

This is the Accepted Manuscript (pre-typeset version) of the article authored by NOROCEL Ov Cristian, titled “Åkesson at Almedalen: Intersectional Tensions and Normalization of Populist Radical Right Discourse in Sweden”, which was published in *NORA: Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 25(2)(2017): 91-106. The article is available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2017.1349834>

## **Åkesson at Almedalen: Intersectional Tensions and Normalization of Populist Radical Right Discourse in Sweden**

Ov Cristian Norocel<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Université Libre de Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium

<sup>2</sup> University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

### **Abstract**

This study analyses the populist radical right discourse of the Sweden Democrat's (*Sverigedemokraterna*, SD), examining how Jimmie Åkesson, the SD chairperson, conceptualized gendered social positions in the *folkhem* ([Swedish] people's home) in his annual speeches in Almedalen, since the SD entered the Swedish Parliament in 2010 to date. Attention is being paid to whose voices are allowed to come forth and in which manner is this done, and to how inequalities intersecting gender and ethnicity are explained and reproduced, as means to normalize populist radical right discourse in Sweden. Theoretically, the study rests on the conceptualization of populist radical right as a thin-centred ideology, which is contingently adapted to national politics, to which it ads “intersectionality from above” as a specific analytical perspective. The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) provides the methodological tools for the analysis, and facilitates its contextual positioning. The article contributes analytically to the field, shedding light on how in the context of populist radical

right discourse, welfare chauvinist appeals are employed to formally acknowledge the importance of gender equality in Sweden, and are used as a device to contour two antithetic entities: the supposedly gender equal Swedish ethnic majority as the opposite of the allegedly deeply patriarchal migrant Other. The article also contributes empirically to the study of populist radical right in Sweden. It provides a more nuanced picture of the party's ideological transformations in what it is envisaged to be their ideological normalization—from fringe nationalism (antidemocratic national socialism) and outright racism to welfare chauvinism and cultural racism (Islamophobic exclusionary nationalism) in conservative clothing.

**Keywords:** intersectionality; Almedalen; populist radical right; Sweden; Discourse-Historical Approach

## Introduction

For quite some time, most Swedish political parties seemed to agree about how the country should react to the unfolding refugee crisis, which reached a scale unseen since the World War II. Sweden was to confirm its status of a “moral superpower”—with reference to its previously generous asylum and migration policies—and welcome all those fleeing from oppression and war. Only one Swedish party, the populist radical right Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*, henceforth SD), struck a different note. The SD chairperson Jimmie Åkesson argued for “helping refugees locally, in the near vicinity of their home-country” rather than welcoming them to Sweden, warning that allowing them to seek refuge in Sweden would entail too great a burden for the welfare state, and may lead to the collapse of Swedish society altogether. In 2016, however, the situation could not be more different. During the yearly Almedalen week (*politikerveckan i Almedalen*), the most influential forum reuniting

politicians, lobby groups and businesses, public administration representatives, and journalists in Sweden, several chairpersons of centre-right parties argued for a return to “Swedish values” as a necessary social adhesive, in a move which legitimized the SD’s welfare chauvinist calls concerning the contemporary challenges faced by the Swedish welfare system. This legitimization of the SD discourse, a party with roots in the white power movement and fringe nationalism environment, makes Sweden a very interesting case in the study of populist radical right in Europe.

It is particularly the SD’s nostalgic appeal to an idealised and sanitised version of the Swedish welfare system, commonly referred to as the *folkhem* (in translation, the “[Swedish] people’s home”) (Hellström, Nilsson & Stoltz, 2012, p. 195; Norocel 2013, p. 143) that seems to have helped the party gain access to parliamentary politics (Norocel, 2016, p. 372). In the 2010 elections, the SD passed the parliamentary threshold with 5.7 percent of the vote, and entered the Swedish Parliament. Then, in the 2014 elections, the party further consolidated its parliamentary presence, receiving 12.9 percent of the vote. Since the election of Åkesson as chair in 2005, the SD has undergone an ideological transformation for the purpose of acceding into parliamentary politics and normalizing populist radical right discourse in Sweden.

References to the Swedish people and their *folkhem*, their culture, and their Christian (Lutheran) religion replaced former appeals to safeguarding racial purity, reintroducing death penalty, banning abortion, and stopping non-European adoptions from the SD discourse, albeit arguably in such a “racializing manner that often recreates the content of biological racism through different words” (Mulinari & Neergaard, 2014, p. 45). More so, the SD not only proclaimed its attachment to the Swedish welfare system and parliamentary democracy, but it also apparently accepted the ideal of equality between men and women as part of the core “Swedish values”. The present article examines how gendered positions in the *folkhem*

are conceptualized in Åkesson's speeches since he became one of the party chairpersons present in the Swedish Parliament. Attention is being paid to whose voices are allowed to come forth and in which manner is this done, and to how inequalities intersecting gender and ethnicity are explained and reproduced, as means to normalize populist radical right discourse in Sweden.

Next, this study introduces the key conceptual tenets, discussing the particularity of populist radical right parties in the Nordic context, and it introduces a specific take on intersectionality as a means to conceptualize populist radical right discourses. The subsequent section then explains the study's critical methodological apparatus, which adds a gender lens to the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA); it then explains the *folkhem*'s role in structuring political life in Sweden, and positions the Almedalen political event in the context of Swedish politics; the section also details the selection of empirical material. The following section presents the analysis, unveiling how gendered social positions underpin the *folkhem*'s construction from a populist radical right perspective. Finally, the concluding section reflects on the analytical and empirical implications arising from these results and indicates further avenues for research.

