

“We Are Not as They Portray Us”: Women Populist Leaders’ Re-Presentations of Racism-Related Scandals

Katarina Pettersson ¹ , Jennifer De Paola ¹ , and Gilda Sensales ² 

¹ Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki, Finland

² Department of Psychology of Developmental and Socialization Processes, Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

Correspondence: Katarina Pettersson (katarina.pettersson@helsinki.fi)

Submitted: 17 March 2026 **Accepted:** 30 June 2026 **Published:** 29 July 2026

Issue: This article is part of the issue “From the Far-Right to the Far-Left: Women Populist Leaders in Comparative Perspective” edited by Henriette Müller (New York University Abu Dhabi) and Pamela Pansardi (University of Pavia), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i515>

Abstract

This article offers a comparative analysis of how two prominent women populist leaders—Finland’s Riikka Purra and Italy’s Giorgia Meloni—respond to racist scandals involving themselves or their parties. The cases analysed include the resurfacing of Purra’s past racist online comments and Meloni’s reaction to racist and antisemitic remarks made by members of her party’s youth wing. Using actantial analysis informed by social representations theory, we analyse media-reported statements by the two politicians. The article identifies how these leaders negotiate political accountability and manage their image in the face of controversy. We show how scandals are not only individual crises but arenas in which shared social meanings are constructed and contested. Despite differences in the two politicians’ responses, our analysis shows the centrality of denial, self-defence, and counterattacks in their scandal management, calling into question the notion that right-wing populist women are bound by gender-stereotypical repair strategies. This study makes two contributions: First, it bridges the gap between two separate bodies of literature—women populist leadership and political scandal—by focusing on whether and how gender intersects with the performative dynamics of scandal response. Second, it highlights the utility of social representations theory in capturing how meaning-making functions in political crises. In doing so, the article advances our understanding of the intricate ways in which women populist leaders navigate politically damaging allegations.

Keywords

accountability; actantial analysis; populism; racism; scandals; social representations; women populist leaders

1. Introduction

In the Summer of 2023, news media resurfaced Riikka Purra's—Deputy Prime Minister of Finland and leader of the right-wing populist Finns Party (in Finnish: Perussuomalaiset; in Swedish: Sannfinländarna)—old writings from 2008 posted on an online discussion forum. These writings contained highly offensive racist remarks and incitement to violence against ethnic minorities. Following widespread media attention and political pressure, Purra publicly apologised for the comments, emphasising that they originated from a different time and no longer reflected her views.

One year later, in June 2024, hidden-camera footage published by the Italian online outlet *Fanpage* revealed that young members of Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy party (in Italian: Fratelli d'Italia) were making racist, antisemitic, and neo-fascist remarks, including fascist salutes and praise for extremist groups. As in the Finnish case, the revelations generated a major public scandal, prompting widespread criticism and renewed debate regarding the far-right roots of Meloni's party. Following initial silence, Meloni publicly condemned the actions of the youth wing members and distanced her party from fascism and racism, although her later responses took a more complex rhetorical form.

Political scandals have been conceptualised as norm transgressions that generate public outrage (Neckel, 2005), are amplified by the media (Thompson, 2013), and become sites where social norms, values, and identities are publicly negotiated (Lull & Hinerman, 1997). The nature and severity of the scandal, the position of the involved politician, and the broader political context shape how public actors respond to allegations against them (Newmark et al., 2019). In recent years, research has increasingly examined how right-wing populist politicians manage scandals involving racism, extremism, or anti-democratic rhetoric, often through strategies of denial, victimisation, counterattack, or appeals to anti-elite resentment (e.g., Hatakka et al., 2017; Herkman, 2018). At the same time, scholarship on women populist leaders has highlighted how these politicians often navigate tensions between symbolic modernity and traditionalist, nationalist, or exclusionary agendas (Cilento, 2023; Pettersson et al., 2023; Sensales, 2024).

Both the Finns Party and Brothers of Italy reflect the broader rise and normalisation of populist radical-right parties in Europe, combining nationalist, anti-immigration, and anti-elite rhetoric with increasing electoral and governmental success (Mudde, 2019). While Finland and Italy differ considerably in their political cultures and gender regimes, both countries have recently seen women become increasingly visible and accepted as leaders within right-wing populist parties. Yet these forms of leadership often combine symbolic gender progress with conservative and nationalist political projects. Purra, who succeeded Jussi Halla-aho as leader of the Finns Party in 2021, has publicly rejected feminist framings and presented herself as a strong, self-made politician unwilling to conform to expectations of conciliatory women's leadership (Pettersson & Sakki, 2024). Purra has emphasised immigration restriction, law-and-order policies, and economic conservatism, situating the Finns Party firmly on the populist radical right (Henley, 2023). Meloni, in turn, has combined nationalist rhetoric and traditional family values with the symbolic position of being Italy's first woman Prime Minister (Keeling & Ladini, 2025), embodying what Indelicato and Magalhães Lopes (2024) describe as the paradox of women's right-wing populist leadership.

There is a line of research on (racist) political scandals that has focused specifically on the responses of right-wing populist politicians, and, to a lesser extent, on studies examining the gender dimensions of

right-wing populist leadership and scandal communication. However, research bringing these two fields together remains limited. This article therefore contributes to the literature on populist leadership and political scandal, in a first instance, by examining whether women right-wing populist leaders respond through gender-stereotypical repair strategies identified in previous research, or whether populist and ideological repertoires enable more confrontational and traditionally “masculine” forms of scandal management. Secondly, it demonstrates the utility of a social representations perspective and actantial analysis (Greimas, 1983) for examining how meaning-making, storytelling, and identity construction operate in political crises.

