

# The talk scandal as mediatized event and communicative resource in far-right populist talk

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*Discourse, Context & Media* 29, 2019

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2018.11.004>

## Abstract

This paper examines the discursive realizations and media representations of talk scandals in populist political talk with reference to scandalous statements made during the 2018 parliamentary performances of representatives of the far-right Golden Dawn (GD) party in Greece. By examining the recontextualization of the talk scandals in the Greek on-line media, it is shown that the original speech event gives rise to other speech events related to it, creating a ‘talk scandal universe’. Viewing talk scandals as building blocks upon which engaging media narratives are built, it is argued that they can serve as communicative resources in far-right populist performances, enacting a clean break with established norms and values of the political establishment. Moreover, talk scandals project perpetrators as candid, outspoken and defiant of the status quo, even in the face of damaging face or suffering legal penalties. Finally, as scandalous utterances and subsequent retractions and explanations contain political positioning statements, talk scandals have the potential to rally party supporters and politically dissatisfied citizens in general around divergent ideologies and ‘voices’.

Keywords: talk scandals, political discourse, far-right populist discourse, mediatization, recontextualization

## 1. Introduction

Elaborating on Thompson’s (2000) theory of mediated political scandal, Ekström and Johansson (2008; also 2018, forthcoming) introduced the concept of a talk scandal, thus calling attention to the importance of media talk for the eruption of political scandals. Not only are talk scandals disseminated and dramatized by the media, but they often born from within the media (Ekström and Johansson 2008: 62).

In talk scandals, the talk itself, specifically a speech act, instigates the scandal: “the core of a talk scandal is an *action* that constitutes a *transgression* of norms, rules or moral codes” (Ekström and Johansson 2008: 62; Ekström and Johansson 2018, forthcoming). These breaches relate to what people in public office are allowed to say, yet, to qualify as talk scandals, controversial public statements and gaffes must be met with public criticism and pose a serious threat to reputation (Ekström and Johansson 2018, forthcoming). Following Thompson (2000), Ekström and Johansson categorize talk scandals as *first-order talk scandals*, when the scandal originates

in speech events staged in the media (e.g. news, radio programs, interviews, etc.). Accordingly, *second-order transgressions* may involve sexual, financial, or power scandals (Thompson, 2000; Tumber, 2004) that are brought to public attention by the media, and in the course of which statements are made that are perceived as scandalous in themselves (Ekström and Johansson 2008; Ekström and Johansson 2018, forthcoming).

The role of the media in a political scandal is not just to disclose transgressive acts (Ekström and Johansson 2008; 2018, forthcoming); rather, it is to construct engaging media narratives. These are media stories of “series of events, usually in chronological order, involving descriptions of the people and other circumstances involved” (Squire 1990). As narratives are forms of signification that shed light on collective representations of the social world (ibid), so are narratives of talk scandals. These are built so as to display the act and its *aftermath*, and to keep the story alive for many days on end (Ekström and Johansson 2018, forthcoming). What is more, media stories are framed so as to convey specific journalistic perspectives and ideologies.

*Statements and reactions* in the form of quotes and soundbites from the accused politician and various other actors are building blocks in the dramatization of political scandals. During interviews, journalists quote the politician’s statements, and s/he is called upon to discursively manage the crisis (Ekström and Johansson 2018, forthcoming). Central to the political scandal’s narrative is the *confession*, which may take the form of an *apology*, but also *justifications and explanations* of how the transgressor experienced the event. Media accounts can vary from heated critical attacks to emotional stories capable of producing sympathy for the transgressor (ibid).

Even after the transgression has been reported, subsequent accounts can further criticize and even ridicule the politician’s behavior, keeping the scandal alive and “twisting the knife yet again” (Ekström and Johansson 2018, forthcoming). One way to achieve this is to search the archives for the politician’s past statements so as to illustrate the inconsistency between his/her present behavior with previous statements of moral standards, political vision, and policy declarations (for instance, in cases of racist or ‘hate’ speech, see Rivers and Ross 2018). One common question raised in the media is whether or not the politician should be allowed to retain his/her post, or instead be forced to resign (Ekström and Johansson 2018, forthcoming).

In discourse analysis, talk scandals as an object of inquiry *per se* have been generally overlooked. Instead, more work has been done on the pragmatics of apologies in political discourse (see Kampf 2008, 2009; Murphy 2015). Like talk scandals, political apologies are public and highly mediated; they are also a product of (and produce) conflict and controversy (Harris et al. 2006).

Kampf (2008) examines how “the pragmatics of forgiveness” in Israeli political apologies depend less on the judgement of the linguistic performance of the apologizer, than on the various interests on the part of the forgiver. In fact, Kampf (2009) recognizes an alternative act to formal apologies in public discourse, which he calls “public (non-) apologies”. Asserting the face threat to the public figure posed by the act of apologizing, he explores how public personas engage in “creative forms of apologetic speech in order to minimize their responsibility for misdeeds, while calculating the costs and benefits in producing apology utterances” (: 2257). As will be seen

below, far-right MP K. Barbaroussis engages in verbally elaborate and creative forms of accounting for his act, while at the same time formulating political positioning statements.

The talk scandals discussed in this paper somewhat blur the distinction between first- and second-order transgressions, as they originate in speech events that are not staged directly in the media (parliamentary performances), but are public and subject to continuous coverage and monitoring by the media that relay them to national audiences.

