


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# A populist desecuritisation? Mélenchon, left-wing populism, and the fight against Islamophobia in France

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## Abstract

While there is literature on ‘populist securitisation’ and on the ‘securitisation of Islam’, the possibility that some populists may desecuritize Islam is not sufficiently explored. Left-wing populist parties have demonstrated solidarity towards Muslim minorities in Europe through a discourse based on inclusionary rhetoric and deconstruction of the securitising narratives promoted by mainstream and populist right-wing parties. However, their attitude towards Islam can be ambiguous. This paper argues that left-wing populists tend to desecuritize Islam. However, desecuritisation happens in ways that do not always accommodate Muslims’ religious freedoms. This happens because the driver of the left-wing populist desecuritisation of Islam lies in the left-wing *thick* ideology surrounding populism and not in the populist *thin* core. I illustrate this argument through the case study of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of the left-wing populist party La France Insoumise. Through a discourse analysis of texts from 2009 to 2022, I show that Mélenchon has predominantly desecuritized Islam. While his desecuritisation is populist, it has not been truly emancipatory for Muslims. Although a more committed fight against Islamophobia has emerged since 2019, Mélenchon’s ideological attachment to *laïcité* hinders a full rearticulation of French political community based on genuine recognition of Muslims’ religious freedoms.

**Keywords:** desecuritisation; Islamophobia; left-wing populism; Mélenchon; Muslims

## Introduction

While Islamophobia circulates across conservative, liberal, and right-wing populist political parties,<sup>1</sup> left-wing populist parties are usually more ‘inclusionary’<sup>2</sup> towards ethnic minorities and supportive of anti-racist policies on immigration and citizenship.<sup>3</sup> Let us take the example of France, which is a laboratory of securitarian discourses on the intersection between religion and politics. Since 9/11, French policymakers have increasingly considered Muslims as a potential threat to national security and the presence of Islam in the public space as a threat to French Republican values, such as secularism (*laïcité*). The securitisation of Islam has intensified after some atrocious terrorist attacks ideologically inspired by Islamist fundamentalism, such as the

<sup>1</sup>Hans-Georg Betz and Susi Meret ‘Revisiting Lepanto: The political mobilisation against Islam in contemporary Western Europe’, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 43:3–4 (2009), pp. 313–34; Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter, ‘Articulations of Islamophobia: From the extreme to the mainstream?’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40:13 (2017), pp. 2151–79.

<sup>2</sup>Pablo Castaño, ‘Populismes de gauche en Europe: Une comparaison entre Podemos et la France Insoumise’, *Mouvements*, 4:96 (2018), pp. 169–80 (p. 171). See also Cas Mudde and Cristòbal Rovira Kaltwasser, ‘Exclusionary vs. inclusionary populism: Comparing contemporary Europe and Latin America’, *Government and Opposition*, 48:2 (2013), pp. 147–74.

<sup>3</sup>Giorgos Katsambekis and Alexander Kioupiolis (eds), *The Populist Radical Left in Europe* (London: Routledge, 2018).

ones in Toulouse and Montauban (March 2012), against *Charlie Hebdo*'s offices (January 2015), and in Paris and Saint-Denis (November 2015). Not only did the right-wing parties Front National and Les Républicains call for tougher counterterrorism laws, but, additionally, President François Hollande (Parti Socialiste) declared a state of emergency and then proposed a project of law to revoke the citizenship of dual-national terrorists. Both policies increased the perception of Muslims as potentially radical and suspicious subjects.<sup>4</sup>

This marks a difference from Jean-Luc Mélenchon and his party La France Insoumise (LFI),<sup>5</sup> which are widely considered as an instance of left-wing populism.<sup>6</sup> Mélenchon has repeatedly contested the recent counterterrorism laws because they disproportionately target Muslims. He has instead deconstructed the discourse on Islam as a leitmotiv for radicalisation and argued that the most urgent security threats are not linked to Islam. This alternative discourse has earned Mélenchon the majority of votes by French citizens of Muslim background in the 2017 and 2022 presidential elections<sup>7</sup> and at the same time the label of 'Islamist-leftist' (*Islamogauchiste*), who conspires with alleged radical Muslims to destroy French Republican values, as often implied by French conservative and liberal politicians.<sup>8</sup> This notwithstanding, Mélenchon's genuine commitment to fight Islamophobia has been questioned,<sup>9</sup> considering his frequent disapproval of the hijab<sup>10</sup> and his arguments defending the 'right to dislike Islam'.<sup>11</sup>

