

A populist turn?

News editorials and the recent discursive shift on immigration in Sweden

Mattias Ekman^I & Michał Krzyżanowski^{II}

^I Department of Media Studies, Stockholm University, Sweden

^{II} Department of Informatics and Media, Uppsala University, Sweden

Abstract

This article undertakes a critical discourse analysis of Swedish quality newspaper editorials and their evolving framing of immigration since the 2015 peak of the recent European “refugee crisis”. Positioned within the ongoing discursive shifts in the Swedish public sphere and the growth of discursive uncivility in its mainstream areas, the analysis highlights how xenophobic and racist discourses once propagated by the far and radical right gradually penetrate into the studied broadsheet newspapers. We argue that the examined editorials carry the tendency to normalise once radical perceptions of immigration. This takes place by incorporating various discursive strategies embedded in wider argumentative frames – or topoi – of demographic consequences, Islam and Islamisation, threat, and integration. All of these enable constructing claims against immigration now apparently prevalent in the examined strands of the Swedish “quality” press.

Keywords: discursive shifts, editorials, journalism, immigration, racism

Introduction

Attitudes and opinions amongst the Swedish population have been measured by the SOM institute on a yearly basis since 1986. When assessing opinions on “the most important problems in society”, we can see in the report from 2019 (Martinsson & Andersson, 2019) that the issue of immigration and integration has, over recent years, moved from a once relatively marginal position to the top, thus following trends that could also be observed in many other European countries (Rydgren, 2017). During the period 2015–2017, immigration was, for the first time, deemed the most important “problem in society” by the Swedish population; at the same time, other issues previously ranked high – for example “the economy” or “labour market” – now came to be placed relatively low (Martinsson & Andersson, 2019: 41).¹

The above shift in political priorities and wider social attitudes towards immigration can partly be explained by sociopolitical dynamics in Sweden over the past decade, with increased worries about immigration being especially visible from 2011 onwards. It

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seems that negative attitudes accelerated in the aftermath of the so-called refugee crisis (Martinsson & Andersson, 2019), which peaked in 2015. As a result, negative attitudes towards immigration and immigrants have become increasingly common among the Swedish public, even if people with explicitly negative attitudes were still a minority in 2016 (Ahmadi et al., 2016). But, at the same time, the majority of Swedish citizens wanted the level of immigration to be reduced (Martinsson & Andersson, 2019).

However, the above also mirrors a deeper sociopolitical transformation of attitudes across the European continent and beyond, where the question of immigration and immigrants has moved to the top of the political agenda. This took place in many countries as a result of the strategies and success of populist and nationalist far-right parties and actors (Wodak & Krzyżanowski, 2017). The process has entailed various “discursive shifts” (Krzyżanowski, 2018a) originating in right-wing populist politics and wider radical-conservative (and in most cases online) spaces, effectively bringing various types of discursive incivility (Rossini, 2019) into the mainstream zones of political and public action.

In Sweden, which eventually also followed suit, the rise and increased success of the far-right party Sweden Democrats reflects this wider political development. This increased (negative) politicisation is no longer confined to the right-wing populist fringe but takes place across the wider political spectrum (Krzyżanowski, 2018b), irrespective of the side from which parties and their supporters actually originate (Demker, 2019). In a similar vein, the Swedish news media have also seen a change in immigration-related language. Many of them have picked up – albeit in an often-subtle way – “uncivil” ideas and language brought from the uncivil political and media fringe into the mainstream (Ekström et al., 2020), in a way that corresponds to similar facets of media opportunism in both European and other Scandinavian contexts (e.g., Farkas & Neumayer, 2020).

Precisely because the “immigration issue” has started to occupy so much of mainstream politics in Sweden and elsewhere over recent years, it has given anti-immigrant actors and parties larger visibility within mainstream media and in everyday communication in online spaces (Ekman, 2019). Cammaerts (2018: 7) argues:

Even though journalists tend to be critical of the extreme right discourse, they are also to some extent complicit in amplifying the extreme right discourse and providing a platform for populist politicians using a politics of provocation.

This development coincides with a general crisis of traditional journalism and a fragmented media landscape, where new forms of information sources are increasingly visible. Concurrently, the public’s distrust of news media institutions has been growing, and this is particularly evident concerning news coverage of immigration in mainstream news outlets. In a recent study, 54 per cent of all Swedes agreed (fully or partly) with the statement that Swedish news media “do not tell the truth about the problems associated with immigration [translated]”, with, specifically, right-wing party voters and those with less education ending up being highly overrepresented among those who endorse such a statement (Andersson, 2017: 31). Hence, it seems that Swedish mainstream news media do not only face competition from other sources of information online, but also must tackle growing mistrust amongst the population regarding the reliability of news reporting on immigration and integration.

Building on this complex and dynamic context in Sweden and beyond, this article departs from the contention that specific actors within legacy media feed off the growing

distrust towards immigration reporting among citizens, and that editorials facilitate a wider discursive shift on immigration and immigrants in the media and beyond. This, we argue, takes place via the gradual incorporation of discursive elements usually associated with the populist far right and, effectively, via their normalisation in the mainstream media. In so doing, these editorials indicate a turn from the consensual-tolerant discourse on immigration – one that has characterised Swedish politics in recent decades – to perceptibly more populist ones, even encompassing elements of xenophobia and racism.