## **2. Talk scandals and the mediatization of political talk**

Contemporary politics is largely played out by talking to or in the media. Politicians maintain themselves in the spot light and are continuously evaluated, criticized, even ridiculed, or, conversely, acclaimed, partly in relation to their mediated speech performances. In fact, increased visibility of politicians is a mixed blessing: it creates the conditions for enhancing reputation and gaining power, but also poses a threat to the politician's public image and can damage reputation and symbolic power (Ekström and Johansson, 2018, forthcoming). As part of journalism's professional routines in the traditional and new media, utterances are processed to fit into headlines, soundbites, and dramatized news stories using different quoting techniques (Ekström, 2006; Kroon, 2006).

The construction and representation of political talk scandals is linked to processes of mediatization and recontextualization (see Agha 2011; Fairclough 1995). The concept of mediatization emphasizes the pervasiveness and impact of media communication: "Mediatization of society is "the extension of the influence of the media (considered both as a cultural technology and as an organization) into all spheres of society and social life" (Lundby 2009: 5, quoted in Androutsopoulos 2014: 10). According to Agha, mediatization is a special case of semiotic mediation, and, conversely, semiotic mediation encompasses mediatization. The defining characteristic of mediatization is that it links communication to commodities: "To speak of mediatization is to speak of institutional practices that reflexively link processes of communication to processes of commoditization" (Agha 2011: 163, italics in the original). Finally, mediatization has been conceptualized more broadly as including "all the representational choices involved in the production and editing of text, image, and talk in the creation of media products" (Jaffe 2009: 572; 2011).

In politics, mediatization, also captured by the term 'mediated politics', describes the increasing colonization of politics and political discourse by mass media (old and new) (Hepp, Hjarvard, and Lundby 2015). This tendency has been attributed to the destabilization of political parties (decline of partisanship, legitimacy crisis, etc.) and empowerment of the mass media (proliferation of media, deregulation, commercialization) (Asp and Esaiasson 1996; McNair 2011; Strömbäck 2011; see also contributions in Ekström and Tolson, eds., 2013). Thus, in order to attract voters, political institutions have increasingly relied on media techniques that emphasize "front-stage performances" (Forchtner, Krzyżanowski and Wodak 2013: 206). Likewise, political logic (formulating ideological statements and arguments) has become rapidly dominated by media logic, as in dramatic and spectacular sound bites (Mazzoleni and Schultz

1999; Meyer 2002). This co-articulation of politics and the media creates the preconditions for the representation of talk scandals as particular forms of transgressions.

Mediatization is related to recontextualization. Overall, talk scandals are communicative events that represent social activities. Each communicative event recontextualizes others, producing particular representations (or discourses) and transformations, that may differ from other recontextualizations of the same events (Fairclough 1995, following van Leeuwen 1993). In practices of media text production, earlier versions of media stories (e.g. in news, reportage, and interviews), are embedded and layered within later versions, as earlier versions are continuously transformed and recontextualized (Fairclough 1995). Talk scandals are in themselves forms of social practice, that, accordingly, include specific representations and recontextualizations of social practice from various discursive sites (ibid). Such recontextualizations generate various meta-discourses (talk about talk), and may also give rise to transformations such as regroupings of the participants involved (journalists, politicians, audiences, voter constituencies), and of participants' allegiances and stance: "... *mediatized moments* within a social process *re-scale inputs to recontextualization*, creating large-scale orientations to phenomena to which many forms of uptake occur in response" (Agha 2011:166, italics in the original).

Finally, talk scandals are related to the role of journalists as public watchdogs. Holding politicians to account is a central mission of journalism (see contributions in Ekström and Firmstone, eds., 2017; Ekström and Tolson, eds., 2013), and media representatives must appear to demand accountability from perpetrators of talk scandals. Housley and Fitzgerald (2003) have argued for the moral organization of political discourse, where the ascription of 'Moral Discrepancy' to actors or collectives (e.g. the government) is used to produce a normative breach in settings demanding accountability, such as political interviews; namely, to allocate blame when one of two paired categories does not follow the other (e.g. [declared] intention → [normatively expected] action, or blame → punishment); or conversely, when one of two paired categories follows the other when it should not (see also accountability interviewing, Montgomery 2007; also, Djerf-Pierre et al. 2013).

In their reporting, the media use different techniques to establish the standard assumed to be transgressed. According to Ekström and Johansson (2018, forthcoming), by embedding voices from the public, but also quotes from other politicians who state that the behavior of the person in question is morally reprehensible, the media in essence objectify moral standards. Media scandals are in part built using these statements. In sum, public discontent is projected as a key element in establishing a media scandal (cf. Thompson 2000).

This paper focuses on talk scandals as mediatized communicative events. The media take up politicians' controversial utterances and variously re-shape them into coherent media narratives that are variously disseminated over time and may even cross national borders as global media stories. Talk scandals are thus recontextualized according to the aims and priorities of socio-culturally diverse media and media genres, and, through the discursive orchestration of different voices, help build the moral standards assumed to be breached. Accordingly, talk scandals are 'mediatized objects' (Agha 2011), namely communication forms that are commodified and

offered to audiences for consumption and subsequent recontextualization in other mediatized environments (Facebook, Twitter, etc.).

### **3. Talk scandals as a resource in far-right populist talk**

Despite the existing theorization on talk scandals, there is limited empirical research on the actual realizations, recontextualizations, and overall dynamics of talk scandals as mediatized speech events. This paper will examine the relationship between talk scandals and populist talk by the far-right Golden Dawn (GD) party in Greece. In many cases, talk scandals that erupt from time to time characterize the discourse (either front- or back-stage) of politicians on the fringes of the political spectrum (see Ekström and Johansson 2018, forthcoming, on talk scandals by Nigel Farage and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in 2014 and 2016).