This paper asks whether left-wing populism desecuritisises Islam and, if so, which modalities of desecuritisation it advances. I define desecuritisation as the process that reverses securitisation and denies that a given issue (such as Muslims) is a threat to security, by articulating it instead in a way that does not imply the enactment of security measures. Moreover, desecuritisation often involves the formulation of concrete policies aimed at abolishing the security measures imposed upon an alleged threat. Building on this definition (which will be further discussed in the theoretical framework), the paper aims to enrich the desecuritisation literature through a close engagement with recent studies on populist securitisation.

The traditional approaches in securitisation theories (the Copenhagen and Paris Schools) share an analytical focus on central governments as the main actors of securitisation, through an 'executive-centred'<sup>12</sup> methodological framework that prioritises national security agencies (e.g. intelligence services, military, police) and government representatives (e.g. Home Secretary)

<sup>4</sup> Francesco Ragazzi, 'Suspect community or suspect category? The impact of counter-terrorism as "policed multiculturalism"', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 42:5 (2016), pp. 724–41.

<sup>5</sup> France Unbowed'.

<sup>6</sup> Philippe Marlière, 'Jean-Luc Mélenchon and France Insoumise: The manufacturing of populism', in Giorgos Katsambekis and Alexander Kioupiolis (eds), *The Populist Radical Left in Europe* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 72–85; Paolo Chiocchetti, 'Make way for the people!' Left-wing populism in the rhetoric of Jean-Luc Mélenchon's 2012 and 2017 presidential campaigns', in Giorgos Charalambous and Gregoris Ioannou (eds), *Left Radicalism and Populism in Europe* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), pp. 106–28; Manuel Cervera-Marzal, *Le populisme de gauche : Sociologie de la France Insoumise* (Paris : La Découverte, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Cervera-Marzal, *Le populisme de gauche*, p. 234; Xavier Le Normand, 'Présidentielle 2022: pourquoi les électeurs musulmans ont plébiscité Jean-Luc Mélenchon', *La Croix* (11 April 2022), available at: {<https://www.la-croix.com/Religion/Présidentielle-2022-pourquoi-electeurs-musulmans-plebiscite-Jean-Luc-Melenchon-2022-04-11-1201209823>}.

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Luc Mélenchon, 'Blanquer, le loup dans la bergerie' (20 November 2020), available at: {<https://melenchon.fr/2020/11/20/blanquer-le-loup-dans-la-bergerie/>}; 'Du Venezuela à l'islamogauchisme' (2 December 2020), available at {<https://melenchon.fr/2020/12/02/du-venezuela-a-lislamogauchisme/>}.

<sup>9</sup> FranceInfo, 'Laïcité: Mélenchon a-t-il évolué par conviction ou par intérêt électoral?' (10 December 2020), available at: {[https://www.francetvinfo.fr/economie/medias/charlie-hebdo/video-laicite-melenchon-a-t-il-evolue-par-conviction-ou-par-interet-electoral\\_4202835.html](https://www.francetvinfo.fr/economie/medias/charlie-hebdo/video-laicite-melenchon-a-t-il-evolue-par-conviction-ou-par-interet-electoral_4202835.html)}.

<sup>10</sup> Mélenchon, 'Je suis le bulletin de vote stable et sûr' (25 August 2016), available at: {<https://melenchon.fr/2016/08/25/suis-bulletin-de-vote-stable-interview-monde/>}.

