The great replacement: Strategic mainstreaming of far-right conspiracy claims

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Abstract
This paper assesses how the ‘Great Replacement’ conspiracy theory (the idea that ethnically homogeneous populations in European nations are being ‘replaced’ by people of non-European origin) is articulated online by three different actors. By analyzing argument patterns and multimodal features of the cases, the paper shows that the conspiracy theory is a flexible political discourse that can be used strategically by both far-right and mainstream right-wing actors. It highlights the role of affect in online communication, and particularly how anti-immigration actors feed off circulating emotions such as insecurity and fear among the citizenry. The results show that processes of demographic change, caused by immigration, are negatively politicized through the use of pseudo-scientific sources, historic narratives of ethnic homogeneity, threat frames, visual fear appeals and other elements that constitute the wider conspiracy theory of an ongoing ‘replacement’ of native populations. The paper argues that the mainstreaming of conspiracy claims and theories related to immigration poses a threat, not only to democratic institutions and societies, but also to people of immigrant backgrounds.

Keywords
Anti-immigration, affect, conspiracy theory, online platforms, racism, Sweden

Introduction
The idea that ethnically homogeneous populations in European nations are being demographically ‘replaced’ by people of non-European origin has been propagated by far-right actors for some time (Bjørgo and Ravndal, 2019). However, the idea of a ‘replacement’, orchestrated by liberal and/or left-wing elites, is also being propagated from the top, most notably by (illiberal) leaders such as prime minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary and former prime minister Róbert Fico of Slovakia (Plenta, 2020). Since the refugee crisis in 2015, elements of the ‘replacement’ conspiracy theory have
amplified various (far right) political discourses across Europe. Political statements of failed integration – frequently underpinned by quasi-scientific ideas deeming cultures of immigrants and Europeans as ‘insurmountable’ to one another (cf. Balibar, 1992), and notions of homogeneous national and/or European cultures – has fueled ideas of an ongoing ‘replacement’. This paper argues that ‘The Great Replacement’ conspiracy is a flexible political strategy, encompassing various explanatory frameworks and elements. These can be used strategically by far-right actors in order to induce fear in native populations, by feeding off social and economic insecurity and by relying on ideas of ethnic and/or cultural homogeneity. However, it can also be used by mainstream right-wing political actors in more ‘civil’ versions of similar argumentative frameworks (cf. Ekman and Krzyżanowski, 2021, for a discussion on civil and uncivil argumentation).

Against this background, the aim of the paper is to assess patterns and elements within the ‘replacement’ theory articulated by both far-right and mainstream actors in Sweden online. The study focuses on content produced and disseminated openly in three different online political settings. The study seeks to identify similarities and differences in the cases and asks: if and how conspiracy claims are mainstreamed? Sweden provides an interesting background for analysis. It accepted more refugees/immigrants (per capita) than any other European country during the refugee crisis, resulting in real challenges and problems related to rapid immigration. The question of immigration has also shifted from a relatively marginal position to top of the agenda when assessing citizens’ prioritization of political and social issues in Sweden. During the period 2015–2017, immigration was, for the first time, deemed the most important ‘problem in society’ by Swedish citizens (Martinsson and Andersson, 2019: 41). Immigration to Sweden is not new, as it has been an immigrant country since the 1930s, with labor migrants arriving after WWII alongside increasing levels of refugee immigration since the mid-1970s. During the past decade, most immigrants have come from regions plagued by war and armed conflicts, particularly from the Middle East and East Africa (SCB, 2021). Recently, positive attitudes toward immigration and immigrants have decreased among the Swedish public (Ahmadi et al., 2016), and a majority want lower levels of immigration (Martinsson and Andersson, 2019). During the refugee crisis of 2015, Sweden’s generous immigration policies shifted towards more restrictive ones, following the trends visible across the European Union. Research shows that ‘racial’ demographic change can lead to increased negative attitudes toward minorities/immigrants as the result of perceived multiple out-group threats, both realistic (increased economic costs, pressured welfare systems, etc.) and symbolic ones (values, culture, etc.) (Craig et al., 2018; Obaidi et al., 2021). However, research also shows that such radical demographic predictions – which underpin these threat perceptions – are largely misleading and unrealistic (Alba, 2018; Alba et al., 2005).

The paper analyses how ideas relating to demographic change are used strategically and differently by three actors in order to feed off such anti-immigrant sentiments and attitudes within the citizenry, and it shows that internet platforms are strategically important for disseminating content relating to the conspiracy of ‘replacement’. The paper is structured as follows: It outlines what conspiracy claims and theories are, how they function discursively, and how they could be understood in relation to populism and political positions. Then, the concept of ‘The Great Replacement’, along with its historical background and key elements are discussed. It explains the role of online communication, and particularly the relationship between affect and online engagement in conspiracy beliefs. Thereafter, it provides the rationale of the cases and the methodology used in the analysis of three specific (Swedish) online articulations of the ‘replacement theory’. The data involve actors belonging to the far right as well as more ‘respectable’ mainstream political settings. The paper qualitatively analyses the wider construction of ‘replacement’ by assessing patterns of argument and rhetoric (topoi) on immigration, immigrants, political complicity and so forth. It
examines how the arguments are discursively related to ideas of nation/nation-state, race/ethnicity, culture, religion, community and belonging, and how these constructions are adopted to fit the multimodal and socio-technical affordances online. By analyzing various constructions of ‘replacement’, the paper shows that demographic change is politicized through the use of pseudo-scientific sources, historic narratives of ethnic homogeneity, threat frames, visual fear appeals and other elements that constitute the wider ‘replacement’ theory.

