don't let anyone, no one, ever define who you are. That's your right and never give it away. [2015_04_12]

The *precarious identity* pillar derives from the attempts to re-claim the ability to define oneself while at the same time condemning the self-aggrandizing practices assumed both by the right-wing politicians and the civil society supporting the nationalist cause. The identity of immigrants is framed as constantly questioned, altered, and essentialized to the issue of race. It is the identity of an *outsider* and a *scapegoat*, not a *human being* [2015_04_18; 2015_04_04].

The question of 'who can be Finn?' is recurrent in the studied discourse. The decision on its answer lies in the hands of the 'white' Finnish population, who *run[s] this country politically, culturally, economically, and socially* [2015_04_14]. Both 'whiteness' and 'Finnishness' in this rhetorical thread serve as frontiers to the narrators. They are presented as exclusive factors decisive on who is not equivalent to the hegemonic 'people'.

The arguments of *precarity* of the excluded frontier are built primarily on the scorn towards policies assuming different legal treatment of the immigrants depending on their country of origin, as well as faulty conduct of public institutions overflowing with blatant racism. These are framed to fuel the harmful categorizations, inspired by a strictly colonial thought. What is being produced through these categorizations is the social divide into first-, second-, and even third-class citizens/members of the society, which in turn leads to spread of hate and exclusion. These arguments support the stance on systematic racism present in the anti-immigration rhetoric being simply *bad*.

Anti-immigration rhetoric and intolerance are harmful to any country for a number of reasons. The great harm that such politicians inflict on this country when they victimize migrants and minorities is that they maintain and fuel a climate of suspicion that encourages social exclusion. Their message is clear: You don't belong here, you are a guest no matter how many generations your family lives in this country. You are indefinitely an outsider. Add to the latter poor and shoddy reporting by the national media on cultural diversity topics and a worrisome picture emerges on how migrants and minorities are systemically excluded and treated as second- and third-class members by our society. [2015_04_18]

On top of that, the Migrant Tales point out to the problematic usage of terms such as ‘refugee’, ‘migrant’, ‘foreign background’, or ‘immigrant background’ in public narratives, suggesting that they are being appropriated for political purposes and generally charged negatively by the public figures. Narrators of the blog engage therefore in a paradiastolic activity of redescribing the terms used as vices in the Finnish right-wing populist discourses and equip them back with an ‘original’ and not a ‘negatively charged’ meaning.

The narrative of immigrants being a ‘problem’ is contested additionally with the argument of the inevitability of diversity in the modern day. The hegemonic struggle for the affects tied to the terms used to describe immigration is overflowing the narratives present in the Migrant Tales.

Everytime they label a person or group as a person with “foreign” or “migrant” background they are effectively relegating that person publicly to second- or third-class status in society. [2015_04_14]

The *agency in change* thread is visible in a way the blog encourages the call for anti-racist and pro-inclusion transformation. Immigrant narrators are performing themselves as leaders of the potential social movement and the watchdogs of justice, not only through the substantial argumentation against nativist politics but through the rhetorical approach present in the imperative manner they address the potential recipients of their message. They position themselves as the alternative hub, where there can appear a spark for a positive political change in the areas of their very interest.

The lack of proper *leadership in the area of cultural diversity* [2015_04_30] needs to be tackled and Migrant Tales is here to inspire the immigrants to do it. In the call for action, the idea of being in a precarious position of exclusion and non-belonging, becomes the uniting and ultimately mobilizing factor.

Finland’s Other, which have the same rights to live here as everyone else, will have to figure out and organize more effectively against a party that is openly hostile to us and may form part of government. Expecting others will do this for us is wishful thinking. The election results reinforces as well Migrant Tales’ role as a voice of migrants and minorities. Stay tuned folks, what you saw on Sunday is nothing that we’ll see in the next four years. [2015_04_20]

Minorities and non-whites will not be respected as equals by white Finns in this country as long as we expect them to do it for us. They will never treat us equally until we form a social movement and challenge white Finnish privilege. [2015_04_12]

We need more social inclusion in Europe to build a better society tomorrow. [2015_04_27]

Moreover, the *agency in change* thread assumes the authors' (and general immigrants') ability to recognize racism in its many disguises, decode the *coded racism* [2015_04_14], as well as identify political trends such as 'populism' and 'nationalism'. The space taken up for an explanation of why the then anti-immigration sentiment is problematic and what it entails, together with direct instructions of 'vote' or 'don't vote', suggests that the immigrants can act as a politically active and knowledgeable collective.

What is additionally conducive to the 'agency' narrative is the variety of published genres and the very sources of posts. It reinforces the narrative that it is 'us' and not remote 'them' that have an outlet for free-form expression in Migrant Tales. In line with this narrative, the blog promotes for instance artistic pieces made by immigrants, such as the poem by 'Dana' [2015_05_01], as well as social media posts created by 'regular', 'grass-root' blog users and shared in the blog as valuable contributions.

The last rhetoric-performative thread builds on the two already mentioned. The *part of the society* motif manifests itself in the way immigrants intend to remind the public that they are an integral puzzle of the 'people' they are continually excluded from. Moreover, at times they claim the collective responsibility for the pains of the country and the continent in general, highlighting that after all they are also their lawful citizens. Neglects, such as the mistreatment of the refugees dying in the Mediterranean Sea, are framed as the responsibility of the whole of 'the West', to which now the immigrants paradoxically belong [2015_05_02]. Therefore, at times, Finland or Europe is not 'them' but rather 'us', 'our' home, children, and lives, while *[r]acism is the shovel we Europeans use to dig our common grave* [2015_04_27].

The narrative of 'concern for our children' recurs multiple times. Children signify the future of the countries, where they grow up, and therefore *belong* to the idea of Finnishness to a larger extent than their parents. The dream of an open Finland of

the future is not impossible, as the country has the capability to strive for more inclusivity and as it is to be built by the future generations.

Since Finland is our home and will be that of our children, grandchildren and great grandchildren, do not vote for xenophobic candidates and parties that exclude migrants and minorities. We need them like a hole in the head. Vote for an open and tolerant Finland not one built on social exclusion and hatred. [2015_04_18]

What additionally enriches the *part of the society* rhetoric-performative thread is the focus on the active political participation of ethnically diverse Finns. The promotion of parliamentary candidates representing minorities in Finland marks the presence of the immigrant collective in a directly politically relevant sector. The message of inevitability and naturalness of diversity returns in acknowledging the varying demographics in significant areas of socio-political life and in an argument that *Finland is, never was and never will be an only white society* [2015_04_20].

5.2.3 The narratives of Finland and Finnishness: *Finland to 'us'*

Alongside the narratives of Finland being at the same time a synecdoche for 'our home' and a 'place of exclusion', both of which identities balance on the line between the self-performance of immigrants and narrating the country, one can notice many more varying perspectives on its silhouettes. Finland itself becomes a floating signifier on the pages of Migrant Tales. The presence of anything related to 'Finnishness' is ubiquitous and constitutes a contextual base for the formation of the majority of arguments appearing on the website. Finland, even when not mentioned directly, makes a background and a framework for the blog's existence.

'Finland' signifies the country's epistemic authorities, including the media and government. At times, the term relates to civil society. What is being reproduced by those fractions of society entails in turn the narratives *of* the country itself. All in all, Finland loses its significance as a geographical area and gains one as a public body or a personified socio-political hegemon. Finland is 'what happens in Finland'. So, what happens there?

Finland is only for Finnish, a politician recently said on a television [2015_04_17].

First, let us return to the white privilege, brought up regularly in the self-rhetoric aspect. It is equally important in defining the other as it was in defining self. Finnishness is prominently equalled with whiteness, but in more general terms signifies superiority. Both white and non-white immigrants are inferior to 'purely Finnish' citizens. Dehumanization and racism are mentioned as omnipresent in the narratives posed by important politicians and media, including not only the anti-black and Islamophobic xenophobia but also the instances of Russophobia or the ridicule of Estonians. Such an agenda is summed up simply as 'anti-Other' [2015_04_20]. The concern toward the spreading of racist politics is voiced intensively.

One important matter to keep in mind, however, is that intolerance to Others isn't only a PS thing but takes place in all Finnish parties. If you were a migrant or minority searching for a political party that could represent you in Finland, the way you'd go about this is by asking which party is the least racist. [2015_04_18]

Even though the main criticism is directed against politicians, it is rather the engagement of civil society and the mobilized anti-immigration electorate that Migrant Tales community frames as truly 'worrisome'. The civil society is criticized alongside the political parties, for example for initiatives such as a petition to hasten the deportation of sentenced foreigners or for spreading narratives blaming immigrants for all the current social ills, which enhance *Finland's scapegoating culture and climate* [2015_04_15].

Authors of the blog posts often utilize their own experiences of racism and juxtapose them with the stereotypical picture of a 'Finn' in order to contest the existing impeccability narratives and express the confusion as to 'where does this social phenomenon (xenophobia) even come from?'. The positive experiences and connotations of Finnishness are used to ask questions of the possibility of evil happening in an inherently 'good' society. The political situation and the general turn towards more racism in public spheres provide a scope for possible contestation of the hitherto idealized nation.

The Finnish man is not of many words. He is a man that doesn't bicker about what he does not have and just uses what he has to survive and thrive (they even have a word for this, 'SISU'). This is the image of Finland and of the Finnish people I have so you can imagine how astonished and confused I become when I see the opposite happening. The

elections are approaching, and I see these same men just talking all the time and some of them are even shouting out loud. None of them are, however, doing anything to fix the situation. The most peculiar thing about this is that these men are the ones that call themselves “real” Finns. These men are the ones that oppose everything that is foreign, yet they adopted the worst type of behavior by “shouting, blaming and bickering instead of fixing and moving forward”. [2015_04_15]

In the above quote there are traces of both a praise and criticism for the Finnishness. On one hand, one can observe an appreciation for Finnish characteristics and on the other an expression of their failed projection. Certain expectations remain not only unfulfilled but are utterly demolished by the current *anti-foreign* developments. And what is shining through the disappointment is a need to ask: ‘how come’ and ‘why’.

Posing the questions as to ‘how come are we getting so racist’ is an established practice in the Migrant Tales throughout all the studied material, published in all the examined periods. It is at times supported by the argumentation of the abandonment of Nordic values and goes hand in hand with deconstructing the ‘happiest country’ or the ‘best education in the world’ labels. Nordic values, together with migrants, refugees, and minorities are narrated catachrestically as an ‘excess weight’ that the ‘sinking ship’ of Finland has to get rid of. They are, however, not defined in detail, and serve as a synecdoche for ‘all the good’ associations about the region and the country.

