

Researchers working in a currently ongoing European research project have found that the reasons behind people's support for populist movements are complex.

"Our interview material shows that here in Finland, it isn't just voters of the populist radical right Finns Party who bring up populist themes, but others do too, depending on the theme that is being discussed," Professor Inari Sakki says.

Inari Sakki started as Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Eastern Finland in the beginning of February. She leads Academy of Finland and Kone Foundation funded projects addressing populism and participates in the PopRep project funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, which examines populist representations in four European countries. In addition to Finland, representations of populism are studied in Switzerland, Greece and France.

In the project, populism is examined using quantitative and qualitative materials. Sakki's research group is currently conducting in-depth interviews in the four countries participating in the project. In Finland, a total of 55 interviews have been conducted with people of different ages and living in different parts of the country.

"We have interviewed people voting for different parties. Our material is extremely interesting, and it highlights the multitude of narratives and reasons behind populism's appeal."

The project also examines how populist politicians' rhetoric and campaign materials are shared and received on [various social media platforms](#), which puts the focus on visual and multimodal construction of populist messages. Various materials, such as images, news articles and statistics, have also been used in the in-depth interviews.

"When examining emotions and representations, it is often easier for people to talk about the images they see," Sakki says.

Manipulation of people's representations can even mobilize wars

Identifying and unpacking phenomena that are naturalized, that is, being taken for granted has been an overarching theme throughout Sakki's research career. In her research, she has explored identity, misogyny, hate speech and populism, among other things. She looks at these phenomena from the perspective of national and European identities, history education, [political rhetoric](#) and human rights.

The theory of social representations stands at the core of Sakki's research. Social representations are commonly formed everyday theories and conceptions of things that matter to people. Sakki used this approach already in her doctoral research, which examined how people in different European countries are raised as European citizens, and how national and European identities are built.

"As a researcher, I'm interested in how social representations shape the relationship between the individual and society. People's actions and orientation to reality are guided not only by knowledge and their own conceptions, but also by beliefs, in particular what we think other people think, and what we think about others' knowledge of us. These representations and meta-representations play an important role and can also be used for political purposes. To put it bluntly, manipulation of people's conceptions can even spark war," Sakki says.

On the populism spectrum, Finland and Switzerland are moderate

Features typical of populism include anti-elitism, focus on the difference between the people and the elite, and the idea of the people's sovereignty, i.e., their right to self-determination. Although anti-immigration is linked to populism, Sakki says that it is not an essential dimension of it.

"Anti-immigration is typical of a certain kind of populism, but not of populism by default. It is worth keeping in mind that populism has existed long before the issue of immigration became politicized."

According to preliminary results from the European PopRep research project, the dimensions of populism in Finland and Switzerland are moderate, unlike in Greece and France. Based on the study, it may be possible to provide estimates of whether there are populist parties in Finland's political field.

It is important to study the mechanisms of populism

Sakki points out that it is important to study what fuels populism.

"It should be remembered that not all populism is bad. It can make the voices of those furthest from the political mainstream heard."

However, there are also populist mechanisms that are detrimental to certain groups of people and to human rights, and these are something Sakki has tried to make visible in her research. For example, her analysis of the Finns Party's election campaign videos shows that anti-immigration messages are skillfully constructed, entertaining the viewer by means of sound and imagery that can be construed as racist.

"It is also alarming to see how misogyny is linked to populist messages. That's why it is important to scrutinize the content of populist messages that are built intentionally by using rhetoric, humor and populist

imagery."

Social psychology research cannot ignore the visual nature of modern society

Populism is a topical phenomenon that currently captures the interest of many researchers of politics and social sciences. In social psychology, populism has been studied less, although it is closely linked to the processes of social psychology, such as representations, emotions, and identities, which are also at the theoretical core of Sakki's research into populism. Alongside populism research, other important themes of Sakki's research focus on collective memories, national identities, and Europeanness.

With regard to the latter, Sakki leads the Narrated Nation project funded by the Academy of Finland, which examines the creation, nature and use of history-related conceptions in the media, politics and education from the perspective of social psychology.

The project studies how national narratives are created in the media, and what role schools and teaching of history play in raising and educating national and European citizens. It also examines the creation of otherness in political rhetoric, for example through representations of refugees. The research material is diverse, including various media materials, cultural products, textbooks and speeches by politicians.

"A third line of research, and a line that is important to me, is theoretical-methodological. Visuality has become increasingly important in modern society, and social psychology cannot ignore this. This is why I'd like to expand research into social representations and discourses to the field of multimodal research. I believe this type of an approach will offer better tools for a more diverse understanding of socially constructed reality

and, for example, for examining the content of everyday thinking that may be difficult to put into words, intentionally silenced, or even unconscious."

Provided by University of Eastern Finland

Citation: The reasons behind people's support for populist movements are complex, research shows (2022, March 29) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-03-people-populist-movements-complex.html>

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