Conspiracy theories and ‘the great replacement’ conspiracy

Political scientist Barkun (2013) argues that conspiracy claims are characterized by three generic principles: Nothing happens by accident: Nothing is as it seems and: Everything is connected. Conspiracy claims also presuppose the idea that a group of ‘conspirators’ – who most often are portrayed as evil – act intentionally. The victims of the conspiracy are most often ordinary people who are kept in a state of obliviousness (Butter, 2020). Needless to say, the propagators of conspiracy theories reveal these connections and make conspirators and alleged patterns visible. Social psychologist van Prooijen (2018) argues that conspiracy theories are characterized by five elements: patterns, agency, coalitions, hostility and continued secrecy (p. 5–6). Thus, the events, or outcomes of what appears to be random patterns, are always intentional and orchestrated by coalitions of actors operating in stealth – with malevolent intent. Barkun (2013) also distinguishes between three types of conspiracy theories: Event conspiracy theories: Systemic conspiracy theories and: Superconspiracy theories. The first refers to specific events of historical and/or political significance, such as the 9/11- terror attacks or the assassination of US president John F. Kennedy in 1963. The second refers to conspiracies with broader objectives, such as economic or political control of geographic areas and/or systems. Classical versions of systemic conspiracies are anti-Semitic claims of Jewish world domination, ideas of global power elites such as the ‘Illuminati’ or claims of communist infiltration in the US during the Cold War (McCarthyism). The third refers to theories that stitch various conspiracy claims together, and where ‘event and systemic conspiracies are joined in complex ways, so that conspiracies come to be nested within one another’, as the result of an imperceptible evil power (Barkun, 2013: 6). An example of the latter could include conspiratorial ideas of a communist-Jewish world domination in cohort with political leaders in secretive global networks.

Conspiracy theories also construct various kinds of conspirators. These could be actors and powers from both outside and within societies. They could already be in power (top-down conspiracies) or trying to gain power (bottom-up conspiracies). Historically, the latter are ideas of Jews, Freemasons, liberals or socialists/communists who are secretly seeking power within the state; these older conspiracy theories mainly flourished within the upper classes during the 19th century (Butter, 2020) or, as in the case of McCarthyism, among leading actors within the state apparatus in the 20th century (although they still exist today). History also reveals a close connection between conspiratorial thinking and the construction of race and religion as enemy subjects, with Jews in particular having been collectively targeted. This is predominantly visible in older, upper class/elite conspiracy theories of Jews and communists/socialists. For example, the combination of race (Jews), politics (communism/socialism), and secrecy (Illuminati and Freemasons) was found in Winston Churchill’s text ‘Zionism versus Bolshevism’ from 1920 (Butter, 2020: 10ff). Key to conspiracy theories is the dualism of good and evil, truth and lies, light and darkness and so on, where conspirators are ‘heavily stereotyped’ and deemed as evil (Önnerfors and Krouwel, 2021: 15). This means that conspiracy theorists orchestrate fear in order to create a fertile ground for their claims – they fuel a politics of fear (cf. Wodak, 2015). Through discursive techniques such as ‘fear
appeals’ (Andreasen, 2020), scapegoating and demonization (Önnerfors and Krouwel, 2021), conspiracy theories effectively create in-group victimization and out-group hostility. There is a close link between conspiracy theories and political populism (Butter, 2020). The latter relies on the construction of ‘the people’ versus ‘the elite’ (de Cleen, 2017), a dualist construction that fits contemporary conspiracy theories’ notion of an alleged corrupt elite deceiving ordinary people. Essentially, all contemporary conspiracy theories are populist in character (Butter, 2020), but ‘conspiracy theories are a non-necessary element of populist discourse and ideology, and they are not necessarily believed by everybody in the populist movement or party in which they are circulating. However, populist movements are very good at integrating conspiracy theorists and non-conspiracy theorists’ (p. 117). This implies that populist actors can use conspiracy theories, beliefs and theorists strategically when it suits their political goals. Conspiracy theories are also highly effective in character. For example, when constructing enemy actors (i.e., the conspirators and their scapegoats) these subject constructions (the deceiving politicians or the corrupt elites) are underpinned by negative emotions, such as insecurity, fear, distrust and hate (cf. Ahmed, 2004). This, as will be discussed subsequently, has been profoundly affected by the rise of online communication and social media.