Finland resembles a sinking vessel in the present anti-immigration and nationalistic political climate coupled with a diehard recession stretching back to 2008. One could ask how is it possible that a country with one of the highest standards of living and best educational systems in the world can cave in to populist anti-immigration rhetoric. [2015_04_26]

The above quote additionally suggests that Finland is ‘a state in need’ of immigration and is ‘losing’ on its anti-immigration stance, not only value-wise but also economy-wise. This stands in direct opposition to welfare chauvinist narratives, according to which Finland and Finnish people become economically threatened by the arrival of more and more migrants (e.g., Pyrhönen, 2013). According to the Migrant Tales, Finland becomes a ‘loser’ by repelling the interest of potential foreign investors and skilled workers with its xenophobic migration regulations [2015_04_19].

In summary, the blog authors narrate Finland as an inherently *good* yet undergoing *bad* transformations. ‘Finland’ itself is a floating signifier, adjusting its contents

depending on the intentions of the narrators. It constitutes at the same time both shelter and danger for the immigrants.

5.2.4 Prominent tropes: *Two Finlands*

The above proves that the character of the blog in 2015 is highly political. The interest in elections and party politics is large. The immigrants narrate themselves as potential agents of change within the society they belong to yet are systematically excluded from. Finland is on the other hand performed both as a home and as a usurper. The term ‘problem’ is floating in the discourse.

The populist tools of othering and antagonization are noticed, with the narrative of ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ at times even reproduced. The biggest discursive frontier is undeniably constituted specifically by the Finns Party and the radical right of the political spectrum, but more generally by the white supremacy and racism. The frontiers are often narrated in what in politics would imply a ‘transgressive manner’ (Aiolfi, 2022), but the blog character of the medium prevents such pre-emptive conclusions. Nevertheless, the straightforward criticism (e.g. calling the Finnish parliament *a big joke* [2015_05_01]) is worth noticing as an affectively charged rhetorical practice.

What is interesting is that in 2015 the Migrant Tales still forecasts that the unconcealed, *thick anti-immigration rhetoric may backfire* [2015_04_02], because it is rather the *coded racism* that is preferable in the Finnish political correctness standards. Compared to the 2023 stance, that the blatant racism sustains the PS’s momentum, it makes up for a curious finding, that I will delve into more in the next chapter.

Among the theoretical phenomena that are acknowledged in the discourse from 2015, one can observe the recognition of welfare chauvinist narratives, even though not called by that name, contained in some of the PS’s politicians’ speeches about ‘poor Finns exploited by the immigrants’ [2015_04_24]. The example of Sweden’s dystopic images operationalized by populists are noticed as well. Additionally, scapegoating is widely recognized as a common practice in media, civil society, and politics. On the other hand, however, the exploitation and appropriation of women’s and sexual minorities’ rights for the anti-immigration cause is not visible in this data portion.

The narrators employ a variety of tropes, especially utilizing the synecdochic potential of the signifier ‘Finland’. One particular trope highlights the duality of some self-narratives and narratives about the country, mentioned at the beginning of this subchapter, grasping and summing up the idea of Finland having a potential that is however endangered by this-day’s racism. It is the idea of *two Finlands*, one with bright and one with rather unpromising future.

There are two Finlands today: The developed one where there are migrants and those regions that are dying or where there are few migrants. The former regions have a future whereas the latter have a bleak one. What we need today is leadership in the area of cultural diversity. We don’t need fear-mongering but facts and answers on how to tackle the real problems in our society, which aren’t migrants or minorities. [2015_04_30]

5.3 Year 2019

5.3.1 General description of the blog contents

Around the election of 2019, a large portion of Migrant Tales’ contents highlights how the Oulu crime story¹⁰ was operationalized as a political tool not only by the populists but by the media, too. According to Jarmo Mäkelä from the International Centre for Defence and Security of Estonia, the events sparked a local hysteria, which in turn was exploited as a fuel for the anti-immigration agenda of the PS.

As a result of the debate, which had created hysteria, a significant number of citizens believed that the True Finns (predecessor of the Finns Party) had been right in their anti-immigrant criticism all along. Between December 2018 and April 2019, support for the Finns Party doubled, and they came top in opinion polls just before the elections, with 18.8%. Such a rapid and large increase in support has not been experienced by any other party in Finland. In the elections, the Finns Party received 17.5% of the vote. (Mäkelä, 2019)

In the 37 articles from the year 2019, the word xenophobia was more often replaced by the variations of the word racism, suggesting the lean toward more plain language in describing the discrimination experienced in Finland by immigrant minorities. Racism is also more and more often equated with pain and suffering, adding to the narrative new affective charges. There is less focus on juxtaposing ‘us’ and ‘them’ directly

¹⁰ For more see Chapter 3.2.

through the signifiers beginning with the prefix *anti*, but the interest in white Finnish supremacy and privilege remains a recurring theme.

Except for the Oulu sexual abuse scandal, among the relevant events that the blog is preoccupied with, one can distinguish instances of violence directed both against immigrant communities and public figures such as then Foreign Minister Timo Soini and Left Alliance candidate Suldaan Said Ahmed. The media monitoring activity is less organized, but not less prevalent, as the media hubs are continually seen as crucial actors in enhancing the Finnish political *scapegoating climate* [2015_04_15].



Figure 5. Word cloud of the data from 2019 representing the most-mentioned phrases..

Perussuomalaiset remain the main frontier in the discourse, however, the scorn for the anti-immigration policies is becoming more personalized and manifests itself more plainly in the criticism of the specific politicians. Particularly strongly subjected to scrutiny are the rhetoric of the Finns Party leader Jussi Halla-aho and negligence of Finland's then-president Sauli Niinistö. Even though the focus on party politics seems to be less prevalent in the data from 2019, much attention is paid to the Finns Party structure transformation, with vast consideration for the Blue Reform's emergence on the right-wing map. The explanation of the acronym usage evolved according to the events related to the party's split.

The Perussuomalaiset (PS) party imploded on June 13, 2017, into two factions, the PS and New Alternative, which is now called Blue Reform. Despite the name changes, we believe that it is the same party in different clothing. Both factions are hostile to cultural diversity never mind Muslims and other visible minorities. One is more open about it while the other says it in a different way. A direct translation of Perussuomalaiset in Finnish would be something like "basic" or "fundamental Finn". Official translations of the Finnish name of the party, such as Finns Party or True Finns, promote in our opinion nativist nationalism and racism. We,

therefore, at Migrant Tales prefer to use in our postings the Finnish name of the party once and after that the acronym PS. [2019_03_25]

The intensified criticism is directed also towards specific institutions, such as the Finnish Immigration Centre and the Police, and the newly made-up anti-immigration civil collectives such as the vigilante Soldiers of Odin.

What is noticeable in the materials from 2019 is also the increased coverage of cases of Islamophobia and general critique of stigmatizing Muslims. Moreover, the platform serves as a place for outreach from the Muslim community, including a letter from the Islamic Society of Oulu.

Among the contents posted in the blog, there is also an announcement about the ELGS Migration School Programme, as well as promotion of immigrant-made art. Since the community of immigrants in general assumes a more expressive tone on the pages of Migrant Tales in 2019, there is a detectable shift toward the empathizing practices of storytelling and advocacy. It is distinguishable in the number of personalized stories published on the blog, and the concentration on promoting the well-being of those discriminated.

I will commence the analysis of the data from 2019 by looking at these storytelling endeavours and their denotations for the self-identity rhetoric performance of immigrants. Followingly, once again I will observe how *growingly hostile Finland* is being narrated in the circumstances of political change, and lastly, I will examine the recurring tropes and signifiers, including the discussions about *social illness*, and *non-surprised* attitude. Finally, I will shortly verify the recognition of the phenomena such as welfare chauvinism, colonial complicity/innocence, and securitization, mentioned previously in theoretical and contextual backgrounds.

5.3.2 The immigrant self-narratives: *We are here*

Similarly to the data from the year 2015, a certain *call for action*, coupled with the promotion of generally immigrant and specifically Migrant Tales' agency in making a change, as well as expressions of threatened *precarious identity*, constitute major elements in self-narratives of the blog authors.

In the unstable circumstances, when other media platforms remain biased, *Migrant Tales* serves as an outlet for criticizing racist discourses and the practice of *speaking up*. It accounts for an alternative cure for the *symptoms of our silence* [2019_03_25].

As long as Finland sits on the fence of racism and fascism and only white people speak for migrants and minorities, the problem will worsen. (...)

*I know for a fact that if I were to write about migrants and minorities for the Finnish media like I do in *Migrant Tales*, there would be a good chance that my writing would be rejected.* [2019_04_21]

By vast criticism of systemic discrimination and the practice of calling out and revealing the entanglements between media, police, and political agendas, the narrators perform themselves as the last remaining guards of the shared cause. They are those able to extract the coded racism and the *underlying political message* [2019_04_26], hidden inter alia in the linguistic practices present in the public discourses, as well as the framing strategies employed in media, and unequal approach to crime depending on whether it was committed by immigrants or native Finns.

The particular outrage in 2019 is ignited by the observation of the media coverage of the Oulu sexual abuse cases. The narrators of *Migrant Tales* extract from it what Moffitt (2016) would call an intensified incitement of the ‘crisis, breakdown, or threat’, or simply, the powering of hysteria. The criticism is based on the arguments against the unequal approach to the then-discovered cases of paedophilia committed by white Finns, as well as against the exploitation of the crime to fuel the *Islamophobic thunder* of the right [2019_03_28].

By using figurative and expressive language, including rhetorical questions, repetitions, and a variety of tropes, the *Migrant Tales* express the need for condemnation and for a change, while at the same time attempting to unite the two frontiers against the ‘real’ and ‘serious’ *social ill called pedophilia and sexual abuse* [2019_03_28]. Racializing the crime is criticized not only for its essence but for the side effects it produces, namely distraction from eradicating the *core problem* [2019_04_02]. The signifier of ‘problem’ returns back in a reiterated form, and there is an observable quest for the hegemony in defining what it really means.

The lifesaver that was supposed to propel the Perussuomalaiset (PS) to new heights in the polls, suffered another setback on Wednesday when*

the National Bureau of Investigations arrested five white Finnish suspects implicated in violent child sexual abuse. (...)

When we lose sight of the ball because we are too busy labelling and victimizing certain migrant groups, we lose sight of how to effectively challenge a social disease like pedophilia and sexual abuse. Yle's coverage of the Oulu sexual assault cases could be at its best described as overkill, even unethical. It is like using a bazooka to kill an ant. There is little balance never mind fairness in Yle's reporting of the topic. (...)