We focus on Purra and Meloni because they represent two prominent women leaders governing European right-wing populist parties, who faced major racism-related scandals within a relatively short period. The selected scandals were analytically relevant because they generated extensive attention, threatened the legitimacy of both leaders and their parties, and required public responses from Purra and Meloni themselves. In Finland, the controversy surrounding Purra’s writings contributed to a broader governmental crisis and parliamentary no-confidence proceedings concerning racism scandals within the ruling coalition (Lehto, 2023). In Italy, the *Fanpage* investigation prompted wider debate regarding racism, antisemitism, and neo-fascist continuities within Brothers of Italy (Pons, 2024). Rather than striving for broader generalisation, the present article compares how two women leaders negotiated racism-related scandals across contrasting gender-political contexts, highlighting how populist scandal repertoires may at times complicate or partially override conventional gendered expectations of political communication.

2. Political Scandals, Right-Wing Populism, and Gender

There are several approaches to and definitions of political scandals. From a sociological perspective, Neckel (2005) conceptualises political scandals as publicised norm transgressions by political actors that generate moral outrage and threaten political legitimacy. According to Neckel, scandals are socially constructed and structured processes that typically evolve from primary exposure to media coverage, followed by public reaction, eventually ending in some form of resolution. Similarly, Thompson (2013) conceives scandals as inseparable from the media environment that shapes their trajectory, and highlights the central role played by intense media coverage in escalating political scandals and damaging the reputation of the involved politicians. Lull and Hinerman (1997) add the dimension of scandals as “morality tales” told in the media, where publicised transgressions become sites for negotiating social values, identities, and desires.

The outcomes of scandals depend on an array of factors, including the severity and type of transgression (e.g., whether it involved personal or political misconduct), the leader’s political capital before the scandal, their degree of partisan loyalty, and whether the leader can reframe the event in their favour (Allern & Pollack, 2012; Newmark et al., 2019). Likewise, politicians’ responses to scandals range from submissive to assertive tactics (Benoit, 2024; McGraw, 2001) and from denials to explicit apologies (Kim et al., 2004). Benoit’s (2024) image repair theory outlines five broad categories of strategies—denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification—which can be used simultaneously or interchangeably as a scandal unfolds. Typically, when a scandal has escalated and outright denial is not possible, politicians deploy self-defensive strategies, including attempts at excusing or justifying the event, providing concessions and partial acknowledgment of responsibility, and attacking accusers by questioning the legitimacy of their allegations (Benoit, 2024; McGraw, 2001).

However, political scandals, the reactions they demand, and the consequences they entail should always be examined in relation to their surrounding cultural context (Allern & Pollack, 2012), especially regarding norms of political morality. This may be particularly important when scandals involve racist or xenophobic dimensions. Regarding scandals around right-wing populist politicians, the literature suggests that these share many features of general political scandals yet also have specific characteristics. In his study of media coverage of scandals surrounding right-wing populist parties in the Nordic countries, Herkman (2018) shows that, depending on the position of the party and the involved member(s), right-wing populists may benefit from scandals. Especially in their incipient phase, these parties may utilise the scandal to claim an underdog position, framing allegations as unjust witch-hunts orchestrated by the media and political elites.

Hatakka et al. (2017), in turn, show that a typical pattern of scandal management by right-wing populist parties is what the authors term the strategy of “calculated ambivalence,” where confrontation (rejecting the legitimacy of the accusation and reframing it as elite/media bias) is mixed with submission (partial distancing from the accused comment or person). Other studies (e.g., Ernst et al., 2019; Pettersson, 2019) confirm that right-wing populist discourse tends to be more confrontational on social media and more submissive in interviews with mainstream news. Such “dual communication” allows right-wing populists to balance between ideological purity and political survival, simultaneously maintaining appeal among loyal supporters while avoiding full alienation from mainstream audiences.

Few studies to date have focused on the gender dimensions of political scandal management. One exception is a study by Cucchi et al. (2021), who experimentally examined participants’ evaluations of restoration strategies by women and men politicians following a scandal. They found that using mitigating circumstances was more beneficial to women politicians, while diffusing responsibility by accusing others was more beneficial to men. These results suggest that gender-stereotypical behaviour—connecting submissive strategies with femininity and assertive strategies with masculinity—evokes more positive public assessments in scandal management.

A question that remains open, however, is whether ideological affiliation interacts with gender in shaping the strategies politicians deploy—and how well they function—in alleviating scandals (Cucchi et al., 2021). Women politicians are generally known to face a “double bind” of identity management: emphasising womanhood may result in accusations of “playing the gender card,” whereas stereotypically strong, “masculine” behaviour may be ridiculed, forcing a lose–lose situation (Jamieson, 1995). Interestingly, some studies suggest that behaving “gender appropriately” may be less constraining for women right-wing populists, as they skilfully navigate between the traditional “patriarchal” ideology of populist parties and liberal norms of women’s rights and gender equality (Bast et al., 2022; Cilento, 2023; Pettersson & Sakki, 2024; Sensales, 2024). Whether and how such navigation matters for the scandal management strategies of right-wing populist women remains unclear. In the following section, we outline how a social representations approach can be deployed to address this question.

3. A Social Representations Approach: Political Scandals as a Co-Construction of Meaning, Ideology, and Identity

A few decades after Moscovici’s (1961) foundational study on psychoanalysis in French society, research on social representations expanded to include gender, adopting diverse theoretical and methodological approaches (Arruda, 2003). This work emphasised the role of language and communication, particularly

through mass media (e.g., Duveen, 1996), in shaping how groups internalise and negotiate social representations and reproduce gender stereotypes (Kruse et al., 1988). This line of research has informed later studies on gender bias in representations of women politicians within the androcentric field of politics (Sensales & Areni, 2017; Sensales et al., 2016).

Like research on political scandals, social representation approaches acknowledge the role of media and publics in constructing social reality and reinforcing or contesting hegemonic ideologies (Wagner et al., 1999), while placing particular emphasis on language and communication (Harré & Moghaddam, 2015). The media are understood as active participants in producing common sense and mediating between political actors and citizens. At the same time, laypeople also actively co-construct reality by promoting competing versions of the social world that protect particular identities and interests (Howarth, 2006). Thus, representations of political scandals become struggles over legitimacy, identity, and power.