‘The Great Replacement’ is an example of a systemic conspiracy theory, where white Europeans are supposedly being replaced by immigrants from non-European countries through the actions of politicians and power elites (Bergmann, 2021; Butter, 2020). The conspiracy theory is linked to processes of immigration and has been amplified by past decades’ waves of refugees from the Middle East and Africa. The conspiracy comes in various versions depending on national contexts, proponents and political discourses, but it is connected to a long lineage of far-right discourses. The term itself rose to fame when it was used as a book title by French philosopher Renaud Camus (2012). Camus is an influential theorist within the French far-right ‘identitarian’ movement (Bergmann, 2021), a ‘third-position’ extreme-right current that has spread across several European countries over the past few decades (Zúquete, 2018). The identitarian movement has also been key in spreading the idea of an ongoing ‘replacement’. In his book, Camus mainly focuses on France, but argues that mass migration is eroding European civilization from within, and that European natives are being replaced by migrants, particularly from Muslim countries (Önnerfors, 2021). One of Camus’ key arguments is that, due to lower birth rates, French natives are slowly being replaced by Muslim immigrants with higher birth rates (Bergmann, 2021). In Germany, the corresponding version of the conspiracy theory is called ‘Umvolkung’ or ‘Der Grosse Austauch’ (Önnerfors, 2021: 76). In Sweden, the term ‘folkutbyte’ (trans. ethnic replacement) is used to connote the replacement of Swedish natives by immigrant populations. The actual term ‘folkutbyte’ has previously been used as a way of describing ‘natural’ migration flows between nations, here referring to ‘exchange’ rather than ‘replacement’. (cf. Kvist Geverts, 2008: 90). However, in contemporary discourse this older meaning is absent. Camus (2012) refers to (Muslim) immigrants as ‘replacants’, he describes them as an alien element in French society and culture. It does not matter if French Muslims claim that they belong to France, as in Camus’ nativist discourse, being French is to have a specific cultural essence, and if Muslims can be French, then he argues: ‘To be French has become meaningless, and France has been reduced to a territory’. (Bracke and Hernández-Aguilar, 2020: 686). The idea of (national) ethnic homogeneity, and ‘culture’ as underpinned by ethnos is key to nativist and ethno-nationalist views on citizenship (cf. de Cleen, 2017). Camus (2012) also stresses that the behavior and actions of the ‘replacements’ (regardless of whether they were born in France or not) are alien to French culture. He stresses certain behaviors, such as being noisy, loitering and harassing people in streets as characteristic of immigrants (Linders, 2020: 20). Similar stereotyping of Muslims has been found in British Tabloids (Poole, 2006), where they have been framed as ‘cultural devian[t]… and
as a cultural threat’ to the British mainstream (p. 101f). In Camus’ view, Muslims are ‘counter-colonizing’ France (Linders, 2020: 20), imposing their foreign culture on society in a way that France did not do in their former colonies. So, for Camus, contemporary immigrants are a far cruder colonizing force compared to the West’s historic colonialization of the Global South.

The arguments in ‘The Great Replacement’ theory are not novel, they are present in various far-right discourses of the past, such as the Eurabia conspiracy flourishing in the ‘counter-Jihad’ movement a decade before the release of Camus’ book (Ekman, 2015). The idea of a foreign colonization by, or a shadow government of, Muslims in Europe are key elements of the Eurabia conspiracy formulated by Bat Ye’or (Bangstad, 2019; Carr, 2006). In ‘Eurabia’ the silent Muslim take-over is facilitated by liberal and/or left-wing politicians, who in various ways enable the replacement by secret agreements with Muslim organizations and/or nations and actors. Thus, the gradual decline of Western societies is perceived to be orchestrated from the inside, and the take-over by Muslim immigrants is contingent on these internal allies (such as ‘traitorous’ politicians or more indistinct power elites), who are perceived as gaining from this silent power shift (Ekman, 2015). The ‘replacement’ theory also builds on more explicit theories of ‘white genocide’ (Jackson, 2015; Wilson, 2020), flourishing in neo-Nazi milieus since the 1980s (cf. Askanius, 2021). The white genocide conspiracy rests on the idea that a Jewish elite promotes ‘non-white immigration into majority-white nations in order to weaken and dominate the white population’ (Allington, and Joshi, 2020). The most prominent version is the idea of a Zionist Occupation Government (ZOG), ruling behind elected officials and aiming for world domination (or global economic control) – or in more ‘superconspiracy’ versions: already having achieved world domination. ‘The Great Replacement’ connects ‘contemporary expressions of Islamophobia with centuries-old anti-Semitism’ (Askanius, 2021), through the use of empty signifiers such as ‘the global elites’ (rather than Jews or ‘ZOG’) as perpetrators, and by deploying updated slogans such as ‘genocide by substitution’, rather than ‘white genocide’ (Bjørgo and Ravndal, 2019). Consequently, there is an obvious historical lineage between older anti-Semitic fantasies of ‘white genocide’, and the more refined contemporary ‘replacement’ conspiracy theory.

Key to the ‘replacement’ conspiracy is the discursive construction of in-group victimization. By producing a common ‘us’ (French, Europeans, whites) as victims of the actions and plans of traitorous politicians and/or secret agreements within power elites, immigrants are constructed as an out-group threat. However, immigrants are also perceived as a tool for conspirators rather than active subjects. In anti-immigration discourse, the actions and behaviors of immigrants are the palpable ‘evidence’ of an ongoing ‘replacement’, but politicians and power elites are seemingly facilitating the behavior, norms and actions of immigrants through generous policies and financial support – for example, when supporting Muslim organizations and cultural projects or through social welfare.

**Mainstreaming conspiracy at the top**

While ‘The Great Replacement’ conspiracy is primarily propagated by far-right actors and organizations, there are also examples of more prominent advocators. As mentioned above, it has been advocated by prime ministers Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Róbert Fico in Slovakia (Plenta, 2020). Orbán, who has spearheaded anti-immigration policies and nativist discourse within the European Union by framing immigration as an existential threat, used rhetoric similar to the replacement conspiracy at an international conference entitled the ‘Budapest demography summit’ in 2019 (Walker, 2019). During the meeting, Orbán stated that ‘if Europe is not going to be populated by Europeans in the future and we take this as given, then we are speaking about an exchange of
populations, to replace the population of Europeans with others’, and ‘[t]here are political forces in Europe who want a replacement of population for ideological or other reasons’. (Walker, 2019). Orbán’s statement should also be understood in relation to the recent demographic policies in Hungary, where the ruling government tries to counter a domestic demographic deficit (an aging native population and low birth rates) with various benefits for parents who have additional children, in the so-called ‘fertility policy’ (Kováts, 2020). In this context, ‘replacement’ claims underpin the rationale of actual national polices on demographic issues.