In light of the latest pedophilia cases, where is the outrage? Why so much silence? Where are those courses for white Finns on Finnish values? Due to the latest crime that came to light on Wednesday, isn't time ripe to leave our racism, prejudices, opportunism and hypocrisy aside and deal with a serious social ill called pedophilia and sexual abuse?

[2019_03_28]

The narrators react and encourage reaction. They reveal the bias and call to, figuratively speaking, open one's eyes to it. They also point out the negative side effects of immigrant scapegoating, including the distraction from, again, 'the real problems'.

It seems that beyond the media and political biases, the blog authors notice the beneficial nature of immigration for the country once more. Country, which unluckily is *not smart enough* to appreciate its economic potential [2019_04_07]. It resembles the arguments of the *two Finlands*, according to which immigration equals rather prosperous future and well-being of the state. These practices of argumentative advocacy put them in the position of experts of their own experience. This way, they conduct the process of 'reclaiming' the discourse, and therefore reclaiming (im)migration (Squire et al., 2021).

The *precarious identity* rhetoric-performative thread is in the instance of 2019 present robustly in the article on the correlation of racism and well-being, which claims that *the Finnish virus of denial* coupled with the xenophobic sentiments reaching public narratives causes mental suffering and confusion [2019_04_28]. The minorities exposed to not only direct social exclusion but also to problems related to acclimatization in a new environment, difficulties in finding jobs, and establishing social bonds, because of the lack of recognition and aid, often experience depression and trauma. Moreover, their struggle is at large ridiculed, as compared to other places in the world, their situation is framed as not 'that bad'. The argument that 'not all the Finns are racists' [2019_04_25] is looked at closely, too.

No winter day can be as dark and freezing as being assaulted when everyone looks away. (...) “Elsewhere is not any better!” – this claim is rejecting immigrants’ suffering and fear. It is an obstacle to facing the problem and promoting inclusion. We are living in this country as immigrants, and it is not of much help to hear it could be even worse – elsewhere. It could also be better: And we are not elsewhere – we are here! [2019_04_28]

Except for the practices of advocacy, in the data from 2019, the most space for immigrant agency and self-identity construction lies in storytelling. There is a noticeable shift towards including more and more postings, where the anti-racist and pro-immigration argumentation line is expressed through personalized stories. The police, the child protection services, as well as the Finnish Immigration Service are critically scrutinized precisely through the individual experiences of immigrants.

The institutions’ misconduct is illustrated for instance in the story of a Mauritanian couple. The husband is deported back to his country in a violent manner, cuffed, frisked, and then abused physically. Migrant Tales shares the messages sent by the family and the pictures showing bruises around the man’s wrists. The story is narrated as *another sad chapter in the inhumane manner that the Finnish Immigration Service and the police treat some migrants, especially those from Muslim-majority countries* [2019_04_03].

Next to that couple’s story, one can find multiple other cases on the Migrant Tales’ pages from 2019, including the testimony of a starving asylum seeker from Afghanistan, and an Iraqi family, who was forced to hand their children to child custody.

The asylum seeker said that he had the right to a free meal at the Vantaa reception center but after being transferred to Kajaani, located 548km north of Vantaa, he has had “to beg” for food from other asylum seekers. “I have asked an employee of the reception center why they don’t pay me for the five months they owe me?” he said. (...) The asylum seeker said that begging for food at the reception center was a breach of his basic rights in Finland. [2019_03_29]

Migrant Tales has received many calls from migrant families stating that they were “deceived” into family separation. [2019_04_13]

The couple states that child protection has made no effort in offering to counsel and help to reunite the family. Instead, they want to give custody of the children to a Finnish family. [2019_04_22]

Furthermore, Migrant Tales posts about acts of racially motivated vandalism experienced by immigrants [2019_03_25], as well as intensified attacks on Muslim communities, including the series of desecration of mosques in Oulu and Helsinki or the court case regarding the religiously motivated clothing [2019_04_02].

The stories of suffering and tales of exclusion continue. Presenting them is, again, the practice of reclaiming one's experience, together with promoting the immigrant cause, revealing the *harmful shortcomings* of the Finnish system, and providing alternative media narratives.

5.3.3 The narratives of Finland and Finnishness: *It could also be better*

The signifier *Finland* is once again filled with rather paradoxical affective content, connotating a variety of emotions that at times are contradictory. Alongside the critical approach, there is a recurring notion of nostalgia for what Finland used to be, present in pondering about the former political leaders and for what it could be if only had the state exploited the potential hidden in the Finnish values and transferred them also to other social groups than the natives.

How many leaders of the same caliber as former President Tarja Halonen do we have today in government? Very few if any.
[2019_04_02]

Finland is a good country with ample resources to challenge Islamophobia and all forms of hatred. It has the ability to make our ever-growing culturally diverse a success, where everyone can practice his religion in peace and feel safe. [2019_04_14]

Furthermore, the positive associations and the acknowledgment of the 'better sides' of the Finnish circumstances are present in the way the notion of *good intentions* appears in the texts [e.g., 2019_04_21] as something that a part of the Finnish society has shown in opposing Perussuomalaiset and Jussi Halla-aho altogether.

The *good Finns* seem to be, however, useless. The idea of *good but useless* comes back in the recurring rhetoric of *the worst yet to come* [e.g., 2019_04_14]. According to this line of argumentation, even though the Social Democrats are the forerunners in the political race, the immigrants should remain alarmed, because the portion of the vote cast won by the Finns Party is not to be derided. The existence of pro-immigration Finnish frontier is acknowledged but its efforts seen as sterile.

The Finns Party is continually presented as an *opportunistic bully*, who provides *simplistic answers to complex social ills* [2019_04_19]. This catachrestic metaphor suggests that rhetorically the party became an impersonated synecdoche – a signifier containing all the problems occurring on the Finnish political scene. Even though this narrative of *good but useless Finns* merely looms in the background of articulated arguments, it is worth noting, as this time it establishes the position of the Finns Party and the anti-immigration bloc as the main frontier in the discourse as opposed to the whole of the *white Finnish* society.

At the same time, the Migrant Tales blog once again engages in contesting the idea that the Finnish society is homogenous, or entirely white. It does so by reaffirming that the cultural diversity is not something new, and so that it will keep progressing in the modern day. This suggests that the Finnish peripheral mindset and provincialism do not signify these days anything exceptional but rather demonstrate *regress*, *shortsightedness*, and *falsehood* [2019_04_02]. The following quote falls within this argumentation. It describes the narratives of Lassi Kaleva of Perussuomalaiset, who, in his political discourse, operationalizes the idea of *failed multiculturalism* to promote the anti-immigration agenda.

Is he implying that cultural diversity is not possible because it always fails? Does he mean that white Finnish society is “perfect” while culturally diverse societies are flawed? Is he saying that countries like Canada, Australia, Argentina, the United States, and others are good examples where multiculturalism has failed? Is he denying European history, which is and was historically always culturally and ethnically diverse? (...) One can disagree with his conservative and simplistic views on cultural diversity, but there is one matter that puts Kaleva in the same league as other Islamophobes in Finland: Retarding social equality and acknowledging cultural diversity by spreading fear and social exclusion. [2019_03_28]

What is additionally distinguishable from the piece above is the reference not only to Finland but to Europe – as a place of long-present diversity. Finland in the blog posts published in the year 2019 is consistently narrated as a contested element of *Europe*, on one hand manifesting itself as a part of a bigger shift in the continent, on the other – departing from its values. *Europe* becomes a floating signifier, at times carrying a positive affective charge and at times signifying condemnable transformations.

Being a part of the general negative change in the political climate of Europe is narrated as a damage to Finnish exceptionalism. The fear for Finland's international image, which might be harmed by the racist uprising manifests itself in the hesitation to *name things as they are* in public discourses such as the mainstream media. Even though PS is a party that forms alliances on the EU level with other European far right political groups and is thus repeatedly called out for its radical right stance by the foreign media, the Finnish broadcasters are reluctant to use such terminology.

The PS' connections and ideological compatibility with the European far right, even neo-Nazi groups, is not news. It is a fact that has been around for a long time but which the media and other political groups have had a hard time admitting. If we admit it, what does it say about our country, political system and ourselves as a nation? Some correctly call it denial with the help of Finnish exceptionalism. [2019_04_09]

Except for being a part of the continental trend, Finland joins the trends happening across the Nordic region and forms ideological friendships with other Nordic anti-immigration collectives. A prominent example surfacing from the data is Denmark, which is *not only a country that is Islamophobic but one that is Islamophobic on steroids* [2019_04_19].

But, as mentioned initially, *Europe's* signified floats to more positive affective connotations, when mentioned as a hub of values, from which Finland departs. The vices hidden behind the notion of Europeanness are redescribed as virtues in this paradiastolic endeavour. This way, political right becomes rhetorically a threat to the values and freedoms that are inherently positive. The explicitly critical language used to narrate the danger suggests growing frustration with such a state of matter.

In a country which makes you wonder nearly every day if it actually joined the European Union over 20 years ago and ever implemented the basic freedom of movement, Perussuomalaiset (PS) party Chairperson Jussi Halla-aho expresses concern regarding the incoming and outgoing workforce flows between Finland and other EU member states. [2019_04_07]*

In the same text, it reads:

A unique phenomenon a foreigner faces is that a Finn always knows better than an immigrant and what the immigrant ought to "feel." (...) PS leader Halla-aho also fears that the brain drain in Finland is causing many educated Finns to move away from the "world's happiest country." To make matters worse, many have good chances to find employment in

other countries that are smart enough to embrace diversity. Not Finland though. (...) Also, educated Finns will more and more use their authentic EU freedoms to leave a sinking ship called Finland. [2019_04_07]

The metaphor of sinking ships returns to illustrate the problematic characteristics of the Finnish socio-political reality. What emerges from this metaphor is *a Finland not being smart enough to embrace diversity* and Finland being perhaps the world's happiest country but having this title put between the quotation marks. On the other hand, however, the potential of Finland lies within people, who notice its ills, namely the educated workforce willing to leave *the broken vessel* in pursuit of better future.

Lastly, what is noticeable in the criticism contained within the data from 2019 is the argument of Finland being asleep and neglectful towards the problems faced by its minorities [e.g., 2019_03_25]. Practices of normalizing racism ubiquitous in media, politics, and institutions such as police, lead to general societal compliance with racialized discrimination, or, coming back to the theoretical concepts, with what Suvi Keskinen (2019) would call a 'colonial complicity'.