## **The Populist Radical Right and Gender**

To avoid conceptual overstretching, populism is narrowly understood herein as “a thin centred ideology”, which primarily distinguishes between two monolithic and homogenous groups: the “pure people” in an antagonistic relationship with the “corrupt elite” (Mudde 2004, p. 543). In the European context, then, this is attached to a more complete ideology—that of the radical right—characterised by authoritarian and nativist conceptions. More clearly, authoritarianism pertains to a punitive interpretation of conventional ethics coupled with a

strict enforcement of law and order (Mudde 2007, p. 23; Norris 2005, p. 192). Nativism in turn overlaps—almost perfectly—with the boundaries of the modern state and those of the native ethnic majority population (“the nation”). It identifies the seemingly allogenic and non-native Others—be they ethnic minorities, or migrant communities that are described in terms of homogenous totalities—as fundamental threats to the ethnic purity and socio-cultural cohesion of the nation-state (cf. Betz & Meret, 2009, p. 333; Mudde, 2007, p. 19; Norocel, 2013, pp. 44–45; Spierings, Zaslove, Mügge & de Lange, 2015, p. 8). A caveat: ethnic purity and socio-cultural cohesion are understood in this study as deeply gendered constructions. They are gendered in the sense that they reproduce processes, social relations, actions, and representations that consolidate and reify the dichotomous distinction between women and men, and the different effects they have on the social positions thus ascribed (Yuval-Davis, 1997).

Furthermore, the present article follows in the footsteps of intersectionality scholarship, thereby including other social positions, besides gender, as politically productive devices for the social division of power, such as ethnicity/race, and social class (Walby, Armstrong & Strid, 2012). These notwithstanding, intersectionality is employed here as an “analytical perspective” to unveil “the construction of meaning at specific intersections of gender, which fulfil a strategic function” within populist radical right discourse, in a manner labelled “intersectionality from above” (Mayer, Ajanovic & Sauer, 2014, p. 251). This is to say that while nativist conceptions appear to be demarcated first and foremost in ethnic terms, opposing the native ethnic majority to an allogenic minority, they are also demarcated in gender terms, albeit in a more discrete manner. Put differently, ethnic purity pertains here to the imperative of women conceiving and raising the right type of offspring (Yuval-Davis, 1997, pp. 26–29). Indeed, populist radical right discourses insist that the native woman’s

reproductive sexuality must be manifested within a legally sanctioned monogamous union (marriage) with a man from the native ethnic majority (Wodak, 2015, p. 153). Women's membership in the native ethnic majority is thereby conditioned by them fulfilling the position of normative motherhood, consequently encroaching on their rights to terminate undesired pregnancies, on performing motherhood on their own terms, and on their choice of partners.

Second, socio-cultural cohesion is employed in this study in reference to both the emancipatory rhetoric directed at the Other women, which is allegedly aimed at preserving the openness of the European societies (Akkerman & Hagelund, 2007, p. 214; Keskinen, 2012, pp. 226–227; Meret & Siim, 2013, pp. 83–84; Norocel, 2013, pp. 63–64), and to the welfare chauvinist appeals, which exclude the migrant Others from welfare provision since this is regarded as the exclusive proprietary right of the native ethnic majority (Mudde, 2007, p. 47; Norocel, 2016, p. 386; Norris, 2005, p. 25). On these matters, in the cultural and ideological context of Northern European countries, the populist radical right claims for gender equality as a core value of their societies—more often than not instrumentally employed as a means to distinguish between the gender equal native ethnic majority from the supposedly deeply patriarchal migrant Others—are accompanied by a strong emphasis on the importance of traditional family values (Meret, 2015, pp. 96–97; Meret & Siim 2013, p. 93; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015, pp. 26–29; Norocel 2010, pp. 173–175; Siim & Stoltz, 2014, pp. 247–248). In this context, the “intersectionality from above” approach proves useful in unveiling these deep ambivalences and contradictory references to gender equality, as marker of Nordic socio-cultural cohesion, in the populist radical right discourses under analysis.

The populist radical right inroads into parliamentary politics across Europe in the past decades have been facilitated by two intertwined processes. On the one hand, the populist radical right underwent a purposeful process of ideological normalization, marked by a change in tone and focus, whereby antidemocratic and outright racist appeals inspired by national socialism were toned down, and draped in elaborate cultural racist counter-visions to multiculturalism with the proclaimed aim of preserving the nation's European cultural specificity. On the other hand, the manner of "doing politics", against the background of a neoliberal logic that posited the triumph of consensual politics "beyond left and right" antagonism (Mouffe, 2005), changed significantly. Instead of politics of governance, which was removed from the public reach as an arena of technocratic knowledge and political compromise, focus was put on politics of communication, thereby increasing media's role in the political process, in other words a mediatisation of politics. This provided a powerful tool for populist radical right challengers, and facilitated the slow transition of their discourses into the mainstream mediated political debate (Mudde, 2004, pp. 553–554; Wodak, 2015, pp. 125–127).

Examining how populist radical right ideology is gendered in the context of mediated politics becomes an important site for mapping out the ideological normalization of these parties, revealing both their attempts at transcending the confines of being merely *Männerparteien* (Mudde, 2007, pp. 90–118), and the limitations of their ideological horizon.

### **The Discourse-Historical Approach as Means to Analyse Political Speech**

The article's methodological apparatus builds on a critical approach to how meaning is construed in political discourse put forward in the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009; Wodak, 2015), to which it adds a gender lens (Verloo & Lombardo, 2007) to enable the analysis of selected texts from an intersectional analytical perspective.

The DHA concentrates on the analysis of "texts—be they audio, spoken, visual and/or written—

as they relate to structured knowledge (*discourses*), are realized in specific genres, and must be viewed in terms of their *situatedness*.” (*italics* in original) (Wodak, 2015, p. 51) Here discourse entails “a cluster of context-dependent semiotic practices”, which are “socially constituted and socially constitutive” that are “related to a macro-topic”, and “is not a closed unit, but a dynamic semiotic entity that is open to reinterpretation and continuation” (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 89). To do so, DHA follows the *principle of triangulation* that situates the analysed discourse in a multi-layered *context* that explains “the broader socio-political and historical context” into which the discourse is embedded, and then “the extralinguistic social variables and institutional frames” of the specific “context of situation” of said texts (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 93). Returning to the matter at hand, DHA enables understanding the specificity of populist radical right discourse in the context of Swedish politics. More clearly, the aim of such a methodological construct is to unveil how the *folkhem*, as a deeply seated Swedish concept, is employed as a central organizing theme for framing populist radical right political endeavours as “Swedish-friendly” politics, and normalize them under the guise of gender equality efforts.