In the United States, the idea of replacement has been propagated by Fox News star host Tucker Carlson. Carlson has repeatedly expressed the idea that ‘white Anglo-Saxons’ are being replaced by immigrant populations (Åsard, 2020). Moreover, Republican senators such as Ron Johnson have also tapped into ‘The Great Replacement’ theory when addressing questions on (new) voter cohorts. Johnson claimed that immigration policies are a way for Democrat elected representatives to ensure political support: ‘[T]his administration wants complete open borders. And you have to ask yourself why? Is it really, they want to remake the demographics of America to ensure their – that they stay in power forever? Is that what’s happening here?’ (Benen, 2021). The idea that immigration is a way of increasing voters for liberal/left-wing political parties is recurrent within anti-immigrant and racist discourse (Ekman, 2019). Claims that immigrants are ‘voter hoards’ for parties with softer and more liberal immigration policies are a common way of pointing to the underlying (and unspoken) objectives of these policies. In Sweden, such ideas have mainly been articulated by far-right and right-wing populist actors, for example by representatives of the right-wing populist/far-right party The Sweden Democrats (Vergara, 2019).

Online communication logics and conspiracy theories

The emergence of online communication has profoundly changed the way conspiracy claims and theories are disseminated into the public sphere. Once, mainly found in smaller and isolated communities, reaching only a few, conspiracy claims can now be found everywhere online. Butter (2020) even argues that conspiracy claims were ‘virtual absent’ from public discourse between 1965 and 2000, but that they are now ‘practically omnipresent’ (p. 121), as the result of the internet. Besides the obvious observation that the internet facilitates all kinds of information to potentially large audiences, there are other characteristics of online communication that impact the way conspiracy beliefs and theories are shaped and disseminated. The rise of interactive communication has contributed to new and revitalized forms of civic engagement, including both actors from the far right as well as from conspiracy milieus. The subsequent section highlights features pertaining to digital media logics more broadly, and to interactive communication logics on online platforms (Soriano and Gaw, 2021) in particular. It then discusses their impact on conspiracy claims and theories.

Spread: as asserted above, the reach of conspiratorial claims and theories is potentially huge online. Publishing content on global commercial platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and so on (or using them as gateways through linking), means that you can disseminate conspiracy claims and theories to anybody at any time, with a potentially large reach.¹ Conspiratorial claims also fit the logics of ‘spreadability’ (cf. Jenkins et al., 2013), since they often contain controversial, sensationalist and shocking content, and they also include narratives of good and evil etc., addressing basic understandings of perpetrators and victims. Speed: online communication also facilitates rapid dissemination of information on events as they unfold, which paves the way for disinformation strategies as well as alternative explanations to current events. Actors spreading conspiracy theories can take advantage of the rapid development of events and the contradictory information flows that surround them. By stitching pieces of information together, conspiracy
Theorists can construct seemingly rational conspiracy claims. **Sourcing**: the relative openness of internet communication means that there is an abundance of actors and spaces that could be used as sources. People spreading conspiracy claims can strategically select parts of information from credible sources and construct seemingly trustworthy bricolages in order to validate their claims. The **interactivity** that characterizes most online spaces creates collective affective practices (Nikunen et al., 2021). Conspiracies and theories rely on affective practices such as in-group victimization and the construction of an ‘evil-Other’, and since communication in online spaces ‘produce[s] and circulate[s] affect as a binding technique’ (Dean, 2010: 95), conspiracy claims are molded through expressions of sentiments among users (cf. Papacharissi, 2015: 125). Since ‘The Great Replacement’ theory relies on anti-immigration and racist sentiments circulating among citizens online, actors can feed off circulating emotions of insecurity, powerlessness, fear, hostility and hate. The construction of nation/national identity, ethnos and culture depends on the exclusion or deprecation of subjects based on these emotions (Ahmed, 2004). So, the construction of inclusion (of national or European identity, culture and behavior) in the ‘replacement’ presupposes the construction of the threatening ‘Other’ – the immigrant. ‘Shared affective practice can legitimize various controversial, even harmful ideas and activities, such as racism, as a collective truth in the groups [online]’ (Nikunen et al., 2021). Therefore, online sites that spread conspiracy beliefs and theories also function as spaces of legitimization. Legitimization occurs both at the discursive/interactive level, among users liking, sharing and discussing conspiracy beliefs with each other, and at the socio-technical level, through sourcing, linking, algorithmic processes and so on.