<sup>11</sup> Mélenchon, Twitter (21 November 2015), available at: {[https://twitter.com/JLMelenchon/status/668138652552331264?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E668138652552331264%7Ctwgr%5E7c6e2dd14445838d1c8d8c5c249f6649b0d5cd8c%7Ctwcon%5Es1\\_&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.leparisien.fr%2Fpolitique%2Fpla-tres-nette-evolution-de-melenchon-sur-la-question-de-l-islamophobie-10-11-2019-8190327.php](https://twitter.com/JLMelenchon/status/668138652552331264?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E668138652552331264%7Ctwgr%5E7c6e2dd14445838d1c8d8c5c249f6649b0d5cd8c%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.leparisien.fr%2Fpolitique%2Fpla-tres-nette-evolution-de-melenchon-sur-la-question-de-l-islamophobie-10-11-2019-8190327.php)}.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Neal, 'Events dear to you, events': Terrorism and security from the perspective of politics', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 5:1 (2012), pp. 107–20 (p. 110).

over other political agents. Despite a significant evolution over the past two decades, the existing literature does not capture how the construction and contestation of security change across political parties because it assumes that all parties securitise and desecuritize in the name of the survival of the state, the main referent object of securitisation for the Copenhagen School.<sup>13</sup> Instead, I endorse Wojczewski's suggestion that populism challenges 'existing theoretical assumptions about security as something designed by states' representatives and security experts.'<sup>14</sup> Populists differently shape securitisation by proposing images of the security threats aligned to the narrative that ordinary 'people' are threatened by malign 'elites'.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, this paper zooms in on the political leader of a left-wing populist party whose posture on the securitisation of Muslims differs from the one adopted by right-wing and mainstream Left French political parties.

Before proceeding, it is essential to define what I mean by populism. While there is a moderate consensus around parties and political leaders who are classified as populist, scholars disagree on what populism means, given its multifaceted features and polemical uses. The paper subscribes to Mudde's 'ideational' definition of populism as a 'thin-centred ideology' which lacks the substantial ideological core retained by 'thick' ideologies (e.g. conservatism, socialism, etc.).<sup>16</sup> The core ideological feature of populism is the division of society 'into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, "the corrupt elite" versus "the pure people";<sup>17</sup> the latter being the only depository of sovereignty. To understand if populists want to securitize Islam, we need to engage with right-leaning or left-leaning thick ideologies. My choice resonates with scholars who privilege an ideational approach to studying the foreign and security policies of populist parties<sup>18</sup> and to analysing Mélenchon, whose thick ideologies combine 'Marxism, French socialism and communism, left-wing republicanism, alter-globalization, Latin American socialism, radical ecology, techno-futurism'.<sup>19</sup>

Yet whereas some scholars have already explored forms of securitisation by populist parties and of the securitisation of Islam,<sup>20</sup> there has been no equivalent attention to populist desecuritisation. The prevailing emphasis on populist securitisation results from the synergies between populist politics and securitisation theory's interpretation of security as existential, antagonistic, and urgent.<sup>21</sup> Still, populists desecuritize too, as they do, say, after that the 'elite' has securitized an issue that

<sup>13</sup>Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework of Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998), p. 4.

<sup>14</sup>Thorsten Wojczewski, "'Enemies of the people": Populism and the politics of (in)security', *European Journal of International Security*, 5:1 (2020), pp. 5–24 (p. 5).

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>16</sup>Cas Mudde, 'The populist Zeitgeist', *Government and Opposition*, 39:4 (2004), pp. 541–63 (p. 543). On 'ideational' and other definitions of populism, see Jonathan Dean and Bice Maiguashca, 'Did somebody say populism? Towards a renewal and reorientation of populism studies', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 25:1 (2020), pp. 11–27 (pp. 14–16).

<sup>17</sup>Mudde, 'The populist Zeitgeist', p. 543.

<sup>18</sup>Bertjan Verbeek and Andrej Zaslove, 'Populism and foreign policy', in Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 384–405; Sandra Destradi and Johannes Plagemann, 'Populism and international relations: (Un)predictability, personalisation, and the reinforcement of existing trends in world politics', *Review of International Studies*, 45:5 (2019), pp. 711–30; Mike Slaven, 'Populism and securitization: The corrosion of elite security authority in a US–Mexico border state', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 6:4 (2021), pp. 1–18; Thorsten Wojczewski, 'The international cooperation of the populist radical right: Building counter-hegemony in international relations', *International Relations* (2024), pp. 1–26, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178231222888>.