A social representations approach, therefore, examines how politicians, media, and publics co-construct meanings and identities around scandals. As Buhagiar and Sammut (2020) argue, social representations are action-oriented forms of social “re-presentation” that guide social practices. Political scandals, in turn, involve interactions between politicians, citizens, and media actors that continuously shape one another (Jerslev et al., 2025). According to Marková (2003), these struggles often revolve around self/other distinctions expressed through narratives, arguments, and justifications.

This framework is particularly relevant for examining how women populist leaders manage racism-related scandals, where ideological and gendered tensions intersect. As noted above in our discussion of the double bind facing women politicians, they are typically judged not only politically but also through gendered expectations regarding authority, rationality, and emotionality (Cucchi et al., 2021; Jamieson, 1995). Media play a central role by framing scandals and demanding responses, forcing politicians to navigate political legitimacy, ideology, and gendered expectations simultaneously.

Social representations research distinguishes between sociogenesis (societal level), microgenesis (group interaction), and ontogenesis, referring to how representations are mobilised in everyday sense-making (Flick et al., 2015). In analysing Purra’s and Meloni’s speeches and written responses, we focus on the ontogenetic level to examine how socially shared representations are activated in their discourse. Although articulated individually, these responses draw on common-sense understandings surrounding their parties and the scandals in question.

4. The Present Study

4.1. Data

The data analysed in this study consists of Riikka Purra’s and Giorgia Meloni’s public statements following racism-related scandals connected to them or their parties. Rather than focusing on explicitly gender-related scandals, we argue that visible racism-related scandals are useful for examining whether and how gender becomes implicated in women populist leaders’ scandal responses under conditions of intense political pressure. Such cases make it possible to explore how gender intersects with broader ideological and populist repertoires even when the controversy itself primarily concerns racism, ideology, and party legitimacy.

The comparison further allows us to examine similar scandal situations across distinct national and gender-political contexts while holding constant several analytically relevant features: both leaders headed electorally successful populist radical-right parties, both scandals concerned racism-related allegations threatening party legitimacy, and both required highly visible public responses. At the same time, Finland and Italy represent contrasting symbolic contexts regarding gender and women's leadership, with Finland often associated with the Nordic model of gender equality (Tanhua, 2018) and Italy associated with more traditional Catholic gender norms. The aim is therefore not statistical generalisation, but analytical comparison of how women populist leaders draw on similar repertoires of meaning-making and scandal management across comparable yet distinct cases.

In the case of Purra, the data consist of 19 news articles collected from the Finnish Broadcasting Company YLE's website, the daily newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*, and the evening tabloid *Ilta-lehti* during the months following the scandal—"Purra" was used as a search word. As Meloni's and Purra's responses to the scandals comprised mainly public statements and social media posts that were reported in news media, the newspapers functioned primarily as repositories of publicly available statements and reactions rather than as objects of media analysis. The articles covering the scandal specifically were then selected manually. Many of the articles cited Purra's blog entry on 10th July 2023, where she defended herself against criticism for past online comments, arguing that digging into her old posts was politically motivated, and insisted she has grown and changed over time. In the later addition, she acknowledged her past frustration about immigration-related issues, framing her earlier angry writings as spontaneous outbursts of anger. The analysed articles also contained Purra's Twitter (later X) posts and responses to the media.

In the case of Meloni, the data consists of 25 news articles collected from major Italian newspapers and news websites—*La Stampa*, *La Repubblica*, *Il Corriere della Sera*, and *Il Fatto Quotidiano*—during the months following the scandal, using "Fanpage scandal" as the search term. Many of these articles referenced four key statements made by Meloni. Her initial response came on June 28, 2024, when she broke her silence and addressed the revelations by *Fanpage* in a press statement at the end of a European Council session in Brussels. This statement was also posted on her social media accounts and widely reported by Italian media. The second statement was an official letter to the leader of the Brothers of Italy, published on July 2, 2024, which reinforced her position on the matter. The third statement occurred on December 16, 2024, during a public speech at the annual political festival organised by the Brothers of Italy, where Meloni directly addressed the youth wing and framed her stance within a broader political narrative. The fourth statement occurred on September 21, 2025, during the youth wing Festival Fenix 2025. The festival's theme was "Without filters. The courage to live in a new time."

4.2. Methodological Perspective and Analytic Approach

We analysed the data using two complementary approaches. First, we applied actantial analysis (Greimas, 1983) to identify the actors (actants) and their actions in the scandal narratives involving Purra and Meloni. Since dealing with the scandal was a central quest for both women politicians, the actantial model is particularly suitable for analysing actions within quest-based narratives (De Paola et al., 2026). This model identifies six key actors that drive a story forward: main character, quest, sender, receiver, helper, and opponent. To illustrate, consider the familiar tale where Prince Charming rescues and marries the Princess (Hébert, 2019). The main character is the protagonist pursuing a goal (Prince Charming); the quest is the

desired achievement (marrying the Princess); the sender is the character who initiates the quest (the King); the receivers are those who benefit from success (the Prince, the King, the kingdom, etc); the helper is the character assisting the hero (e.g., a magic horse); and the opponent is the character hindering the quest (often a dragon). Our analysis focused on identifying these six actors in what we approached as the stories that Purra and Meloni constructed around the scandals.

Next, we examined the central concepts of social representations theory—anchoring, objectification, and themata (Marková, 2003)—for each of the scandals. Anchoring refers to the process of making new or unfamiliar phenomena understandable by connecting them to familiar ideas or categories. Objectification entails the process of turning abstract concepts into concrete, tangible images or symbols, whereas themata constitute deep-seated cultural oppositions (e.g., us/them) that subtly structure how people interpret social issues. Social representations are often organised in narrative form (László, 1997), which helps structure meaning and communicate it effectively. Reflecting this, our identification of objectifications focused on the verbal images generated in written and oral statements about the scandal. Anchorings were understood as the ways in which Purra and Meloni linked different constructions of the scandal to pre-existing concepts.