**Methodology**

The paper uses case study methodology (Bryman, 2016) assessing how ‘The Great Replacement’ conspiracy theory is articulated by three actors in three online spaces. It draws on data from a Swedish context, where the senders belong to different political/ideological milieus. Thus, they serve as exemplifying cases (Bryman, 2016: 62) of ‘replacement’ argumentation from three different political settings. The cases were selected purposely in order to include actors from: the extreme right, right-wing populism, and a traditional (‘respectable’) conservative milieu. The sample allows for comparisons between strong (explicit/anti-Semitic) and more ambiguous (implicit) versions of the conspiracy theory. The data was collected at one point in time – August 2021 – while the cases were published in the year 2018, 2010 and 2021 respectively, and are still available online (more details on the data are presented in the subsequent analysis). Using Sweden as a context for the study is motivated by three main factors; 1) Due to immigration, Sweden has gone through a rapid demographic change in the past few decades. This may have provided a fertile soil for conspiratorial ideas on the causes and effects of demographic change caused by immigration. 2) Swedish citizens have relatively high trust in public officials, government, elected representatives and the mass media system, a trust that usually provides resilience towards conspiratorial beliefs. 3) Sweden has a system of public openness, which means that all public decisions, documents, and correspondence are fully accessible to the public. This contributes to the high levels of trust among the citizenry. These factors make Sweden an interesting context, and it also points to the important role of digital communication for the dissemination of unconventional and conspiratorial ideas in a wider public context (ideas that are absent in legacy media). However, the cases should also be understood in relation to more global trends where anti-immigration discourses are conflated and actors communicate and influence each other transnationally through online communication. For example, contemporary far-right and nationalist movements and actors are ‘international’ in their practices (cf. Doerr, 2017).
The methodological approach is qualitative, assessing the wider discursive construction of ‘The Great Replacement’ conspiracy. The analysis focuses on the discursive strategies used in framing demographic change caused by immigration to Sweden. More specifically it assesses the *topoi*, i.e. the strategies of argumentation (*Wodak, 2015*: 51) when framing key elements in the conspiracy. The analysis assesses: 1) how conspirators are constructed discursively, 2) what underlying (implicit) objectives they have in facilitating the ‘replacement’, 3) how immigrants are constructed, their agency (or non-agency) in the ‘replacement’, 4) what actions characterize the ‘replacement’, 5) what processes facilitate the ‘replacement’ and, finally, 6) the construction of victims of the alleged ‘replacement’. While assessing these six features, the paper examines the discursive construction of *culture* (native and foreign/alien), *citizenship*, and the *actions* of individual and/or collective social actors that support a wider set of arguments within the conspiracy. The latter includes analysis of ‘self- and other-presentation’, through the assessment of referential and predicational strategies (*Reisigl and Wodak, 2001*). These strategies are used to positively and/or discriminatorily construct ‘self’ and ‘other’ representations of social actors in discourse, and encompass categories such as ‘collectivization, (de)spatialization, somatization, culturalization, criminalization, social problematization’, and more (*Reisigl and Wodak, 2001*). Furthermore, the analysis also covers the interplay between various semiotic resources (cf. *Van Leeuwen, 2008*) that are part of the online multimodal material (such as text, images, video, music/sound, etc.). In this part of the analysis, focus is placed on how images, video footage, and sound construct social actors and their wider contexts in relation to the textual discourse when combined. This is particularly evident in case two. The case methodology enables fruitful comparisons of argumentative patterns across the three cases, as well as a discussion of the limitations and opportunities of the individual cases. The data is sampled from Swedish-speaking political and media contexts, but their characteristics also make them relevant for assessing articulations of ‘The Great Replacement’ in other national/transnational settings.

**Case one: An far-right anti-semitic version of ‘the great replacement’**

The first example of the ‘replacement’ conspiracy theory is from the site Nordfront.se, belonging to the militant neo-Nazi organization *the Nordic Resistance Movement* (NRM) (*Askanius, 2021*). The site features multimodal content, such as articles, podcasts, videos, and other material. The article analyzed here is entitled ‘George Soros and MasterCard form a new unholy alliance’ (*Forsell, 2018*).² The headline is followed by a preamble stating: ‘GLOBALISM. The Jew George Soros collaborates with MasterCard in order to speed up the replacement in the West’. Underneath the preamble is an image of a MasterCard, featuring (what appears to be) two African men on a motorcycle. The name of the card holder says ‘Abraham Ukbagabir’. Ukbagabir was an asylum seeker from Eritrea who, when denied asylum in Sweden in 2015, stabbed a woman and her son to death at an IKEA department store in the city of Västerås. The murders have been used by the far-right in order to fuel anti-immigration sentiments.

The article begins with defining immigrants as belonging to an ‘alien race/people’ (from the German [Nazi] term ‘fremdvölkische’, or in Swedish ‘rasfrämling’), and claims that they are in fact not refugees but ‘lifestyle immigrants’ who arrive in Europe for economic reasons. The article then notes that some European governments have started to understand this and that they are changing their policies accordingly. In the second paragraph the article claims that the ‘invasion of outsiders is orchestrated by foreign powers’ and that this is something that the readers of Nordfront already know. Here the article creates an in-group understanding that presupposes that the notion of a ‘replacement’, or ‘invasion’, is not coincidental, but orchestrated – and has been so for a long time. The article then discusses the relationship between state and capital and claims that ‘banks control
capital, start wars and control politics within single states, and to a greater extent also within supranational states such as the EU and US. The idea of a global banking elite in control of national and supranational political structures surfaces as a rationale for the ‘replacement’. Soros is described as a ‘Jewish financier/investor’ who supports refugees in order to increase his own wealth. The article quotes a Christian orthodox nationalist historian, who states that ‘we are now experiencing an organized influx of non-whites in enormous proportions, sent here by non-governmental organizations’. Using a pseudo-scientific source, the article tries to validate the argument that immigration is orchestrated by international NGOs controlled by Soros, among others. Hungary and Russia are described as countries that try to resist this phenomenon through policies and legislations against NGOs. The same source describes how there is a ‘Jewish bank control’ over the Vatican and that the ‘private sector’ needs mass immigration of ‘foreign races’, and that Soros ‘admit[s]’ that he is aiding immigration not only for humanitarian reasons but also for economic ones. Soros is described as being in cohort with human rights activists in an attempt to weaken national states (within the EU) in order to gain influence over immigration policies. The construction of Soros is realized through predication strategies that depict ‘Jews’ as evil, deceitful and essentially greedy. In the article, the ‘Great Replacement’ conspiracy surfaces as a superconspiracy (Barkun, 2013). Soros is claimed to spearhead the ‘genocide’ of ‘white Europeans’, then accused of orchestrating the economic crises of several nations, then having financed ‘soft revolutions’ in the Czech Republic, ‘coup[s]’ in Croatia, Georgia, Slovakia and in ‘the whole former Yugoslavia’, as well as the Occupy Wall Street and Black Life Matters movements in order to destabilize the United States. The genocidal argument is also implicitly connected to the aforementioned image, whereby the murders committed by ‘the card holder’ become metonyms of the ongoing violence by immigrants on white citizens. The murders are understood to be the outcome of immigration orchestrated by Soros. The article then describes a partnership between Soros and the MasterCard Foundation, set up to aid people seeking refuge. Soros is supposed to profit from this in order to ‘fund more political events’ and to incite more ‘streams of refugees to the West’. The article ends with a quote from the aforementioned historian: ‘It would not surprise me if George Soros and other bankers are starting to arm immigration militias. Many of these guys are in the age of military service. I make no predictions on these matters, but it would not surprise me’.

