

The visual construction of “the people” and “proximity to the people” on the online platforms of the National Front and Swiss People’s Party

Elsa Gimenez · Natalie Schwarz

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Abstract The article explores and compares how the online communication of the National Front (FN) and Swiss People’s Party (SVP) visualise and define “the people” and “proximity to the people” in the wake of the Swiss federal elections and the French regional elections in 2015. Considerations based on netnography, discourse analysis and visual culture studies inform the corpus-based approach of the study. The results of the analysis show significant differences in the way each party represents itself: the FN visually frames itself as a party *for* the people whereas the SVP portrays itself as a party *of* the people. This is due to distinct ways of depicting the relation between party representatives and citizens as well as the “in-group”.

Keywords Visual culture · Right-wing populism · Front National · Swiss People’s Party · Online communication · Discourse analysis

Die visuelle Konstruktion des „Volkes“ und der „Volksnähe“ in der online-Kommunikation des Front National und der Schweizerischen Volkspartei

Zusammenfassung Der Beitrag untersucht und vergleicht, wie die Online-Kommunikation des Front National (FN) und der Schweizerischen Volkspartei (SVP) das „Volk“ und die „Volksnähe“ kurz vor den Eidgenössischen Wahlen in der Schweiz und den Regionalwahlen in Frankreich im Jahr 2015 visuell darstellen und deuten. Überlegungen auf der Grundlage der Netnographie, Diskursanalyse und den Visual

E. Gimenez (✉) · N. Schwarz

Lab Capitalism, Culture and Societies (LACCUS), UNIL University of Lausanne, Building Géopolis

- Office 5330, Quartier Mouline, 1015 Lausanne, Switzerland

E-Mail: Elsa.Gimenez@unil.ch

N. Schwarz

E-Mail: Natalie.Schwarz@unil.ch

Culture Studies bilden den korpus-basierten Ansatz der Studie. Die Ergebnisse der Analyse legen dar, dass Zeigekonventionen der einzelnen Parteien den FN eher als eine Partei *für* das Volk und die SVP als eine Partei *des* Volkes rahmen. Dies indem die Beziehung zwischen politischen VertreterInnen und BürgerInnen oder die „Wir-Gruppe“ unterschiedlich visuell konstruiert werden.

Schlüsselwörter Visuelle Kultur · Rechtspopulismus · Front National · Schweizerische Volkspartei · Online-Kommunikation · Diskursanalyse

1 Introduction

In this article, we examine the visual practices of the National Front (*Front national, FN*) and the Swiss People's Party (*Schweizerische Volkspartei, SVP*)¹ on their official online platforms. More precisely, we study and compare how the web visuality of the FN and SVP as right-wing populist parties portray and construct “the people” or their relationships to them. This question seems important since scholars roughly define populism as the act of publicly taking the side of the people in order to defend their interests against an elite or as a “cult of the people” with its various connotations (popular sovereignty, popular culture etc.) (Taguieff 2012: p. 39). Consequently, concepts of populism fluctuate between “appeal to the people” and “cult of the people” (ibid.). This specific research interest is due to several considerations and observations:

Many Western European countries are currently shaped by right-wing populism, which has not remained unnoticed by the research community. Although a rich scholarly literature on this topic can be found today, our article is innovative for several reasons. Putting into perspective two right-wing populist parties reveals several commonalities: their great success in their respective countries, their similar political agendas, their apparent interest in the web as communication support² and the fact that both their countries held elections in 2015 (fig. 1).

The FN and SVP operate in countries with differing political systems, cultures and historical backgrounds. These variables will be considered when interpreting and comparing their respective visuals on the web. Another reason why our study is innovative is its focus on the visual online practices of these two parties. Previous (but rather rare and isolated) studies on the visual communication of the FN and SVP have mainly studied campaign posters (cf. Demarmels 2009; Dézé and Girod 2006; Haver (in press); Maire and Garufo 2013 for the SVP; Novak 2011 for the FN). Against this backdrop, the article also seeks to broaden existing knowledge of the visual strategies of the FN and SVP by shifting the focus on their web visuals.

The research question was inspired by preliminary observations on the online platforms of the FN and SVP revealing a prevalence of photographic images rep-

¹ The *Swiss People's Party* is also known under its French and Italian appellation *Democratic Union of the Centre* (UDC).

² In the second half of the 1990s, both parties launched a party website; the first political parties of their countries to do so (cf. Dézé 2011; Skenderovic 2009).



Fig. 1 Tweet of Marine Le Pen commenting on the positive election results of the SVP. She signifies its victory as proof that people from all over Europe are saying no to migratory flows and are thus approving the FN’s and SVP’s political positions³ (Accessed on 28.10.2015)

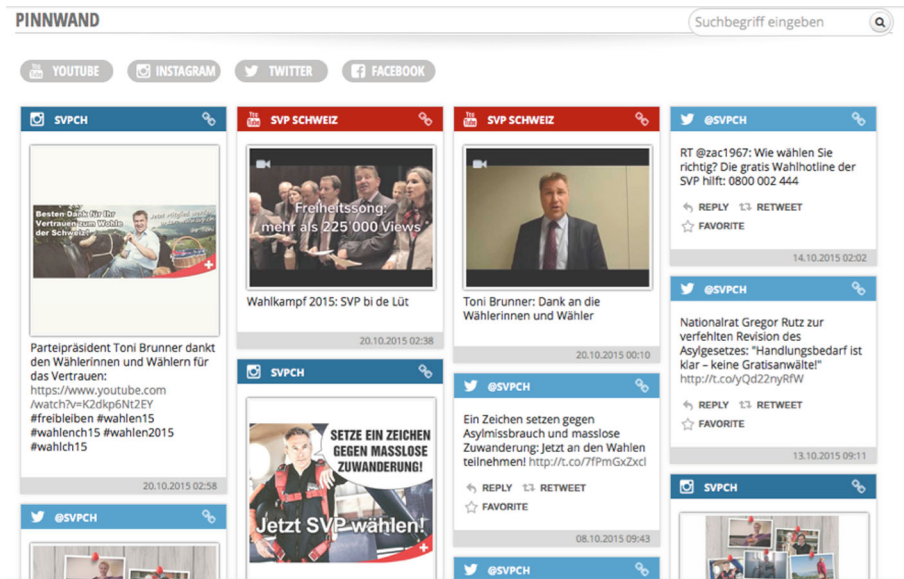


Fig. 2 The website of the national SVP displayed a “pin board” at the time of the study, on which it relayed the latest posts from its social media accounts⁶ (Screenshot taken on 27.10.2015)

resenting different types of people at various kinds of events and settings. Consequently, our visual data mostly inform about how the FN and SVP visually mediate specific visions of persons rather than topics. Further observations also disclosed four recurrent categories of persons within their respective photographic production for the web: the citizens, the supporters, the party leaders and other party candidates. These categories in particular frame visions of “the people” or the party’s relation to

³ While Switzerland held Federal elections for the National Council and the first round of elections to the Council of States on 18 October, France had regional elections on 6 and 13 December. These elections took place in time for our study since election campaigns have become moments of increased visual production (Knieper and Müller 2004: p. 7).