Hence, through our analysis of editorials, we aim to show that – in Sweden, just like elsewhere – a wider trend of “mainstreaming” the positions of the “radical right” (Feldman, 2019) now occurs, with the news media playing a central part in that process. In order to assess these wider discursive shifts, the article analyses editorials in two leading Swedish broadsheet newspapers between 2015 and 2019. The study draws on critical discourse analysis of media and political discourse in the context of right-wing populism (Krzyżanowski & Wodak, 2009) to explore how editorials construct themes and arguments, or *topoi*, around immigration, immigrants, integration, and so forth, in two widely circulated and politically influential quality Swedish newspapers: *Svenska Dagbladet* and *Göteborgs-Posten*. We argue that, in both cases, immigration and immigrants are discursively related to particular constructs and wider *topoi* – or arguments – of nation and nation-state, community and belonging, culture, religion, and crime and sexual violence, all of which include elements of xenophobic and racist discursive strategies once propagated mainly by populists and the far right. Moreover, we show, by articulating elements and tropes associated with the populist far right, that the examined editorials normalise, as well as provide legitimacy for, right-wing populist discourse.

Racism, populist strategy, and the news media

Historical research shows that mass media play a crucial role in enabling public acceptance of racism and xenophobia (e.g., antisemitism during the 1930s), and that news media are key institutions in the process of normalising xenophobic and racist utterances (e.g., Pollack, 2020). In the process of normalising previously marginalised opinions and representational frames, certain actors in society are more powerful than others. For example, legacy media are important in “mainstreaming” discourses situated at the far (right) flank of politics (Cammaerts, 2018). They can provide far-right actors and their provocative political style with both a discursive space and public visibility (Cammaerts, 2018), as well as stretching the boundaries of publicly accepted speech on immigration and immigrants by incorporating questions, discursive elements, and alleged solutions propagated by populist actors and the explicitly nationalist far right (Ekman, 2019). Key actors of right-wing populist politics have in many ways succeeded in normalising the language and tropes of the far right, and thus paved the way for illiberal politics entering the mainstream. They draw on a peculiar set of affordances created by so-called borderline discourse (Krzyżanowski & Ledin, 2017), which gradually migrated from online and fringe spaces of uncivil society into mainstream politics and the media. This discourse – effectively placing uncivil opinions and ideas (such as anti-immigration expressed via racism and xenophobia) in frames of civil discourse (of democracy, nation-state, freedom of speech, rationalism, and the like) – has, to a large

extent, allowed furthering nativism and right-wing nationalism in mainstream domains (see also Farkas & Neumayer, 2020).

Moreover, increasingly driven by commercial media-systems logic, the media easily adopted this provocative style (including a “taboo-breaking” discourse of the far right). Since “taboo news” is an increasingly central commodity within the digital-news economy (Titley, 2019), populist discourse also proved able to fit in the structural transformation of news media production and the news media’s adoption of populist elements like simplicity and brevity in reporting. Within right-wing populist discourse, complex social matters, such as unemployment, housing, social cohesion, crime, and so forth, have often come to be reduced to questions of immigration and immigrants as “simple solutions to complex questions” (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). After the refugee crisis of 2015, with the rapid influx of refugees to Sweden, this discursive *modus operandi* has become particularly evident among anti-immigrant actors. Visible in the populist emphasis of a society in crisis (Ekman, 2018), or even the notion of a society in collapse, it has also taken on more subtle forms, for example, the mainstream-political turn to nativism (Krzyżanowski, 2018b).

Another recurrent element in right-wing populist political discourse has been the articulation of immigrant cultures as insurmountable to those of immigrant populations (Balibar, 1991), meaning that cultural differences are naturalised through a discourse that locates the acts and morality of individuals as ineradicable factors of a certain (alien) culture, religion, or national background. These often take a (somatic) form of the “threatening other” (Ahmed, 2004) and creating fear, for example, by turning violence against women into an “immigrant problem” (Miles & Brown, 2003: 52) or by stressing crime as an inevitable result of immigration (Wodak, 2015). Reciprocally, the solidarity expressed by citizens and political actors during the refugee crisis has, in hindsight, been depicted as naive, irresponsible, and a betrayal to the home nation (Devlin & Grant, 2017). That is, “do-gooders” put the interests of the “other” before their own native population. Additionally, the “demographic threat” frame is an element aligned within a transnational right-wing populist political discourse.

In certain national contexts – for example, Hungary (Bajomi-Lázár, 2019) and Poland (Krzyżanowska & Krzyżanowski, 2018) – the idea of immigration posing an ongoing threat to national values and cultures is propagated at the very top of society. In this explicit form, the demographic threat resembles the neo-fascist idea of ethnic cleansing through immigration (i.e., the conspiracy theory of a “great displacement” or “white genocide”; Besley & Peters, 2020). But in its less explicit versions, the demographic threat is constructed more subtly, for example, through voicing public worries about immigrants being increasingly visible (physically) to the public, altering the physical setting of people in cities and public spaces (Poole, 2006), or by stressing the inability to accommodate refugees.

The political significance of editorials

Compared to conventional news journalism and political news in particular, the political implications of editorials are quite under-researched within journalism studies, at least over a Swedish horizon (Bolin et al., 2016). To date, there are only a few studies concerned with the political significance of news editorials in a Swedish context (Nord,

2001; Nord & Stúr, 2009). Some of these have assessed the framing of specific topics in editorials, for instance, the question of religion in modern Sweden from the 1960s onwards (Lövheim, 2017), the representation of the US since the 1980s (Hammarlund & Riegert, 2011), the Iraq War (Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2005), recent terror attacks in Europe (Kristensen & Roosvall, 2017), or editorial discourse on immigration (Bolin et al., 2016). Especially, that last study is of prime relevance here as it is a content analysis of four leading Swedish newspapers – two broadsheets and two tabloids – and their editorial framing of immigration between 2010 and mid-2015 – that is, immediately before the highpoint of the recent refugee crisis. The study concludes that there is an increase in coverage of immigration in the newspapers over time (2010–2015), and that 33 per cent ($N = 129$) of all editorials during the first half of 2015 framed immigration in a negative way. Moreover, it found that negative framing increases over time, and that the most negative newspaper is *Svenska Dagbladet*, where 30 per cent of editorials framed immigration in a negative way during the whole period (Bolin et al., 2016).