The first and second authors of this article, being native speakers of Finnish and Italian, respectively, analysed the original data and translated the quotes analysed in Section 5 into English, retaining linguistic nuances as far as possible. Throughout the analytic process, we discussed our interpretations and findings, relating these to each other and reflecting on similarities and differences between the two cases, before finalising the results. Supplementary File 1 contains a full list of articles included in the data corpus and Supplementary File 2 contains the quotes analysed in Section 5 in their original languages.

5. Findings

In this section, we illustrate our findings through excerpts from Purra's and Meloni's written and spoken responses to political scandals. We first analyse these responses using the actantial model to identify the key narrative forces structuring their scandal narratives. We argue that these responses construct stories in which Purra and Meloni are the main characters engaged in a quest to address the scandal while defending themselves and their parties. We then draw on social representations theory to interpret their practices and actions as representational strategies supporting this quest, while examining how gendered positioning and expectations are negotiated within these narratives.

5.1. *Riikka Purra*

The narrative of Purra's response to the resurfacing of her 2008 online comments unfolds across four distinct actions undertaken by Purra herself as the central figure in the narrative. Each action corresponds to a distinct stage in this process, characterised by a specific re-presentation of the scandal and an accompanying communicative shift. Purra's response re-presents the scandal across four representational stages: (a) non-story; (b) politically motivated attack; (c) emotional outburst; and (d) stupid mistake. In the following subsections (5.1.1 to 5.1.4), we illustrate these re-presentations with quotes from the analysed data.

5.1.1. Re-Presenting the Scandal as a “Non-Story”

In this first phase, the prevailing action of the main character—Riikka Purra—is her refusal to make comments or express any guilt. The immediate strategy is one of silence and dismissal, aimed at minimising the issue by framing it as insignificant and unworthy of serious attention. This phase reflects an attempt to construct the scandal as a “non-story” in an effort to avoid amplifying the controversy and to signal that the matter does not merit a substantive response. This is illustrated in the following response Purra gave to *Iltaalehti* in a text message in February:

I have no need to comment on the guestbook writings on Scripta from 2008. I have previously said that I read Halla-aho's blog and took part in the discussion. The guestbook is available for everyone to read. (*Iltaalehti*, July 12, 2023)

From a social representation perspective, by referring to her own violent online writings as “available for everyone to read,” the main character can objectify the alleged scandal as a freely available resource stripped of any mystery or secrecy. In addition, Purra presents her online writing as a thing of the past, anchoring the alleged scandal to the popular notion that time cures everything. Indeed, by repeatedly using past tense and by situating the mistake in the year 2008, the scandal is represented as an “expired” matter—an issue rendered obsolete and resolved by the passage of time. Overall, this initial phase of denial and avoidance functions as a self-defensive strategy to distance the main character and her party from any involvement in racist activities.

5.1.2. Re-Presenting the Scandal as a Politically Motivated Attack

As the media and political opponents intensify scrutiny, Purra shifts to a defensive strategy and represents the scandal as a politically motivated attack to undermine her position as a politician. This narrative positions the main character as the target of unfair treatment by the opponents, who at times remain implicit, yet at other times are explicitly singled out as “left-wing politicians” and “the media.”

In a *YLE* article on July 10, Purra draws on the imagery of the “energetic actor” and the “archeologist” to objectify her opponent as excessively invested in an obsessive “pastime” and “game” she refuses to join. This depiction frames the opponent as relentlessly committed to sustaining the accusations through practices of “wading through the guestbook” and “digging.” The imagery anchors the scandal to a lose-lose scenario in which the main character appears trapped: the accusations will never cease, leaving her unable to alter the situation. Refusing to engage in the “game” can also be interpreted as a strategy for avoiding a gendered double bind in which assertiveness risks being judged as aggression, while compliance risks appearing weak. While declining to participate in the game imposed by the opponents (“but I will not get involved in a game with the left and the media”), she simultaneously redirects attention toward what she frames as the only relevant issue: the political aims of the Finns Party. The full quote is:

Before the elections last winter (IL 1.2.2023) and now again, energetic actors have waded once more through the guestbook of Halla-aho's blog Scripta and searched there for my sins. We're talking about the year 2008. That is, almost ten years before I even entered politics. Surely there will be more to come, since there are thousands of my writings on the internet. Nice pastime for archaeologists. (*YLE*, July 10, 2023)

As she does not feel the need to renounce or apologise for her earlier writings or actions, Purra proceeds:

Why on earth should I do that? I certainly don't agree with nearly everything [I wrote], with many things I do, but I will not get involved in a game with the media and the left....There would be no end to it. Absolutely no end. Even memory would become an issue. So let the interested ones dig. (YLE, July 10, 2023)

On July 13, 2023, Purra frames the quest as the defence of the Finns Party's political legitimacy as it enacts a strict anti-immigration policy within a democratically elected system. In this narrative, the helpers are her fellow party members and supporters, depicted as acting courageously through democratic and legitimate means, whereas the opponents are constructed as adversaries who both actively seek to undermine the party and fail to address the problems that only the Finns Party dares to confront as it "speaks about those problems that others, for one reason or another, do not." Purra declared:

Our immigration policy line is justified and legal, and there is nothing wrong or suspicious about it—even though, from some quarters of the political field, there is a desire to present it as if the goal were to nullify our agenda. (YLE, July 11, 2023)

She proceeded by adding:

The Finns Party always advances its policy objectives in accordance with parliamentary and democratic principles, and also speaks about those problems that others, for one reason or another, do not. (YLE, July 11, 2023)

Overall, the function of this stage is to position the main character and her helper (the Finns Party) as vulnerable underdogs under endless attack by an allegedly biased collective elite comprising the media and political adversaries (the opponents) who engage in an endless "game." This stance of victimhood may become particularly persuasive when it aligns with gendered stereotypes of vulnerability and moral worth, thereby strengthening the representation of Purra as the unjust target of elite hostility rather than as a legitimate object of political accountability.