⁶ This pin board was not analysed by Luginbühl (2014) since his study ended shortly before the party changed its web appearance in 2014 and newly included content of social media. However, we can say that the way the SVP uses its online platforms has not fundamentally changed since Luginbühl’s study (cf. introduction).

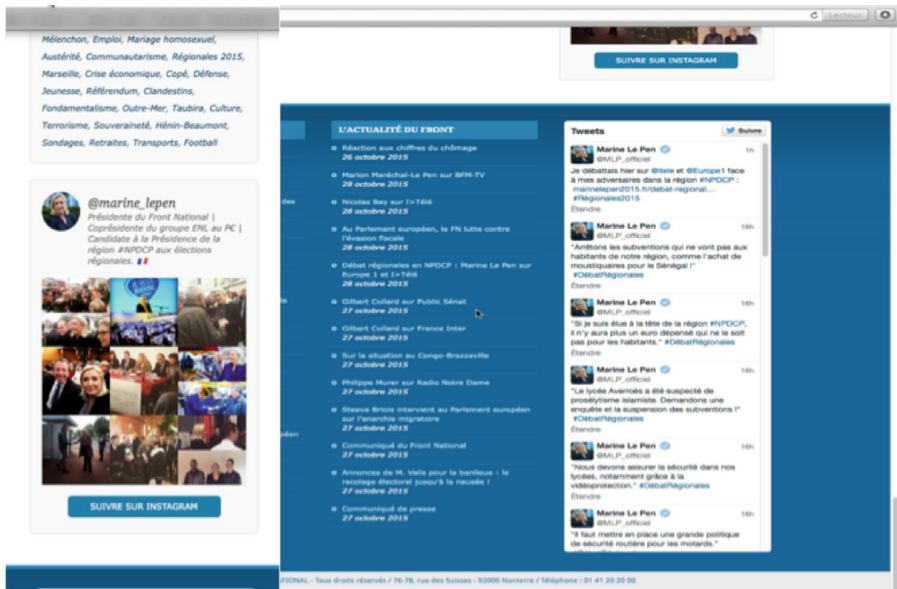


Fig. 3 Front page of the FN's official website embedding content of MLP's Twitter and Instagram account (Screenshot taken from the official website on 27.10.2015)

them. Perspectives of discourse analysis as well as existing knowledge about right-wing populism, the Swiss and French context and the visual communication of both parties have ultimately informed our approach and analysis.

We chose to prioritise the focus on visual practices and not to study how the FN and SVP address the issue of online participation. However, this undoubtedly important question was raised by Munoz (2005) and Bonhomme and Stalder (2006) for example. They both seek to measure “technical democracy” on the websites of the FN and SVP, which Web 2.0 is supposed to promote. In this regard, their studies revealed a lack of organisation by both parties to administer and take up exchanges with users. It was also found that the main function of the FN's and SVP's websites is self-promotion. Following this logic, their home pages serve primarily as show-cases to encourage users to find out more about the party. A more recent study on the FN's web communication (Boyadjian 2015) shows that its websites, social networking and sharing platforms have two main functions: to capitalise on the number of likes, subscribers and “fans” and to implement a standardisation strategy with the aim to align the layout of the own website to those of other French parties (e. g. banner visuals). Finally, Luginbühl (2014) describes how the SVP and Young Socialists of Switzerland use the web for political communication (i. a.): both parties have their own websites and are present on social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter) and social sharing sites (YouTube, flickr) via personal accounts. A closer look revealed however that their websites remain to be the most central information portals. Furthermore, both parties seldom use the potential of Web 2.0 for their websites or social media platforms (e. g. by posting in real time, conceiving new content for social media or reacting to comments to enable direct discussion

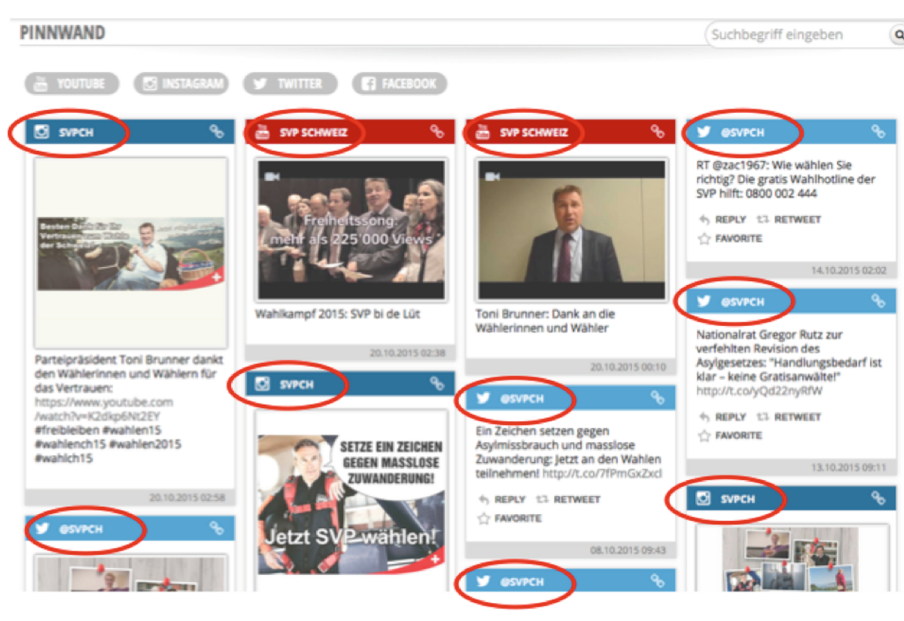


Fig. 4 Social media “Pin board” on the official site of the National SVP (Screenshot taken from the official website of the national SVP on 27.10.2015)

between the party and the citizens). Consequently, they limit themselves to one-way communication.

Our article is divided into four sections. The sections *Theoretical framework* and *Methods of data collection and analysis* elaborate on the way we approached the publicised visuals on the online platforms of the FN and the SVP at the time of the study. The section *Empirical findings and analysis* presents the results of our visual analysis. The *Conclusion* summarises major findings and seeks to explain similarities and differences between the web visuals of the FN and SVP.

2 Theoretical framework

In this study, we look at visuals as produced in and by particular social domains because all institutions in society have their own rhetoric, visual imagery or technological apparatus in order to convey specific meanings or interpretations of the world for particular purposes (Clarke 2012: p. 244 f.; Evans and Hall 2010: p. 2). In this sense, we consider any visual product of the FN and SVP as constructed and both parties as producers of specific types of knowledge. Interested in describing and analysing symbolic orders in their respective historical and social context, we point to Michel Foucault’s *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1981 [1961]), which provides a helpful methodology for such research goals. In the following sections, we will present the broad lines of his methodology and discuss them in view of visual



Fig. 5 Picture from the event “SVP with the People” in Fribourg (Screenshot taken from the official website of the national SVP on 27.10.2015)

analysis. Next, we will present considerations in regards to photography since we primarily dealt with photographic images in our study.