Given the study’s ambitions, a gender lens is added to the DHA methodological apparatus, paying attention to “issues that are highly present in the current feminist debates, such as, the meaning of gender, the treatment of intersectionality, the inclusion of voice, or the structures reproducing gender inequalities.” (Verloo & Lombardo, 2007, p. 35) This enables an analysis aware of the underpinning assumptions that bear the populist radical right problem formulation of “the present state of the *folkhem*”. Intersectionality from above, in this context, facilitates an analysis of the discursive construction of such issues as how are gendered positions in the *folkhem* conceptualized, whose voices are allowed to come forth and in which manner, and how inequalities intersecting gender and ethnicity are justified and reproduced—

whereby the underlying conceptual premises are assessed critically. This methodological part continues with two sections that incorporate the gender lens and triangulate the multi-layered *context* of analysed texts. The first section explains the historical context specific to the development of the Swedish welfare system, and highlights the *folkhem*'s inbuilt tensions, sourced on its universalist claims based on an exclusionary logic, that were later successfully exploited by the SD for electoral gains. The second section sheds light on the context of situation, positioning Almedalen in relation the wider contemporary neoliberal mediatisation of politics in Sweden, and it explains the criteria and means for collecting the empirical material.

### ***The Historical Context: the Folkhem and the Swedish Populist Radical Right***

The SD claim to be the *folkhem*'s sole guardian, and the party's rise in prominence in Swedish politics in the past decade need to be understood in their *historical context*. Importantly, the *folkhem* is the quintessential concept of modern Swedish politics and society, representing a political and social project that aimed at symbolically gathering together (Swedish) men and women under the protective roof of a collective home, thereby the home of the (Swedish) people (Andersson, 2009). The concept embodies the “Swedish model”, a social-democratic welfare system that coupled comprehensive welfare with democratic government on egalitarian principles under the stewardship of successive social-democratic governments for most of the twentieth century. Put simply, the two concepts were in time blended together: naming the welfare system in Sweden implied a discrete reference to the *folkhem*. These notwithstanding, the *folkhem* also signals the welfare system's indisputable Swedishness, whereby the distinction between Swedish “natives” and “other” inhabitants of the country is informed by discrete cultural racism (de los Reyes, Molina & Mulinari, 2006, pp. 16–18).

The *folkhem* reached its zenith for a couple of decades around mid-twentieth century and was characterised by a strong belief in a collective future reached by rational modernisation, and minute social engineering, achieved by means of tight social control. The formal commitment to gender equality as an inherent principle in the *folkhem* cemented the Swedish self-image as a “women-friendly welfare state”, very much like its Nordic counterparts (Bergqvist, Olsson Blandy & Sainsbury, 2007, pp. 243–245; Meret & Siim 2013, pp. 85–86). The *folkhem*’s universalist claims were nonetheless underpinned by social marginalisation, and even forced sterilisation of those who did not meet the ideals of a “fit” and “authentic” Swedish citizenry. This affected not only people deemed genetically unfit (with physical and intellectual disabilities), or those among certain “problematic ethnic minorities” (particularly Roma and Sámi), but also women considered to fail the feminine ideal of “good citizens” (such as single mothers living in extreme poverty), and even migrant women whose emancipatory efforts embedded into their own cultural backgrounds were dismissed as of lower dignity (cf. Andersson, 2009, p. 230; Hirdman 2000, pp. 235–236; Knocke, 1991, p 473). More recently, as the overall makeup of Sweden’s population continuously diversified, socio-cultural cohesion resurfaces reiterated in a different key: the supposedly gender equal Swedish natives, both women and men, are distinguished from their immediate Other, that are thereby considered to fail reaching to the ideals of gender equality and women’s emancipation (Mulinari & Neergaard 2012, pp. 16–17; Norocel, 2016, p. 375).

This tension was employed as political currency by the populist radical right, in the sense that the SD exploited the *folkhem*’s conceptual saliency to cement an image of the Swedish society as the home reserved exclusively to its (Swedish) people under constant threat at the hands of its immediate Others. On this matter, the SD claimed to be the *folkhem*’s sole defenders, positioning themselves as the only political alternative in Swedish politics, as all mainstream

political parties were derisively labelled with the collective appellation “the seven-leaf clover” to underline their supposedly shared political stance on such matters as migration, integration, and multiculturalism. In other words, the SD constructed an antagonist discursive model, which opposes the Swedish welfare model—the *folkhem* built by previous generations—to the “unrestrained migration” of the present. These were accompanied by demands for a tougher approach to matters pertaining to law and order, and a renunciation to feminist emancipatory activism, with the purpose of returning to conservative moral attitudes and traditional gender roles (Mulinari & Neergaard 2014: 53–54; Norocel 2013, p. 5; Towns, Karlsson & Eyre, 2014, p. 243). Indeed, research evinces that such welfare chauvinist appeals were used to consolidate the SD’s ideological profile in its struggle for political legitimacy, both in its confrontations with other Swedish parliamentary parties, in its mediated interactions in Swedish mainstream media, and in the attempts of its activist to distil cultural racism into a rhetoric of care for their own ethnic group (Hellström & Nilsson, 2010; Hellström *et al.*, 2012; Mulinari & Neergaard, 2012; 2014; Norocel, 2010; 2013; 2016; Towns *et al.* 2014). Against this socio-political and historical context, the present article aims to add a systematic examination of how the SD justifies and reproduces inequalities intersecting gender and ethnicity in the context of the *folkhem*, which serves as a background for the ideological normalization of the populist radical right.

### ***The Context of Situation: Almedalen and the Mediatisation of Politics***

The *context of situation* in the present study is constituted by the annual Almedalen week, which arguably represents the apex of mediatised politics in Sweden. Indeed, contemporary Swedish politics illustrate the contemporary neoliberal mediatisation of politics, whereby political actors professionalise and decrease their level of direct interaction with their constituencies turning to media in order to articulate, and disseminate their political discourse.