Apart from those important contributions, the editorials of Swedish news media remain largely under-researched, at least from a Swedish perspective. However, there are several compelling arguments why editorials need to be examined more closely, particularly in order to better understand their role in shaping contemporary public opinion, policy-making, and overall political discourse within society. Heeding this call, Bolin and colleagues (2016) argued in the aforementioned study that the importance of editorials has increased due to the digitisation of the news media landscape. Digitisation has transformed the news media industry entirely and, perhaps most profoundly, the printed press. The radical structural changes in news production, distribution, and consumption have resulted in declining revenues from advertising and an increasingly fragmented news landscape, including less loyal audiences and increased competition for readers. This situation has been part of the wider crisis in journalism (Blumler, 2010; Zelizer, 2015), resulting in an immense rationalisation of news production, including downsized news desks (Widholm et al., 2019), the platformisation of news (van Dijk et al., 2018), accelerated commercialisation of news content, and branding of news outlets (Ots, 2013), including its professionals (Ekman & Widholm, 2015; Nord & Stúr, 2009).

Alongside the above changes – and, in particular, cutbacks to the journalist workforce, predominantly among traditional and specialised journalists – there has also been a notable shift in priorities within news production. Since the platformisation of news is highly dependent on networked strategies, user dissemination of news via digital platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, has become essential for reaching audiences and having an impact. However, the platform logic tends to privilege infotainment and “breaking news” content over traditional (slower) news coverage (van Dijk et al., 2018), thus often leading to the sensationalisation of news. And at the same time, platform logics also seem to facilitate opinion-driven content. This often leads to opinion journalism genres (editorials, debate, commentaries, etc.) being among the most circulated news categories on SNS platforms:

The large share of opinion items might reflect the tough competition in the digital news market. When competing with the enormous supply of information online, it has become more important for news outlets to profile themselves with unique content. This is hard to do when it comes to traditional news reporting, where

news values and priorities tend to be similar among news producers, but this is easier when it comes to opinion and commenting content [translated]. (Wadbring & Ödmark, 2014: 41)

Yet, the wider adaptation to digital platforms facilitates not only a general commercialisation of news, but also production strategies whereby various opinion content is valued higher than before. It also implies that the position, role, and style of editorials in news production have become more significant than before, mainly for economic reasons. Editorial writers have thereby become profiled by their news outlets and frequently turned into brands supporting those of their respective newspapers. Simultaneously, editorial writers are often featured on social media, particularly Twitter and Facebook, where they can communicate in a more personal and provocative style, and where their communication is not restricted by their employers' policies. However, even if editorial writers operate their social media accounts as "individuals", their profiles are an important part of the marketing and branding of their news outlets (Ekman & Widholm, 2015). From the perspective of news producers, the valorisation of "brand" is partly connected to the personalisation of opinions belonging to these particular profiled editorial writers (rather than relying on anonymous editorial writers). This also implies that the branding strategies of editorial writers are closely connected to the wider marketing strategies of news producers that take place in the digital age (Ots, 2013). For instance, commercialisation and particular communication practices, including provocative and sensationalist styled content, can be used to increase the impact on digital platforms.

Discursive shifts and normalisation of racism and xenophobia

We understand discourse as both "constructions or significations of some domain of social practice from a particular perspective" (Fairclough 1995: 94) and "the production of language that has a will to power" (Poole, 2012: 165). This means that the (broadly defined) political and politicised discourse we explore through editorials produces and reproduces relations of social power within society. In order to grasp the gradual process of the normalisation of racism and xenophobia across societies (Krzyżanowski, 2020b), we draw on the concept of discursive shifts (Krzyżanowski, 2018a, 2020a) as a means to explore how social (political and media) actors make visible and profit from this gradual change within public discourse in our case of immigration and immigrants. Discursive shifts are related to the concept of discursive change (Fairclough, 1992), which aligns social, political, economic, and discursive dynamics at the macro level and encompasses macro frames (of, e.g., globalisation, neoliberalism, populism, etc.) which are used to "engineer" discourse in a context-specific and actor-dependent way. Within this perspective, discursive shifts allow tracing meso- and micro-level changes in discourse – for example, within specific media outlets, political parties, and the like – but by relating them to the wider, macro-level facets of discursive change. Most importantly, seen as a multi-stage and not always linear process, discursive shifts entail a gradual approach to discourse dynamics, recognising the stages of "enactment", "perpetuation", and "normalisation" (Krzyżanowski, 2020a) as a way of analytically approaching gradual changes within public discourse. We argue that discursive shifts

appear in spaces of legitimisation of public discourse – such as, in particular, mainstream news media – and therefore elements, attitudes, and ideologies of racism and xenophobia previously deemed unacceptable and located outside the ethics of public discourse and public expression become gradually normalised.

Methodological approach

The data for analysis were retrieved from the Swedish digital news archive Retriever Research/Medicarkivet. The sampling process took place in two steps. First, all editorials containing the truncated search words (in Swedish) “immigration”, “integration”, “refugee”, and “ethnicity” were selected, resulting in 195 items for the whole sampling period of April 2015 to September 2019. Then, in order to reduce the sample prior to qualitative analysis, the articles were searched using further search terms, such as “demography”, “culture”, “nation”, “crime”, and “violence”, along with a search for particular editorial writers who have profiled themselves as commentators on the issue of immigration. In this way, the sample was further reduced through a qualitative assessment of articles that in some respect contained elements and indicators of a discursive shift relating to the immigration issue.