How can *orders of knowledge* (or elements of it) be grasped? To start with, Foucault refers to them also as *discourses* and gives them a quite specific meaning: they designate groups of *statements*, which provide a way to represent knowledge about a particular topic at a particular historic moment and social context (Hall 1997: p. 44). A main concern of Foucault’s definition is to overcome a purely linguistic concept of discourse that distinguishes between what one *says* (language) and what one *does* (practice) (ibid.). Therefore, he insists on the performative aspect of linguistic practices, that is, their ability to constitute reality or the object of knowledge by themselves. Viewed from this perspective, discursive practices can produce powerful knowledge.

Foucault considers statements as the smallest units of discourses. Nevertheless, they always appear as *discursive formations*, namely in specific relation to other statements. According to Foucault, a discourse analyst strives to reconstruct *formation rules* of which specific discourses derive. Knowing that analysis of statements is the core of discourse analysis, it is interesting to note that there are several moments in the *Archaeology of knowledge* where Foucault implies that any kind of signifying practice can be potentially discursive (1981 [1961]: p. 146 ff.; 120). On the basis of this observation, several authors have already proposed thinking of discourses as articulated through all sorts of visual and written materials (cf. Betscher 2014; Clarke 2012; Eder and Kühschelm 2014; Fetger 2010; Hall 1997; Keller 2016; Maasen et al. 2006; Rose 2012; Traue 2013). This reading of Foucault encouraged us to operate with a more general comprehension of his statement concept since it allows us to analyse visual representations as discursive practices manifesting in a visual register. In other words: as *showing conventions* that regulate ways of giving to see and make sense of things, events or persons (cf. Keller 2016).



Fig. 6 Picture from MLP’s personal Instagram account during a visit in Cambrai with caption “meeting with inhabitants” (Accessed on 27.10.2015)



Fig. 7 Photomontage from MLP’s personal Twitter account of a campaign meeting in Calais with caption “room is packed” (Accessed on 14.10.2015)

However, by considering the importance Foucault gives to *formation rules* in his discourse theory, “visual” statements cannot be detected by the analysis of isolated visual documents. His methodology rather suggests identifying a series of visualisations within a specific (e. g. institutional) visuality that are organised by specific rules (cf. Betscher 2014; Fetger 2010; Rose 2012). In agreement with Fetger (2010: p. 215), we also believe that the analysis of the visual regularities themselves has

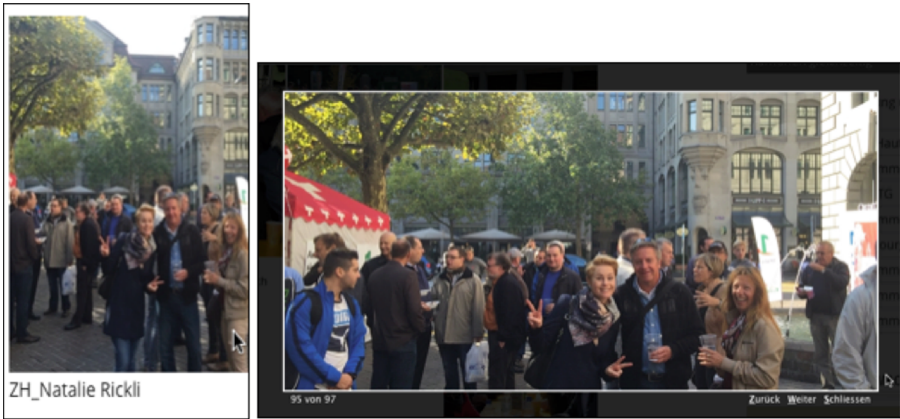


Fig. 8 Extract from the album overview with caption (picture to the left) and photo of the event “SVP with the people” in Zurich (picture to the right) (Screenshots taken from the official website of the national SVP on 27.10.2015)



Fig. 9 Picture of the event “SVP with the people” in Zurich (Screenshot taken from the official website of the national SVP on 27.10.2015)

to focus on *what* visual representations show and evaluate as true (issues, subject positions) as well as on *how* they show something (specific themes, recurring connotations, compositional aspects, etc.). The way we proceed to reconstruct series of visualisations that function according to specific rules within the visual web communication of the FN and SVP will be discussed in the next section. Before that, we want to elaborate on what distinguishes the visual from the written language and what characterises photographs in particular. This way, the aim is to explain wherein the discursive “potential” of photographic representations lies (ibid.: p. 211).

What characterises photographs as a specific picture type is their resemblance to the depicted object. However, this analogy only applies to a limited extent be-



Fig. 10 Picture of the event “SVP with the people” in Zurich (Screenshot taken from the official website of the national SVP on 27.10.2015)



Fig. 11 Picture of DJ Tommy, composer of the song “Welcome to SVP”, at the event “SVP bi de Lüt” at Zurich main station (Screenshot taken from the official website of the national SVP on 27.10.2015)

cause lines, forms and colours have little in common with the object they stand for (cf. Eco cited in Fegter 2010: p. 212). Another quality associated with photographs is their capacity to mirror reality because they can only refer to things that were once in front of a lens (ibid.). Photographs are thus often considered to be transparent and objective relays of external realities (Evans 2010: p. 12). As a final point we also want to underline their reality constituting character: contrary to widespread opinions, photographs incorporate specific ways of seeing and are not simply mechanical recordings because the photographer chose a view out of an infinite number of viewing possibilities or made compositional choices (Fegter 2010: p. 112). Hence, *visuality* is – in contrast to vision – always constructed (Foster



Fig. 12 Picture of the event “SVP bi de Lüt” in Zurich. The caption says “Good music but even better politics” (Screenshot taken from the official website of the national SVP on 27.10.2015)



Fig. 13 Picture from MLP's personal Instagram account (Accessed on 27.10.2015)

1988: p. ix). Such constructivist considerations on photo documents tie in well with assumptions related to discourse analysis.

As a last theoretical prerequisite, we want to introduce Roland Barthes' idea that visuals never express the intentions of their “authors” (cf. Barthes 1997). It is an important theoretical premise to us because we only study visual products and not their production processes. Furthermore, the producer's intentions do often not tell much about visual meanings since they may not coincide with what viewers actually derive from them (cf. Hall 2006). In our analysis we are consequently not seeking to disclose true communicative intentions or intended effects, but suggest instead possible contemporary readings of the visual practices of the FN and SVP



Fig. 14 Picture from the FN’s flickr account (Accessed on 28.10.2015)

(cf. Müller 2003). At best, we make justified assumptions about media strategies or visual choices of these two parties.