<sup>19</sup>Chiocchetti, "'Make way for the people!'", p. 111; Donatella Bonansinga, "'A threat to us": The interplay of insecurity and enmity narratives in left-wing populism', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 24:3 (2023), pp. 511–25 (p. 516).

<sup>20</sup>Stuart Croft, *Securitising Islam: Identity and the Search for Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Luca Mavelli, 'Between normalisation and exception: The securitisation of Islam and the construction of the secular subject', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 41:2 (2013), pp. 159–81.

<sup>21</sup>Wojczewski, 'Enemies of the people', p. 23. In this regard, Slaven also argues that 'populists mobilize a logic that resonates with classical securitarian concepts of community and threat but which fundamentally impugns the authority of governing elites to define and address the issue' (Slaven, 'Populism and securitization', p. 3).

makes the ‘people insecure’ – such as when Donald Trump tried to desecuritize climate change<sup>22</sup> and Covid-19.<sup>23</sup> Thus, I am interested in investigating whether left-wing populism can desecuritize Islam, since it usually shows solidarity towards Muslim minorities through an inclusionary discourse that deconstructs securitising narratives and policies embraced by right-wing and some mainstream Left parties.

This paper argues that left-wing populists can desecuritize Islam but not necessarily in a transformative way that satisfies Muslims’ religious freedoms. The findings unpack a more nuanced picture where two different forms of desecuritisation (‘management’ and ‘transformative’) coexist with residual securitisation of some Islamic practices such as wearing the hijab. This happens because the main driver of the left-wing populist desecuritisation of Islam lies in the left-wing *thick* ideology and not in the populist *thin* core. Mélenchon’s populist ideology does not give indications about his attitude towards Muslims: his anti-racism derives instead from his radical Left background. Such an ideological legacy leads Mélenchon to consider religion as a matter to confine to the private dimension, if not to fully eradicate. Mélenchon’s strong attachment to French *laïcité* (a referent object to secure against religious particularism and multiculturalism) limits his fight against Islamophobia, despite significant progress in this regard since 2019.

Moreover, the paper shows that Mélenchon’s desecuritisation of Islam adopts three common ideological and stylistic traits of populism: anti-elitism, sense of urgency, and fearmongering.<sup>24</sup> Although it includes Muslims in the ‘people’, Mélenchon still polarises French society in two antagonistic blocs. This dichotomy potentially generates insecurity among those who disagree with LFI’s political agenda, raising doubts on the ability of left-wing populism to be a truly desecuritising force for the whole polity.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section reviews the literature on desecuritisation and on populism and securitisation and proposes a theoretical framework to study left-wing populist desecuritisation. The second section explains my research design and methodology. The third and fourth sections illustrate the main findings of my discourse analysis of Mélenchon, supporting my argument that different varieties of desecuritisation (not always emancipatory towards Muslims) coexist with residual securitisation of some Islamic practices.

## Populism and (de)securitisation

While existing scholarship has identified different forms of desecuritisation, it has not sufficiently examined the contestation around security issues raised by multiple political parties. After reviewing the literature, in this section, I retain the main difference between ‘management’ and ‘transformative’ modalities of desecuritisation<sup>25</sup> and bring it into conversation with the available research on populism and securitisation, which shows that populists regard security issues in ways that differ from non-populist political parties. Building on Wojczewski,<sup>26</sup> I propose to broaden the subjects of security to include populist parties, who desecuritize in the name of the people rather than to protect state survival. In agreement with the claim that forms of populist securitisation depend on thick ideologies, I aim to investigate whether and how Mélenchon has rejected Islamophobia and desecuritized Islam following his left-wing populist ideology.

<sup>22</sup>Wojczewski, ‘Enemies of the people’, pp. 15, 22.