It will be shown that, in far-right populist talk, talk scandals often capitalize on public discontent with specific government policies and actions, building an ideological core that enacts a clean break with established conventions, norms, and values of the political establishment. By disrupting ‘majority’ norms, populist leaders can lay claims to - authentically and without pretenses - voicing ‘what the people really believe’. At the same time, they project themselves as candid, outspoken, and defiant of the status quo, even in the face of damaging reputation, or suffering legal penalties. Thus, scandalous talk may function as a rhetorical *modus persuadendi*, enhancing the speaker’s credibility (ethos).

In addition, as the next section will show, the talk scandal gives rise to series of other speech acts and events related to the original event, creating a ‘talk scandal universe’, which may serve as a publicity tool for populist politicians and parties. This is because second-level events, such as revocations, explanations and justifications of the original act typically contain political positioning statements.

In sum, to be realized felicitously, a political talk scandal must have the perlocutionary effect of producing reproachful public discourse (public condemnation, blame attribution) by those directly or indirectly involved (politicians, journalists, bloggers, as well as everyday people). Depending on its nature and severity, the talk scandal may also trigger various non-discursive actions; in the case at hand, the warrant for the arrest of K. Barbaroussis.

Drawing upon discourse analysis of spoken and written talk, the following sections will examine the discursive realizations and recontextualizations of scandalous populist performances. They will thus offer insights into the ways in which talk scandals serve as communicative resources in far-right populist discourse, with the potential to rally party supporters and politically dissatisfied citizens around deviant ideologies and ‘voices’, despite the reported inconsistencies and breaches of norm. Although this article focuses on talk scandals committed by far-right populist politicians, they are obviously not exclusive to them, but may also emanate from politicians in the political mainstream.

#### **3.1 The ‘Barbaroussis talk scandal’ in Greece**

In the case study presented here, the talk scandal resulted in the criminal prosecution of GD MP George Barbaroussis, who at the Plenary of the Greek Parliament, called upon the Greek military leadership to arrest the President of the Hellenic Republic, the prime minister, and the Defense Minister. His statement was seen as a call for a coup d'état, and triggered immediate outcry as well as an arrest warrant for the GD MP, who initially fled the Greek capital to avoid arrest. As the timeline below shows, the MP's call for military action triggered a series of political, legal, and discursive events that received extensive coverage in the on-line, broadcast and social media in the following days.

While, according to Ekström and Johansson (2008: 64) the likelihood of legal infringement in the case of talk scandals is low (in contrast to sexual, financial, and power scandals), this study presents one of the rare cases where a talk scandal led to the legal prosecution of the perpetrator. The next section follows the media coverage of the 'Barbaroussis talk scandal' from the articulation of his call for a military coup until the narrative's resolution (see Lavov's 1972 basic narrative structure) with the MP's plea and release from custody. As will be seen below, elements of evaluation (ibid) by other politicians, institutional bodies, journalists, and ordinary citizens (in social media commentary) are embedded in these media narratives.

### 3.1.1. The talk scandal lifecycle in the Greek on-line press

- On 15 June 2018 the Greek Parliament debates a no-confidence motion in the government initiated by the opposition over prime minister Alexis Tsipras's recent agreement with neighboring Skopje over its name, aimed at solving a decades-old dispute between the two countries. Two days before, Tsipras and FYROM Prime Minister Zoran Zaev had reached an agreement to call the ex-Yugoslav republic the 'Republic of North Macedonia', thus removing an obstacle to Skopje's bid to join the European Union and NATO. On June 17, 2018 at the Prespes lake district where the borders of Greece and FYROM meet, Tsipras and Zaev were due to officially sign the agreement on the country's new name.
- From the parliament podium, Konstantinos Barbaroussis, the far-right lawmaker of <sup>1</sup>Golden Dawn, urges the country's military leadership to arrest the President of the Greek Republic Prokopis Pavlopoulos, Alexis Tsipras and the Defense Minister, Panos Kammenos. His call provokes a strong reaction from the MPs present at the Plenary:

#### Extract 1 – "your heads in Prespes"

(G: GD MP; MPs: Parliament MPs; P: President of the Greek Parliament; GD: GD MPs)

- 1 B ...((high volume & pitch, gestures vividly))and because
- 2 the political leadership of the country does not
- 3 legislate in the interests of the nation, but in their
- 4 personal interests, (.) I call upon the leadership of
- 5 the country, to arr – the military leadership of the

6 country to respect its oath - to arrest the prime  
 7 MPs minister Alexis Tsipras (.) [Panos Kammenos, (.) and >>  
 8 S [(noise))  
 9 B [plea:se - plea:se]  
 10 >> Prokopis Pavlopoulos, in order to ave:rt, this  
 11 treason (.)((shouting)) your heads ((should roll))in  
 12 MPs Prespes - your heads ((should roll)) in Prespes  
 13 GD ((applause))

As shown in extract 1, the call for military action is prefaced by an explanation of the political rationale behind it (lines 1-4). Amid the general commotion caused (8-9), the utterance culminates in a threat of physical violence against the accused political leadership phrased directly in the second person plural form (11-12). The MP then walked away from the podium amid applause from his fellow party MPs and strong disapproval by all other political parties.

Parliament Speaker, Nikos Voutsis, was the first to publicly comment on Barbaroussis's call with a forceful call to the Greek Parliament to condemn fascism and "its expressers, homeland mongers".