The article builds on two main topoi connected to the wider understanding of ‘replacement’. The topos of existential threat, which is mainly constructed around the threat of immigrants to native Swedes (in the implicit references of violence, or by explicit remarks of genocide) and the topos of elite collaboration and secrecy. The latter is constructed through various alleged connections between power-holders (from finance, states, etc.) and their secret collaborations orchestrated by Soros. The second topos is underpinned by historic anti-Semitic predications of the nature of ‘Jews’, thus underpinned by the use of historicized discriminatory and negative ‘other-representation’ strategies. Two online sources are added here to provide legitimacy to the claims of an ongoing global conspiracy. One linked source is the far-right news site Breitbart and the other a conservative think-tank named ‘Capital Research Center’. The two sources serve as validations of the arguments made in the article and provide professed legitimacy to the anti-Semitic claims propagated by NMR.

Case two: ‘Replacement’ in right-wing populism. The election campaign video by the Sweden Democrats

The second example of how elements of the ‘replacement’ theory are articulated online comes from an election campaign video produced by the right-wing populist party the Sweden Democrats. The video was produced for the national election in 2010, after which the party entered the nation
parliament for the first time. Since then, the party has rapidly increased its support and is now the third-largest party in Sweden, gaining 17.5% in the 2018 election and thereby transforming the entire political landscape. The campaign video provides an interesting case for several reasons. Firstly, representatives (including MPs and other high-ranking actors) have on several occasions articulated the idea of ‘replacement’ in public discourse, including the Eurabia conspiracy and more general ideas of an orchestrated ongoing ‘replacement’ (cf. Vergara, 2019; Osman, 2019; Vesterlund, 2020). This means that the clip needs to be understood contextually in relation to party representatives regularly articulating conspiracy beliefs. Secondly, the video was banned from the terrestrial broadcaster TV4, where it was supposed to be aired, and instead published on YouTube. On YouTube it attracted a huge audience (receiving more than 100,000 views and several thousand comments in less than 24 h after publication). Thirdly, the election campaign video has fueled various online conversations on immigration, particularly targeting Muslim immigrants in Sweden. YouTube also serves as an archive, which means that the temporality of the clip is extended, and the connection to a specific election has less importance. It is still featured on YouTube and has received 1,237,879 views (YouTube, 2021).

The video is 30 s long and the setting is a dark room in which two persons are sitting by two parallel tables. The people are feeding cash into two automated money counters. On the table there are two signs that read ‘Administrative Officer. Pensions’ and ‘Administrative Officer. Immigration’. A numeric figure, that connotes the state budget, is counting down rapidly in the foreground. A female voice declares ‘all politics is about prioritizations’, creating a binary opposition between pensions and immigration. Suddenly, a loud alarm much like a civil defense siren sounds, a red beacon starts flashing in the background and the voice says, ‘now you have a choice’. Two red emergency stop brakes simultaneously drop from above, one with the word ‘pensions’ and the other with ‘immigration’ written on them. The combination of the semiotic resources connotes a national emergency. The two breaks function as metaphors for tax spending (or the possibilities of cutting them) and anchor the message that there are only state funds for one of these ‘options’. So far, the clip mainly reproduces a common anti-immigration message by juxtaposing two ‘tax-consuming’ groups. The clip then shifts to a person approaching the two emergency breaks. It is an elderly lady pushing a medical walker in front of her. The camera shifts between a close-up of the face of the elderly lady (with a Swedish appearance) and the slowly moving wheels of the walker. The lady has a determined look in her eyes and makes her way slowly towards the two emergency breaks. Suddenly, she looks over her shoulder and the camera shifts to an approaching group of (supposedly) women, all dressed in black burqas and niqabs. The women are pushing strollers in front of them. They approach fast and start to race the elderly lady towards the emergency breaks. The clip ends with a close-up centered on the two breaks, with the elderly lady’s hand trying to reach the ‘immigration break’ and several hands simultaneously reaching for the ‘pension break’. The scene ends with the voice stating: ‘on 19th of September, you can choose the immigration break over the pension break, vote for the Sweden Democrats’.