5.1.3. Re-Presenting the Scandal as an Emotional Outburst Within a Heroic Pursuit

As the controversy continued to dominate the news cycle, Purra shifted toward partial acknowledgment of the issue. She admitted that her remarks were inappropriate, yet denied engaging in dual communication, speaking in different ways depending on the context—news media or online—and the audience (Hatakka et al., 2017)—general population versus own supporters—and downplayed their significance, as demonstrated by the following quote:

I don't engage in any kind of dual communication. I sometimes use humour—I should do that less. I don't think anyone else in my party engages in dual communication either. (YLE, July 12, 2023)

This strategy allowed her to concede some ground while simultaneously creating distance between her outdated and allegedly irrelevant comments from the distant past and her present self, portrayed as the

main character in a quest to defend Finland and Finns. The following quotes from *Ilta-Sanomat* on July 11, 2023, that cited Purra's writings on X illustrate the partial acknowledgement of the issue:

At times, I was very frustrated and despairing about certain side effects of immigration seen in Finland, for example, harassment and sexual offenses against women, and the unequal practices of Islam. As many others have been to. In those moments, one might say or write angrily or foolishly....My angry text is just angry text, nothing more. I do not accept, and have never accepted, any kind of violence....As I said earlier, of course, in this position, stage of life, and age, I would not write anything like that, and I no longer agree with many of those things. (*Ilta-Sanomat*, July 11, 2023)

In these passages, emotional imagery (i.e., frustration, despair, and anger) frames the online comments as an outburst triggered by the main character's frustration at being hindered in her central quest: defending Finland—and particularly Finnish women—positioned as the receivers of that quest. The image of harassment enables Purra to balance her identity as an accountable political actor with that of a woman protecting other women. In this frame, her "despair" and "frustration" gain embodied credibility, as her position as a woman also renders her vulnerable to harassment. This emotional framing anchors the scandalous comments to a transient emotional reaction with no real-world consequences ("an angry text remains just text"), while firmly linking the opponent to tangible harm, namely sexual harassment. Temporal references ("in those moments") further underscore Purra's transformation from an emotionally driven main character into someone occupying a different "position, life stage, and age." Yet one element remains unchanged: unlike her opponent, she insists she has never accepted "real violence." Through these actions, Purra distances herself from her earlier online writings, including any perceived incitement to violence, while simultaneously legitimising her party's anti-immigration agenda as a mission to protect the receivers—Finland and the Finns—from immigration-related threats.

5.1.4. Re-Presenting the Scandal as the Stupid Mistake of a Virtuous Figure

Finally, under mounting political and public pressure, Purra issued a formal apology, signalling that the controversy could no longer be deflected or minimised. By acknowledging the harm caused and apologising, she sought to resolve the matter and restore her political legitimacy. This stage is illustrated in the following quote:

I apologise for the stupid social media comments I made 15 years ago and for the understandable harm and distress they have caused. I am not a perfect person; I have made mistakes.... At that time, I expressed myself in ways and with words that I would in no way accept or use today. (YLE, July 11, 2023)

Purra then tweeted:

Taken out of context and judged in the present, some of the texts look even worse.... I do not accept any form of violence, racism, or discrimination. Those who know my way of working and my values know that. (YLE, July 11, 2023)

Here, Purra formulates an explicit apology. Her condemnation of violence and racism is unequivocal; however, as the main character of her own narrative, she mitigates personal guilt by highlighting the “stupidity” of her earlier comments, emphasising the time elapsed since they were written, and asserting that her present self would not express such views. She further suggests implicitly that the remarks have been taken out of context by the media. By describing herself as “only human” and fallible, Purra frames imperfection as a general rather than specifically gendered failing, enabling her to express accountability while avoiding the construction of failure as tied to her position as a woman leader. This strategy anchors the scandal to the actions of a flawed yet moral protagonist—incomplete but guided by higher principles (“my way of working and values”) and whose integrity is affirmed by close colleagues (helpers) who recognise her genuine good character.

Ultimately, Purra’s apology—recognising the harm caused—can be seen as functioning to neutralise opposition and refocus political discourse on her object explicated in the final quote of Section 5.1.2: the party’s strict immigration policy. At the same time, the apology downplays gender by framing the controversy primarily as general human fallibility rather than gendered failure.

Table 1 summarises the actors presented across the four stages in Purra’s narrative of the scandal. For each stage, the anchoring and objectification strategies that shape its re-presentation are presented in Table 2.

Table 1. Actors in Purra’s narrative (actantial analysis).

Actors	Purra’s narrative of the scandal
Main character	Riikka Purra
Quests	Protecting Finland (core quest); protecting herself and the Finns Party from the scandal
Sender	Finland and Finns (implicit)
Receiver	Finland and Finns
Opponent	Left, media, and immigrants
Helpers	Finns party

Table 2. Ontogenesis of the online writings scandal, actions by the main character, objectifications, anchoring, and themata (social representations analysis).

Re-presentation of the scandal	Actions by the main character	Objectifications	Anchoring	Themata
“Non-story”	Dismissal and denial	Expired matter, freely available, resource devoid of mystery, 2008	Time cures all things	Non-story vs scandal
Politically motivated attack	Self-defensive counter-attack	Archeologist, energetic actors, game, past time	Lose-lose scenario	Game-playing vs bravery
Emotional outburst within a heroic pursuit	Partial acknowledgement	Desperation, anger, sexual assault	Consequences of words and actions	Emotional outburst vs real violence
Stupid mistake of a virtuous figure	Public Apology	Only human, stupid mistake	Human fallibility	Transient mistakes vs stable ethics

5.2. Giorgia Meloni

Giorgia Meloni's response to the revelations by *Fanpage* begins on June 28, 2024, when she breaks her initial silence with a press statement following a European Council session in Brussels. The statement is subsequently echoed across the Italian media, followed by an official letter to the leaders of the Brothers of Italy, and an appeal to the party's youth wing during a public speech. These communications are marked by repetition and overlapping formulations, creating a sense of rhetorical persistence rather than narrative progression. Unlike Purra's case, Meloni's narrative does not unfold through distinct phases but through multiple re-presentations of the scandal that define the roles and positions of the various characters involved. Within this storyline, Meloni frames the scandal as: (a) the misconduct of a few individuals; (b) a regime-style investigation; (c) stupid folklore; and (d) an ugly story. In Sections 5.2.1 to 5.2.4, we illustrate these re-presentations with excerpts from the data.