3 Methods of data collection and analysis

In line with a corpus-based approach, our data collection took place from 24 September until 17 October 2015 (two days before the National council elections in Switzerland and two months before the regional elections in France) and addressed all visuals that were relevant to our research question. We started with the entire visual production publicised on the official websites of the national SVP (www.svp.ch) and FN (<http://www.frontnational.com>) during that period⁴ and looked at both parties as discourse producers. While viewing the FN’s and SVP’s websites, we also used an analytical grid to guide our observations with regard to their architecture and functioning at the time of our study.⁵ In this context, we noticed for example hyperlinks referring to other websites, social networking and social sharing platforms (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, flickr). Yet, these social media platforms were always declared as official communication organs of the FN, Marine Le Pen (MLP) or the SVP by their description. In particular places, the websites of the SVP or the FN also embedded content stemming from such external platforms (fig. 2).

⁴ We noted that in February 2016, the FN and SVP had transformed their websites and social media accounts. Since then, a large part of the visuals studied in this article were no longer accessible.

⁵ This way of proceeding was inspired by netnographic approaches of Jouët and Le Caroff (2013).



Fig. 15 Picture of the event “SVP with the People” in Biel (Screenshot taken from the official website of the national SVP on 27.10.2015)

In view of these cross media references, we decided to consider the social networking and sharing sites as extensions of the official website and added them to our material corpus. Since the latter consisted of hundreds of photographic images in the end, we chose to separate our data into two analysis corpora – a “study” and a “reference” corpus (cf. Rastier 2004) – in order to handle their abundance. The *study corpus* is the corpus on which we based our analytical work. It was made up of content from photo galleries, social networks and sharing platforms that were publicised on the parties’ website. The *reference corpus* however was used for more general observations regarding specific kind of content on the external online platforms (e. g. videos on YouTube) or the websites in order to contrast or control observations in our study corpus.

Most of our analytical steps were inductive (with exception of the last one) so that empirical findings could guide the further avenues of our study. It also allowed us to prevent bias by, for example, searching through photographic images in order to confirm what we already thought to know about them or by losing sight of the exact status of a specific visual within the FN’s and SVP’s web visuality. Specifically this means that we devised categories for coding⁷ or while reconstructing frequent showing conventions. Furthermore, both of us worked first on the visuals of a specific party. The codes that emerged from our individual work were later compared, discussed and adjusted in order to create as unambiguous categories as possible.⁸ The last analytical step was, as already announced, interpretative and dedicated to the most frequent and hence salient coding categories, uniting specific

⁷ Coding categories that did not emerge from the coding process itself were based on our above-mentioned and preceding “netnographic” observations.

⁸ At this point we would like to mention that one author of this article is a French and the other a Swiss-German sociologist. During data coding and interpretation, both repeatedly informed each other when cultural knowledge was mobilised during visual interpretation.



Fig. 16 Picture of a SVP information event in Locarno concerning the renovation of the Gotthard Tunnel on Instagram (Accessed on 14.10.2015)

groups of visuals under one roof. Exemplary photographs of such series received a detailed analysis consisting of formal descriptions of what the FN and the SVP is showing us as well as an interpretative work aiming to understand what these visuals stand for (cf. Hall 1997) and how they make sense in their immediate⁹ and wider contexts. At this point, we would also like to point out that we would not take the party ideology of the FN and SVP as reference point for visual analysis. With Dézé (cited in Sainty 2015: p. 130), we argue that such an approach would overestimate the knowledge of the precise party program and positions by supporters, voters or potential viewers.

4 Empirical and analytical findings

Preliminary netnographies brought to the foreground four visual categories of persons that we took into consideration during the analysis of our visual corpora in view of our research interests. However, these visual categories were a lot more difficult to distinguish among the web visuals of the SVP than among the web visuals of the FN. The category of “supporter” for example mixes with the categories of “candidates” and “citizens” in photographs of the SVP. In the following two sections, we

⁹ In an article, Boullier and Crepel (2013) lay great stress on the importance of all available information that surround a photographic image circulating on the internet (e. g. tags, likes, album descriptions etc.). During the analysis of our visual corpora, we also gave special consideration to the different places of publication (website and social media) as well as captions accompanying photographic images.

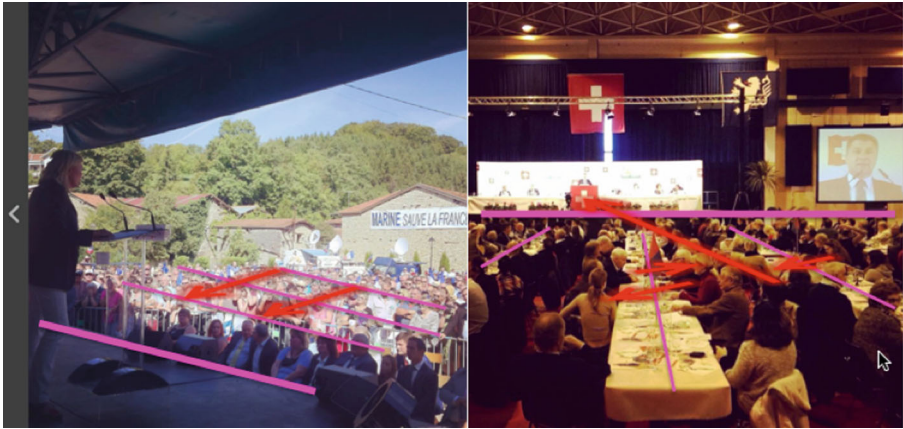


Fig. 17 Photomontage exemplifying typical camera positions used by the FN and SVP

analyse photographic pictures that represent in an exemplary way salient groups of visualisations within our study corpora. Such representative pictures were procured cross-medially since both parties regularly re-post the same or similar visuals on their various online platforms. Finally, it should also be said that while the SVP website refers to official social media accounts of the party (fig. 4), the FN's website refers to those of its party leader Marine Le Pen (MLP) (Twitter, Instagram) (fig. 3).

This observation suggests that the FN and SVP do not grant the same space to their party leaders within their official web communication. With this said, since MLP's social media accounts appear on the official FN party website, we decided to consider them too.

4.1 The FN and SVP visualising their relations to the people

Regarding how the FN and SVP portray themselves online, we observed that most of the time, both visualise their relations to the people. Considering that both parties are right-wing populist, it is not surprising that the idea of *proximity to the people* is a central element in their web visuality. However, we could identify different forms of portraying proximity, be that within a specific party visuality or in comparison to each other. The following subsections organise recurrent representations of the parties' relation with "the people" around three main themes: *Being with the people*, *Addressing the people* and *Representing the people*.