<sup>23</sup>Jessica Kirk, ‘“The cure cannot be worse than the problem”: Securitising the securitisation of COVID-19 in the USA’, *Contemporary Politics*, 29:2 (2023), pp. 141–60.

<sup>24</sup>These three categories are mostly built on Wojczewski, ‘Enemies of the people’, pp. 14–15, who identifies three common traits of populist securitisation (dramatisation/fearmongering, simplification/scapegoating, propagation of state of emergency).

<sup>25</sup>Thierry Balzacq, Sara Depauw, and Sarah Léonard, ‘The political limits of desecuritization: Security, arms trade and the EU’s economic targets’, in Thierry Balzacq (ed.), *Contesting Security: Strategies and Logics* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 104–21.

<sup>26</sup>Wojczewski, ‘Enemies of the people’, p. 5.

*Desecuritisation: Management versus transformative*

Desecuritisation has been defined as a ‘conceptual twin’<sup>27</sup> of securitisation since both words were coined simultaneously in a manuscript published in 1995 by Wæver.<sup>28</sup> According to the existing research on the topic, desecuritisation means to bring back an issue from the discursive realm of ‘emergency’ opened by securitisation to the realm of ‘normal’ political negotiation and debate.<sup>29</sup> In other words, it indicates the deconstruction of the securitarian register used to frame an issue as an urgent and extraordinary threat to a referent object: the survival of the state. Hence, desecuritisation seems to be symbiotically linked to securitisation and stands in a lower hierarchical position compared to its conceptual twin. This asymmetry explains why studies on securitisation are more frequent than those on desecuritisation. Many scholars of Critical Security Studies have dwelled on the definition and the varieties of desecuritisation, as well as on the desirability of desecuritisation. Despite suggesting various categories, the literature seems to agree that the desecuriting discourse has two broad purposes.

The first purpose is to show that a particular issue should not be treated as a security threat for instrumental reasons. Accordingly, if there is no factual evidence that something undermines the security of a referent object, or if the securitising approach is deemed inadequate to solve the alleged problem, desecuritisation must be preferred to securitisation. This technique has been defined by Huysmans as ‘objectivist’, since it aims to ‘confine desecuritization to counterarguments aimed at disabling a securitizing discourse,’<sup>30</sup> or as ‘instrumental’, which implies refusing a security-based approach to face a particular issue because it ‘is considered to be an ineffective way of dealing with the question.’<sup>31</sup>

A similar logic appears in another modality of desecuritisation, ‘replacement’, which occurs when an issue is securitised while another is simultaneously desecuritized. Yet removing an issue from the security threats by replacing it with another one does not imply that the hostility against the first issue disappears, but only that the political community redirects its antagonism against new enemies – following a Schmittian understanding of politics that is sometimes embraced by Copenhagen School scholars and post-structuralist theorist alike.<sup>32</sup>

The second purpose of desecuritisation is to unravel the use of a security language not because it is futile or analytically wrong. Instead, securitisation must be rejected as problematic on a normative level because it reproduces hierarchies of oppression by depicting some groups as threats to national security. Therefore, desecuritisation becomes an ‘ethico-political’ option, as Huysmans argues, when it serves to reflect on how security practices are used to organise and govern the relations between social groups.<sup>33</sup> Choosing an ‘ethico-political’ desecuritisation of immigrants means rejecting the xenophobic discourse and potentially proposing a more inclusionary form of politics, based on sympathy towards their daily travails. Likewise, Hansen identifies a ‘rearticulating’ form of desecuritisation that differs from the ‘replacement’ because it implies ‘a more direct and radical

<sup>27</sup> Claudia Aradau, ‘Security and the democratic scene: Desecuritisation and emancipation’, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 7:4 (2004), pp. 388–413 (p. 389); Lene Hansen, ‘Reconstructing desecuritisation: The normative-political in the Copenhagen School and directions for how to apply it’, *Review of International Studies*, 38 (2012), pp. 525–46 (p. 526).

<sup>28</sup> Ole Wæver, ‘Securitization and desecuritization’, in Ronnie Lipschutz (ed.), *On Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 46–86.