The final sample analysed here consists of 45 editorials: 23 published in *Svenska Dagbladet* (SvD) and 22 in *Göteborgs-Posten* (GP). The data encompass articles published in the above broadsheet newspapers’ printed editions (also published online) during the period encompassing the second half of 2015 – the highpoint of the recent refugee crisis – and the following years, when the repercussions of the crisis were widely debated in the Swedish political arena and the media. The two newspapers in focus – located in Sweden’s two largest cities, Stockholm (SvD) and Gothenburg (GP) – are currently the second and third most circulated broadsheet newspapers in Sweden, respectively (KantarSifo, 2019). Their editorial political viewpoints are stated as “independent moderate” (SvD; moderate here refers to the Swedish Moderate Party) and “independent liberal” (GP); the two outlets hence represent positions towards both the right and centre-right of the Swedish political spectrum. However, it is worth noting that after a shift of the entire editorial staff at the beginning of 2015 (including the recruitment of a new editorial manager), GP also moved away from its former social-liberal position and its editorial section has become evidently more liberal-conservative in character.

In order to explore how the examined editorial discourse moves beyond traditional arguments in mainstream criticism related to immigration and immigrants – for example, based on economic costs, housing problems, failed policies, and so forth (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001) – the analysis focuses on how arguments surrounding immigration are articulated through what might be viewed as more or less standard populist and xenophobic discursive elements (Krzyżanowski & Ledin, 2017; Wodak, 2015).

At a broader level, we examine how the specific constructions of individual or collective social actors support a wider set of arguments – or topoi (Krzyżanowski, 2010) – and whether, again, the argumentation moves beyond civil frames of looking at immigration and is increasingly located within a borderline discourse (Krzyżanowski & Ledin, 2017) that promulgates civil and uncivil framing. The analysis below is therefore structured according to the four inductively identified argumentative frames in the data sample:

- Topos of demographic consequences, arguing mainly about the (alarming) consequences of immigration-related demographic change in Sweden.
- Topos of Islam, or Islamisation, underlying arguments about Islam and Islamism and its apparently direct relationship to multiculturalism and the ideologies or politics of, in particular, the left.
- Topos of threat, arguing that migrants pose a physical as well as otherwise understood threat to Swedish society.
- Topos of integration, framing arguments that integration in Sweden is a largely failed project and that migrants are essentially unable to integrate for cultural and other reasons.

While our focus is on analysing the complexity of the arguments, we also examine to what extent the argumentation provided is consistent with populist, xenophobic, and racist discourses increasingly visible in contemporary Swedish politics and wider Swedish society. At an in-depth level, the analysis also covers strategies of “self- and other-presentation in discourse” (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001) and of “representation of social actors” (van Leeuwen, 2008). Hence, we explore the construction of immigrants or refugees at the referential and predicational levels – looking at how they are named and represented, (de)activated, front- or back-staged, and at what characteristics are ascribed to them discursively in the process – and whether all of the above visibly move beyond acceptable ways of describing migrants and refugees. But we also look at how the analysed discourse is often strategically “intensified” rather than “mitigated” (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001), and hence points to a departure from restrained ways of describing immigration towards a more sensationalist and radical(ist) tone.

Analysis: A populist turn?

The (alarming) consequences of demographic change

The claim that demographic change gradually transforms the very foundations of the receiving country is not new in immigration-related discourse. For instance, it was (in)famously central to Margaret Thatcher’s major speech on immigration in January 1978. Thatcher warned that Britain was being “swamped by immigrants with alien cultures” (Barker, 1981: 1) and that immigrant cultures were so different that people just expressed “genuine fear” about what was going on in society. The idea that people from other cultures pose a threat because of their incompatibility with the “culture” of the majority is at the heart of “cultural”, “new”, or “xeno” racism (e.g., Barker, 1981; Balibar, 1991). Culture has merely replaced concepts of biological and physiognomic inferiority. Subsequently, the idea of gradual demographic change caused by asylum seekers and immigrants is accompanied by the notion of social, cultural, and even somatic transformation of society. In the editorials, the topos of threat – especially seen as a demographic danger – is often articulated as questions addressing what society “we” (implicitly Swedes who allegedly have the same “cultural” affinity) want in the future. In the editorial, “What Sweden will we have 45 years from now?” (SvD, 2015, July 1),² the author plainly speculates that the above will be the case in the very near future, given the many unrealistic scenarios and predictions on immigration levels. The editorial includes various examples of “aggregation” of immigrants – presenting

them as a collective entity (van Leeuwen, 2008) – and creates a sense of dramatic or massive demographic change, as well as explicating the decrease of citizens born in Sweden. There is not any particular argumentation on the issue, but the meaning and the consequences are implicitly evoked: the current level (and future increase) of immigration is understood as undesirable. The aggregation of migrants is a common element in the editorials. It is used to illustrate demographic change, including speculation about future developments where the articulation of dramatic scenarios is a common feature (SvD, 2019, August 1; 2018, July 10; 2017, November 17; GP, 2016, September 3; 2015, November 25).

More explicit claims about the consequences ensuing from demographic transformation are articulated in an editorial questioning, “How much immigration can Sweden endure?” (GP, 2016, September 3). The editorial argues for restrictive immigration policies or levels by pointing to the failure of integration and increasing segregation in society, thus being framed within the topos of integration. The author highlights “white flight”, child poverty, ISIS recruitment, and increasing crime rates, including a moral decline (attacks on police and fire brigades, and car burning) which, according to the editorial, is the result of several years of “borderless” immigration policies (GP, 2016, September 3). But the same editorial writer also points to the alleged historic inability of Sweden to “integrate” immigrants into society, despite “massive reforms” for integration (GP, 2017, June 20). Moreover, the writer claims that the genuine “concern” of citizens is not an expression of xenophobia but a “care” of those “who once upon a time lived here and of those who will live here in the future” (GP, 2017, June 20). This type of argument resembles the construction of “genuine fear” – and, in a wider sense, a topos of threat – in the guise of Thatcherite discourse (Barker, 1981). However, it also resides in what Mulinari and Neergaard (2014) coined “care racism”, and what elsewhere has also been widely seen as a form of “calculated ambivalence” (Wodak, 2015; Krzyżanowski & Wodak, 2009). Such strategies, both typical of far-right discourse, allow constructing “humanistic” or “patriotic” arguments, but in such a way that they are expressed as the care of native citizens and allowing what is essentially discrimination against migrants on the basis of a call for “protecting” the native population, native workforce, and so on – all allegedly as aspects of humanitarianism. In the editorial, this strategy is articulated in the expression that Swedes who hold anti-immigration attitudes and views are, in fact, not xenophobic, rather they simply “care” for those who live here and for the generation to come – that is, natives. Similar, but more focused on society’s inability to “absorb its new population”, is the argumentation in the editorial, “Restrictive immigration policies benefit more people” (GP, 2019, January 26). The editorial makes it clear that it is not immigrants who are the problem, but the failings of the social welfare system in the country. In any case, restrictive immigration is articulated through “care” for the citizens living in Sweden, and the editorial holds that anti-immigration attitudes are only increasing because “society is falling apart” (GP, 2019, January 26).