- Defense Minister Panos Kammenos asks for the immediate waiver of K. Barbaroussis's parliamentary immunity in order for justice to be able to criminally prosecute the MP. According to the Minister, the MP breached article 134 of the Greek Penal Code on high treason and article 134 on preparatory acts for high treason.
- The Ethics Committee of the Greek Parliament calls an urgent meeting to deal with the issue, and rules that Golden Dawn MPs are not to take the floor during the debate on the no-confidence vote.
- To dissociate his party from the talk scandal and avoid prosecution, the GD party leader Nikos Michaloliakos announces the expulsion of K. Barbaroussis from the party's Parliamentary Group in a terse letter addressed to the President of the Greek Parliament. Rather than explicitly condemning the MP's call for a coup, the only grounds provided for the ban is that Barbaroussis's statement "*lies beyond the line of GD*", where "line" is the understood - yet unstated - ideological line of GD:

*"... because of the statement of MP Konstantinos Barbaroussis, a statement which lies beyond the line of GD, ... Member of Parliament Constantinos Barbaroussis is placed outside the PG ((Parliamentary Group)) of the Golden Dawn Popular Association".*

- The Supreme Court of Greece orders an official investigation of the incident. Earlier on, the Justice Minister, S. Kontonis has also requested the conduct of an urgent inquiry. In a radio interview to the «News 24/7» station, the Minister notes that in the MP's call there is <sup>2</sup>“a slew of criminal offenses” (“σωρεία ποινικών αδικημάτων”).

- The district attorney proceeds to formally charge the MP.
- The Hellenic National Defense General Staff issues a statement confirming the Armed Forces' commitment to *"fulfilling their mission, as designated in the Constitution and the current institutional framework ..."*

The GD MP's call for military action was generally perceived as <sup>3</sup>"fascist rant" by both Greek and international media. Indicative of the framing and tone of on-line articles, is the <sup>4</sup>title: *"Who is the "bully" Barbaroussis who proposed a coup d'état inside the ... temple of Democracy"*. The article paints a picture of Barbaroussis as the *"the "bully" with a ... burdened past"* emphasizing the fact that the MP had been previously charged for other criminal offenses.

Another <sup>5</sup>title reads: *"Barbaroussis charged for the felony of high treason. The MP's statement of "regret" and the staggering response of the Hellenic National Defence General Staff..."*.

- In a written statement, K. Barbaroussis performs "a U-turn", <sup>6</sup>retracting his parliamentary call and accounting for it as a "spontaneous", namely unplanned, act, not meant to challenge constitutional legality:

1        *My spontaneous statements today – which I retract – were by no means meant to*  
 2        *question Constitutional Legality. Unfortunately, they were subject to treacherous*  
 3        *political exploitation and misinterpretation and gave the government a pretext for*  
 4        *exposing me personally and the Golden Dawn party, but also to communicatively*  
 5        *cover [up] the sellout of Macedonia ....*

Following a categorical denial of criminal intent (line 1; for a discussion of denial strategies used for impression formation, see van Dijk 1992), the MP goes on to assign indirect blame through impersonal noun phrases and elevated language (2-3). He then names *"the government"* as responsible for using his statement as *"a pretext"* for accusing the MP. He also labels his prosecution as a communicative trick to cover up *"the sellout of Macedonia"*, namely Tsipras's forthcoming agreement on the name of FYROM.

The term "sellout" typically figures in the far-right populist discourse of GD, where it epitomizes the opposition to the political establishment for systematically "selling out" the country's national interests (for instance, "the sellout of the Aegean").

- The media report on the <sup>7</sup>*"cinematic pursuit of Barbaroussis on national highway"* as the MP flees Athens to escape arrest and is chased by police while speeding past highway checkpoints.

The talk scandal was reproduced on social media where it was met with widespread disapproval by members of the public. The ironic comments below poke fun at Babaroussis's alleged manliness while characterizing him as a coward ("Chicken") for fleeing arrest. The commenter's ironically evaluative stance is highlighted through the use of smiling emoticons. In CMC,



emoticons can serve as an indication of how the utterance is to be interpreted (Dresner and Herring 2010; Georgalou 2017; Skovholt et al. 2014).

15 June 2018:

- "The Wolf who was disguised as a Coyote"
- "After the blood from Ilias's ((reference to GD MP Ilias Kasidiaris)), now the sea of Alimos has flooded with Barbaroussis's testosterone! Men with ((idiom.)) pride! Their word, [is] a contract!"  
😊
- "Chicken"
- "If they ((i.e. GD) wrote off Barbaroussis they must also write off Kasidiaris"
- "And then what hero will we admire cutting heads off in Parliament?! 😊"
- "Joking aside, he must be arrested for inciting a coup and not see the light of sun again"
- "Simply expelling him from Parliament is a caress"
- "he should have already been arrested by the Parliament guard"

- On 18 June 2018, Barbaroussis is arrested by Greek anti-terrorism police and is given a two-day notice to plead his case. His lawyer labels his statements as an <sup>8</sup>"an unfortunate choice of words" and claims that the charges against him were excessive.
- From the police headquarters where he is held, Barbaroussis issues a lengthy written <sup>9</sup>statement declaring his respect for the Constitution and attempts to justify his Parliamentary call as "verbal exaggerations" (lit. hyperboles):

1       *Through the present I'd like to state my total respect for the Constitution, the*  
2       *Democratic polity and its fundamental institutions. I have vowed to serve*  
3       *Constitutional legality as an elected member of the National Delegation and this*  
4       *constitutes a structural element not only of my political action, but also a conscious*  
5       *value choice of mine.*

6       *In a small part of my speech during the exercise of my duties at the Parliament*  
7       *Plenary on June 16<sup>th</sup> 2018 ((added emphasis)) **incomplete lexical exaggerations***  
8       *((lit. hyperboles)) **and unfortunate expressions were randomly and spontaneously***  
9       ***integrated, that are due to the affective outburst caused to me by the substantial***  
10       ***stakes of the discussion.***