<sup>29</sup> The distinction between security as realm of the exceptional and politics as the realm of the ordinary has been challenged by recent studies, such as Andrew Neal, *Security as Politics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

<sup>30</sup> Jef Huysmans, ‘Migrants as a security problem: Dangers of “securitizing” societal issues’, in Robert Miles and Dietrich Thränhardt (eds), *Migration and European Integration: The Dynamics of Inclusion and Exclusion* (London: Pinter, 1995), pp. 53–72, mentioned in Balzacq, Depauw, and Léonard, ‘The political limits of desecuritization’, p. 106.

<sup>31</sup> Jef Huysmans, ‘The question of the limit: Desecuritisation and the aesthetics of horror in political realism’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 27:3 (1998), pp. 569–89 (p. 572).

<sup>32</sup> Hansen, ‘Reconstructing desecuritisation’, p. 541. For instance, Aras and Polat argue that the desecuritisation of the Kurdish issue in Turkey at the beginning of the 2000s coincided with the securitisation of other sources of concerns, such as northern Iraq. See Bülent Aras and Rabia Karakaya Polat, ‘From conflict to cooperation: Desecuritization of Turkey’s relations with Syria and Iran’, *Security Dialogue*, 39:5 (2008), pp. 495–515 (p. 512).

<sup>33</sup> Huysmans, ‘The question of the limit’, p. 573.

form of political engagement' to solve the underlying conflicts and 'move out of the friend-enemy distinction'.<sup>34</sup> This version theorises the possibility of a non-instrumental desecuritisation that might empower the securitised subjects. Moreover, both Huysmans's ethico-political and Hansen's rearticulation categories resonate with the argument advanced by Aradau that desecuritisation is only possible by engaging with a democratic politics of emancipation.<sup>35</sup>

In a later contribution,<sup>36</sup> Balzacq, Depauw, and Léonard have built two ideal-typical categories which condense the variants of desecuritisation fleshed out by the literature. While they clarify that the distinction between the two ideal-types is not absolute, they also explain that in some cases it is possible to 'identify activities which take more or less the shape of one of them'.<sup>37</sup> The first ideal-typical category is the 'management way of desecuritisation', which aims to move an issue out of the security realm to locate it in a different sector. As such, it is predicated on a problem-solving logic that considers the language of security as ineffective in dealing with a certain phenomenon. The management way displays clear resemblances with the 'instrumental' modality theorised by Huysmans and includes the 'replacement' category created by Hansen. Conversely, the second ideal-typical category, defined as 'transformative', is predicated on normative and deconstructivist concerns. It rejects the 'exclusionary logic of security'<sup>38</sup> by unravelling the dominant representations of putative threats. Hence, it resonates with the 'ethico-political' (Huysmans) and the 'rearticulating' (Hansen) varieties of desecuritisation.

Despite its conceptual advancements, these authors analyse desecuritisation without considering the contestation around security issues raised by multiple political parties, which, as I will explain, are essential to decide whether some issues should be securitised.

#### *A theoretical framework for left-wing populist desecuritisation*

In retaining the difference between 'management' and 'transformative' categories, I aim to show that when Mélenchon has desecuritised Islam, he has mostly followed the first ideal-type: Muslims are not a security threat because securitisation would be an ineffective way to deal with Islam and/or because other issues represent the real source of insecurity in France. The desire to desecuritize Islam through a transformation of Muslims' place in the French polity appears instead less frequently in his words. On top of exploring the distinction between management and transformative, I also want to enrich desecuritisation literature by proposing an intensive engagement with populism and demonstrating that populists translate the categories of desecuritisation into their ideas and language. Theorists of desecuritisation have not explored this dimension because they do not contest the Copenhagen School's separation between ordinary politics and exceptional security as different discursive realms.<sup>39</sup>

In contrast, this paper contends that such a distinction is ultimately misleading because it does not capture how securitisation and desecuritisation are both contested across political parties, who might want to unravel the securitarian frame around certain issues depending on their interpretation of security. This analytical edge has been less explored by existing literature on securitisation, despite some notable exceptions. Among these, Croft takes seriously the role that political parties play in the securitisation process, by arguing that the Conservatives and Labour advanced

<sup>34</sup> Hansen, 'Reconstructing desecuritisation', p. 529, pp. 542–3.