The idea of an allegedly collapsing society recurs in other editorials, in statements such as “taboo is the only explanation that I can think of as to why we ended up where we were at the autumn of 2015, with 163,000 asylum seekers, a collapsing system, tent camps, and rampant public spending” (SvD, 2017, November 17). In one editorial, the writer suggests that immigrants should be excluded from the welfare system for a period of five years after arriving in the country (school and emergency healthcare not

included) (GP, 2016, January 23). The argument – again following the aforementioned “calculated ambivalence” logic – is that such a dismantling of the principle of equal treatment of all those residing in the country would in fact paradoxically increase the population’s acceptance of immigration. In one editorial, “This is why the political map is being redrawn”, demographic change is described as the “main explanatory factor” for the rise of nationalistic and populist movements (SvD, 2018, October 25), again an act of finding, in a typically right-wing populist fashion, “simple answers to complex problems” (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). The editorial then refers to the key arguments in Eric Kaufmann’s (2018) controversial book *Whiteshift*. Interestingly, the writer does not question any elements of Kaufmann’s explanatory framework in general (the editorial is a short summary of its key argument about why nationalism grows), but it does state that it is “hard to digest” Kaufmann’s idea of “whiteness” as a key signifier of national identity (SvD, 2018, October 25).

Elsewhere, in the editorial, “Migration transforms the whole foundation of Sweden” (SvD, 2019, June 11), the idea of somatic change in the Swedish public (i.e., stressing the arrival and actual presence of immigrants in the public space) is articulated. The article associates the public presence of EU migrants – explicitly depicted as migrants from Romania and Bulgaria who settle in Sweden for short periods of time and engage in, for example, begging outside grocery stores and in other public spaces (Hansson & Jansson, 2019) – with the wider increase in immigrants and multiculturalism – both seen negatively – in the country. The editorial adopts the narrative format of a “small story” (Georgakopoulou, 2007), while describing an unspecified or imaginary Swedish town:

Suddenly, there were beggars, mainly from Romania and Bulgaria, outside shops, at train stations, not only in the main cities, but in nearly every town [...] the recent years’ migrant flows are also visible here. Before, there were only a few immigrants in the small town, now public spaces are dominated by them. This is probably because many of them have no work and therefore idle around and about. The situation here is not unique, all over Sweden the demography has changed. There are few places that have not yet been affected. Nearly everyone has witnessed this change with their own eyes. (SvD, 2019, June 11)

The editorial’s argument constructs a negative imaginary of migrants and, effectively, criticising a recent research report focusing on the costs of immigration. As is thus argued, the lack of a “demographically realistic” perspective should be borne in mind when explaining the increase in anti-immigration sentiment in the country. The writer also puts forward – in rhetorical modus of guessing and asking questions – an argument which draws on the topos of demographic consequences. The editorial supports a claim that anti-immigration attitudes are to be treated as “real”, as they do not derive from imaginaries or ideologies but de facto experiences of a native population that is allegedly surrounded by migrants in its physical space. This, much more than anti-immigration views or xenophobia, is seen as the main reason for the increase in anti-immigration attitudes: “When Swedish cities are drastically transformed over the course of a few years, it is enough information for those who live there. In their everyday life, they observe how their community is changing in character” (SvD, 2019, June 11). The argument here is that the arrival of immigrants in the public spaces of Swedish cities

is causing citizens to vote for parties with an anti-immigrant agenda. According to the writer, this is the reason for political transformation not only in Sweden, but all over the West (SvD, 2019, June 11). Consequently, the topos of demographic consequences captures the construction of a “genuine fear” amongst the Swedish population, and the editorials effectively play on a variation in the gradual transformation of society caused by immigration as an implicit threat to the nation “as we know it”. Thereby, a discursive construction of the nation as a culturally static entity occurs. This “nation” is shown as if pressured by the individual and collective presence of migrants. To some extent, the editorial thus articulates demographic change in a manner that recontextualises explicit forms of racism visible in, very notably, the Islamophobic discourses of the far right (Ekman, 2015).

Islamism, multiculturalism, and the left

The idea that the political left – or the “liberal left” – is paving the way for an ongoing “Islamisation of Europe” is widespread among the far right (Fekete, 2012). This fear of Muslims interrelates with the trope of a demographic threat, as it is often argued that refugees arriving in Sweden originate from countries with a dominant role played by Islam. In the more extreme arguments, a gradual “Muslim” takeover is alluded to and regarded as a sinister orchestrated geopolitical plan enacted by Islamist actors outside Europe. While such a “Eurabian” conspiracy theory (Carr, 2006) is – at least for now – still generally avoided in political discourse in contemporary Swedish politics, there are elements of a similar, yet more subtle, version of the “Islamisation” trope to be found in some of the editorials. Here, the argument – encompassed by the still wider topos of Islam and Islamisation – focuses on an increase in various elements and practices associated specifically with Islam or Muslim immigrants.