5.2.1. Re-Presenting the Scandal as the Misconduct of a Few Individuals

From the onset of the scandal, Giorgia Meloni—positioned as the main character in the scandal narrative—emphasises the gravity of the alleged misconduct attributed to the youth wing of her party, thereby framing the accusations as a matter of profound significance. Her initial press statement (June 28, 2024) highlights the incompatibility of racism with the mission of her party and reinstates the distance between the misconduct and the image of the party as self-evident:

As I said many times before, and I say it again, I think that whoever has sentiments of racism, antisemitism or nostalgia, has simply chosen the wrong home, as such sentiments are incompatible with Fratelli d'Italia, they are incompatible with the Italian Right, and they are incompatible with our orientation. On this, I do not accept any kind of ambiguity, and I asked the Party to take action....This people who clearly did not understand where they are, are possibly the best allies for those who wish us harm, and therefore I think that we have to be very determined and clear about that....Someone asked for the dissolution of the Youth Party based on what instead concern only specific individuals. (Press statement in Brussels, June 28, 2024)

In this statement, the home metaphor draws on culturally familiar ideas of family and parental—particularly maternal—authority in defining who belongs within the moral household. The metaphor makes tangible the physical and symbolic distance between the Brothers of Italy youth wing and the few unwitting intruders (i.e., the racist members), who “did not understand where they were.” Although this is the first time Meloni has broken her silence on the issue, her firm intolerance of any “sentiment of racism, antisemitism, or nostalgia” is presented as long-established (“I have said it many times, and I say it again”) and further reinforced by her readiness to mobilise her allies—the Brothers of Italy—and “take action.” The culpable members, rather than representing the youth wing itself, are portrayed as instruments (“best possible allies”) in the hands of malicious opponents (“those who wish us harm”) seeking to undermine Meloni and her allies.

Overall, this re-presentation permits Meloni to fully acknowledge the gravity of the footage that emerged, while at the same time containing the accusation from spreading to the entire youth wing. By ascribing racist sentiments to “specific individuals,” the scandal is anchored to the understanding that finding one malefactor in a group should not make you suspicious of everybody else—as the popular saying goes, there are always going to be a few bad apples in a barrel.

5.2.2. Re-Presenting the Scandal as a Regime-Style Investigation

In the same statement (June 28, 2024), Meloni also criticises the investigative method, calling for greater transparency and questioning the ethical principles and core values of journalism:

For decades of republican history, no one ever thought of infiltrating a political party and secretly recording its meetings. Is this allowed? I'm asking you, I'm asking the political parties, I'm asking the President of the Republic: is this allowed from today? Perfect, because now we know that from today it is permitted to infiltrate political parties and secretly record their meetings. Do you know why I'm saying this? Because in other times these were the methods used by regimes....No one has ever thought of infiltrating a political organization, secretly recording its meetings, recording even the personal situations of minors, selecting what to broadcast. (Press statement in Brussels, June 28, 2024)

Attacking the investigative method more clearly casts the press in the role of opponent. By comparing journalists' actions to those of a regime, the narrative reverses the scandal storyline, portraying journalists as guilty of the same totalitarian associations they sought to expose—likely alluding to the OVRA, Mussolini's secret police. The image of “minors” further sharpens the moral divide between legitimate and illegitimate conduct while aligning Meloni with gender-congruent expectations of care and protection. Finally, by appealing to opponents (“I'm asking you, I'm asking the political parties”) and the sender (“I'm asking the President of the Republic”), the narrative reframes the scandal as a broader struggle over the moral boundaries of journalism. Although Meloni signals willingness to conform (“Perfect, because now we know that from today it is permitted”), such compliance remains conditional on the establishment of new rules, allowing her to maintain gender-role congruity without appearing submissive.

5.2.3. Re-Presenting the Scandal as Stupid Folklore

On July 2, 2024, in a formal letter to the leaders of the Brothers of Italy, Meloni largely reiterates the narrative constructed during her Brussels interview—framing the scandal as the misconduct of a few individuals and portraying the investigation as “regime-style.” This is achieved through near-identical repetition of the lines used earlier. Beyond reinforcing this framing, the letter also clarifies the party's role and its core mission:

There is no room, in Fratelli d'Italia, for racist or antisemitic positions, just as there is no room for nostalgics of the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, or for any display of foolish folklore. The right-wing parties from which many of us come to politics reckoned with the past and with the fascist twenty-year period several decades ago. (Letter to the leaders of the Brothers of Italy, July 2, 2024)

Meloni reconstructs the Party's mission by balancing historical roots with forward-looking aspirations, emphasising the intention to “leave the past behind.” She assigns contemporary right-wing values—land, family, and freedom—while depicting fascism as a totalitarian system, using terms such as “nostalgia,” “1900,” and “stupid folklore.” In this narrative, nostalgic elements are portrayed as obstacles to the party's quest, a point reinforced by the anaphora “I/We do not have time”:

Our task is far too great to allow those who have not understood its significance to ruin everything. I do not—and we do not—have time to waste on those who are unable to understand what Fratelli d'Italia is and what the great historical challenges of our era are. I do not—and we do not—have time to

waste on those who want to take us backward, or on those who turn us into a caricature. I do not—and we do not—have time to waste on those who, knowingly or not, become a tool in the hands of our adversary. Those who cannot understand this, who have not grasped this path, who are not able to keep up, cannot be part of Fratelli d'Italia. (Letter to the leaders of the Brothers of Italy, July 2, 2024)