11       *My intention, during my short statement of view was to raise in an emphatic*  
12       *fashion the issue of responsibility of specific state instruments for decision making,*  
13       *which in my political view, would be on the one hand damaging to national*  
14       *interests and on the other hand a product of the imposition of the international*  
15       *factor on a concessive and un-patriotic government stance.*

16       *The relevant ungraceful phraseology on my part can by no means be*  
17       *misinterpreted as an exhortation or demise or modification or distortion of the*  
18       *Democratic Polity, first and foremost because I directly state that there was no*  
19       *cognitive perception and then because, according to reasonable assessment, the*  
20       *inconvenience of committing aberrations in polity by a speaker's verbal*  
21       *exaggerations, without a relevant institutional jurisdiction and what is more from*  
22       *the Parliament podium, is obvious.*  
23

24        *The abusive systemic management of the verbal exaggeration contributed to the*  
 25        *diversion of public opinion from the burning issue of the abandonment of sovereign*  
 26        *national rights and to the dissemination of fear and the perforation of morale.*  
 27        *The accusation that I am faced with is completely incompatible to and*  
 28        *unmatching my character and convictions. I will defend myself against it from the*  
 29        *defendant's position, as in the last resort, our system of law sufficiently protects the*  
 30        *right to free speech.*  
 31        *The revocation of the phraseology ((I used)) constitutes a conscious choice of*  
 32        *mine and not a phobic reaction. I will also repeat it from the Parliament podium,*  
 33        *so that a qualitatively equivalent restoration of the order of things is effected.*  
 34        *G.A.D.A. (Attica General Police Headquarters) 18.06.2018*  
 35        *KONSTANTINOS BARBAROUSSIS*  
 36        *MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT.*

Of particular interest is the elaborate and cumbersome lexical expression of the revocation. This mainly consists of vague and abstract noun phrases that either obscure or indirectly attribute agency. In the statement, the MP performs a series of actions:

1. Reiterates his “*total respect for the Constitution, the Democratic polity and its fundamental institutions*” in a tripartite scheme (1-2).
2. Projects his own credibility (ethos), by recurrently calling attention to his personal value system (3-5; 28-29), and emphasizing that revoking his original statement is not motivated by fear of suffering legal consequences (32-33).
3. Downplays the talk scandal as “*incomplete lexical exaggerations ((lit. hyperboles)) and unfortunate expressions ... randomly and spontaneously integrated*”, “*ungraceful [άκομψη] phraseology*” (16), and attributes it to an emotional outburst on his part (7-10).
4. Like in his initial revocation, he denies having an offensive intent (16-19); in addition, here he affirmatively emphasizes the nobility of his intentions, namely having a sense of responsibility in the face of “*unpatriotic*” compromise of national interests and national sovereignty. For these, he blames the government and an unspecified “*imposition of the international factor*”, 13-15).
5. Affirms as self-evident the argument that a “*a speaker's verbal exaggerations*” are not capable of bringing about a change in democratic polity (19-22).
6. Indirectly attributes political blame to *a.* the government, *b.* unnamed foreign interests (12; 14-15), and *c.* the political establishment (the system) (24) for diverting public opinion from the issue of the name-giving of FYROM, and for triggering catastrophic effects (25-27).
7. Defends his act by referring to freedom of speech (30-31).
8. Casts his revoking statement as an act of making amends for the original offense (34-35).

Barbaroussis's retraction was, again, extensively reported in the media. Harris et al. (2006) show that, according to media and viewer judgements, political apologies need to contain both an *illocutionary force indicating device (IFID)* and an explicit expression of the acceptance of responsibility and blame for the ‘offence’ in order to be perceived as valid apologies. In the talk

scandals examined in this study, no IFID can be recognized in the explanations and retractions of populist politicians' original statements. More specifically, there are no direct or conventional markers indicating that the proposition is to be interpreted as an apology in terms of the performative verbs used (the verb 'apologize' and its synonyms, such as 'regret' and 'be sorry' are absent). Thus, Barbaroussis minimizes responsibility for the talk scandal by simultaneously *a.* avoiding the use of an apology-related performative verb (see Kampf 2008), *b.* questioning the identity of the offended (ibid) (claiming that the democratic political system is not threatened by mere "verbal exaggerations"), and, finally, *c.* by questioning the identity of the offender (ibid) (labelling the act as verbal hyperbole motivated by a noble intent). Thus, the revocation contains expressions of lack of intent (see Murphy 2015 about British parliamentary apologies), accompanied by a statement of pure intentions.

In all, in "consist[ing] largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness" the "inflated style" of the MP's revoking statement echoes George Orwell in '*Politics and the English Language*', the author's 1946 seminal essay on the "abuse of language" for political purposes.

In the uptake of the MP's revoking statement, the on-line media criticized Barbaroussis on moral grounds, calling attention to the inconsistency of his behavior. One <sup>10</sup>article refers to a previous scandal involving Barbaroussis and other GD members who caused chaos at open air markets by overturning the stalls of immigrant sellers, and continues by repeating and paraphrasing phrases from his revoking statement:

*"In fact, having ... forgotten the days when he overturned the immigrants' stalls in the open-air markets, he now declares that he respects the Constitution, not out of fear, but because this conviction of his is a structural element of his character."*

Another <sup>11</sup>title reads: "*Barbaroussis remembered the Constitution after he was arrested*". Finally, another <sup>12</sup>article starts with a metaphor of the MP "rowing backwards" ("αναγκρούει πρύμναν"), namely going back on his initial position: "*For fear of a severe criminal conviction, ex GD MP Konstantinos Barbaroussis is rowing backwards having also acted in a similar manner a few hours after what he has said from the Parliament podium which caused an outcry*".