Consequently, key political actors, particularly chairpersons, engage in what may be perceived as continuous political campaigning, even outside the electoral period, and privilege media interaction as a means to position themselves and their parties on the political spectrum (Wendt 2012, pp. 17–21; Wodak, 2015, pp. 134–136). In this context, the Almedalen week, gathering political parties, lobby groups and businesses, public administration representatives, and journalists on the island of Gotland, enables maximum visibility for parliamentary parties and their chairpersons. However, participation to this “political spectacle” (Wendt, 2012) is restricted to those parties that have gained parliamentary representation in the previous elections. All political parties represented in the Swedish parliament are granted their own “party day” in the Almedalen week; the highest point of this one-day political action is represented by the party’s chairperson delivering their speech.

These speeches serve several different political functions in the arena of political action (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, pp. 92–93). They are an opportunity for the chairpersons to frame ongoing political matters according to their party’s ideological positioning on the political spectrum, by indicating and confirming the party’s course of action in specific policy areas for the year ahead. These speeches are broadcast live on the main Swedish state-owned media (both radio and TV), and on several private TV channels, and later are discussed extensively in a variety of media outlets. As such, these speeches are important for several fields of political action concomitantly: consolidating public attitudes towards the party’s political agenda, but also rallying internal support within the party for a specific line of action, whilst serving as both political advertising and political control of their opponents (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, pp. 91). Consequently, these speeches constitute a specific *genre* of political discourse, representing the apex of mediatised politics in Swedish context.

For the Swedish populist radical right, the Almedalen week represents an important instance of ideological normalization. Indeed, since the SD passed the parliamentary threshold in the 2010 elections, it was included in the rotating system of Almedalen week starting June 2011. Consequently, the SD chairman Jimmie Åkesson delivered the speech summing up “the SD day”, effectively bypassing the *cordon sanitaire* that Swedish media had previously attempted to maintain around the SD and its leader (Loxbo, 2015, p. 171). As such, the empirical material consists of Åkesson’s political speeches delivered during the Almedalen week from 2011 until 2016, which according to the DHA approach are deemed to be *textual* manifestations of the populist radical right *discourse* embedded in the *context* described above (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, pp. 98–93). The six speeches were retrieved from the Almedalen website maintained by the state-owned Swedish Radio (*Sveriges radio*, SR). Each speech lasts between a bit over half an hour (SR, 2016) and almost an hour (SR, 2015) (see Table 1), resulting in a corpus of slightly less than 30,000 words. The translations from Swedish are the author’s unless otherwise stated. The DHA thus equipped with a gender lens enables mapping out from a gender perspective how the populist radical right leader employs the *folkhem* as an organizing theme in his annual speeches as a means for framing the SD’s political endeavour of “taking Sweden back”, to map out the SD’s ideological normalization in the context of mediatised politics in Sweden.

Table 1. about here

Nomination (how events/people are referred to) and predication (which characteristics are attributed to them) as discursive strategies (Wodak, 2015, p. 51), are analysed both at micro-level (lexical constructions), and macro-level (semiotic practices) of text. As such, several keywords were initially identified with the help of the analytical framework discussed above—

i.e. *folkhem*; people (the Swedish root *folk*\*); women (*kvinna*\*) and men (*män*\*—though not in the singular form, as it may be used as the English neutral pronoun “one”); migrant (*invandr*\*); society (*samhäll*\*); Sweden (*Sverige*\*); and welfare (*välfärd*\*). This enabled mapping out a few thematic clusters based on the study’s theoretical framework: the role of “our” Swedish women in preserving the *folkhem*, and the Other women. The detailed analysis of these clusters is presented in the following section.

### **On *Folkhem*, “Our” Women, and “Other” Women: Lexical Constructions**

At the micro-level of analysis, more clearly examining the lexical manner of construction of Åkesson’s speeches by means of the selected keywords (see Table 2 below), the *folkhem*\*—both in singular form and in its declensions, such as *folkhem* idea (*folkhemside*), etc.—does not seem to be a very frequent occurrence, appearing 15 times altogether in the corpus. In fact, it declines sharply from a total of 11 utterances in the first speech (SR, 2011), to merely three utterances in the second (SR, 2012), then it disappears altogether (SR, 2013, 2014, 2015), only to reappear once in the last analysed speech (SR, 2016). In turn, the people (*folk*\*)—with a total of 32 occurrences in the whole corpus—seems to be a more constant, albeit rather slender presence, from a minimum of two utterances (SR, 2011) to a maximum of 10 (SR, 2015). The references to women (*kvinna*\*)—totalling 45 occurrences in the corpus—ranged from a minimum of two (SR, 2012) to as many as 25 utterances (SR, 2013). In turn, there are hardly any references to men (*män*\*)—when discounting such constructions as humanitarian (*medmänskighet*), or human beings (*människor*)—with a total of 18 utterances, which are generally tied into such constructions as “men and women”. The nominal references pertaining to the description of the non-native Other, such as migrants (*invandr*\*), was significantly higher—50 occurrences in the corpus—although rather unevenly distributed between the speeches, from six utterances (SR, 2011, 2012) to as many as 18 utterances (SR,

2014). Sweden (*Sverige*\*) was the only keyword that maintained a high frequency throughout the analysed empirical material with a total of 162 utterances, from a minimum of 16 utterances (SR, 2012) to as many as 39 utterances (SR, 2013, 2016), even when removing inherent references to the party itself (*Sverigedemokraterna*). Interestingly, when mapping out the frequency of references to welfare (*välfärd*\*), which totalled 33 occurrences, it is uttered at least once the (SR, 2016) while the maximum is 11 times (SR, 2012); however, several of these instances, particularly in the latter speeches (SR, 2013, 2014, 2015), are in fact a combination of several keywords referring to the Swedish welfare society (*välfärdsamhäll*\*), which lies conceptually close to the *folkhem*. In other words, despite the noticeable decline in its frequency in lexical form, the *folkhem* as conceptual construct occupies a prominent place in the corpus as a semiotic practice. In addition, these references to Swedish welfare seem to occur concomitantly with a higher frequency of references to women as well (SR, 2013, 2014, 2015), which may be interpreted as cues for the gendered construction of the *folkhem*; these connections were then explored more in detail at the macro-level of analysis.