4.1.1 The FN and SVP being with the people

In the case of the SVP, we can easily discuss the theme *Being with the people* through the example of depictions of the event "SVP bi de Lüt" (Swiss German for "SVP with the people"), an event that has been organised regularly in the past in public spaces (fig. 5). On 3 October 2015, shortly before the Swiss elections, the event even took place in all cantons simultaneously. The official website of the national SVP section provides us with well documented photo albums on this subject.



Fig. 18 Photo “triptych” from MLP’s Twitter account (Accessed on 14.10.2015)

The FN also exhibits photographic images of meetings with the people in public spaces. They are often accompanied by captions containing the expression “à la rencontre de...” (French for “meeting with”) sending a similar message (fig. 6).

A closer look however reveals that the concept of “proximity” varies strongly in the way each party visualises it. The photograph of MLP above (a visit in Cambrai) is very exemplary for pictures that set her apart from the people, making the figure of the leader very visible: she is easily identifiable due to a frequent safety distance between her and the people. This distance is particularly illustrated by the visible presence of bodyguards establishing a security zone around her. Furthermore, the chosen camera angle in this type of photographs also regularly shows MLP from the front and the inhabitants from behind.

Another photo group identified within the web visuality of the FN visualising “distinction” shows meetings with the people in more shielded locations. Such locations only enable encounters with supporters that are ready to travel in order to meet the FN.

One aspect of fig. 7 is to show the large number of people who attended events in order to listen to MLP (second picture to the right). In contrast, we can see MLP put forward as sole speaker on stage in many other pictures, as illustrated by the exemplarily photo on the left-hand. Such visuals help to convey the impression that the French are eager to hear the FN since it is able to gather a large number of persons at party events.

As we have already seen, the SVP organises more random meetings with the people. Such campaign and representational practices enhance the idea of “similarity” because they make it difficult to distinguish between different categories of persons. Fig. 8 for example shows the SVP candidate for National Assembly Natalie Rickli



Fig. 19 Picture on MLP's Instagram account showing her sightseeing during her political visit in the Czech Republic (Accessed on 27.10.2015)



Fig. 20 Picture on MLP's Instagram account showing her getting ready for the First of May speech (Accessed on 27.10.2015)

(blonde woman with short hair) during a “SVP bi de Lüt” event in Zurich posing with people. Without any previous knowledge, only the caption would let us know that there is (somewhere) a party candidate in this photo.

The fact that this picture was taken in the heart of the city of Zurich is another important aspect of the event “SVP bi de Lüt”. Photographs taken from the same kind of events in other cantons reveal that the SVP usually campaigns at public meeting points of Swiss villages or cities. As a campaign strategy, this practice



Fig. 21 Still from the clip “Welcome to SVP” on the SVP’s Instagram account (Accessed on 28.10.2015)

allows SVP candidates to get in touch with passers-by and not only with supporters. As a showing convention, it conveys the idea of real proximity by closeness and similarity between party representatives and citizens.

Finally, another series of photographs revealed that the “SVP *bi de Lüt*” event is also characterised by (traditional) meals that are regularly served on this occasion (figs. 9 and 10). This group of frequent pictures not only holds on photographically how the SVP shares convivial moments with citizens/supporters but also how the party literally feeds them. By portraying itself as a “nurturing and caring mother”, the SVP is able to enhance the idea of paying particular attention to the wellbeing of the Swiss people.

Another form of the SVP to show proximity with supporters/citizens is to de-dramatise and loosen up political campaign events by adding elements of entertainment and popular culture. In this logic, we can see throughout the SVP’s online albums (whether on the website or social media platforms) pictures of singers that have come to give a show during public party events (fig. 11).

In this context, we also identified a series of photographs that show people having a good time with the SVP (fig. 12).

On the web, visuals of the SVP showing proximity with the people is frequently constructed through moments of entertainment and popular culture, providing the viewer with pleasant but also familiar pictures. This is done by showing citizens during more quotidian moments that are typically shared with friends and family members (e. g. concerts, meals etc.). From this logic, elements of entertainment and popular culture transfer SVP events from the political to the cultural field.

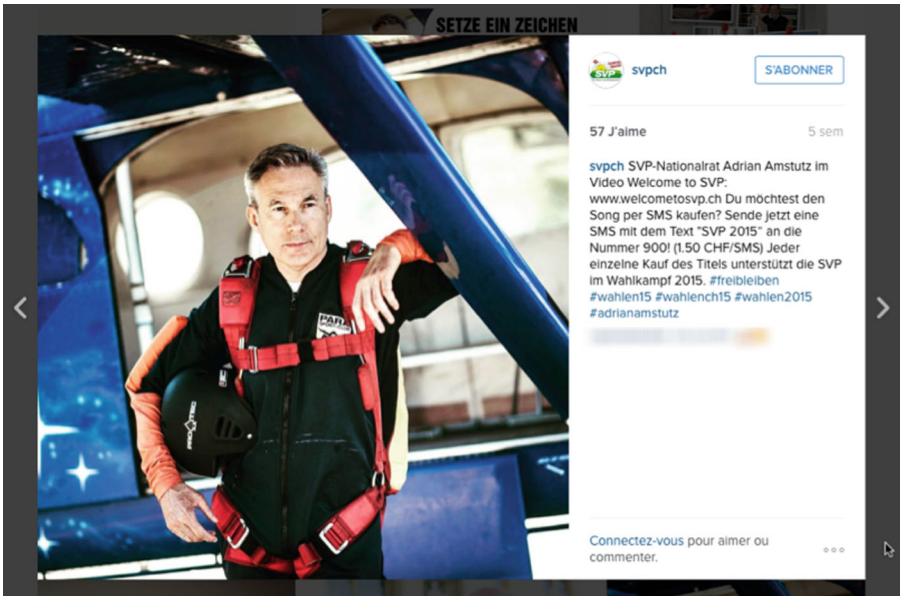


Fig. 22 Still from the clip “Welcome to SVP” on the SVP’s Instagram account (Accessed on 28.10.2015)

4.1.2 The FN and SVP addressing the people

During the analysis of visuals by the FN and SVP, we could identify a series of photographs portraying proximity during speeches. Therefore, we focused on how they distribute space to different categories of persons during such events. Differing showing conventions can be attributed again to the distinct visual practices of the FN and SVP.

Within the web visibility of the FN, one photograph attracted our attention particularly (fig. 13) since it is exemplary of how the FN’s visibility accords space to different categories of persons. It was taken on the occasion of a meeting.

This photographic image shows MLP alone on a stage, in the process of giving a speech. A banner in the background suggests a specific reading of MLP’s highlighted position because it calls on her to save France. From the left to the right, the second half of the photography shows a first line of persons facing the stage and seated in the shadow. One can assume that the persons in the first row are deemed to be more important since the shaded area is not open to all. We assume that these are political representatives or local policy makers. Behind them, a line of barriers marks the third part of the picture, a standing crowd exposed to the sun. This recurrent way of representation reveals that space and comfort equipment are not offered in a similar manner to each category of people, implying that politicians, policy makers and supporters do not have the same status. We can therefore conclude that an important number of visuals are showing distinctions between MLP and the rest as well as between the “political class” (seated people) and supporters/citizens.