Migrant Tales' authors describe the widespread phenomenon of white Finns *getting away* with racism and diminishing its harmfulness (*sweeping the problem under the rug* [2019_03_29]) with a term *racist immunity* [2019_04_13]. Ethnicity of a person is pointed out as a factor conditioning the threshold for tolerance towards their discriminatory behaviour. This is another way in which Finnishness is seen to be equalled with whiteness.

5.3.4 Prominent tropes: *Disappointed but not surprised*

What does the rise of a far-right party say about us as a society? In my opinion, it is a diagnosis that Finland is inflicted with social ills like racism even if we want to drench ourselves in our exceptionalism. [2019_04_26]

The above quote summarizes neatly the key aspects brought up in the debate present on the pages of Migrant Tales in 2019. First, the *us as a society* phrase suggests that immigrants, even though facing obstacles, feel like they are a part of the Finnish society – a part, which needs to be more participative and reclaim the voice promoting its cause. Democracy and society are often referred to as something of *ours*. This narrative falls within both the *part of the society* and *agency in change* rhetoric-performative threads of self, brought about previously.

The references to Finnish exceptionalism come back to ask a question about the sources of the inherently 'bad' anti-immigration shift happening nowadays, in a country that is supposed to be 'good'. The very question loses, however, its real intent in favour of rhetoricity, as the *non-surprised* attitude overflows the discourse this time. Especially after the election's results are out, there is a clear idea of being disappointed yet not surprised: *[t]he election result in Finland was what it was. Stop acting surprised* [2019_04_17]. Such strategy puts the authors in a position of having been able to predict the situation, and therefore as the experts on the matter.

A prominent rhetorical trope present in the vast amount of blog posts of 2019 is *illness*. Racism and exclusion, as well as denial of these two are narrated as societal *sickness* or *virus*. Such metaphors induce the performance of a problem, or, referring to populist characteristics, of a breakdown, crisis, or threat (Moffitt, 2016). Through the vocabulary of illness, the *realness* and *seriousness* of the dangers are discussed once more, proving how empty is the signifier of a 'problem' or 'issue' in this discourse. The application of such vocabulary is also a catachrestic practice, as one cannot speak about a *social disease* unmetaphorically.

Among other prominent catachrestes are those relating to body parts, for example *ugly face of xenophobia and racism* [2019_04_07]; or to romantic relationships, for instance *Finland's rendezvous with xenophobia and nationalism* [2019_04_09]. Their usage facilitates the assignment of affective charges to the statements and reinforces them rhetorically in a sense of persuasion and opinion voicing.

In the year 2019, there is a relatively high level of recognition of the phenomena mentioned in the theoretical background of this thesis. Immigrants feel securitized (Farny, 2016) while it is their security that is narrated as *threatened*. It relates back to the *precarious identity* rhetoric-performative thread, encompassing the sense of exclusion and pointing out the harm imposed on immigrants by the manifestations of racism in public discourses.

Moreover, in the stories of immigrant women and in the narratives around sexual crimes from 2019, one can detect a critical approach toward reiterations of feminism for nationalistic causes. Additionally, alongside the securitization and traces of femonationalism, especially the economic, welfare chauvinist arguments are exposed as disguises of the racist agenda. They are detected inter alia in the narratives of

natives' poverty and unemployment mobilized against immigration – a motif indeed noticed by the scholars researching welfare chauvinism (see e.g., Pyrhönen, 2015, p. 111-118).

Yle, for one, searches for explanations why people vote for the PS. Even if they claim that it may have to do with limited education and low socioeconomic status, their conclusions are only excuses and denials of racism in our society. Another explanation, shrouded as well in denial, is that people are racist because they are unemployed. If this were the case, people living under brutal regimes would automatically become Isis members and commit acts of terrorism. [2019_04_19]

The year 2019 is overall narrated as a déjà vu of 2011. It is framed as the beginning of *something much worse to come*. Migrant Tales marks the given 8 years as *The PS and Blue Reform decade of xenophobia and nationalism* [2019_04_09]. The following analysis of the materials from the year 2023 will consider these assumptions and prognoses as I intend to position the findings extracted from the last portion of data within already discovered contexts.

5.4 Year 2023

5.4.1 General description of the blog contents

Migrant Tales framed the government coalition in 2023 as an *election pact with the devil* [2023_03_21]. The continuity of misery of the minorities since the success of the Finns Party in 2011 is once again highlighted in the contents published around the time of the political transformations. This time, however, the anti-immigration narratives employed by the party are evaluated as their only outstanding political stance, and therefore a sole factor sustaining their popularity.

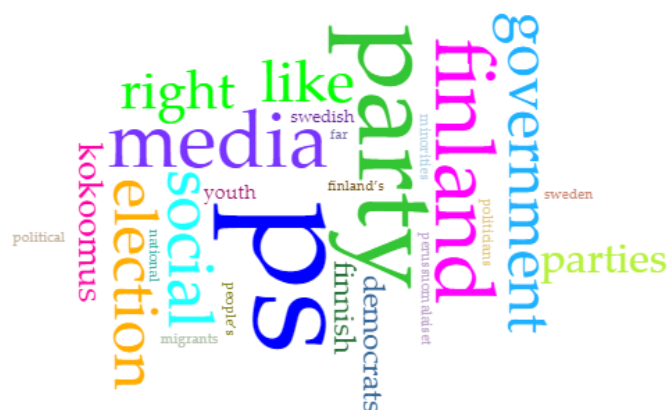


Figure 6. Word cloud of the data from 2023 representing the most-mentioned phrases.

There is an observable shift toward more criticism directed against other political parties, too, including the National Coalition, the Centre Party, and the Social Democrats. They are seen as not sufficient in challenging the rise of the Finns Party [e.g., 2023_04_26] and its anti-immigration agenda, and at times even conducive to their success. All in all, the focus on party politics increases again, as the parliamentary elections and their consequences are relatively broadly covered.

Migrant Tales strives to reveal the reasons behind exploiting immigrant crime by public discourse hegemony for their own benefit. Therefore, the recurring trio of *media*, *politicians*, and *the police* is subjected to scrutiny. All three are presented as hostile and enhancing polarization in society through normalizing and denying xenophobia for the profit, or in the authors' words by *capitalizing* on racism [2023_03_18].

This time, the theme of *youth gangs* replaces the Oulu sexual abuse cases as a topic of interest and contestation. The blog points out the supposedly malicious usage of the term to associate groups of young immigrants with violence. The media monitoring activity detecting issues as such reassumes a more systematized shape, as the Media Monitoring Group of Finland is constituted by the blog's editors and issues its first official report on the 17th of March 2023.

Furthermore, the blog's attention is brought to the inequalities in Finland's and Europe's approach to the refugees from Ukraine and other parts of the world, particularly those from the Middle East [2023_03_23]. The authors note that the discrepancies in treatment of both groups are based on racial premises, in practice meaning that the refugees' *goodness* is dependent on their *whiteness* (as in Bauvois, 2022). This observation further reflects how the racist and neo-colonial thought is being reproduced to this day. The recurring idea of *double standards* based on the *white* privilege is being revealed also in the context of terrorism, as *[t]he Finnish media, politicians and the police treat white far-right terrorism differently* (than radical Islamist terrorism) [2023_03_24].

Around the parliamentary elections of 2023, Migrant Tales reposts the annual European Islamophobia Report, containing the chapter about Finland written by Enrique Tessieri. In the language employed both in the report and blog posts from this period, there is a shift in the direction of comparing xenophobia and

Islamophobia with the breach of human rights, which are framed as not *high up on the priority list* in the current Finnish politics [2023_04_05].

Even though the data period is widened in case of the 2023 due to its less frequent publications, the analysed material consists of 21 written articles published between March 13th and April 30th, which is significantly less than in the previously examined years. The situation derives from the hacker attacks that Migrant Tales fell prey to. Because of that, the self-rhetoric is additionally based on the idea of resistance to online offense (extended to real life, too).

In the following sections, I will look at which themes, signifiers, and tropes reappear again, and which ones are new or reiterated. First, I focus on the self-rhetoric of resistance, entangled with already hitherto appearing storytelling narratives of agency and suppression. Then, I continue extracting the views on the ideas of Finnish (and Nordic) exceptionalism articulated increasingly transparently. Lastly, I observe the data from 2023 in relation to what was published before and extract the common threads that constitute preliminary conclusions.

5.4.2 The immigrant self-narratives: *What doesn't kill you makes you stronger*

There is an observable consistency in continuing the rhetoric-performative threads about the immigrant 'self' detected in the previous subchapters. All the discursive narratives, including the *precarious identity* of immigrants, their *agency in change*, and immigrants as a *part of the society*, come back in more or less reiterated form. On top of that, once more, alongside other narrative strategies, storytelling practices are employed to pursue the promotion of these three themes.

I don't read Finnish newspapers and none in particular. I find them very taxing to read. Constantly, people who look like me are vilified, branded as the devil himself and the root cause of all problems. I have always known the correct term for an event that bothers me, and when I learned it, I sighed with relief. I no longer had to doubt myself and had facts to back up my feelings. It is dog-whistle politics, and even though I am a "Finn" on paper, the media reminds me that I am not wanted here. If I didn't feel under constant attack, I could read papers. – Asmaa [2023_03_30]

Asmaa's statement quoted above is an example of a personal story told to highlight the difficult situation of immigrants (*precarious identity*), while at the same time marking their actual belonging to the Finnish society (*part of the society*) and a need

for alternative public narratives that cannot be found in the mainstream media (*agency in change*). By posting such statements, Migrant Tales performs itself as this alternative media outlet that is yearned for by those whose struggles are neglected by the epistemic authorities of the country.

On multiple occasions, the blog, just like in previous years, assumes the role of a watchdog of justice and of the immigrant interest. It happens through editors' activity in evaluating and monitoring the authorities, whose malevolence is at times disguised and thus needs to be revealed, through advocacy for the minorities' rights in various debates on the topic, and through the practice of asking *the right questions* and posing *the right accusations*. It additionally reinforces the authors' position as experts on the topic and as active participants in the political discourses on the matters relating to them directly. Immigration is in this way being once more 'reclaimed' (Squire et al., 2021).

Table 2. Selected quotes from 2023 juxtaposed with the self- rhetoric and performative practices present therein.