Table 2. about here

### **On *Folkhem*, “Our” Women, and “Other” Women: Semiotic Practices**

At the macro-level of analysis—thus examining the semiotic practices, and building on the preliminary findings discussed above—Åkesson’s speeches consolidate an idealised vision of the *folkhem* as an exemplary welfare society based on the homogeneous (national) community of Swedish citizens (SR, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016). In so doing, Åkesson seems to consistently follow the line of reasoning that he has previously put forward in his editorials in the party newspaper, before the SD gained seats in the parliament in aftermath of the 2010 Swedish parliamentary elections. These have been analysed elsewhere (see Norocel 2010,

2013). This line of reasoning appears very clearly articulated in Åkesson's speeches from 2011 and 2012, wherein he emphasised that the SD politics are about “unity and consensus, about a coherent, warm, and solidary Sweden” (SR 2012, 20'23”–20'30”), about a tightly-knit society that makes no distinctions “between the privileged or the neglected, [There are] no sweethearts and no stepchildren. There, not one of them despises the other.” (SR, 2011, 41'20”–41'56”) In other words, the *folkhem* envisaged by Åkesson is one built on the ethnic and cultural homogeneity of the Swedish native majority, engaged in an intimate relationship characterised by warmth and solidarity towards one another in a manner resembling a family reunited under the *folkhem*'s protective roof. Åkesson makes it clear in the following speech that the SD is driven by “a story about the good home for citizens, about the *folkhem*, a tale of a society where no one is left behind. Our story is about the family. In a loving family, people are there for one another, supporting each other unconditionally [...].” (SR, 2012, 20'31”–21'00”)

His reference to such a nation-wide family with “no darlings” and “no stepchildren”, wherein “no one is left behind” serves two important functions which cement Åkensson's intersectionality from above perspective. First, it is an almost verbatim reproduction of the iconic early-twentieth century social-democratic discourse, which consecrated the *folkhem* as the welfare society erected on the principles of equality, solidarity, and confidence in progress (Hansson 1928/2010, pp. 57–58). The repetition of these words almost a hundred years later appears indicative of Åkesson's intention to present himself as *the* legitimate heir to the social-democratic *folkhem* in the contemporary political context in Sweden. Second, describing the *folkhem*'s inhabitants as family members, Åkesson attempts to enforce the idea that the Swedish native majority constitutes a homogenous community of blood. This also indicates the discrete contours of a conservative model of authority based on a father-mother-

children social order, which entails a division of responsibilities among the family members to provide for and defend, on the one hand, and to birth and nurture, on the other, confirmed by an unwritten social contract that proclaims the formal equality of its members (Hellström *et al.*, 2012, pp. 195–196). In so doing, Åkesson specified the criteria for membership in the *folkhem*, thereby enforcing a distinction between those “rightfully” belonging to the *folkhem*’s enclosure, and migrant Others as potential intruders among the *folkhem*’s family members (SR, 2011, 42'56"—44'10", 2014, 48'35"—49'05", 2016, 25'40"—26'10").

On this matter, Åkesson operated a discursive distinction between those migrant Others that assimilated into the Swedish society and embraced the “Swedish values” underpinning the “Christian, democratic world” that Sweden is part of, on the one hand, and those migrant Others who failed the integration test and instead had willingly joined “the world’s Islamists”, on the other (SR, 2014, 33'54"—35'10", 2015, 6'25"—10'35"). In other words, “becoming Swedish” is not a mere matter of fulfilling the administrative citizenship requirements, rather it entails a more profound process, which hinges on “cultural commensurability with respect to the foundational values that define [...] Europe’s cultural heritage.” (Betz & Meret, 2009, p. 318). While acknowledging the difference between Muslim faith and Islamist ideology, Åkesson underlined however Christianity and its moral values as central cornerstones of the *folkhem*. This may indicate a thinly veiled assumption that Muslim faith in itself—described by Åkesson as a deeply patriarchal religion of “genital mutilation of completely healthy children”, and of “violence and oppression in the name of honour” (SR, 2014, 06'11"—08'17")—constitutes a hindrance for the migrant (Muslim) Other to become a full-fledged and law-abiding citizen of the *folkhem*, which “had been built on democracy and a thousand years old Christian foundation” (SR, 2015, 10'27"—10'35").

What is striking in this context, however, is that Muslim faith is depicted as irreconcilable with the *folkhem*'s founding principles on deeply gendered terms, in the sense that the status of incompatibility is not only based on dogmatic differences between Islam and Christianity, but also on the *folkhem*'s socio-cultural cohesion underpinned by women's rights as full-fledged citizens, which consequently stand against genital mutilation, forced marriages, or honour killings (SR, 2016, 04'10"—04'26"). Claiming to defend these "Swedish values", Åkesson criticised the Swedish establishment fighting for gender equality for turning a blind eye to the plight of Other women that "each summer fall victims to forced marriages in the name of preserving the family honour" (SR, 2013, 20'20"—20'38"). Concerning the treatment of intersectionality, then, the Other women appear to be talked about in Åkesson's speeches, but without the possibility of testifying for or against their alleged status of oppression. Their different religious denomination seems to suffice in determining their position of vulnerability and oppression at the hands of their men in front of an irresponsible Swedish establishment. Concerning the selected keywords, not only that references to these women are scarce in Åkesson's speeches, but these are mainly contextual, the Other women generally being referred to as "victims" rather than as (migrant) women at all (SR, 2013, 20'20"—20'38", 2014, 6'11"—7'10").

From an intersectional perspective, then, the description of the Other women as powerless victims reiterates stereotypical depictions of migrant women as "vulnerable and helpless, burdened by their obsolete traditions and cultural heritage, controlled by oppressive men, tied down by their large families, by their lifestyles and values." (Knocke, 1991, p. 473). What is new in this context, however, is the singling out of a religion, namely Islam, as both an inherent danger for the Swedish *folkhem*, and a crucial obstacle for the emancipation of Other women. In other words, it is a discursive strategy whereby Åkesson employs previous claims

that gender equality is a *fait accompli* in Sweden, inasmuch as to “ethnify powerlessness” (Knocke, 1991), and emphasise the distinction between the Swedish “democratic welfare society” and the conservative and traditionalist (Muslim) migrant Other, which are thus given the contours of a homogenous group (Wodak, 2015, p. 153).