<sup>35</sup> Aradau, 'Security and the democratic scene'.

<sup>36</sup> Balzacq, Depauw, and Léonard, 'The political limits of desecuritization', p. 109. As argued by Hansen, this difference is significant because it 'links desecuritization directly to the theme of contestation: It differentiates between depoliticization-managerialism on the one hand and politicization-contestation on the other' (Lene Hansen, 'Towards an ontopolitics of security', in Thierry Balzacq [ed.], *Contesting Security: Strategies and Logics* [London: Routledge, 2015], pp. 219–31 [p. 222]).

<sup>37</sup> Balzacq, Depauw, and Léonard, 'The political limits of desecuritization', p. 109.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> A separation that Balzacq indeed challenged in Thierry Balzacq, 'The three faces of securitization: Political agency, audience and context', *European Journal of International Relations*, 11:2 (2005), pp. 171–201.

competing partisan narratives about which ‘British values’ should be secured against jihadism.<sup>40</sup> Another relevant strand of literature has more recently argued that security is a realm of ordinary political discussions and that there is significant political contestation across parties around the meaning of security.<sup>41</sup> Finally, as I recalled in the introduction, authors working on populism and securitisation invite the integration of traditional accounts of securitisation theory by overcoming its elitist and state-centred character and engaging with how seemingly powerless voices (the ‘people’ instantiated by populist parties) turn into securitising actors in the name of specific referent objects.<sup>42</sup>

Why do we need to pay more attention to the entanglement between party politics and securitisation? For at least two reasons. First, the securitisation of Islam does not happen uniformly across all political parties. Second, populism considers security differently from other political ideologies by interpreting security in light of the Manichean distinction between ‘people’ and ‘elite’ and by contesting the role of official security bureaucracies.<sup>43</sup>

While securitisation has been frequently deployed against Muslims, it has not represented a uniform discourse that all political parties from Right to Left have promoted in the same measure, even in the wake of the numerous terrorist attacks committed in the name of Islam. Instead, securitisation has depended on the ideas that these parties advance about how inclusionary or exclusionary the political community should be towards Muslim minorities and their religious freedoms. Also, securitisation is intrinsically tied to discussions about contested concepts such as ‘radicalisation’,<sup>44</sup> which do not raise homogeneous opinions across right-wing and left-wing parties. Therefore, I want to analyse Mélenchon, since he is the political leader of a left-wing populist party whose posture on the securitisation of Muslims has substantially differed from other French right-wing and mainstream Left political formations. The desecuritisation of Muslims proposed by Mélenchon and other left-wing populists<sup>45</sup> indicates that political parties do not necessarily agree on the need to frame some issues as sources of fear and unease.

To understand whether populists desecuritize Islam, we need to analyse the thick ideologies accompanying populism because the content and targets of the hypothetical populist securitisations are ultimately dependent upon either a reactionary or a progressive vision of the ‘people’. Right-wing populists subscribe to an ethno-cultural meaning of the people as ‘Nation’, whereas left-wing populists defend a socio-economic meaning of people as ‘Class’, which aims to represent the socio-economically disadvantaged categories independently from their religious and ethnic background.<sup>46</sup> The third, political meaning of people – ‘sovereign Demos’ – is instead usually shared by all populists.<sup>47</sup> This difference explains why right-wing and left-wing populists adopt divergent solutions to transborder migration and relations with Muslims, in the name of divergent ‘referent objects’ to secure. Hence, both Mélenchon and Marine Le Pen have underlined the substantial divergences between their programmes regarding security, immigration, and Muslims against the

<sup>40</sup> Croft, *Securitising Islam*, pp. 165–9.