Quote	Rhetoric-performative practice
<i>Recently at an Islamophobia conference in Ankara, Turkey, I asked the crowd how a country that won for a sixth consecutive time the title of the happiest country on Earth may have such a big racist party. Silence responded to my question. [2023_04_22]</i>	Asking the right questions, advocacy in the debate.
<i>The fact that Finland has a virtual three-way tie in the polls over who will win Sunday's election does not only reveal Finland's "r" problem but how politicians and society have failed to tackle the cancerous social ill. [2023_04_01]</i>	Exposing the practices of disguising racism.
<i>If we don't watch out, we will end up sacrificing our democracy like the one in Viktor Orbán's Hungary. [2023_04_12]</i>	Warning, watching out; broader expertise in politics.
<i>The PS even discriminates against the deceased. According to Helsingin Sanomat, the Helsinki city council voted to build a Ghosl facility for Muslims at the Malmi cemetery. In the same way, the Finns washed their dead in saunas before burial, Muslims in Finland will have the same opportunity to show their respect for their deceased. Even if sensible people would have no qualms about such a matter, there was one person and party that did. Yes, you guessed correctly. The party is the Perussuomalaiset (PS)*, and the politician, city councilor Laura Korpinen (...). [2023_04_09]</i>	Addressing current issues concerning the immigrants; evaluation of public practices/narratives.

Quotes in Table 2. demonstrate the presence of all three rhetorical threads again. The *precarious identity* is present in the narratives of discrimination, the *agency in change* is ubiquitous in the Migrant Tales' advocacy and criticism directed towards the discursive frontier (the PS, the racists), and the *part of the society* identity emerges in the consistent usage of the possessive suffixes with terms such as *democracy* or *society*, that are also *ours*.

Even though there are many similarities to the materials examined previously resurfacing again, there are two elements that stand out from 2023's data corpus, containing similar rhetorical threads but constituting new topical and strategical avenues. Firstly, it is the devotion to the concept of resilience, and secondly the idea of advantages of (our – immigrants', minorities') suffering for the benefit of the discursive frontier (them – politicians, media, racists, the PS).

Resilience is particularly notable in reaction to the hacker attacks that the blog fell prey to. Respectively on April 17th and 21st, two posts are published, where the readers are informed of the online attacks on the blog resulting in the website being taken down for several days. Such a situation created both an obligation to explain the issue and an opportunity for rhetorical self-performance in a situation of a 'crisis'. Migrant Tales did use this opportunity to formulate its stance of readiness for facing the enemies and continuing its significant work for the cause.

While these attacks aim to shut us up, they only make us more determined and prove that our fight is right. [2023_04_17]

What does not kill you makes you stronger. Some may have noticed that Migrant Tales has been for almost two weeks due to a barrage of long and sustained hacking that corrupted the database. (...) Hackers are like killers, who try to silence you. They can't and never will. (...) We will not go away and continue to publish and be that voice for those whose views and situation are understood poorly and heard faintly by the media, politicians, and the public. [2023_04_21]

The second outstanding narrative is shaped by pointing out the wickedly beneficial nature of immigrant suffering. In this way, not only the anti-immigration narratives, but their harmful consequences are presented as advantageous for the interests of the discursive frontiers, and more specifically the interests of the PS, media, and the police.

This rhetoric occurs primarily in the renewed criticism of exploiting immigrant crime for political purposes and in the way the Finns Party builds their success exclusively on the anti-immigration arguments, being at the same time politically infertile in other areas. According to Migrant Tales, the very success of the group lies in the suffering of the minorities, as it sustains the party's pronounced attitude. The authors implement catachrestic sarcasm to highlight the negative character of such phenomenon.

The PS should offer gratitude to its victims: immigrants, refugees, and minorities. [2023_04_01]

If it tones down its xenophobic rhetoric, it will lose voters. [2023_03_18]

All in all, the way Migrant Tales blog performs itself is construed around the need to express opinions in the crucial political debate and lead to a change that would carry positive consequences for the vulnerable part of society. It is being done with the help of figurative and affective language that testifies to the discourse's rhetoricity. In the articles published in 2023, it again implements hybrids of many practices, including storytelling, advocacy, call for transformation, and extensive critique of the public discourses spread mainly by authorities, media, politicians, and other official institutions. It positions itself as a guard of justice and an alternative viewpoint.

5.4.3 The narratives of Finland and Finnishness: *A wise tale of exceptionalism*

The paradoxical nature of Finland being both a home and a hostile environment is pressed upon to a lesser extent in the year 2023. The latter perspective is dominant this time. Even though the idea of belonging to a society and sharing its values recurs [e.g., 2023_04_03], there are fewer references to the country being a place for raising children, starting a business, or generally settling down.

Nevertheless, the duality of the scenario for Finland's future remains in the idea of two alternative pathways for the country¹¹, one beneficial – with skilled immigrant labour supporting the country's development, and the other – harmful, built on exclusion and xenophobia. The day of the elections is framed as a *historic day* when

¹¹ *Two Finlands*, see Chapter 4.2.4.

Finns choose between an open and closed society suffering from social ills like racism [2023_03_18].

The narrative of denial and neglect of racism remains strongly articulated in arguments about anti-immigration political agenda not treated *seriously* by the media. Once again, articles published on the Migrant Tales point out the differences in terminology applied by the foreign and Finnish media hubs in regard to the PS. To strengthen the reasoning behind the claims of ‘normalizing’ practices, authors present the party postulates and pose rhetorical questions as to whether they truly are ‘normal’. The signifier *normal* is emptied of its meaning in the pursuit of the contestation of its usage in the similar way the *real problem* was hitherto emptied.

*It is surprising how the foreign and local media treat the Perussuomalaiset (PS)*differently, even if The Guardian and El País of Madrid refer to the party as far right. Other adjectives are used, like Eurosceptic, nationalistic, and right-wing populist. In Finland, we rarely, if ever, see such descriptions of the PS. Yle News, for example, refers to the radical right party as “nationalist.” The fact that the media treats the PS as a “normal” party explains how its radical policies are becoming normalized. Here are some things PS head Riikka Purra has spread recently:*

- *The PS will not form part of a government that does not tighten immigration policy further.*
- *Stop people from outside the EU from moving and working in Finland.*
- *Islam and white Finland are incompatible.*
- *Seeking asylum is not a right.*
- *Cultural programs are a luxury.*
- *Everything that does not work is due to poor immigration policy.*
- *Only Finnish citizens can get social welfare.*
- *Leave the European Union in the long term.*
- *Harden criminal sentences, especially when migrants or minorities are involved.*

If these are “normal” political opinions, they are nothing more than a betrayal of our most important values based on human rights and human dignity. The fact that the media appears not to take such opinions seriously, coming from the second-biggest party in Finland, reveals our country’s denial of the social ill. [2023_04_03]

Finland is narrated as *our country*, being however subject to worrisome social transformations, or even *social ills*. The question that is posed therefore is that of alleged happiness. By referring to suffering, the authors attempt to contest Finnish exceptionalism based primarily on the ideas of joy and security.

Contestation of exceptionalism is articulated more and more explicitly in the year 2023. This time, however, it extends to the entirety of the Nordic region, as the right-wing populist trends spread across the region, not only manifesting itself in the support for the Finns but also in the growing popularity of the Sweden Democrats and Danish People's Party [2023_04_22].

Nordicness is redescribed in a paradiastolic manner, inter alia by constructing phrases such as *Nordic problem of social exclusion* that come to exist in an interplay with the stereotypical formulations of an opposite character – in this specific case: *Nordic advantages of social inclusion*. The ideas of *noble Nordicness* are framed as *wise tales* that are rather unfounded in the modern day and have a delusive, deceptive character. While the alternative parties such as the Social Democrats are not efficient enough to sustain the positive national and regional image, the long-built exceptionalism falls subject to decay.

For me, the rise of parties whose message is maintaining white-Nordic privilege should not surprise anyone. The exceptionalist view that the Nordics are home of social equality and other noble values is a wise tale. The question a serious student should ask is who enjoys social equality (...). The rise of hostile political parties and public discourse against minorities and migrants reveals how Nordic countries have failed to create social equality. [2023_04_22]

The rise of the PS in Finnish politics is a blow to its exceptionalism and alleged "happiness", as it has won for a sixth time in a row the title of the happiest country in the world. How can such a happy country house so much hatred for other groups? [2023_03_30]

The exceptionalism and façade of Finland's social equality is nothing more than a mirage of exceptionalism. [2023_04_01]

A new trope operationalized to outline the multifaceted characteristics ascribed to Finland which appears in 2023 is the metaphor of mask, hiding the many faces of the country and which is likely to be ripped off when the election results are revealed [2023_04_01]. Just like the process of questioning exceptionalism, such rhetoric suggests that the positive image of the country is majorly disturbed by the political development against the immigrants.

From the above, it can be concluded that the silhouette of Finland drawn by the Migrant Tales in 2023 is yet again conditioned by the idea of a wasted potential, seen

in an inherently (or historically) good country that is however currently exposed to evil.

5.4.4 Prominent tropes: *No evil can last 100 years*

Even though, according to Migrant Tales, as a result of the elections held on April 2nd, 2023, the country is exposed to evil, *no evil can last 100 years* and not *all is lost* [2023_04_26]. Through a decision to include the Finns in the government, the party's infertile political program is put to the test:

Some believe that it is high time that the PS and Kokoomus start to take responsibility instead of whining in the opposition for the past four years.
[2023_04_26]

The traces of hope do not however mean that the coalition as such is not criticized. The relationship between the Kokoomus¹² and Perussuomalaiset is narrated in an interesting way, by implementing the metaphor of erotic union. The figurative character of the language used to describe the *romance* between the parties suggests ridicule and scorn, coupled with the sense of impurity assigned to it. *Going to bed with the PS* is framed as a cardinal sin committed by the National Coalition [2023_03_21]. The mistake is highlighted in using tropes directly related to evil, as well. By establishing the coalition, Kokoomus not only *sleeps with the enemy* but *signs a pact with the devil* [2023_03_21].

Increasing cultural and ethnic diversity is repeatedly narrated as inevitable while the far right's attempts to eradicate it are futile endeavours resembling a *fight with windmills* [2023_04_26]. This way, they are presented as not only harmful, but also unnecessary and hopeless in a long run in the modern world.

In the year 2023, the discursive frontier is less defined than before, as now it includes both coaliting Kokoomus and other smaller anti-immigration groups as well. However, the largest wave of indirect criticism is thrown against Riikka Purra, the new leader of the PS. Just like Jussi Halla-aho in 2019, she is a synecdochic encompassment of all the negativity and hatred hidden within the party's discourses.