These notwithstanding, Swedish women maintain a constant albeit uneven presence in Åkesson’s speeches, indicative of the fact that not all women are rendered voiceless and disempowered in populist radical right discourse. It is not only that; Åkesson mentioned at length those SD supporters among women that have engaged in a dialogue with him (SR, 2011, 31’55”–35’36”, 2013, 14’20”–17’58”, 2014, 36’40”–38’32”), their life stories being narrated in what may be considered an attempt to give more consistent contours to what previous research constantly argued to be a rather narrow and elusive group (Hellström & Nilsson, 2010, p. 58; Loxbo, 2015, pp. 182–183). The SD’s difficulty in appealing to women voters was attributed by Åkesson to the party’s specific development. The SD had successfully highlighted its core “conservative elements [...] with regard to defence policy, immigration policy, in terms of criminal policy”, but failed to explain “its efforts and vision for a secure and prosperous society” (SR, 2015, 20’26”–21’43”).

Tellingly, in one of Åkesson’s first speeches, the story of 82-year old Hjördis—the woman that he supposedly encountered in his visit to the southern city of Malmö—illustrates how the lives of Swedish women are affected by foreign organised crime because of too generous asylum and migration policies, the allegedly relaxed Swedish criminal legislation, and the underfinancing of police forces (SR, 2011). Falling victim to “a league from Eastern Europe”, that “tricked their way into her home, who beat her up, and robbed her of all her valuables”, Hjördis’ life had changed completely: “She has always been cheerful and outgoing, but now

she suffers from constant fear and anxiety, and she does not even dare to go out alone after dark.” Moreover, Hjördís’ misfortune was given as an example of an increasingly aloof and dangerous Swedish society wherein “10 per cent of the country’s women don’t dare to go out alone in the evening, one that has more reported rapes than both Burundi and Swaziland” (SR, 2011, 31’55”–35’36”). Connecting the issue of controlling migration to that of ensuring the (Swedish) women’s safety in the public space is nonetheless a recurring strategy across the analysed speeches (SR, 2016, 20’50”–21’50”). In an intersectional key, this story specifies gender as an important social position in the dichotomic relationship between native Swedes and allogenic Others. Indeed, these intertextual relations denote that safeguarding the *folkhem* entails not only a defence of its constitutive values and its social institutions—a direct reference to maintaining socio-cultural cohesion—but also the imperative to protect “its” women, and consequently ensure the implicit Swedishness of future generations to call the *folkhem* their own—preserving the country’s ethnic majority (Norocel, 2013, pp. 150–153).

Signalling a dramatic shift in tone and focus, in 2013, however, Åkesson allocated a substantive portion of his speech to sharing with his audience the confession of a woman that adamantly subscribed to the SD’s self-proclaimed line of “Sweden-friendly politics” (*Sverigevänlig politik*), and illustratively signed her letter with “a friend of Sweden at heart” (*Sverigevän i hjärtat*) (SR, 2013, 14’20”–19’07”). Her text is waved in with Åkesson’s own ideological posturing along a conservative and welfare chauvinist line of reasoning concerning the women’s place in the *folkhem*. The 60-year old “friend of Sweden at heart” was described as a woman “with a long career in geriatric nursing services offered by the commune”, thereby reiterating the image of (Swedish) women confined by a highly gender-segregated labour market to lowly-paid positions in the state-owned welfare system (Mulinari & Neergaard, 2014, pp. 52–53). Despite her meagre salary, she had dedicated all her energy

to “make life bearable for the elderly and the sick in her care. At the same time, she nurtured a family with three children, now [enlarged] with four grandchildren. She took care of the house and the garden.” (SR, 2013, 17'00”–17'29”) For her heroic self-sacrifice and dedication to her family, by holding steadfast to traditional family values, Åkesson praised her to be a “true pillar of the society” (*samhällsbärare*), adding:

And she is not alone, there are many such pillars of the society, such heroines, just like her, that are friends of Sweden at heart, that embody in their daily lives Sweden-friendly values and mores, that keep together and cherish their families, that defend traditions, that seek to provide a feeling of security and community, that through their hard work contribute to our common construction of the society. [...] They are all friends of Sweden at heart! (SR 2013, 17'59”–19'07”)

Such discursive strategy unveils Åkesson’s attempts to normalize populist radical right ideology: not only that the SD is given the opportunity to claim a comprehensive welfare political agenda, it also portrays the SD as a legitimate, even the preferable political option for those preoccupied with the state of Swedish welfare system. These notwithstanding, gender equality is confirmed as a keystone in the *folkhem*’s construction inasmuch as it materialised in a neutralised manner—men and women may work equally outside the family home, but in such a manner careful not to upset the conservative sensitivity towards preserving and enforcing traditional gender social positions within the family and Swedish society. Consequently, Swedish women are portrayed as selfless heroines caring for their family at home, and as a sign of their emancipation, caring for their fellow citizens outside the home as well. Although Other women represent a substantial part of the workforce in these lowly-paid positions in the Swedish welfare system, they go unacknowledged. In other words, Åkesson

deprives them of agency as workers maintaining the *folkhem*, instead they are relegated to a position of victims to their own conservative and traditionalist families, thus removed from the wider Swedish society.