The campaign clip does not contain any explicit references to the ‘replacement’, but the ‘immigrants’ are portrayed in a way that mirrors key arguments in the conspiracy theory. First, the horde of (rapidly approaching) Muslim women functions as a faceless threat from an outside group/culture (Ahmed, 2004). They are articulated through a fear appeal, a metaphorical attack on/within society (cf. Andreasen, 2020). Second, the topos of cultural threat also relies on the key argument of a demographic shift articulated by Camus. The strollers represent higher birth rates among Muslims, and, when combined with the faceless ‘women’ and the non-visible children, embody a potentially hostile future. Andreasen (2020) argues that this could be understood as a specific discursive mechanism called ‘antagonistic anonymity’, that ‘construct[s] an intimidating, unapproachable
identity based on the very incomprehensibility of the target. It reinforces suspicion and a fearful frame of interpretation in which people are invited to assume the worst about the target group…’ (p. 15). The topos of cultural threat is constructed around predicational strategies where Muslims are depicted as a particularly intimidating group, with certain characteristics (they are a burden to the welfare system, have high birth rates and are culturally deviant). Thus, implicitly they are also easily transformed into an existential threat. The clip also builds on the topos of conflicting interests, juxtaposing two groups on the basis of economic logic, hence drawing on more traditional anti-immigration arguments that stress the economic burden related to immigration (de Cleen, 2017).

Case three: Mainstreaming ‘replacement’ in a conservative right-wing online space

The third example features an online column published on the political debate site ‘Det Goda Samhället’ (The Good Society). The site is produced by a market-oriented and commercially funded right-wing think-thank called ‘Den Nya Välftar’ (The New Welfare) which was launched as part of a larger business-oriented opinion-forming (neo-liberal) initiative in the 1990s (Borén, 1994). It has since then evolved in a more conservative direction. The site’s publisher is a well-known upper class persona who has received the ‘Seraphim Medal’ for ‘significant contributions to Swedish society’ from the Swedish king in 2011 (Kungahuset, 2011). The site hosts articles on various topics, as well as a television channel featured on YouTube, on which opinion leaders, journalists, academics and politicians are interviewed on current affairs, among other content. The site has a Facebook page on which all of the articles are promoted (incl. preambles and links). The site claims to ‘create contemporary self-awareness’ and hosts various (more or less controversial) writers belonging to the mainstream and the not-so-mainstream right of Swedish politics. In particular, it features many articles critical of immigration with a particular (negative) focus on immigrant ‘cultures.’ The column is written by one of the editorial members, an associate professor of Romance Languages and former senior lecturer in French (Sörman, 2021). It is published under an editorial byline, and the headline reads, ‘I want them to go back home’. The headline is followed by an image portraying what appears to be a cherry-blossom tree in full bloom with a green meadow in the background. The image is taken using backlighting, and the tree creates a bright feeling among the green surroundings. A small dog is visible, and at one end of the meadow a house can be vaguely distinguished. The column adopts the narrative format of a first-person story and describes the author’s recent experiences while (practicing) driving with ‘a young friend.’ The setting is the county of Uppland, a few miles outside the city of Uppsala. It describes a familiar and ‘typical’ late spring/early summer setting at the end of May, full of adjectives creating a pleasant environment. The setting of the Swedish countryside (constructed by an interplay of image and text) creates a metonymic understanding of Swedish-ness – a familiar notion of peace and tranquility. Upon leaving the car in the ‘green’ setting near a lake, the author describes how ‘loud music’ suddenly caught their ears. By this point the text has established a presupposed element to the described settings – a noisy disturbance to the peace. He then speculates [to the reader] about the possible suspects: ‘could it be locals or immigrants [?]’ but concludes ‘it was not locals, but immigrants. Everybody at the lake beach was an immigrant. They were around 60 individuals. Most of them Arabs.’ Here the text quickly moves from a more general referential strategy of collectivization, ‘immigrants,’ to a precise de-toponymic anthroponym, ‘Arabs’ (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001: 48). This is key to the following arguments. The article moves on, describing noisy and ‘merciless’ music ‘roaring’ in the Swedish summer night. After depicting a beautiful Swedish landscape in a grandiloquent style, the author notes that ‘all Swedes had fled…No Swedes were there because of all
the immigrants.’ According to the author, many Swedes are still in denial about what is going on, but he states: ‘We want them to go home’. Here, the author assumes the position of a silenced vox populi, someone who dares to speak the truth when ordinary citizens either are silenced or in denial. The creation of an in-group (Swedes) and an out-group (‘Arabs’), enables the author to speak on behalf of ‘we’ (Swedes) – a standard discursive technique among right-wing populist actors. The author then articulates the ‘replacement’ when he asserts that ‘the fact remains, the real problem is the replacement of a people (trans. ‘folkutbytet’). We Swedes are making ourselves refugees in our own country. I do not accept this. I will never accept it. Never. A repatriation project is inevitable…it is best for everyone’. The cultural differences and the essential character of ‘Arabs’ make integration impossible. Instead, the author celebrates segregation, ‘long live segregation.’ The claim that repatriation is ‘best for everyone,’ evokes the idea of monoculturalism as natural to national groups. Key to the argument is the role of ‘Swedes’ (i.e., ethno-cultural), who are depicted as naïve and stupid but kind-hearted, clearly the stooges of policymakers and politicians who (implicitly) have created the current situation. Thus, the replacement is the result of bad politics, but he also states that ‘Swedes’ think what he dares to say, and that ‘they do not dare to think what they feel’ (e.g., Allington and Joshi, 2020). The column articulates immigration as an existential threat. ‘What would it mean for our existence in our own homeland if all these people…from the Middle East and Africa enter our public authorities, politics, media, the juridical system?...or if these people leave their suburbs and move to the residential areas and to the red cottages in the countryside?’ But it also builds on the topos of cultural threat, with an emphasis on the demography and the argument that foreign people are unable to adjust to their new ‘homeland.’ The insurmountable differences between ‘Arabs’ and ‘people from the Middle East and Africa’ and Swedish culture (the column is unclear about what this is) are constructed around predications of these groups’ behavior. Moreover, the topos of complicity is particularly interesting here. Implicitly, the ‘replacement’ take place due to bad policies and politicians (named ‘perspectiveless utopians’), but the role of the majority in the complicity is ambiguous. Ethnic ‘Swedes’ are both complicit (through their silence), but also victims (of those in power and by the behavior of immigrants), and the column implicitly reviles a top-down perspective framing the majority. This is particularly evident in relation to the initial speculation of ‘locals’ as possible sources for the disturbance (these are described in class-demeaning terms). The text relies on the strategy of ‘calculated ambivalence,’ thus conveying two (contradictory) messages for different audiences (cf. Wodak, 2015): a traditional conservative message and a more contemporary right-wing populist message. The former connects to the notion of a silenced majority, incapable of understanding its own best interest and which needs authoritative guidance to realize the palpable nature of the ‘replacement’. The second builds on victimization and is realized through a series of imperatives at the end of the column: ‘Sweden should be the land of the Swedes. Sweden should be a country where we Swedes feel at home. It is unproblematic and obvious. It is one of our most basic human rights to wish to remain ourselves in our own national and cultural identity’. Thus, immigration through ‘replacement’ poses an existential threat to Sweden and to the ‘human rights’ of the native population.