In the editorial, “The left is excusing Islamism” (SvD, 2015, August 19), the unspecified or undetermined “left” is accused of not focusing on the ideological aspect of violent Jihadism. At the same time, the editorial deals specifically with the Left Party’s apparent “inability to acknowledge” the growing Islamism emerging in “Swedish suburbs”. According to the writer, by focusing on social and economic issues as the main problem (instead of Jihadist ideology), the left is effectively “excusing” Islamism. In another editorial, now focusing specifically on a conflict between a specific member of parliament of the Swedish Left Party and the party leadership (SvD, 2017, December 3), the same writer asks rhetorically: “Why did they side with Islamists and those who support honour-based oppression, rather than with their own party member?” (SvD, 2017, December 3).

Notably, the idea of a left-wing betrayal of Western values, common within the Islamophobic far right (Ekman, 2015), also appears in some of the editorials. Two editorials even claim that the left has betrayed its Enlightenment roots and the working class (SvD, 2017, August 19; GP, 2015, May 18) by turning to “identity politics”. One of the editorials argues that the left, in many localities, “has become allied with Islamists”, and instead of standing up for women’s rights, the “left-feminists now put on the veil in solidarity” (SvD, 2017, August 19). The reason behind this alleged transformation of the left, it is argued, is the dominance of multiculturalism that followed immigration from the Global South. Or as the writer of the editorial puts it, “the people from the

colonies have moved here”, and therefore they have become the “primary subject of the left” (SvD, 2017, August 19).

Hence, the betrayal of the political “left” is framed as the result of immigration, but also as a strategy set within a larger ideology of multiculturalism geared towards gaining new voters. Therefore, the politics of “multiculturalism” is claimed to have now replaced traditional class politics in Sweden and elsewhere, and the left is now, accordingly, mainly preoccupied with restricting the freedom of expression of the political right as a result (SvD, 2017, August 19). In fact, the idea that the left is trying to silence the opinions of others (i.e., the political right) is a recurrent element in editorials highlighting immigration as a taboo issue (GP, 2018, July 14). The left’s focus on racism has also led them to an (implicitly racist) idea of the “white male as an oppressor” and the left is accused of being “fixated on race and skin colour” (GP, 2015, May 18).

Related argumentation can be found in a series of editorials claiming that “clan-based” or “ethnic” politics has evolved in Sweden due to immigration from Muslim countries. In two editorials, the presence of “clan” and “ethnic” politics is addressed as one of the major threats to democracy. One editorial claims, for example, that clan politics is “happening just below the surface in Sweden. It can’t be ignored any longer” (SvD, 2018, September 8). It thus creates a notion of an undisclosed threat, within the wider topos of threat. Using some classic formats of argumentation, the editorial also provides an informative example of an alleged local politician for the Green Party who, at the municipal level, tried to influence voters in his local mosque in exchange for more funds for the Muslim community and the mosque itself. The writer asks rhetorically, “Why can’t the Green Party, again and again, keep Islamists out of their party?” (SvD, 2018, September 8). Strategically reversing the well-established slogan of parallel societies (used, for example, to call for more integration of migrants, etc.), the editorial concludes by stating that “parallel societies have evolved in Sweden. Different groups vote with their clan, mosque or other collective. Our democracy takes the hit” (SvD, 2018, September 8). Another editorial (by the same writer), “A Somali voice in Parliament”, published shortly after the national election in 2018 (SvD, 2018, October 4), similarly discusses “ethnic voting” and the wider democratic implications of politicians who mainly target their respective minority groups as if forgetting about the interests of wider society. The implicit argument here is that a member of parliament (for the Green Party) was elected only by means of targeting the Somali diaspora in Sweden, and not by addressing political issues important to citizens; hence, an argument of a specific clientelism in the political representation of migrants is put forward. The editorial states that “ethnic voting is now a factor in Swedish politics, but the issue has gone unnoticed in public debate” (SvD, 2018, October 4). Thus, the plausible negative impact on democracy relates to the ethnic dimension of politics following demographic change.

Migrants as a violent (physical and sexual) threat

In right-wing populist discourse, immigration is commonly associated with violent crime and sexual violence, hence not only allowing for arguments built on the topos of threat, but also representing a new, more radical version of the usual migration-related topos of law and order (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). This is done in particular through various

ways of “culturalising” alleged migrant perpetrators and conflating wider cultural or religious “threats” associated with immigration with individual acts of physical or sexual violence. This strategy is often realised via aggregations and statistics, and through wider argumentation using numbers. In this guise, some editorials also highlight immigration as one of the plausible reasons for an increase in various forms of crime, such as gang violence in Sweden (GP, 2017, August 31). Most striking, however, is the association made between immigrants and increased sexual violence – one which recontextualises a wider discourse connecting immigration or refugees and “rape” known from, for example, Swedish uncivil society online discourse (Ekman, 2018), but also from other European countries (e.g., Krzyżanowski, 2020a). Here, the connection is often made by way of rhetorical questions, for instance, in an editorial entitled “What reasons are there for the new insecurity of women?” with the preamble, “sexual assaults in public spaces” (SvD, 2017, June 12). The writer describes the problem of women feeling insecure in public as a result of the influx of unaccompanied immigrants, and through speculation about an alleged correlation between an increase in sexual assaults and the presence of migrants – that is, “men from countries such as Afghanistan, Eritrea, and Somalia” (SvD, 2017, June 12). As is explicitly argued, “it is not a wild guess that tens of thousands of young men from cultures with a completely different view of women, compared to what is the norm here, will have consequences for women” (SvD, 2017, June 12). The writer also attempts to back up the statement with “facts” – by creating an authority-based legitimation pattern (van Leeuwen, 2007). The editorial hence refers to a research report by The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (BRÅ) (Command et al., 2017). It omits, however, one fact: the reported increase in women feeling insecure (the survey question dealt with feelings of insecurity “felt in public during the evening in the nearby neighbourhood”) has only been evident for one year (between 2015 and 2016) out of the total of eleven years taken into consideration. Consequently, by omitting crucial data, women’s feelings of insecurity are articulated as something “new” (as stated in the headline of the editorial), and thus related to the, allegedly, equally “recent” wave of immigrants.