In this context, the class element is used instrumentally in order to justify opposition to the unreasonable financial burden entailed by the Others' presence within the *folkhem*. Even in these circumstances when in his speeches Åkesson apparently voices the concerns of Swedish working class women, these are refined and reproduced through his own ideological filter, and his position as SD chairperson. In this, Åkesson confirms the SD's self-appointed task to defend Swedish women not only from the menacing (male) Muslim Other, but also from pursuing emancipatory activism on their own, thereby confirming tacitly the patriarchal assumption about male superior rationality he tries to embody. Indeed, although seemingly concerned with the (Swedish) women's challenges in their daily lives, Åkesson's preoccupation with gender equality as part of the *folkhem* system is only instrumental, and serves a welfare chauvinist purpose to instigate and consolidate the Swedish native ethnic majority's opposition to the presence of the migrant (Muslim) Other in the *folkhem*'s confines (cf. Norocel, 2010, pp. 173–176). This reflects similar developments across Europe, whereby the populist radical right leaders morphed from “radical right-wing ‘thugs’ [into] well-educated and well-dressed demagogues, typifying overtly ‘soft’, caring and responsible politicians.” (Wodak 2015, p. 185)

## Conclusions

This article examined how Åkesson conceptualized gendered social positions in the *folkhem* in his annual speeches in Almedalen, since the SD entered the Swedish Parliament in 2010 to date. The article makes two contributions to the study of populist radical right in Europe, with

the help of “intersectionality from above” as an analytical perspective. First, the article contributes analytically, strengthening the arguments of previous analyses, which evinced that populist radical right parties become increasingly well-adapted to the cultural and ideological idiosyncrasies of Northern Europe (Akkerman & Hagelund, 2007; Keskinen, 2012; Meret, 2015; Meret & Siim, 2013; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015; Norocel, 2013, 2016; Siim & Stoltz, 2014). Most importantly, the article sheds light on the means through which the Swedish populist radical right utilised welfare chauvinist appeals to formally acknowledge the importance of equality between men and women in Sweden, which was consequently both elicited as key to maintaining the *folkhem*’s socio-cultural cohesion, and employed as a device to contour two antithetic entities: the supposedly gender equal Swedish ethnic majority as the opposite of the allegedly deeply patriarchal migrant Other. Such a move was nonetheless coupled with a strong emphasis on the SD’s own conservative understanding of family values and class antagonism, thereby actively counteracting emancipatory efforts towards substantive gender equality, and social solidarity. Extrapolating these findings at the wider European level, then, it seems that populist radical right discourses combine economic arguments (“our welfare”), and cultural references (“our national values”) to their repertoire of discursive strategies to appeal to wider categories of voters.

Second, the article contributes empirically to the study of populist radical right in Sweden. Previous contributions to the field have evinced the SD’s complex ideological transformations towards an alleged ideological normalization (Loxbo, 2015), centred on a welfare chauvinist project underpinned by a “care rhetoric” as cue for cultural racism, and traditional gender roles (Hellström & Nilsson, 2010; Hellström *et al.*, 2012; Mulinari & Neergaard 2012, 2014; Norocel 2010; 2013; 2016; Towns *et al.*, 2014). The present article adds a systematic gender analysis of the manner of normalizing populist radical right discourse. Analysing Åkesson’s

speeches at Almedalen, which potentially sketch out and consolidate the SD’s course of action in specific policy areas, the article provides a more nuanced picture of the party’s ideological transformations in what it is envisaged to be the SD’s ideological normalization—from fringe nationalism (antidemocratic national socialism), and outright racism towards welfare chauvinism, and cultural racism (Islamophobic exclusionary nationalism) in conservative clothing.

It remains to be seen whether Åkesson will continue to signal the SD’s ideological normalization, and connect the party’s core concerns—the vociferous endeavour of bringing migration to a near halt, and the proclaimed tougher approaches to law and order—to more socially-oriented issues—particularly the state’s role in providing future welfare services, and the alleged withdrawal of politics from family matters—in such a manner that could potentially consolidate the populist radical right interpretation of the *folkhem* in a conservative welfare chauvinist key. This may potentially make the SD more appealing to women voters in the future. By the same measure, the gradual opening of the main centre-right Moderate Coalition Party towards a “punctual dialogue” with the SD could eventually lead to a governmental coalition between the two parties, like in Norway, sanctioning the normalization of populist radical right in Sweden. These constitute pressing topics for further research.

## Acknowledgements

This article is part of a project that has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 750076.

## References

Akkerman, T., & Hagelund, A. (2007). "Women and children first!" Anti-immigration parties and gender in Norway and the Netherlands. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 41(2), 197–214.

Andersson, J. (2009). Nordic Nostalgia and Nordic Light: The Swedish model as Utopia 1930–2007. *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 34(3), 229–245.

Bergqvist, C., Olsson Blandy, T., & Sainsbury, D. (2007). Swedish State Feminism: Continuity and Change. In J. Outshoorn & J. Kantola (Eds.), *Changing State Feminism* (pp. 224–245). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Betz, H.-G., & Meret, S. (2009). Revisiting Lepanto: the political mobilization against Islam in contemporary Western Europe. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 43(3–4), 313–334.

de los Reyes, P., Molina, I., & Mulinari, D. (2006) Maktens (o)lika förklärnader [The (many) facets of power]. In P. de los Reyes, I. Molina & D. Mulinari (Eds.), *Maktens (o)lika förklärnader. Kön, klass och etnicitet i det postkoloniala Sverige* (pp. 9–28). Stockholm: Atlas.

Hansson, P.–A. (2010). Folkhemstalet [The Folkhem Speech]. *Fronesis* 34, 57–61.

Hellström, A., & Nilsson, T. (2010). "We are the good guys" Ideological positioning of the nationalist party Sverigedemokraterna in contemporary Swedish politics. *Ethnicities*, 10(1), 55–76.

Hellström, A., Nilsson, T., & Stoltz, P. (2012). Nationalism vs. Nationalism: The Challenge of the Sweden Democrats in the Swedish Public Debate. *Government & Opposition*, 47(2), 186–205.

- Hirdman, Y. (2000). *Att lägga livet tillräffa: studier i svensk folkhemspolitik* [Getting to grips with life: studies in the folkhem's politics] (2nd ed.). Stockholm: Carlsson.
- Keskinen, S. (2013). Antifeminism and white identity politics: Political antagonisms in radical right-wing populist and anti-immigration rhetoric in Finland. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 3(4), 225–232.
- Knocke, W. (1991). Women Immigrants – What is the Problem? *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 12(4), 469–486.
- Loxbo, K. (2015). Sverigedemokraterna: Framgångsrikt enfrågefokus [Sweden Democrats: A Successful Single-issue Focus]. *Statsvetenskaplig tidskrift* 117(2), 169–187.
- Mayer, S., Ajanovic, E., & Sauer, B. (2014). Intersections and Inconsistencies. Framing Gender in Right-Wing Populist Discourses in Austria, *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 22(4), 250–266.
- Meret, S. (2015). Charismatic female leadership and gender: Pia Kjærsgaard and the Danish People's Party. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 49(1–2), 81–102.
- Meret, S., & Siim, B. (2013). Gender, Populism and Politics of Belonging: Discourses of Right-Wing Populist Parties in Denmark, Norway and Austria. In B. Siim & M. Mokre (Eds.), *Negotiating Gender and Diversity in an Emergent European Public Sphere* (pp. 78–96). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mouffe, C. (2005). The ‘End of Politics’ and the Challenge of Right-wing Populism. In F. Panizza (Ed.) *Populism in the Mirror of Democracy* (pp. 50–71). London: Verso.
- Mudde, C. (2004). The Populist Zeitgeist, *Governance & Opposition* 39:3, 541–563.