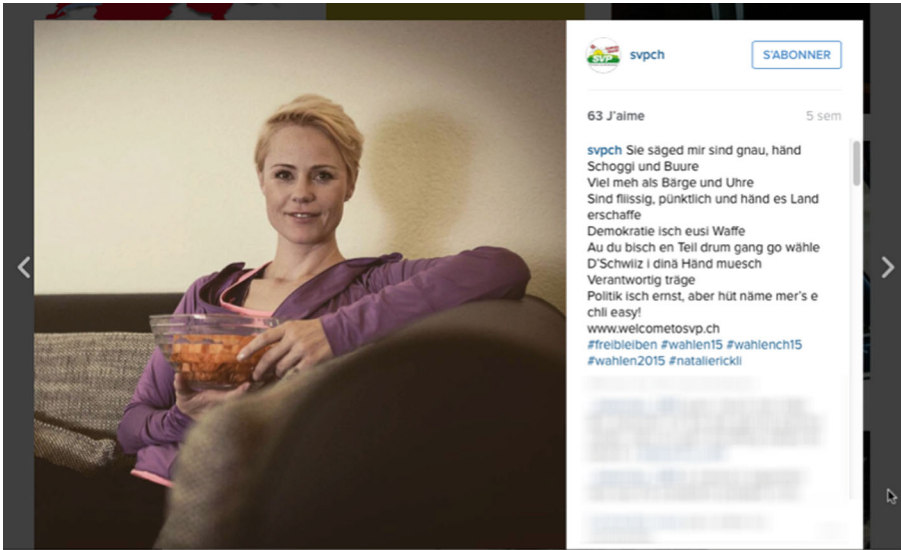


Fig. 23 Still from the clip “Welcome to SVP” on the SVP’s Instagram account (Accessed on 28.10.2015)

Another element in this picture that is very exemplary of how FN visuals represent speeches to the people is that only MLP performs this task. Furthermore, she always occupies a heightened position that sets her apart from other people during speeches. Hence, group pictures are very rare and if the president of the FN is sharing the stage with other party members, she is still separated and distinguished from the rest (fig. 14).

A totally different situation can be found in pictures of public SVP speeches. SVP candidates or leaders are frequently presented collectively and in a real spatial proximity to a potential electorate. As fig. 15 shows, party representatives and citizens are situated at the same level. The orator is even placed between his/her party colleagues and the citizens/supporters as listeners.

We can also see that the listeners are seated on benches and that the spatial positioning of the benches does not oblige them to be fully turned towards the SVP candidates and the speaker. The listeners can continue talking with their table partners if desired.

Fig. 16 has a high resemblance with FN visuals and shows SVP representatives speaking to a big audience. However, it does not emphasize the orator but instead the audience in the hall.

Finally, we would like to elaborate on the ways visuals of both parties frequently position the viewer. Our photomontage (fig. 17) exemplifies typical camera positions.

In the case of the FN (left-hand picture), the viewer is often offered a point of observation external to the depicted event. This type of picture places the viewer outside the unfolding scene. Thus, the viewer of the photography can observe the party president as well as the supporters making up the crowd. In contrast, the SVP offers pictures (such as the picture to the right) in which the viewer is part of the

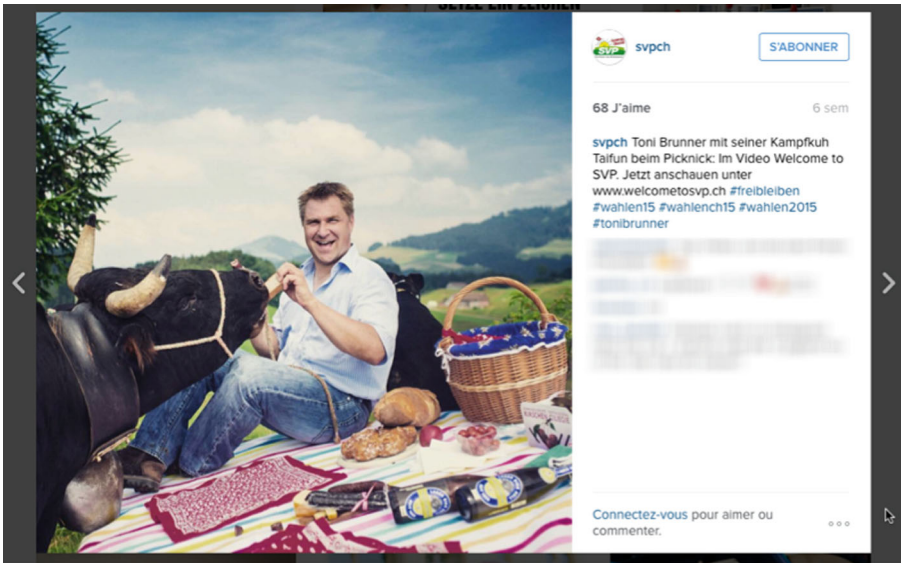


Fig. 24 Still from the clip “Welcome to SVP” on the SVP’s Instagram account (Accessed on 28.10.2015)



Fig. 25 Picture of SVP representatives during the event “SVP bi de Lüt” at Zurich main station (Screenshot taken from the official website of the national SVP on 27.10.2015)

scene and able to place him-/herself in the position of the supporters (looking at political representatives) or the party representatives (looking at the supporters).

These perspectives with focus on the audience reveal another important aspect: the way the orator is supposed to be listened to. In FN visuals, listening is represented as a unilateral process. We often see MLP speaking and the supporters listening within spatial arrangements that orient them towards MLP. Consequently, she seems to have the full attention of the audience on the pictures. In contrast, pho-