While she is fighting windmills with her xenophobic views and trying tooth and nail to stop the country from becoming culturally and

¹² The Finnish vernacular for the National Coalition.

ethnically diverse, the PS and others like Kokoomus will bring much suffering to migrants and minorities. [2023_04_26]

From the interest in the party politics and dynamics of the government's formation derives also quite a large preoccupation with the election day itself. It marks a *historic day*, and just like 4 years prior, signifies continuity that began with the first significant success of the Finns Party in 2011.

What has not been yet mentioned, similarly to years 2015 and 2019, but more prominently in 2023, the term *Sunday* is used as a synecdoche collecting all the associations related to the voting. It connotes affects such as excitement, worry, and anticipation, and at the same time simply carries the meaning of the very activity of electing new members of the Finnish Parliament. *Sunday* signifies *a moment of revelation* and marks a decisive spot, a nodal point around which the discursive elements focus.

Besides the idea of *déjà vu: 2011 all over in 2023* [2023_04_01], both *non-surprised* attitude with large bits of disappointment [2023_04_05] and the vast comparison of the current political developments to a *sickness or illness inflicting Europe* [2023_03_30] that were present in the previous portions of data, reappear in the articles from 2023. Among the new tropes, however, one can observe increased metaphors of destruction and armed conflict/war:

It all starts with a spark (the story) that the media, politicians, or the police ignite. After that, social media turns into a wildfire that spreads relentlessly. [2023_03_13]

Far-right populism is an illness inflicting Europe at present and it now has a beachhead¹³ in Finland. [2023_03_30]

Perhaps due to the smaller number of texts published in 2023, the recognition of phenomena described in the theoretical chapter of this thesis is limited to populism, polarization, and scarce mentions of welfare chauvinist narratives. The criticism towards practices of disguising racism contains also traces of anti-colonial narratives and scrutiny of the neocolonial complicity present in the Finnish politics and media.

¹³ According to Oxford Dictionary: a defended position on a beach taken from the enemy by landing forces, from which an attack can be launched (war-related term).

Neither homonationalism nor femonationalism surface as significant narratives in the examined discourse.

Generally, the data from 2023 mirrors the discoveries from previously analysed materials to a great extent, especially when it comes to the self-narratives of immigrants, who in their discourse strive for agency, recognition, and belonging. Some recurring themes about Finland assume more defined shapes, including the rhetoric of long-lost exceptionalism and the two pathways for the country's future, depending on its attitude toward immigration. The language is filled with tropes, which condition the dynamics of the discourse and encompass meaning-making processes hidden in the articulatory practices. Signifiers such as *immigrant*, *Finland*, *Nordicness*, *society*, or *democracy* overflow with meanings that struggle to take up the hegemony.

The analysis will be now followed by a comparative discussion, summarizing the findings, decoding their significance, linking them further with the theoretical background, and reflecting on the future avenues for this research. All in an attempt to answer questions this thesis poses and the problems it endeavours to tackle.

6 Discussion

The rhetoric-performative approach applied in the analysis conditioned its course, making it interpretative already at the data decoding level, as it constitutes a method preoccupied with qualitative, discourse analytical inquiry. On top of that, implementing the rhetorical lenses reinforces the interpretive practice (Glynos et al., 2009, p. 13-14) as it presupposes dealing with figurative language and extracting meaning-making processes from therein (Palonen, 2018c, p. 180-184). Therefore, the analysis itself is largely intertwined with the very findings.

Nevertheless, the findings need to be systematized and discussed, which this chapter strives to do. It begins with attempts to answer the research questions this work poses, and therefore to put forward the core theses. It continues with verifications of the early hypotheses and ends by suggesting further inquiries for research in the field.

6.1 Characteristics of the underexplored discourse

The first (1) research question posed by this dissertation pertains to the features of the studied discourse: *What are the characteristics of the pro-immigrant and immigrant-made discourses in Finland and how do they correlate with existing populist narratives around immigration?*

It resulted from an observation, that the study of the pro-immigration frontier is comparatively neglected in proportion to the scope of the academic research on the anti-immigration narratives. However, as discourses do not exist in vain and are characterized by their fluidity and instability (e.g., Laclau, 2005, p. 17,) the first RQ (1) was interested also in the dynamics of the studied discourse's interconnections with the theories formulated about the competing rhetoric. The theories deriving from the research of the anti-immigration stances that I focused on included progressive conservativeness (Duina & Carson, 2020) manifested in populist articulations of femonationalism (Farris, 2017), homonationalism (e.g., Puar, 2017 [2007]), as well as welfare chauvinism (e.g., Pyrhönen, 2013).

The discourse shaped on the pages of Migrant Tales is highly politicized¹⁴. What glares from the thematic distribution of the contents is the active interest in the political life of the country and its public sphere. The majority of themes extracted from the studied data relate to current affairs politically and socially significant for the immigrant community. The most prominent tropes revolve around political parties, public institutions, and media.

Moreover, there is an ideological underpinning of the blog content, as it strives to promote a certain political cause. It clearly stands on the pro-immigration side of the immigration debate, substantially arguing the positive impact of the international movement into Finland. By opposing racism and xenophobia, it also engages in the construction of reasoning against the anti-immigration side, positioning it as a political frontier.

I recognize that one of the reasons for such a state of matter might be the fact that analysed data is published around the time of parliamentary elections. Nevertheless, there are factors suggesting that this is rather a general feature of the rhetoric employed in the blog.

Among these factors, there is a noticeable endeavour to advance political opinion through texts that are not directly pertaining to politics or major political events such as elections. The practice of advocacy for the immigrant cause is present even in the postings focused solely on cultural or social aspects and departing from the straightforward preoccupation with party politics or public institutions scrutiny. There is rather a scarce number of texts that do not express the agitation and whose objective is not to advance the pro-immigrant narrative.

Another factor testifying for the overall politicization of the discourse is its venture to monitor and scrutinize the public institutions, and especially the recurring *trio* of politicians, media, and the police. Among the core ideas ubiquitous in the studied source is that the anti-immigration narratives are exploited to advance the benefits of these three groups, such as the support of the electorate, the attention of the media consumers, and the economic gain. Migrant Tales frame it as *capitalizing on racism*.

¹⁴ If we understand politicisation as the action of causing something to become political in character (as in OxfordLanguages).

The discourse comes into play with competing narratives, as it recognizes them and critically evaluates them. The analysis demonstrated that the pro-immigration narrators detect all three fundamental features of populist articulation (Moffitt, 2016) and go as far as reproducing some of them in response to the competing discourses.

The first core pillar, namely the “*us*” vs “*them*” dichotomy, and therefore the formation of antagonisms manifests itself in the discourse in a profoundly complex way. The primary goal behind bringing up this division is seemingly not to further the antagonisms but rather to notice their existence sparked as a consequence of undesired political transformations.

On the other hand, however, the discursive pole construction is clearly undertaken, as well as the reproduction of equivalence and exclusion logic (Laclau, 2005, p. 129-164). The anti-immigration bloc, the proclaimers of racism and xenophobia, and more specifically the Finns Party are rhetorically performed as the main discursive frontier – *them*. At the same time, the construction *us* is a bit more fluid, as the practice of such categorization is either employed as a political necessity (to show that *we*, immigrants, need to unite and advocate for *our own* cause) or to demonstrate its harmfulness (*we* are *unfortunately* narrated in a different way than *them*) rather than desiredness.

Securitization of immigration (see Farny, 2016) and appropriation of the right to define immigrant identities are among the elements additionally pointed out as antagonizing mechanisms reinforcing the “*us*” and “*them*” dichotomy. The practice of defining “*us*” in this case is done within the process of *reclaiming immigration* (Squire et al., 2021), namely reclaiming the right to speak for oneself.

Affective investment in the construction of the discursive poles is “a crucial move in political meaning-making” (Palonen, 2018c, s. 181). Building the frontiers is facilitated by employing rhetoric-performative strategies such as tropes, and the language operationalized in the blog is indeed highly tropological. Considering that the basic role of rhetoric is “[c]onstituting difference, constituting the abstract ‘*us*’ in the space of heterogeneity” (Ibid.), the presence of the “*us*” vs “*them*” division in the data is innate.

What Moffitt (2016) calls *bad manners* and Aiolfi (2022) refers to as *transgressiveness* is delusive to examine in the case of a blog, because there are no specific modes of behaviour expected to occur therein. Blogs are highly subjective and opinionated, and they are not limited by journalistic codes of conduct (Zafiropoulos & Vrana, 2010, p. 18-20). Therefore, they are not expected to produce neutral or high-quality content.

Migrant Tales is not a neutral source, but it endeavours to maintain a reliable position as a media outlet and it states clearly that the *opinions expressed in the blog are of [its] own* (Migrant Tales, n.d.). It does employ explicitly critical language and uses graphic rhetoric devices to express affects such as frustration, anger, and disdain. This, however, due to the medium's specifics, does not put it in a position of a *transgressor* of any norms.

The presence of the last populist feature, namely the incitement of *crisis, breakdown, or threat* (Moffitt, 2016) is again twofold. On one hand, Migrant Tales recognizes this practice in the competing discourses, on the other, it employs it itself. However, again, narratives of a *crisis* do not seem to be operationalized to further the antagonisms, but rather to mobilize to action and reaction and approximate the 'seriousness' of the situation.

All in all, Migrant Tales not only notices the populist dynamic in the political and media discourses in Finland but employs similar practices in response. If not for its uncommercial blog character, it might testify to the occurrence of the populist media logic (Mudde, 2007).

In the theoretical part of this thesis, I also focused on the concrete phenomena exploiting populist stylistics present in the anti-immigration discourses. These included practices of disguising racism in the form of progressive rhetoric (Duina & Carson, 2020). The first RQ (1) is interested in whether Migrant Tales' authors enter the dialogue with such phenomena.

The analysis demonstrated that the most recognized practice of justifying the anti-immigration stance among the ones approximated is welfare chauvinism (Keskinen et al., 2016; Pyrhönen, 2013, 2015). Migrant Tales exposes the welfare chauvinist narratives; however, it does not employ such terminology. It refers to practices of operationalizing economic arguments against immigrants. It tackles the problem of

the inaccessibility of the labour market, as well as problematic political narratives about the social benefits distribution. It is largely interested in the reception of welfare depending on one's country of origin and ethnicity. Additionally, the blog's pro-immigration argumentation is largely based on the fact that skilled immigration has a positive impact on the economy that is however not appreciated enough by Finnish employers.