The letter also conveys pride in the party's achievements:

I am convinced that the constant growth of Fratelli d'Italia is the result of this long journey of ours. Of the fact that Italians see in us the political force that more than any other cares about the national interest, and that more than any other defends the “conservative” values of the land, of life, of the family, of freedom. (Letter to the leaders of the Brothers of Italy, July 2, 2024)

The letter then introduces its core objective: the quest to serve the Italian people. Italians emerge as a new sender, recognising the party as a guardian of national interest. By distinguishing “stupid folklore” from a rational understanding of the past, Meloni positions the party as future-oriented while maintaining continuity with traditional values. Anchoring the scandal to this notion of nostalgic folklore legitimises the party's image and presents its mission as fundamentally incompatible with any form of racism.

5.2.4. Re-Presenting the Scandal as an Ugly Story

In her formal letter to the party, Meloni also seeks to reframe the image of the youth wing as the victim of an “ugly story”:

We are not as they would like to portray us. Neither we nor our young people of Gioventù Nazionale are like that. We have a youth movement that is strong, healthy, vibrant, curious, and open. Our young people, who with uncovered faces and clean reputations, armed with flyers and initiatives, defend Freedom in schools and universities from the violence and arrogance of the left, are the first to be harmed by this ugly story. (Letter to the leaders of the Brothers of Italy, July 2, 2024)

In her more recent statement on the *Fanpage* investigation, delivered at the annual political festival organised by the Brothers of Italy (December 16, 2024) and more recently at the youth wing festival “Youth Without Filters” (September 21, 2025), Meloni addresses the youth wing directly, expressing pride and hope, and reinforcing their agency and identity:

You are not Meloni's youth because you fight for your own values, and I am not a value; I am simply another person fighting alongside you for the same things. You are not Meloni's youth, you are not Meloni's young people, because you do not belong to me—you belong to Italy. You love Italy, you fight for Italy. (Meloni's speech at the festival “Youth without filters,” September 21, 2025).

At the same time, Meloni reconstructs the investigation as a personal attack against herself—an attack that, in her framing, leaves the image of the youth wing untarnished:

That is why I want to tell you that I am immensely proud of you, of the beauty you represent, of the love you put into what you do every single day. Clearly, as I was saying, for some people this is a problem—it must be tainted. They tried to do that to you as well: they exposed you to public ridicule, they portrayed

you as monsters, because your genuine commitment, your selfless dedication, is a problem for some people—it is dangerous to some. And because, in the end, despite your young age, you were being used to strike at a much larger target. Clearly, that target was me. (Meloni’s speech at the festival “Youth without filters,” September 21, 2025).

Here, the youth wing is presented as stable and intact, while the investigation is framed as an attack on the main character—herself. Meloni stresses both the autonomy of the youth wing (“You are not my ‘youth’”) and its belonging to the national collective (“you belong to Italy”), while simultaneously claiming that she is the true target of the attack. This construction replaces the image of the caring mother with that of a more liberal maternal figure who recognises her children’s independence. The logic follows a classic Aristotelian syllogism: If Meloni and the youth wing are distinct agents, and the opponent targeted Meloni, then the youth wing cannot be the true object of accusation. Responsibility is thus displaced from the collective, positioning the group as innocent of the charges. This innocence is reinforced through recurring oppositions between beauty and ugliness, cleanliness and dirtiness. *Gioventù Nazionale* is portrayed as “strong, vibrant, healthy,” with a “clean reputation,” whereas the investigation is described as “an ugly story” seeking to portray them as “monsters.” These contrasts maintain a clear symbolic boundary between the organisation’s internal identity and the negative associations attached to the investigation.

Table 3 summarises the actors presented across the four stages in Meloni’s narrative of the scandal. For each stage, the anchoring and objectification strategies that shape its re-presentation are presented in Table 4.

Table 3. Actors in Meloni’s narrative (actantial analysis).

Actors	Meloni’s narrative of the scandal
Main character	Giorgia Meloni
Quests	National interest (core quest); protecting the youth wing from the scandal
Sender	The president of the republic and the Italians who believe in the party
Receiver	Italians
Opponent	Left and media
Helpers	Brothers of Italy

Table 4. Ontogenesis of the *Fanpage* scandal, actions by the main character, objectifications, anchoring, and themata (social representation analysis).

Re-presentation of the scandal	Actions by the main character	Objectifications	Anchoring	Themata
Misconduct of a few individuals	Acknowledgment and recognition	Wrong home	A few individuals don’t spoil the whole group	Few/real group
Regime-style investigation	Counter-attack	Regime	Ethical journalism	Ethical/unethical
Stupid folklore	Distancing	1900 folklore caricature	Nostalgia	Emotional outburst vs real violence
Ugly story	Re-framing the main character as the target of the scandal	Uncovered faces flyers monsters	Innocence	Beautiful vs ugly

6. Conclusion

This article examined how two right-wing populist women leaders responded to political scandals involving accusations of racism and/or fascism directed at themselves or their parties. Drawing on social representations theory and Greimas' (1983) actantial model, we analysed how Riikka Purra and Giorgia Meloni publicly negotiated these scandals through denial, justification, distancing, and counterattack. From this perspective, scandals are not merely individual crises but arenas in which meanings, (gendered) identities, and moral boundaries are publicly contested (Jerslev et al., 2025). Political responses can thus be understood as attempts to re-anchor threatening events within familiar representational frameworks and restore legitimacy.