**Conclusion**

‘The Great Replacement’ conspiracy is contingent on the capability to foment fear within the citizenry. It relies on various affective communicative practices, such as fear appeals, visual threats, out-group hostility and in-group victimization, which have the ability to exploit emotions circulating among everyday users online. The extreme-right version of the conspiracy theory centers on the classical anti-Semitic concept of the ‘global’ (cosmopolitan) and ‘evil’ Jew, thus restraining the
political impact of the ‘replacement’ claims. On the other hand, these types of patterns of arguments have been visible among political leaders in other national settings, most notably in Hungary (Plenta, 2020), pointing to the mainstreaming of anti-Semitism in other national contexts. The softer and more implicit use of conspiratorial elements by actors within the political establishment (case two) and the mainstream (case three) are more multifaceted and potentially more dangerous. They reveal that the socio-technical infrastructure of online media can be effectively utilized by anti-immigration actors, and by removing explicit references to specific conspirators (such as ‘Jews’ or ‘Soros’), the idea of a ‘replacement’ can be refined. Here, the conspirers are neither a mysterious entity nor a single powerful actor, but elected politicians and other power-holders whose actions facilitate the ‘replacement’ while the majority is kept in ignorance. Yet, the topoi of existential and cultural threat build on similar argumentative patterns in all three cases. Depictions (textual and visual) of immigrants are heavily stereotyped and derogatory, reinforcing the idea of cultural homogeneity and (ethno-) essentialism, key to nativist definitions of national inclusion and exclusion. The two latter cases show that conspiratorial claims regarding immigration are not confined to ‘extreme’ actors only, but that elements of ‘The Great Replacement’ can be recontextualized and reframed in order to fit established and respectable actors’ repertoires of communication too. They build on recognized right-wing populist strategies such as provocation, sensationalism, vox populi, calculated ambivalence and fearmongering (Andreasen, 2020; Wodak, 2015), consequently creating online spaces where racial/ethnic antagonism takes center stage. Thus, the core of the ‘replacement theory’ transcends more conventional anti-immigrant sentiments fueled by fear relating to economic costs and/or social unrest and crime, known as ‘realistic’ threats, (Craig et al., 2018). When depicting immigrants as an existential (ontological) threat to the native population (its way of life, existence and ethnos), it draws on symbolic threat perceptions that supersede possible policy-making regarding integration and social cohesion. Recent research on public attitudes in Norway and Denmark shows that support for the ‘replacement theory’ evokes support for discriminatory practices, and ‘specifically, because it portrays the majority population as victims whose ethnicity is under existential threat, it may help to justify violence as a necessary means to avert such threats.’ (Obaidi et al., 2021: 16).

This also points to the limitations of this paper, which only assesses the patterns of arguments and elements across three online articulations of the ‘replacement theory.’ It does not cover actual reception, nor their wider impact among the citizenry in Sweden. Neither does it assesses how frequent and prominent conspiratorial claims connected to the ‘replacement theory’ are online. For this reason, future research should focus on the socio-political impact of conspiratorial claims connected to the ‘replacement theory’ and quantitatively assess the spread and impact of such claims online.

To conclude, conspiratorial claims and theories on internet platforms do not exist in a vacuum. They fuel racial antagonism, and ultimately underpin the actions of people partaking in the production and circulation of anti-immigration and racist conspiracies. This became palpable in the El Paso shooter’s ‘manifesto’ (when a terrorist killed 23 and injured 23 Latino citizens in Texas, US in 2019), claiming that he was ‘simply defending my country from cultural and ethnic replacement brought on by an invasion’ (Obaidi et al., 2021: 16), as well as after the Christchurch mosque massacre in New Zealand (2019), in which a terrorist killed 56 Muslims attending the Friday prayer, with his ‘manifesto’ surfacing online shortly thereafter, entitled ‘The Great Replacement’.

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Notes

1. Even if platforms such as YouTube have ‘deplatformed’ some of the most notorious conspiracy theorists, there is still much content of this kind on the platform.
2. All translations from Swedish are made by the author.

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