Alongside the evaluation of welfare chauvinist attitudes, there are small traces of femonationalism (Farris, 2017) detected, too. Migrant Tales, through posting stories of immigrant women (e.g., about religious clothing) and families (e.g., about difficulties in raising children), presents the cases of ostracization experienced due to the demonization of cultural differences in gender and family norms. The scrutiny of femonationalist narratives occurs also as authors describe the biases of public discourses on sexual crimes committed by immigrants in comparison to the coverage of violence perpetrated by Finnish individuals.

Nevertheless, Migrant Tales' interest in the operationalization of gender for political purposes is scarce. There is no mention of homonationalist practices on the pages of the blog in any of the studied data body parts. However, the notion of Finland disguising, justifying, and normalizing racism is ubiquitous.

What falls outside the proposed categories of welfare chauvinism or femo- and homonationalisms, is the vast focus on the exploitation of immigrant crime to advance anti-immigration and *capitalize* on it. Racism is neglected, as it is usually *coded* and *hidden* in stigmatizing argumentation. Anti-immigration narratives are framed as conducive to discrimination executed more *freely*; they help to justify and neglect the existence of racist discourses. Considering racism is a manifestation of neocolonial thought, these practices fall in turn within what Keskinen (2019) conceptualizes as *colonial complicity*.

In sum, the discourse under study expresses a clear ideological stance and interest in its political advancement. Moreover, it enters a dialogue with narratives on immigration existing in the competing discourses.

The analysis of the periodical dynamics did not prove particularly interesting, as the material is relatively coherent. There are, however, some nuances worth mentioning. Compared to the data from 2015, in the articles from the years 2019 and 2023, the

word xenophobia was more often replaced by the variations of the word racism, suggesting the progressing lean toward more plain language in describing the discrimination experienced in Finland by immigrant minorities. Moreover, with time, interest in Islamophobia as a separate phenomenon has grown, too.

In 2015, Migrant Tales was very explicit in voicing its political stance, as it lists names of politicians that are to be voted for or not. Even though the blog generally does not refrain from mentioning names, such a straightforward activity as the indirect suggestion of *don't vote for these candidates*, was not observed either in the year 2019 or 2023.

6.2 Rhetoric-performative articulations of immigrants and Finland

The second (2) research question pursues the answer as to *how are both immigrants and the host society articulated (performatively and rhetorically) in the studied discourse*.

It is greatly conditioned by the application of the Rhetoric-Performative Analysis. RPA suggests that the discursive elements have the potential to convey something (rhetoricity) and act something out (performativity). It happens through articulatory practice (DeLuca, 1999) of uttering statements while having certain objectives in mind. “For Laclau and Moufe (1985), articulation is a practice, and hence it is not simply about speech or writing—but speech and writing also have a meaning-conveying or transforming function” (Palonen, 2018c, p. 182).

In the analysis, I focused on how the writings of Migrant Tales demonstrate rhetoricity and performativity in articulating the self (the immigrants) and Finland (the host society). The density of tropes present in the language employed in the blog largely facilitated the process of extracting the main rhetoric-performative threads from therein.

The narratives of the immigrant self are based largely on three such threads, which I detected in all the parts of the studied data, including respectively all three portions of articles from 2015, 2019, and 2023. I named them: *precarious identity*, *agency in change*, and *part of the society*.

The *precarious identity* pillar is built by the immigrants articulating themselves through the blog by presenting the daily instances of discrimination, as well as

expressing the struggle, pain, and overall suffering caused by the competing discursive frontier (anti-immigration actors) and the current socio-political situation. Among the substantial examples of such expressions, one can distinguish the narratives of insecurity and mental illnesses caused by experiences of racism, precarious situation on the job market in Finland, or an exposure to xenophobia in public spaces.

Moreover, the *precarious identity* thread contains the argumentation of the immigrant identity being continually appropriated by non-immigrant actors. Within this argumentation, they express the longing for hegemony on deciding and affectively charging the definitions of concepts such as ‘refugee’, ‘foreigner’, or ‘immigrant’ - a capacity, which has been taken away from them. This longing is related to the critique of the essentialist perception of immigrants, who are not viewed as complex human beings but are perceived through singular characteristics such as their legal status, religion, or skin colour.

The first proposed rhetoric-performative pillar of the narratives of the immigrant self is reinforced by the practices of storytelling employed vastly in the blog. Migrant Tales is active in telling personal stories of immigrants in a variety of ways, i.a. by tendency to describe individual experiences rather than generalize, and by sharing the blog’s space as a platform for immigrant-authored texts. It publishes articles written not only by its editors but also promotes immigrant-made social media posts, blog entries, or pieces of art. Such a strategy is among the first manifestations of the attempts to *reclaim immigration* present on the pages of the blog and fulfils the medium’s vision to “represent the voices” and “speak for the Others” (Migrant Tales, n.d.).

Indeed, on the pages of the blog, a lot of importance is assigned to the immigrant authorship of the discourse on immigration and the agency in its shaping, which is demonstrated in the next rhetoric-performative thread present in the self-narratives – *agency in change*.

As demonstrated in the analysis, the narrators keep issuing calls for action, to mobilize immigrant environments to take a stand on matters related to their own cause and act politically against the frontier. Additionally, in the hegemonic struggle (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) to *reclaim immigration*, the blog positions itself as an alternative field for expression and opinion-voicing which are otherwise restricted

from the mainstream communication channels. In times when the hegemonic media outlets are biased or unreachable, Migrant Tales serves as a peculiar place of resort.

Moreover, the *agency in change* pillar allows the blog to demonstrate its expertise on the matter of immigration. First of all, the authors narrate themselves as *able* to read the *coded* information such as hidden traces of racism. Second, by their involvement in commenting on salient political developments not only in Finland but in Europe and globally, it places itself as a specialist on the topic and therefore highlights the ability of immigrants to produce knowledge about immigration skilfully. The practice of *reclaiming immigration* is transparent here as well.

The last rhetoric-performative thread present in the immigrant self-narratives combines the objectives of the previous two and garnishes them with the aspect of belonging. Migrant Tales strives to say: “even though we are discriminated (*precarious identity*), we have the ability to act upon it (*agency in change*) as the citizens (*part of the society*)”.

This thread is once again detectable in the storytelling endeavours and in the scale of personalization of the discourse, but also – in noting and promoting the immigrant presence in important sectors of life. The blog plays a part in elevating the position of immigrants on the political scene by sharing the agenda of candidates with immigrant backgrounds. It also promotes educational opportunities for immigrants, as well as shares the cultural events and creative works developed by them.

The sense of belonging to the society is also present in the way the daily life of immigrants is being described. They express hopes and plans for the future in Finland, where they intend or already do pursue their careers and start families. This last thread constitutes a good introduction to the narratives of the host society and country, as it presupposes that immigrants’ identity exists in tight interconnection with their perception of Finland and Finnishness.

The narratives of Finland and Finnishness present in the pro-immigration discourse contained within the studied data are deeply dichotomic and somewhat paradoxical. It is expressed through the dual attitude toward the country itself. On one hand, Finland is performed rhetorically as a home, connotating positive associations, such as warmth, belonging, and shelter. On the other, however, it is framed as a place of insecurity, danger, and failed expectations.

Finland is perhaps the most prominent floating signifier I identified in the studied discourse. Narrators engage in a highly paradiastolic activity (Palonen, 2018c, p. 184; Skinner, 2007) of redescribing Finland's qualities, its vices as virtues and vice versa. Finland is at times described as neglectful, hostile, and blind, but meanwhile, it is also framed as a land with great resources and potential. There is a clear narrative that Finland is inherently *good* but exposed to *evil* through its anti-immigration political transformation.

The term 'Finland' acts as a synecdoche for the country's institutions, history, and reputation – it basically signifies *everything that happens in Finland*. 'Finland', depending on the context, equals either 'Finnish media', 'Finnish politics', or 'Finnish public sphere'. Thanks to the rhetoric personification of Finland realized in the figurative language, the state becomes a living agent in the debate.

What is interesting, is that the signifier rarely signifies the Finnish people. Finnish people do not play an active role in the discourse. With the small exception of the critique of civil groups forming vigilantes, the Finns¹⁵ are mentioned merely as a passive group of privilege. This privilege in turn results from their Finnishness, which is deeply embedded in their whiteness.

Such a relationship of whiteness and Finnishness is presented not as much in a venture to antagonize the white Finns, as in pursuit to point out that ethnicity is a factor conditioning the status and worth of the citizens in the country. At times the immigrants unite to deconstruct and contest this exclusive association by saying "we are Finns, too". This is demonstrated majorly through the stories of second-generation and long-naturalized immigrants.

Another prominent narrative on Finnish people is so that they are *good but useless*. They fail to fulfil expectations assumed of them due to their exceptionalism. The *failed expectations* rhetoric is also advanced by the mentions of the delusiveness of the country's reputation rooted in the happiness rates or the level of education. However, this argumentation is convoluted in the contestation of Finnish exceptionalism, which is already a concern of the following subchapter.

¹⁵ Here: Finnish people. Not to confuse with the Finns Party.

6.3 Contested exceptionalism

The last research question (3) asks *how do discovered tropes and narratives contest (or contribute to) the notion of Finnish exceptionalism.*

I reckon the high density with which the idea of Finnish exceptionalism recurs in the studied discourse as an enlightening finding. It very well captures the dual perception of Finland, its *once-great character*, and the *failed expectations* toward it. Finland is rhetorically narrated as a sinking ship, tormented by the storm of its social ills. A ship that once was magnificent, but now heads to the bottom.

I find this metaphor employed in the Migrant Tales particularly curious, as it contains traces of nostalgia, which were indeed present in my observations of the immigrant-made discourse. The blog exhibits longing for what Finland *used to be* and *could have been*. It opens a space for consideration on the topic of the national identity of immigrants and the sense of connection with the host country's history, national symbols, and reputation¹⁶.

As the term *exceptional* presupposes positive features and outstanding characteristics, it means that Finland is expected to be exceptionally *good*. However, as narrated by the Migrant Tales, the problems caused by the current anti-immigration upsurge are the reasons why it is contested. It cannot be exceptionally *good* in the circumstances of *evil*.

More specifically, Finland is no longer exceptional because, first and foremost, it is racist and thus reproduces the neocolonial thought. The colonial complicity (Keskinen, 2019) present in normalizing, justifying, and denying racism is among the main factors that make up for this contestation.

Furthermore, Finland cannot be exceptional, as it reproduces the political trends that are spread across Europe and the West more generally. As it experiences negative transformations to the same or even larger extent than the other international actors and is incapable of issuing a valuable response, it ceases to stand out from amongst them.

¹⁶ For more on the topic, see: Verdugo & Milne, 2016, p. 271-337.