Our analysis highlights both similarities and differences linked to political context, audience, and the nature of the scandals. Consistent with previous research on right-wing populist scandal communication (Hatakka et al., 2017; Herkman, 2018), both politicians relied heavily on confrontational and self-defensive strategies, including denial, victimisation, attacks on media and political opponents, and portrayals of the scandals as politically motivated. The data also revealed elements of calculated ambivalence or dual communication (Hatakka et al., 2017), visible in Meloni's shifting rhetoric across audiences and in Purra's movement from denial and counterattack toward partial acknowledgement and apology. These manoeuvres reflected attempts to balance competing representational demands: maintaining in-group legitimacy while responding to broader public expectations.

We nevertheless found differences in how the scandals were managed, reflecting not only communication style but also political position, audience, media context, party dynamics, and the nature of the scandals. Purra's responses aligned relatively closely with the phases identified in image repair theory (Benoit, 2024), progressing from denial and attacks on accusers toward reducing offensiveness and eventual mortification. Her position within a governing coalition under intense pressure limited opportunities for continued denial and likely contributed to her apology. Audience also mattered, as Purra's strongest self-defence appeared in communication directed at supporters, whereas later concessions reflected broader governmental expectations of accountability.

Meloni's responses, by contrast, varied less across time than across audiences and communicative settings. She alternatively framed the scandal as the actions of a marginal group, a politically motivated investigation, banal "folklore," or an orchestrated attack against herself, reflecting victimisation strategies associated with right-wing populism (Bouchafra, 2025; Di Cicco et al., 2024; Rovamo & Sakki, 2024). Unlike Purra, Meloni could more easily distance herself from the scandal by framing it as involving members of the party's youth wing rather than her own past statements, allowing her to condemn the behaviour while protecting the party's legitimacy.

Regarding gender, our findings only partly align with research suggesting that women politicians benefit from more conciliatory or stereotypically "feminine" scandal-response strategies (Cucchi et al., 2021). Although Purra eventually shifted toward partial concession and apology, this appeared closely linked to escalating political pressure and her institutional position rather than gendered expectations alone. Overall, both leaders relied primarily on rhetorical repertoires already identified in research on right-wing populist scandal management, particularly confrontation, victimhood, anti-elite positioning, and delegitimisation

of critics (Hatakka et al., 2017; Herkman, 2018). These cases therefore suggest that populist and ideological repertoires may partially override or reshape conventional gendered expectations surrounding scandal communication.

At the same time, gender was not absent from the leaders' responses. Consistent with previous research on women right-wing populists (Pettersson et al., 2023; Pettersson & Sakki, 2024), Purra invoked concerns about immigration, Islam, and women's safety when accounting for her earlier writings, linking anti-immigration discourse to gendered vulnerability and protection. Meloni, in turn, combined assertive self-defence with a protective stance toward the youth wing of her party, echoing the "maternal" performances identified in earlier studies of women populist leaders, such as Marine Le Pen (cf. Pettersson et al., 2023). Rather than disappearing, gender remained intertwined with broader populist identity performances and ideological positioning, functioning less as a direct constraint than as a flexible symbolic resource within populist narratives of victimhood, protection, and national identity.

The contribution of this study is therefore not to claim that gender is irrelevant in populist scandal communication, nor to generalise across women populist leaders, but to show how these two highly visible racism-related scandals illuminate the interaction between gender, populist ideology, and scandal management in specific political and media contexts. The cases were analytically relevant because they involved major controversies threatening the legitimacy of governing right-wing populist parties and required explicit public responses from the leaders themselves. Comparing Purra and Meloni thus offered insight into how women populist leaders negotiate such crises across different gender-political contexts while drawing on similar populist repertoires. While the cases differed in important respects—including the broader gender-political context and whether the allegations concerned the leader herself or members of her party—the analysis nevertheless identified comparable strategies for negotiating accountability and legitimacy.

At the same time, the qualitative and exploratory nature of this study, as well as the limited number of cases, necessarily circumscribe the scope of its conclusions (see Goodman, 2008). The findings do not allow firm claims about women populist leaders generally, nor definitive comparisons with men populist leaders or women politicians from other ideological backgrounds. Rather, the cases illustrate how gender may intersect with populist identity performances when racism-related accusations threaten both personal credibility and party legitimacy. Unlike scandals surrounding some other women political leaders—such as the strongly personalised and gendered scrutiny directed at Sanna Marin (Sakki & Martikainen, 2022)—the scandals analysed here centred primarily on ideology, racism, and political legitimacy rather than femininity or personal morality.

Finally, a social representations perspective helped illuminate how scandal responses function as boundary-making practices that stabilise collective identities by defining "us" and "them" (Marková, 2003; Wagner et al., 1999). Both Purra and Meloni constructed narratives in which their parties appeared unfairly targeted by media and political adversaries, while positioning themselves as defenders of national values and legitimacy (Sakki & Pettersson, 2016). Future research should compare scandal communication across women and men populist leaders, as well as across ideological contexts, media systems, and forms of gendered political scrutiny. Further research could also examine how different audiences—including party supporters, political opponents, and the broader public—interpret and respond to these scandal-management strategies.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Research Council of Finland (Pettersson, grant number 368051).

Funding

Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between the University of Helsinki and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data is available from the authors on request.

LLMs Disclosure

Open AI (ChatGPT) was used to polish the language and remove repetitive content. All suggestions made by AI were carefully reviewed by the authors. AI was not used for content generation.

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About the Authors



Katarina Pettersson is an assistant professor of social psychology at the University of Helsinki. Her research examines political discourse, gendered ideologies, right-wing populism, and online hate. She leads two Research Council of Finland-funded projects: YOPO on youth gender polarisation and MOSH on urban micro-segregation.



Jennifer De Paola holds a PhD in social sciences and a master's degree in clinical psychology. She is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Helsinki, Finland. Her research focuses on social representations of abstract topics and the public understanding of science, examining how lay people make sense of complex concepts.



Gilda Sensales (PhD) is an associate professor in social and political psychology at the Sapienza University of Rome, Italy. Her main research interests include the representations of populism, political communication between mainstream and new media, gender and sexism in politics, and the critical history of social and political psychology.