- 20 June 2016: Following his pleading, K. Barbaroussis is set free on bail having denied the charges attributed to him. He is imposed a 30.000 euro bail, a ban from leaving the country and compulsory appearance at the police station of his area three times a month. Coming out of the courthouse, and applauded by a small group of his supporters, he <sup>13</sup>states:

*"I would respect whatever decision the Greek justice would take. I thank my lawyers. Macedonia is Greek and this does not change."*

Thus, the story ends with a concise political statement in the present simple by the talk scandal perpetrator on the Macedonia naming debate: "Macedonia is Greek and this does not

change”. Generally, the articles that reported the MP’s release contained excerpts of his revoking statement and his statement of respect of the Constitution.

Schematically, the Barbaroussis ‘talk scandal universe’ can be represented as following:

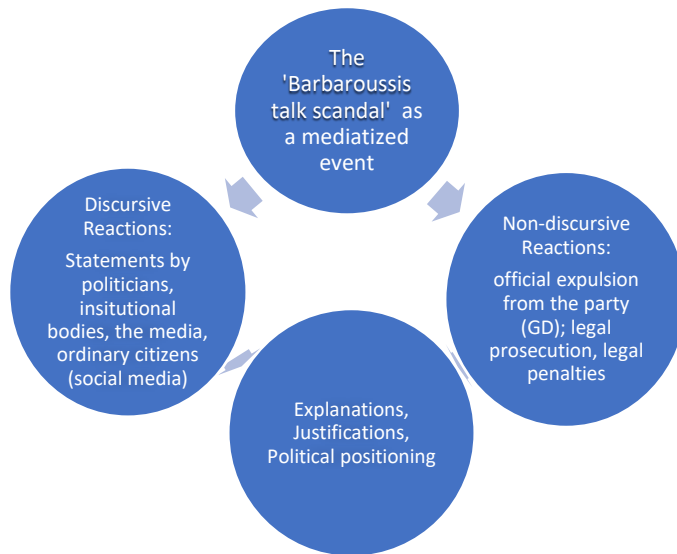


Figure 1: The Barbaroussis ‘talk scandal universe’

In sum, the ‘talk scandal universe’ of statements, speech acts, and media reports in its aftermath, works unanimously to ascribe ‘Moral Discrepancy’ (see Housley and Fitzgerald 2003) to the far-right MP for a normative breach, which, in this case, has had legal repercussions, and was followed by legal punishment.

### 3.2 The talk scandal on child fostering by same sex-couples: mixed media framing

However, not all talk scandals are framed similarly by the on-line press and the media at large. On 8 May 2018, in the course of the Parliamentary discussion of article 8 of a bill allowing for child fostering by same-sex couples, another GD MP, Ilias Kasidiaris, took the floor on the Parliament podium to say the following:

#### **Extract 2** – “you are not normal, you are against nature”

(K: GD MP; MPs: Parliament MPs; P: President of the Greek Parliament; GD: GD MPs)

- 1 B ...SYRIZA is voting for nation-zeroing laws - we’re
- 2 talking about the ultimate decadence, the final breakup
- 3 of everything, the absolute degeneration - the normal
- 4 is what develops according to nature, in nature
- 5 different sex couples have the possibility to reproduce
- 6 - ((to SYRIZA MPs)) if today you are making a law for

7 same-sex individuals to adopt children, you are not  
 8 normal, you are against nature – the aim is dissolving  
 9 the family which is the basic cell of the nation state  
 10 – your aim is to dissolve the core of the society, to  
 tear down nation state, a classic globalization plan  
 11 which only GD resists  
 12

On line 1, Kasidiaris articulates a direct accusation against the SYRIZA government. Note that “nation-zeroing” (or nation-annihilating) in “nation-zeroing laws” is an adjective currently used as a buzz word in far-right populist discourse to name-call the government for its reportedly unpatriotic stance on national issues, such as the agreement on FYROM’s new name of ‘Republic of North Macedonia’ discussed in the previous section. The term is in essence an antonym to “homeland mongers”, mentioned previously in relation to the Parliament Speaker’s statement of condemnation of far-right Barbaroussis’s call for military action. “homeland mongers” or “nation mongers” («πατριδοκάπηλοι» or «εθνοκάπηλοι») are the government’s labels attributed to those opposing them on the issue of FYROM’s use of the name ‘Macedonia’.

The MP’s accusation is followed by a three-part scheme of blame-casting noun phrases: “the ultimate decadence”, “the final breakup of everything”, “the absolute degeneration”. After defining “normal” in relation to the ability to procreate (3-5), Kasidiaris turns to directly address governments lawmakers, characterizing them “not normal” and “against nature” (7-8) for passing the law on child fostering by same sex couples. The utterance ends with the lawmaker accusing the government of planning to break up the institution of family and that of nation-state in accordance with “a classic globalization plan” (11) that is purportedly solely resisted by his own party, Golden Dawn (12). Kasidiaris’s talk thus echoes populist anti-establishment discourse.

These characterizations caused severe public stir, yet, in contrast to the Barbaroussis talk scandal discussed previously, they provoked mixed reactions. In fact, in the ‘talk scandal universe’ of talk produced in its aftermath, part of the press positioned against article 8 praised the far-right MP for being forthright and outspoken.

For instance, an editorial from <sup>14</sup>“Crash Online” magazine is entitled “*Kasidiaris ((idiom.)) made no bones ((about article 8))! “SYRIZA wants to break up family”*”. The journalist here readily adopts the stance and tone of the GD speaker. In its main body, the editorial mainly consists of direct quotes from Kasidiaris’s speech, while the MP’s position is highlighted through the reporting clauses used (bold letters added): “*Yet Mr. Kasidiaris **didn’t just stay at that, but he ((also)) accused SYRIZA of exercising racism against all those thinking in normal terms and based on the text of more than 60 university academics he mentioned that SYRIZA made them sign a text which abounds in anti-scientific views***”.