The contents present in the studied discourse do not solely contest the idea of Finnish exceptionalism, though. In my understanding, they also paradoxically contribute to its enhancement, as even though Finland currently fails the expectations imposed by exceptionalism, the very issuing of these expectations in the first place assumes that the whole idea is something desired and cherished. Implementing the elements of nostalgia for the long-lost past of the exceptional era implies that the phenomenon is hoped to manifest itself in the modern day, too. Finnish exceptionalism is something *real* because it is *possible*.

But the bigger question is whether the existence of the pro-immigration discourse contests (or contributes to) the idea of Finnish exceptionalism in a larger picture outside of the studied data. I can answer to that only superficially by suggesting that the very characteristics of the immigration debate, namely the extent to which it is polarized, both anti-immigration and pro-immigration stances included, puts the idea of Finnish exceptionalism in an uncertain, disputable position.

6.4 Reviewing hypotheses

Before finalizing the discussion, I want to briefly return to the hypotheses formulated at the beginning of this thesis. First of all, prior to the research, I assumed that the discourse on immigration floats outside of the typically bipolar right-left political spectrum. I observed that immigration is operationalized politically regardless of the larger ideological stance of the operators and concluded that anti-immigration sentiments can occur both in liberal and conservative narratives.

The truthfulness of this statement was confirmed already in the theoretical and contextual assumptions, which positioned immigration as a point of contestation of the historical liberal-conservative axis. It was supported by the arguments of the hybrid progressive conservativeness occurring in the anti-immigration discourses (Duina & Carson, 2020).

But what derives from the analysis of the pro-immigration source seems exploratory in this context as well. From this research, it turns out that immigration is politicized also within the sources supporting it, not only in the ones opposing the phenomenon. I realize that such politicization may emerge in response and reaction to the discursive frontier. I discovered, however, that the pro-immigration discourse is not merely defensive and politically infertile.

The studied material demonstrated a solid body of argumentation for why immigration is positive for the state. Even though it is not done to gain voters in a straightforward political procedure, in this case, it mobilizes the immigrant community to what I conceptualize (in line with Squire et al., 2021) as *reclaiming immigration*. Therefore, it exhibits a certain political goal.

Secondly, I hypothesized that the underrepresentation of immigrant voices in the debate on migration is among the main issues pointed out in the pro-immigrant discourses as condemnable. This hypothesis proved to be most clearly verified by this work. The notion of underrepresentation and the ubiquitous expression of the need to change it conditions the shape of self-narratives put forward by the Migrant Tales' authors and the blog as an entity (*alternative outlet*) itself.

Lastly, I presupposed that ethnicity, gender, and religion are recurring subjects in the examined discourse, and they are inherent to the topic of immigration regardless of the narrators' stance on it. I do believe, that both contents of anti-immigration discourses analysed in the theoretical part and the inquiry into a pro-immigration source proved that the statement is generally true. The notion of white superiority as opposed to the inferiority of the Other is inseparable from the studied field.

Migrant Tales are preoccupied with confronting discrimination based on a variety of factors. Religion and ethnicity indeed recur with a high frequency as elements conditioning the immigrant experiences of exclusion and xenophobia. Gender, however, is relatively less prominent in the studied discourse. Femonationalist or homonationalist narratives have not been noticed to be of any major significance in the analysed data.

6.5 Further avenues for the research

I believe that the methodological perspective I undertook together with the findings presented in this work provide an interesting starting point for further academic inquiry. My suggestions as to its direction begin with encouragement to study the pro-immigration discourse with similar attention and eagerness that is put into an examination of the anti-immigration narratives.

This piece of research intended to delve into the underdeveloped discursive frontier, but it certainly has not exhausted the many avenues such endeavour opens. My thesis

pertains to a relatively narrow piece of a larger discourse, in fact – one constantly growing in the modern, globalized world with increasing experiences of international mobility. It must be remembered that this dissertation focuses solely on the immigrant-made discourses and the blog character of the medium under study does not remain without significance for the results of the research.

It would be interesting to conduct a more detailed examination of the extent to which the media genre influences the shape of rhetoric employed in the discourse and whether the pro-immigration blogosphere exhibits populist media logic (Mudde, 2007). Especially since such narratives are already subjected to research in the case of the anti-immigration media, including the countermedia hubs (Ylä-Anttila et al., 2019) and imageboards (Ylä-Anttila et al., 2020).

Moreover, the analysis conducted in this thesis is interested solely in the original postings of the blog, while omitting the significance of the comments and forums co-created by the online audiences. Those may offer interesting paths for comparison and consideration of additional authorship of the discourse. Furthermore, similar attention, if not bigger, should be paid to the pro-immigration narratives circulating outside of the grass-root-sourced blogosphere, in plenary halls and public spheres at large, as well as in the civil society offline.

What is worth recognizing is that this study is concerned with and conditioned by country-specific circumstances. I gather that the application of the Finnish lens enriched this research, while at the same time, I presume that a similar analysis undertaken in a different national context would have brought much different results. It might constitute an avenue for similar inquiry into a different geopolitical background. Such inquiry opens in turn the door to more comparative research as well.

Lastly, preoccupation with the data produced around the time of political transformations, i.e. the parliamentary elections, is most likely consequential for the research results. I believe that there is a need for yet another comparative study that would juxtapose the shape of the discourse around different political moments. The findings may prove to be different when extracted from data published in times of more political stagnation.

7 Conclusions

This thesis strived to discover the characteristics of an immigrant-made discourse in Finland in the context of the anti-immigration populist upsurge in Europe generally, and within the country specifically. It did so by applying a rhetoric-performative lens in a discourse analysis of the content posted in the Migrant Tales blog around the time of consecutive parliamentary elections of 2015, 2019, and 2023.

As presumed in the initial chapters approximating the theoretical and contextual backgrounds of the field, the debate on immigration is continually polarizing into two discursive frontiers – pro, and against. What is more, in times of the neoliberal values' hegemony, the stance on immigration is turning as far as into an element deciding on the larger ideological underpinnings of the political groups, who continually exploit both the conservative and progressive arguments (Duina & Carson, 2020; see: Chapters 2.2 – 2.4).

The polarization of the debate is fuelled by the antagonizing articulations of *us* and *others*, omnipresent in the public discourses distributed by the media and politicians. Such articulations are shaped in a populist manner, through inciting a sense of crisis, embracing a transgressive style of expression, and constructing groups of belonging and exclusion (Moffitt, 2016; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; see: Chapter 2.1).

What glares from the theory is that the academic inquiry is largely preoccupied with the anti-immigration pole, while the pro-immigration resources remain underexplored. Hence, the main objective of this research was to bring scholarly attention to the underdeveloped side of the discourse in a process of amplifying the opinions of the very agents of international mobility – immigrants themselves. Such a process is in this work conceptualized as *reclaiming immigration*¹⁷ and is both extracted as a practice ubiquitous in the studied discourse, as well as an ethically motivated ideal accompanying this research.

The application of Rhetoric-Performative Analysis (RPA) drawing from the cannon of Postfoundational Discourse Analysis allows one, while recognizing that discourses are fluid and convergent, to grasp mechanisms conditioning the polarizing meaning-

¹⁷ Derived from the idea of *reclaiming migration* developed by Squire et al., 2021.

making processes in temporarily fixed discourses. Both such mechanisms and the very fixation of the discourse are possible to extract through the study of articulatory practices. Discursive articulation has in turn a rhetoric-performative character, exemplified for instance by the figurative language of tropology. Therefore, what is subjected to analysis here is a message contained within tropes ubiquitous in the studied body of written texts.

Additionally, RPA focuses on the formation of political frontiers through reproducing the logic of difference (exclusion – *them*) and equivalence (belonging – *us*) (see: Chapters 4.1-4.2). That is the reason why the narratives of the immigrant self and of Finland were examined in this thesis with particular care.

The method's claim of convergence and fluidity of discourses allowed me to additionally study how the system of meanings under the exploration engages with other narratives on the topic of immigration, existing primarily in the opposing frontier. I verified the pro-immigration discourse's interplay with the anti-immigration strategies, including progressive conservativeness manifesting itself in welfare chauvinism, femonationalism, or homonationalism.

The first portion of the findings is greatly related to the applied method and the theoretical concepts I operationalize. First and foremost, the immigrant-made discourse on immigration is highly politicized and motivated by ideological underpinnings. It is largely preoccupied with exposing the negative consequences of exclusion and othering while promoting the cause of cultural minorities and immigration's beneficial nature for society. This discovery demonstrates that the topic of immigration is operationalized politically by both frontiers in an endeavour to claim hegemony¹⁸ over it.

Immigrants on the pages of *Migrant Tales* narrate themselves as the experts of their own struggle, demonstrating the agency and credibility in the debate. At the same time, they position themselves as an inherent part of Finland's society, expressing the need to be recognized as citizens and simply as complex human beings. Such narratives are reinforced by the practice of advocacy and storytelling, all in an attempt to *reclaim* the *voice* on the matter by the ones who are most affected by it.

¹⁸ Hegemonic struggle, as in Laclau & Mouffe, 1985.

Finland is on the other hand rhetorically narrated in a deeply paradoxical way, demonstrating immigrants' dichotomous perception of the notion of Finnishness, connotating both positive and negative associations manifested in failed expectations towards a country that is inherently *good* but mangled by the current *evil* socio-political developments.

The perception of Finland failing certain expectations leads finally to the last core endeavour of this thesis, namely to the verification of discursive disputations over the idea of Finnish exceptionalism. The study explored how tropes and narratives within the pro-immigrant discourse both contest and contribute to this notion. The blog exhibited nostalgia for Finland's past greatness, while also critiquing its current political trends blemished by the traces of colonial complicity expressed in the state's racism and xenophobia.

The analysis proved that both the existence and the contents of the pro-immigration sources evidence the deconstruction of Finland's exceptional status. However, the dissertation suggests that by acknowledging and longing for Finland's exceptional past, the studied discourse's narratives paradoxically contribute to its enhancement, implying that exceptionalism is desired and possible.

All in all, the broader polarization of the immigration debate, including both anti-immigration and pro-immigration stances, further complicates the idea of Finnish exceptionalism, placing it in an uncertain and disputable position. This thesis merely points the attention in this direction, but much is still to be done.

The scientific endeavour into the study of the socio-political transformations should consider the pro-immigration pole with greater attention. Even though, I believe this thesis contributes to filling that blank, it poses as many questions as answers. The avenues opened by this research include the possibilities for examining the specific media types' and narrators' roles in shaping the discourse, as well as for a comparative study of different country-specific and period-specific contexts.

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