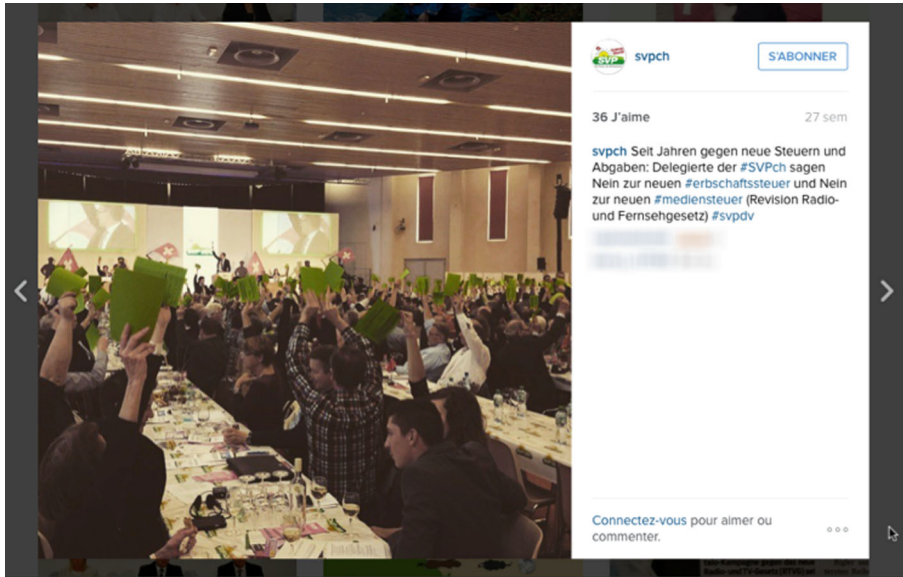


Fig. 26 Photo of an Assembly of Delegates posted on Instagram (Accessed on 28.10.2015)

tographic images of the SVP suggest a way of listening that may be characterised as less authoritarian. As viewers, we are in the middle of a seated crowd listening to the speeches of SVP representatives but we are also able to observe other supporters talking with each other. And again, this is due to the spatial arrangements.

4.1.3 *The FN and SVP representing the people*

How do the FN and SVP visuals show party leaders/members in their respective roles? In this regard, distinct but recurrent photographs were publicised online by the FN and SVP at the time of our study. In the case of the FN, we can find several photo series that depict MLP in various situations of her political or personal life. We start by showing conventions that portray the political life of MLP.

Fig. 18 shows a photomontage that was posted on MLP’s Twitter account. Its individual pictures are at the same time exemplary of several visuals on the online platforms of the FN and MLP. The first one shows portraits or full-body pictures of MLP during appearances in the media, press conferences, party or political meetings etc. It contrasts with visual practices regarding the audiences she is addressing (top left picture): it mainly portrays listeners as a passive crowd and rarely in motion. In turn, the picture down on the right of the photographic triptych shows how the FN typically illustrates the relationship between the party president and supporters: far from the online imagery of the SVP, which rather depicts close proximity through similarity between all visual categories, MLP is shown as a star giving autographs.

There is another series of photographs on the online platforms of the FN that contributes to MLP’s “starification” depicting moments of her personal life. In fact, these pictures are always somehow connected to her political work as captions

Fig. 27 Campaign poster of the SVP “Implementation Initiative” reusing the controversial theme of the black sheep of the Deportation Initiative (Screenshot taken from the official website of the national SVP on 4.2.2016)



Fig. 28 FN leaflet on Facebook criticising issues of immigration and other political parties (Accessed on 28.10.2015)

reveal. In this logic, many photos depict MLP sightseeing within the framework of her political visits (fig. 19).

On Twitter and Instagram, we encountered other frequent pictures supporting the impression that the FN uses social media primarily to give users a sneak peek behind the scenes of the party's life, embodied by the figure of MLP¹⁰ (fig. 20).

As we have already pointed out, a picture type of the SVP puts forward the collective dimension of political life. In this logic, moments of expression are rarely

¹⁰ We did not push our analysis of the leader figure of MLP further. Boudillon (2005) and Achin et al. (2008) did this work.



Fig. 29 Picture of SVP candidate posing with winemakers in traditional clothing at the market of Vevey (Screenshot taken from the official website of the national SVP on 27.10.2015)



Fig. 30 Picture of a parade of “Trychler” on the SVP Facebook account (Accessed on 04.02.2016)

individual and tend to reduce or even suppress distinctions between representatives and citizens/supporters. In fact, some SVP visuals go even further by suggesting representations of self-mockery. We could find them in stills of SVP candidates from the campaign clip “Welcome to SVP”¹¹ and pictures that include mascot Willy, a Bernese mountain plush dog that was presented in 2014 to the Swiss via mass media.

In September 2015, the SVP released a song clip via YouTube during its election campaign. On the party’s Instagram account, we found stills from that clip where party representatives are represented with a quirky sense of humour. Therein we can see the Federal Councillor Ueli Maurer (SVP) riding a bicycle and playing with toy planes (at that time he was the head of the Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sports) (fig. 21); Adrian Amstutz (member of the National Council)

¹¹ For the clip see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ysYg6sWD8B4> (accessed on 30.10.2015).



Fig. 31 Picture from a Facebook-album apropos the SVP commemoration event “20-year anniversary of the EEA/EU-No-vote” in 2012 (Accessed on 14.10.2015)

in front of a plane with parachute equipment (fig. 22); Natalie Rickli (candidate for National Assembly) sitting in front of the TV (fig. 23); and the president of the national SVP section Toni Brunner having a picnic with his combat cow Taifun (fig. 24).

In this series of photographs, the role of the leader is humorously mocked. Also, these clip stills differ a lot from pictures that show political representatives in their representative roles usually more seriously and distanced.

The second group of photographs that show party candidates campaigning for their (re)election into a representative function involve Willy the mascot. It is interesting to note that in this series of photographs, Willy has three distinctive functions. As a mascot, he represents the SVP. As a watchdog he embodies a protector. Furthermore, Willy is given the place that normally belongs to MLP in the FN visuality: in a lot of pictures of SVP events the mascot appears in front of the candidates. This visual practice can be explained by the fact that the SVP did not have a strong candidate for the elections of 2015 as the party did with Christoph Blocher during other elections. These three characteristics of Willy become obvious in fig. 25.

As we have stated with the FN, its social media visuals regularly offer sneak peeks behind the scene of MLP’s political life. The SVP also makes party activities transparent by photographing them. However, pictures of this kind are neither about following representatives during their political work nor showing backstage scenes prior to important political events.¹² Instead, they provide access into the heart of the party by usually depicting moments of collective decision-making during Assemblies

¹² At an Assembly of delegates, delegates decide on suggestions regarding federal voting objects, launch popular initiatives or elect party presidents, new members etc.



Fig. 32 Picture of a trip of the parliamentary group to Central Switzerland on Twitter (Accessed on 14.10.2015)

of delegates (fig. 26). Such pictures recall scenes of the *Landsgemeinde*¹³ as the oldest and simplest form of direct democracy in Switzerland.

Finally, it could be quite useful to analyse “proximity to the people” as a characteristic of populism through the continuum from “distinction” to “similarity”. Concerning this, the examples of the FN and SVP are very interesting since their online visuals show proximity in this way very distinctly. Nevertheless, we assume that other populist parties may publicise visualisations of proximity that are rather situated between these two extremes.

4.2 The FN and SVP depicting the people

Right-wing populist parties usually tend to define national identity by a process of negation, that is, by defining what creates a threat (immigration) or what has to be condemned (a corrupt elite). Consequently, identity is determined by what is not a feature of an affirmed identity or “the good people” (cf. Taguieff 2012). Figs. 27 and 28 exemplify these ideas.