Another publication entitled <sup>15</sup>“*Kasidiaris: the bill on ((child)) fostering is against nature*” simply reports a summary of Kasidiaris’s talk relayed as direct speech, without explicitly taking a stance for or against it: “*SYRIZA is voting for nation-zeroing laws*”, *denounces the Golden*

*Dawn MP*. However, a stance in favor of the MP is implicit in the reporting verb chosen “denounces” (‘καταγγέλει’). Another <sup>16</sup>title reads: “*Kasidiaris to SYRIZA MPs: you are non-normal*”. The article’s subheading is a direct quote from another, highly contested, extract from Kasidiaris’s parliament speech on article 8: “*when the child is asked who will get the ((school)) marks and he says “Lakis”, then Lakis will be a bald guy*”.

Another <sup>17</sup>article title takes a stance directly opposing Kasidiaris’s talk: “*Incredible racist rant of Ilias Kasidiaris in Parliament: “Against nature” SYRIZA MPs*”. With the choice of “racist sewer”, the subheading rhetorically augments the oppositional framing: “*Ilias Kasidiaris completely “went off track” in Parliament, during his proposal on the child-fostering bill, breaking down in a racist sewer against SYRIZA MPs*”.

Finally, a <sup>18</sup>title labels these controversial statements as: “*A rant competition in Parliament*”. The journalist’s stance is evident in the favorite media term “rant” («παραλήρημα») used to disparage provocative statements by politicians; also, in the use of colloquial language (verb ‘γουστάρει’ / likes to) and in the reported view, which, though attributed to third parties (those inside the Parliament), it is endorsed to the effect that Kasidiaris has a psychiatric disorder: “*Kasidiaris ((coll.)) likes to provoke, but yet another time he went off track, doing justice to those inside the Parliament who claim that he is in need of psychiatric monitoring*”.

It is clear, therefore, that, even the on-line articles that strongly position themselves against the GD spokesperson’s extreme view, characterizing it as “racist” or “homophobic rant” contain extensive direct quotes from the original talk scandal. One common reporting technique used in the online articles is reporting a summary or gist of the speaker’s talk as a direct quote within quotation marks. This means that the journalistic editing that has taken place is invisible to the reader.

#### 4. Conclusions

The titles, subtitles and extracts from the online articles discussed above are indicative of the potential for high visibility of talk scandals in the media, as they provide a constant source of media narratives that are built upon high news value, quotable statements. This article has argued that in the era of on-line and social media, talk scandals play a significant part as resources for “populist challenging of the political establishment and the related destabilization of the norms of conduct” (Ekström and Johansson 2018, forthcoming). Besides focusing on the discursive action of the original transgression alone, the study has traced the ‘talk scandal universe’ comprising a wealth of statements (spoken and written), speech acts and on-line media reports produced in the aftermath of recent parliamentary performances by MPs of the far-right GD in Greece. Although it is recognized that journalism has lost part of its authority in reporting scandals to the increasing domination of social media, it was seen that on-line journalism remains important “for the evaluation and determination of the magnitude of accusations of norm transgressions” (ibid). The study showed that this evaluation can range from being categorically negative and denunciatory, to mildly critical or even positive, as in the case of article 8 on child-fostering by same sex couples, depending on the nature of the talk scandal and the political positioning of the on-line platform.

In the face of public outrage, the media are faced with denials by politicians or justifications to the effect that their words have been misinterpreted and their intentions misjudged. In general, on-line articles and citizen commentary on social media bring to the fore the discrepancy between the moral standards and/or political and ideological values of representatives of far-right populist parties and the values of a tacit majority of ‘liberals’ in the center of the political spectrum.

Irrespective of the language chosen to set the tone and frame articles, selected statements from the ‘talk scandal universe’ are relayed to audiences through various reporting and editing techniques in media stories that maintain the talk scandal alive. This creates increased visibility for representatives of far-right populist parties, and may thus serve as a publicity tool for perpetrators of talk scandals. Paradoxical as this may seem, the original scandalous statements and subsequent retractions and justifications project perpetrators as candid, outspoken and defiant of the status quo, thus enhancing populist politicians’ credibility (ethos), *despite* the displayed inconsistencies or breach of norms. Moreover, as the talk scandal universe is rife with political positioning statements, it is argued that talk scandals have the potential to rally far-right party supporters and politically dissatisfied citizens in general around divergent or deviant ideologies and ‘voices’.

Overall, this study sheds light on the negotiations of norms of verbal conduct, moral and ideological values that take place in the performance and recontextualization of scandalous utterances in the media (the talk scandal universe), as well as on the potential of on-line media, alongside traditional or legacy media, for the uptake and dissemination of scandalous talk. The attendant dynamics in the talk scandal lifecycle shape the potential of talk scandals to function as communicative resources for far-right populist politicians. The discursive realizations and recontextualizations of political talk scandals, and their functions as discursive resources are fruitful, though largely unexplored, avenues of inquiry in political communication research and sociolinguistic discourse analysis. As such, they merit further investigation through cross-cultural empirical research across different mediated settings.