A more alarming headline equally articulates the connection between immigrants and the rape topos in a different editorial claiming, “The rape epidemic is the greatest betrayal of our time” (SvD, 2018, November 22), wherein arguments based on topos of threat, criminality, or law and order, and so forth, are yet again explicitly connected to data from the annual BRÅ report. However, here, the alleged sexual offences against women are the focal point of the article, which also heavily relies on the “epidemic” metaphor (SvD, 2018, November 22), which, used with regard to immigration, carries depersonalising and biologising functions (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001) otherwise widely enacted in recent right-wing populist migrant- or refugee-related discourses (Krzyżanowski, 2020a; Wodak, 2015). The above is linked here to society facing the apparent “betrayal” mentioned in the headline (SvD, 2018, November 22). The writer discusses various explanatory factors for such a “betrayal” and argues, yet again, that immigration is mainly the root cause, and thus, rather than supporting and empowering women, the Swedish society or state acts against them and their safety. The central issue here is the implicit – albeit direct – link established between crimes against women and immigration, as per the statement that the “BRÅ could easily control for demographic change in order to measure its impact on the development of sexual offences” (SvD,

2018, November 22), where the “demographic change” quite obviously serves as an implicit metonymical replacement for “immigration”.

One editorial is even more explicit on the connection between immigrants, their culture, and rape (GP, 2018, March 24). The editorial claims that “32 of 43 men convicted for gang rape are born outside Sweden”. Moreover, the reader is told that “the remaining convicts have, except one, parents born outside Sweden”. The article states that, as such, “gang rape has escalated over the recent years”, yet no data are provided to verify this. Instead, the article discusses the relation between birth country (of the offender) and violent crime, and proceeds to summarise, for example, results from a survey measuring Egyptian men’s attitudes towards women in Egypt. The editorial concludes that “the recent increase in gang rapes, alongside the influx to Sweden of numerous men from cultures with different attitudes toward women and their sexuality is, from this perspective [referring to the Egyptian survey], probably not a coincidence”. The writer also calls for research on the relation between “ethnicity and crime” (GP, 2018, March 24).

Besides the many logical fallacies in the editorial – including the oscillation between various crime types, national contexts (i.e., Egyptian immigrants to Sweden are few), and so forth – the lexical connection between birth country, ethnicity, and culture is particularly interesting. These concepts are conflated in the editorial, and therefore a similar referential meaning is transferred between them: with birth country becoming ethnicity, and the latter then becoming culture, and so forth. Moreover, an idea that certain (individual) behaviours and morality can be reduced to cultural, ethnic, or national background (as key causal factors) is thereby furthered, as well as being represented as “measurable” and static in character. The call here is, quite evidently, the key to establishing a connection between immigrant “cultures” and rape. Consequently, this allows adhering to the well-known (racist) argumentation wherein violence – in this case against women – is transformed into an “immigrant problem” (Miles & Brown, 2003).

In a similar vein, an editorial headlined, “Do not disregard the cultural roots of the perpetrators”, and written by the aforementioned writer (see GP, 2016, August 9), follows the same route by discussing rape and connecting violent crime to the culture of certain migrant groups (from the Middle East and North Africa). The editorial claims that “the cultural context people are coming from plays a central role, as does the socioeconomic structure”. However, there is no explanation of what cultural context the writer refers to, or what cultural features increase the risk of violent crime. But, unlike the editorial from 2018 (see GP, 2018, March 24), this editorial distinguishes explicitly between “culture” and “ethnicity”, with the latter being linked to genetic features (GP, 2016, August 9). Thus, by transferring explanatory factors from biology (in this case “ethnicity”), to the cultural context of certain immigrants, the editorial additionally “racialises” culture and alludes to cultural roots of the “problems” being those caused by, and associated with, immigration.

Failed integration and cultural incompatibility

The final topos deployed widely in the analysed discourse – that is, the topos of failed integration and cultural incompatibility – serves as a key resource for the discursive

construction of irreconcilable differences between immigrant cultures and the majority culture in the receiving country – that is, Sweden. In its general gist, the said topos reinforces the inherent incompatibility argument in relation to migrants and describes immigrant “cultures” as both monolithic and profoundly different from the “majority” culture. It hence allows the construction of all problems as being related to integration, for which migrants, and their “incompatibility”, are to blame.

For example, in the editorial, “Where multiculturalism leads to disruption” (SvD, 2018, December 20), a connection between integration and the economy is established when the writer argues that multicultural societies are less economically vital and prosperous compared to monocultural ones, and that Sweden is lagging behind economically partly because of its diversity. But then, the writer also implies that ethnic diversity could explain segregated communities, gang criminality, and so on, even asking rhetorically, “Why are youth gangs allowed to destroy public meeting spaces?” The main multi-stage argument is that countries with high levels of immigration become dysfunctional and that the quality of welfare systems thus relies on ethnic or cultural homogeneity. This is even “evidenced” by an infamous 1965 quote from then Swedish prime minister, Tage Erlander, saying that Sweden’s “population is homogenous, not only by race, but also in many other respects”, often used by far-right actors when attacking immigration and integration policies. The very same editorial eventually concludes – again returning to the politico-economic argumentation mentioned at its beginning – by asking, “what makes some countries poor, and some countries rich with high levels of public trust, well developed welfare, and engaged citizens”, and then claiming that “Sweden plods on without any assessment of the consequences” (SvD, 2018, December 20).