In this regard, the visual online corpora on which we worked were very interesting since they took such typical right-wing populist communication/representation processes against current trends. As a matter of fact, the FN and SVP signified identity in positive terms on the visuals we analysed. In this section we shall study the manner both parties represent constructions of affirmed identity.

¹³ *Landsgemeinden* are cantonal assemblies that have been abolished in all but two cantons. During *Landsgemeinden* voting is accomplished by those in favour of a motion raising their hands.



Fig. 33 Picture of a trip of the parliamentary group to Central Switzerland on Twitter (Accessed on 14.10.2015)

Looking at the material, we see firstly that both parties visualise “the people”. But in the case of the FN, visualisations of “the people” rather serve to assert a party identity that represents the FN as being able to lead France. This partly explains why the FN portrays citizens in crowds that travel to meetings with the FN in order to show that the party has many supporters. As a consequence of this visual practice, “the people” form a more anonymous mass of citizens. As regards the SVP, we have access to representations of “the people” that appear less abstract. Largely for this reason, the focus of our analysis here is mostly on the SVP because unlike the FN, the party not only seems to define a party identity but also a genuine Swiss identity and hence the “we-group”:

We could find several series of photographs that exhibit traditional references (figs. 29 and 30). That is because several SVP events draw on Swiss folklore. In this way, showing conventions of this kind not only convey the impression that traditions are important to the party but that the party’s definition of Swiss identity puts forward local and regional particularities. Consequently, the visual practices of the SVP also put in concrete terms representations of *Swissness*.

Such Photographic picture groups also show that events organised by the SVP are not only occasions in which local traditions are revived but also rendered visible in public meeting points such as market places.

Since SVP visuals frequently show an image of Switzerland marked by traditions, the party’s definition of identity also mainly draws on traditions as references to the past. The album “Der Weg der Schweiz in die Zukunft” (German for “The Swiss path to the future”) on the SVP Facebook page confirms this observation: it shows pictures from a public event commemorating the 20-year anniversary of the “EEA/EU-No”-vote by the Swiss in 6 December 1992 (fig. 31). The title of the



Fig. 34 Picture of a trip of the parliamentary group to Central Switzerland on Twitter (Accessed on 14.10.2015)

photo album illustrates very well the valorisation of the past and hence conservative value attitudes.

Furthermore, we could observe that party internal events, and not only public SVP events as explained above, also portray “the people” and in a similar way. There again, we found visualisations of tradition. The repetitive use of traditional elements is sometimes also accompanied by a work of memory. For example, *Swissness* is defined by references to the past during SVP events, mostly by referring to historical moments addressing Switzerland’s independence as well as a continuous rejection of its Europeanisation. Such pictures invite us to assume that internal party events also serve as moments to make SVP representatives familiar with specific ideas of Swiss identity. This ties in with observations in connection with representations of proximity and similarity between political representatives and citizens, signifying that SVP representatives not only are there for the people but that they also constitute the people.

The figs. 32, 33 and 34 show a trip to Central Switzerland, where a reproduction of the Battle of Morgarten (one of many battles between the Habsburgs and the old confederates) was shown to the parliamentary group of the SVP. Moreover, the play is linking Switzerland’s battle with the Habsburgs with a “contemporary battle”, in which, according to the SVP, Switzerland is confronted with the European Union (second picture). This reinterpretation and metaphoric use of the historic battle of Morgarten resonates well with the party’s campaign slogan for the elections of 2015 “Frei bleiben”/“Rester libre” (Remain free), calling for independence from the European Union.

Finally, picture series of historical inspiration do not just signify the rejection of the European Union by the Swiss, but also produce representations of Swiss identity

that exclude newly arrived citizens since it particularly values “descendants” of the old confederates. In addition, and this was also observed in the visuals of the FN, SVP portrayals of “the people” mainly show white people. As a consequence, Switzerland’s contemporary multiculturalism is made invisible and whiteness is evaluated as a “true” characteristic of the Swiss people.

5 Conclusion

In this study, we chose to focus on visuals that were available on online platforms of the FN and SVP and which allowed us to observe how these parties make use of online platforms as places of self-representation and representation of the country. Thereby, we could not only observe recurrent visual practices (and hence discourse statements) in terms of themes such as “the people” and “proximity to the people”, but also differences in the way these themes were represented on the web visuals of each party. The differences can be understood by Switzerland’s and France’s differing political systems. We assume for example that Switzerland’s federalist or particular government system (made up of seven federal councillors) as well as France’s presidential system influence the place that is given to individual party representatives and party leaders at events/on pictures as well as on how the visual category of “the people” is depicted. Visual practices putting forward distinction (typically for FN visuality) and similarity (typically for SVP visuality) between different visual categories probably echo with Switzerland’s militia-based political system and France’s professionalised political culture. In turn, direct democracy might have an effect on the way the FN and SVP address “internal party life” through their visuals. This last theme constitutes further a visual specificity we mostly found on social media platforms of both parties and less on their websites. It works transparency by expanding spaces of the political that are accessible for supporters and all interested citizens. Finally, it can also be argued that showing conventions of the FN and SVP in terms of their relation to the people mainly frame the FN as a party *for* the people (a party standing up for the people) and the SVP as a party *of* the people (a party composed of the people).

To sum up, this research contributes to the study of populism by showing how central features of populist ideology (“the people” and “proximity to the people”) can find very distinct visual expressions. Another major contribution of this work lies in observing spaces for visibility that were little explored up to now as well as in revealing differences with visual content of other communication channels of the FN and SVP. The analysis of posters for popular initiatives launched by the SVP for example revealed that on that media support, the party puts forward themes of anti-identity and threat using a graphic style (see, e. g. Dézé and Girod 2006). This is (almost) not the case in the visuals the SVP puts online. In that regard, it would be interesting to extend this study by a comparative approach apropos visual online practices of different political parties in the same country in order to point out visualisations that are typical for populism, for right-wing or left-wing populist parties or for a specific political context. In addition, undertaking this comparison

between visual practices that are used in conjunction with different communication supports and platforms of a same party could offer further insight.

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Elsa Gimenez Graduate Assistant, since 2013 PhD under joint supervision at the Universities of Lausanne (CH) and Paris Vincennes Saint-Denis (FR). 2012 MA in Sociology at the Mirail University of Toulouse (FR). 2012–2013 Coordinator of Comunitic (community of researchers studying uses of information and communication technologies). 2013 Assistant at LABEX SMS (CNRS).

Natalie Schwarz Graduate Assistant, since 2011 PhD under joint supervision at the Universities of Lausanne (CH) and Augsburg (D). 2009 MA in Social Sciences at the University of Fribourg (CH). 2009–2010 Scientific Project Collaborator at the Military Academy at the ETH Zurich (CH). 2011 Visiting Scholar at the University of Texas in El Paso (USA). 2011–2012 Scientific Project Collaborator at Bern University of the Arts (CH).