## Appendix

### Transcription conventions

[	marks the beginning of an overlapping stretch of talk
]	marks the end of an overlapping stretch of talk
(.)	micropause of less than 2/10 of a second
wo: :rd	stretching of the sound preceding the colons
word,	continuing intonation
>>	continuous utterance by the same speaker
word-	a hyphen after a word or part of a word indicates self-interruption
<u>word</u>	indicates emphasis on the underlined word or part of word
(( ))	marks the transcriber's descriptions of the interaction

### Abbreviations

coll.	colloquial
idiom.	idiomatic
lit.	literally

### List of figures

Figure 1: The 'Barbaroussis talk scandal' universe



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In the last three elections, far-right Golden Dawn has consolidated its position as third party in the Greek Parliament. Despite its Neo Nazi background, in its official public performances in the Greek Parliament and in mainstream media, GD have not invoked Neo Nazi ideology or the demise of democracy. The ‘Barbaroussis talk scandal’ is the sole exception.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Barbaroussis [is] outside the PG [Parliamentary Group] of Golden Dawn’  
<https://www.lifo.gr/now/politics/196906/ektos-k-o-tis-xrysis-aygis-o-mparmparoysis> (date posted: 15 June 2018)

<sup>3</sup> ‘Parliament: Golden Dawn MP calls on military coup and arrest of Greece’s political leadership’ <http://www.keeptalkinggreece.com/2018/06/15/golden-dawn-mp-military-coup-parliament/> (date posted: 15 June 2018)

<sup>4</sup> ‘Who is the “bully” Barbaroussis who proposed a coup d’état inside the ... temple of Democracy’ <http://www.enikos.gr/politics/579525/poios-einai-o-ntais-barmparousis-pou-proteine-na-ginei-praxikopim> (date posted: 15 June 2018)

<sup>5</sup> ‘Barbaroussis charged for the felony of high treason. The MP’s statement of “regret” and the staggering response of the Hellenic National Defense General Staff...’  
(<http://www.mixanitouxronou.gr/gia-kakoyrgima-eschatis-prodosias-katigoreitai-o-mparmparoysis-i-apantisi-toy-geetha/>) (date posted: 15 June 2018)

<sup>6</sup> ‘K. Barbaroussis: I revoke my statements, they were misinterpreted’  
[http://www.athensvoice.gr/politics/452183\\_konstantinos-mparmoparoysis-anakalo-tis-diloseis-moy-parermineytikan](http://www.athensvoice.gr/politics/452183_konstantinos-mparmoparoysis-anakalo-tis-diloseis-moy-parermineytikan) (date posted: 15 June 2018)

<sup>7</sup> ‘Cinematic pursuit of Barbaroussis on national highway’  
<https://www.newsbeast.gr/society/arthro/3714305/kinimatografiki-katadioxi-barmparousi-stin-ethniki-odo> (date posted: 15 June 2018)

<sup>8</sup> ‘Greek far-right lawmaker arrested on treason-linked charges’  
<https://www.boston25news.com/news/greek-farright-lawmaker-arrested-on-treasonlinked-charges/771932154> (date posted: 18 June 2018)

<sup>9</sup> ‘Barbaroussis’s statement from inside the APH [Attica Police Headquarters] about the charges against him’  
<https://www.newsbeast.gr/politiki/arthro/3721775/i-dilosi-barmparousi-mesa-apo-ti-gada-gia-tin-kategoria-se-varos-tou> (date posted: 18 June 2018)

<sup>10</sup> ‘A statement of regret by Barbaroussis: I Respect the Constitution and Democracy’  
<http://www.iefimerida.gr/news/424736/dilosi-metanoiias-apo-mparmparoysi-sevomai-syntagma-kai-ti-dimokratia> (date posted: 27 June 2018)

- <sup>11</sup>‘Barbaroussis remembered the Constitution after he was arrested’  
<https://www.parapolitika.gr/article/mparmparousis-thimithike-to-sintagma-afou-ton-sinelavan>  
 (date posted: 18 June 2018)
- <sup>12</sup>‘Konstantinos Barbaroussis: I revoke what I said in Parliament’  
<http://www.enikos.gr/politics/580079/konstantinos-barmparousis-anakalo-osa-eipa-stin-vouli-tora> (date posted: 18 June 2018)
- <sup>13</sup>‘Barbaroussis free on bail ((lit. restrictive conditions))’  
<https://www.parapolitika.gr/article/eleftheros-me-perioristikous-orous-mparmparousis> (date posted: 20 June 2018)
- <sup>14</sup>‘Kasidiaris ((idiom.)) made no bones ((about article 8))! “SYRIZA wants to break up family”’.  
<https://www.crashonline.gr/politiki/1138680/ekso-apo-ta-dontia-ta-eipe-o-kasidiaris-o-syriza-thelei-na-dialysei-tin-oikogeneia/> (date posted: 8 May 2018)
- <sup>15</sup>‘Kasidiaris: “the bill on ((child)) fostering is against nature”’  
<https://www.inewsgr.com/267/kasidiaris-to-nomoschedio-gia-tin-anadochi-einai-para-fysin.htm>  
 (date posted: 8 May 2018)
- <sup>16</sup>‘Kasidiaris to SYRIZA MPs: “you are non-normal”’  
<https://www.newsbeast.gr/politiki/arthro/3578049/kasidiaris-se-vouleftes-tou-siriza-iste-mi-fisiologiki> (date posted: 8 May 2018)
- <sup>17</sup>‘Incredible racist rant of Ilias Kasidiaris in Parliament: “Agains nature” SYRIZA MPs’  
<http://www.epikairo.com/apistefto-ratsistiko-paralirima-tou-ilia-kasidiari-sti-vouli-para-fysi-i-vouleftes-tou-syriza/> (date posted: 8 May 2018)
- <sup>18</sup>‘A rant competition in Parliament’ <https://www.iapopsi.gr/diagonismos-paralirimaton-stin-voyli/> (date posted: 9 May 2018)

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*Declaration of interest:*

The study was financially supported by the Swedish Research Council (Dnr: 2016-02071).