Mudde, C. (2007). *The Populist Radical Right in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mudde, C, & Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2015). *Vox populi or vox masculini? Populism and gender in North Europe and South America*. *Patterns of Prejudice* 49(1–2), 16–36.

Mulinari, D., & Neergaard, A. (2012). Violence, racism, and the political arena: A Scandinavian dilemma. *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 20(1), 12–18.

Mulinari, D., & Neergaard, A. (2014). We are Sweden Democrats because we care for others: Exploring racisms in the Swedish extreme right. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 21(1), 43–56.

Noroce, Ov Cristian (2010). ‘Constructing radical right populist resistance: metaphors of heterosexist masculinities and the family question in Sweden’, *NORMA- Nordic Journal for Masculinity Studies*, 5:2, 169–183.

Noroce, Ov Cristian (2013). *Our People a Tight-knit Family under the Same Protective Roof: A Critical Study of Gendered Conceptual Metaphors at Work in Radical Right Populism*. Helsinki, FI: Unigrafia.

Noroce, Ov Cristian (2016). Populist Radical Right Protectors of the *Folkhem*: Welfare Chauvinism in Sweden. *Critical Social Policy*, 36(3), 371–390.

Norris, P. (2005). *Radical Right: Voters and Parties in the Electoral Market*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Reisigl, M., & Wodak, R. (2009). The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA). In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* (pp. 87–121). London: Sage.

Siim, B., & Stoltz, P. (2014). Editorial. Special issue on “Nationalism, Gender Equality and Welfare: Intersectional Contestations and the Politics of Belonging”. *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 22(4), 247–249.

Spierings, N., Zaslove, A., Mügge, L. M., & de Lange, S. L. (2015). Gender and populist radical-right politics: an introduction. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 49(1–2), 3–15.

SR (Producer) (2011). Jimmie Åkessons tal i Almedalen 2011 [Jimmie Åkesson speech at Almedalen 2011]. *Sveriges radio i Almedalen*. Retrieved October 5, 2016, from <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=83&artikel=4578352>

SR (Producer) (2012). Jimmie Åkesson (SD) talade i Almedalen [Jimmie Åkesson spoke at Almedalen]. *Sveriges radio i Almedalen*. Retrieved October 5, 2016, from <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/gruppsida.aspx?programid=3227&grupp=17878&artikel=5167565>

SR (Producer) (2013). Jimmie Åkessons tal i Almedalen 2013 [Jimmie Åkesson’s speech at Almedalen 2013]. *Sveriges radio i Almedalen*. Retrieved October 5, 2016, from <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/gruppsida.aspx?programid=3227&grupp=19466&artikel=5580476n>

SR (Producer) (2014). Jimmie Åkessons tal i Almedalen 2014 [Jimmie Åkesson’s speech at Almedalen 2014]. *Sveriges radio i Almedalen*. Retrieved October 5, 2016, from <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/avsnitt/401044?programid=3227>

SR (Producer) (2015). Jimmie Åkesson talar i Almedalen 2015 [Jimmie Åkesson speaks at Almedalen 2015]. *Sveriges radio i Almedalen*. Retrieved October 5, 2016, from <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/avsnitt/566690?programid=3227>

SR (Producer) (2016). Jimmie Åkesson (SD) talar i Almedalen 2016 [Jimmie Åkesson speaks at Almedalen 2015]. *Sveriges radio i Almedalen*. Retrieved October 5, 2016, from <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/avsnitt/743442?programid=3227&groupid=23060>

Towns, A., Karlsson, E. & Eyre, J. (2014). The equality conundrum: Gender and nation in the ideology of the Sweden Democrats. *Party Politics*, 20(2), 237–247.

Verloo, M., & Lombardo, E. (2007). Contested Gender Equality and Policy Variety in Europe. Introducing a Critical Frame Analysis Approach. In M. Verloo (Ed.), *Multiple meanings of gender equality. A Critical Frame Analysis of Gender Policies in Europe* (pp. 21–49). Budapest: CEU Press.

Walby, S., Armstrong, J., & Strid, S. (2012). Intersectionality: Multiple Inequalities in Social Theory. *Sociology*, 46(2), 224–240.

Wendt, M. (2012). *Politik som spektakel: Almedalen, mediemakten och den svenska demokratin* [Politics as Spectacle: Almedalen, the Power of Media and the Swedish Democracy]. Stockholm: Atlas.

Wodak, R. (2015). *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*. London: Sage.

Yuval-Davis, N. (1997). *Gender and Nation*. London: Sage.

Almedalen	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Speech (year)						
Length	51'17"	38'26"	41'25"	58'30"	58'20"	34'03"

**Table 1. Length of Jimmie Åkesson's speeches**

Word root (frequency)	Speech (year)	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	Total occurrences (over the years)
<i>folkhem*</i>		11	3	-	-	-	1	15
people ( <i>folk</i> *)		2	6	3	3	10	8	32
women ( <i>kvinn</i> *)		3	2	25	3	9	3	45
men ( <i>män</i> *)		-	2	10	-	4	2	18
migrant ( <i>invandr</i> *)		6	6	11	18	7	2	50
society ( <i>samhäll</i> *)		15	16	5	9	10	23	78
Sweden ( <i>Sverige</i> *)		21	16	26	39	21	39	162
welfare ( <i>välfärd</i> *)		2	11	8	9	2	1	33

Table 2. Keywords frequency in Åkesson's speeches