The above editorial deploys various research examples from the social sciences – following an authority-based argumentation pattern mentioned above – yet it does so in a strategically inconsequential way by linking ideas and claims from completely different contexts and time periods. By using three different sources of research at the same time, the editorial also answers a cluster of (self-posed) rhetorical questions, which additionally help to conceal anti-immigration elements in a pseudo-scientific – and apparently civil – discourse. It describes Swedish society as a state in “total decline”, thus recontextualising and making overarching (Krzyżanowski, 2016) a “collapsing society” fallacy widely propagated by the Swedish far right and uncivil society. A similar argument is made elsewhere: in the editorial “Immigrants are not robots”, it is, for example, claimed, “In order to make immigration profitable, people must come here without the dysfunctional institutions, destructive norms and cultures that made their native counties poor” (SvD, 2017, February 19). Hence, the argumentation related to immigration is recontextualised here for strategic reasons, and in order to criticise government or state policies and thus use immigration as a rhetorical element of political competition.

The editorial “Assimilation comes spontaneously” (GP, 2019, July 5) describes integration from a different perspective by arguing that Sweden was characterised by “spontaneous assimilation” of immigrants until the 1970s. The problem after this period, it is claimed, has been the influx of immigrants with cultures described as “too alien” to the Swedish culture. Such immigration, it is argued, has forced “the whole population, including the majority of ethnic Swedes, to adapt to a multicultural society” (GP, 2019, July 5). The writer argues that this process was somehow “forced” upon citizens and

facilitated through public support for ethnic minority organisations – which, all in all, creates a purposefully intensified and exaggerated argument. The writer argues that immigration of people with “cultures” very different from the Swedish culture effectively needs to stop, in order to restore the “spontaneous assimilation” of the pre-1970 era glorified here as the correct model. The argument is hence underpinned by an incorrect and idealised interpretation of the past, which fails to recognise both historical and recurrent problems following migration, such as segregation, unemployment, language barriers, and so forth.

Conclusions

The analysed editorials from two key Swedish daily newspapers emphasise that the contemporary public discourse on immigration in Sweden is in a state of dynamic and complex – albeit not always very visible – discursive shift (Krzyżanowski, 2018a). Within this shift, many aspects of immigration discourse are still constructed within the usual or “traditional” frames and argumentative structures – such as our four main topoi identified in the analysis – thus making the immigration discourse still largely recognisable and familiar to the reader. However, while those wider frames and argumentative structures are, in many cases, similar to the mainstream discourses on immigration, the detailed analysis shows that the ongoing normalisation effectively takes place at a micro level of linguistic realisation. It is precisely there that many aspects of far-right or uncivil society language are partially or wholly borrowed and repackaged into editorials, as evidenced in the two examined newspapers.

The normalisation is also facilitated by “novel” combinations of various argumentative frames which, in turn, allow for “new” and radical interpretations of ideas and concepts to be put forward. This implies that Swedish news media are not immune to the wider populist currents visible in other national media contexts in Scandinavia (Farkas & Neumayer, 2020), and that they also follow the normalisation of uncivil and populist discourses which “gradually introduce and/or perpetuate in public discourse some new patterns of representing social actors, processes and issues” (Krzyżanowski, 2020b: 432).

The above also emphasises some of our own earlier findings on what has been defined as the broader development of a “borderline discourse” (Krzyżanowski & Ledin, 2017), which – by increasingly packaging uncivil and radical language and arguments in familiar, civil, and quasi-acceptable frames – facilitates the normalisation of radical ideas and concepts, not only in Sweden but also in European democracies elsewhere. But such borderline discourse, as has been shown above, does not only entail “borrowing” ideas from – and interpretations of – immigration-related phenomena and processes from far-right and uncivil society to form acceptable carriers and genres, such as, in our case, newspaper editorials. It also creates a specific hierarchy of discourses whereby recontextualised radical-right opinions and views are placed in a privileged and quasi-hegemonic position (Krzyżanowski, 2016) over civil and other (once) acceptable, liberal-democratic ideas and views on immigration.

Hence, as our analysis shows, by incorporating both micro and macro discursive elements associated with the far and populist right, the mainstream discourse of editorials normalises them and, more importantly, legitimises them. Moreover, this process of “mainstreaming” opens up increased room for manoeuvre for far-right political actors,

and for far-right politics at large, all of which thus become a prominent and legitimate voice in the political realm, additionally reinforced by mainstream news media's normalisation of their radical views. Simultaneously, this process pushes the boundaries of publicly acceptable language and ultimately defines public discourse on immigration within both the political and wider public spheres.

In addition to the above, the increasing importance of editorial writers in the competition for impact and visibility in the fragmented digital news landscape reveals an increased focus on sensationalism, including taboo-breaking and provocative content, such as via the radical statements on immigration explicated in the analysis. In a wider sense, this points to not only a conflation of political (right-wing) populism and journalism – via the evidenced populist discursive shift on immigration – but also to an increased salience of the commercial logics within news media affecting their content. Hence, the articulation of right-wing populism, including elements of xenophobia and racism, within “quality journalism” mirrors (cynical) production logics in a time of apparent economic “crisis” for news producers. By drawing attention to the editorials – and by additionally marketing editorial writers – it both increases the circulation of content and increases data traffic to the platforms of news outlets. The editorials' manoeuvre to the (far) right also coincides with an apparent increase in “uncivil” actors in digital spaces, where stringent thinking, intelligent statements, and reflective reasoning are anything but present.

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Notes

1. The SOM Institute is based at the University of Gothenburg. Every year almost 20,000 Swedes respond to its surveys on, for example, politics, media, lifestyle, and health.
2. All translations of analysed examples into English are ours. The analysis was performed on the original, Swedish-language versions of texts.

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