<sup>41</sup> Neal, “Events dear boy, events”; Jonas Hagmann, Hendrik Hegemann, and Andrew Neal, ‘The politicisation of security: Controversy, mobilisation, arena shifting’, *European Review of International Studies*, 5:3 (2018), pp. 3–29; Hendrik Hegemann and Ulrich Schneckener, ‘Politicising European security: From technocratic to contentious politics?’, *European Security*, 28:2 (2019), pp. 133–52.

<sup>42</sup> Wojczewski, ‘Enemies of the people’, p. 7.

<sup>43</sup> According to Drolet and Williams, recent politicians from the populist radical right have tried to ‘shift the terrain upon which discursive processes of threat definition and securitisation take place by extricating domains of insecurity from expert knowledge’ (Jean-François Drolet and Michael Williams, ‘Radical conservatism and global order: International theory and the new right’, *International Theory*, 10:3 (2018), pp. 285–313 [p. 306]).

<sup>44</sup> Hendrik Hegemann and Martin Kahl, ‘Security governance and the limits of depoliticisation: EU policies to protect critical infrastructures and prevent radicalisation’, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 21:3 (2018), pp. 552–79.

<sup>45</sup> Such as the Spanish party Podemos. See Castaño, ‘Populismes de gauche en Europe’.

<sup>46</sup> Yves Mény and Yves Surel, *Par le peuple, pour le peuple: Le populisme et les démocraties* (Fayard, 2000), quoted in Hanspeter Kriesi, ‘The populist challenge’, *West European Politics*, 37:2 (2014), pp. 361–78 (p. 362).

<sup>47</sup> Angelos Chrysosgelos, ‘State transformation and populism: From the internationalized to the neo-sovereign state?’, *Politics*, 40:1 (2020), pp. 22–37 (pp. 23–4).

discourse that lumps all populists into the same category. Such specular positions had emerged already in 2012, when Le Pen called Mélenchon ‘a crazy immigrationist’, whereas Mélenchon called out the National Front’s leader for her xenophobic remarks.<sup>48</sup> The contrast between Mélenchon and Le Pen indicates that securitisation is contested across parties and invites us to scrutinise how an issue securitised by the Right can be instead desecuritized by the Left.

A second reason that makes the link between political parties and securitisation worth exploring is that populists securitise by using specific features that transcend the Right–Left divide. This is another aspect not captured by the traditional securitisation approaches, as they privilege the level of analysis of national executives without looking at the party politics behind it. Yet populist securitisation reveals unique traits that tend to differ from mainstream parties.

Unsurprisingly, there is wide agreement that anti-elitism is a key element that marks a difference between populist securitisation processes and non-populist ones. As Bonansinga pinpoints in a study on Mélenchon, ‘insecurity narratives can be a vital resource *all* populists can use to both delegitimise elites from speaking security and to promote a populist agenda centred on popular sovereignty.’<sup>49</sup> However, left-wing populists lambast national and international elites whose economic and financial power threatens the people’s security. In this regard, LFI’s leader has frequently lashed out against the European Union (EU) since the imposition of austerity policies,<sup>50</sup> by promoting instead an anti-capitalist agenda that prioritises local particularism over unchecked cosmopolitanism.<sup>51</sup> Conversely, right-wing populists believe that the elites are represented by domestic and foreign institutions that promote liberal norms (e.g. gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights), cross-border migration, and multiculturalism, which should be countered through a reactionary agenda that naturalises identity differences across countries and highlights the prominence of borders.<sup>52</sup> The literature acknowledges that populists follow their thick ideologies to profile their enemies. Yet such enemies are always clustered into supposed elites who ignore citizens’ security concerns and ultimately deprive them of their sovereignty,<sup>53</sup> in a discursive process based on ‘simplification and scapegoating.’<sup>54</sup>

Aside from the different referent objects of securitisation, populists also stand out for their peculiar stylistic features. The language used by all populists is predicated on a sense of urgency, chosen to evoke a normative and political breakdown that requires the immediate transfer of emergency powers to charismatic leaders. The need to establish a ‘state of emergency’ has been recognised as a central category of populist securitisation.<sup>55</sup> Thus, urgency reinforces populists’ calls to mobilise the ‘people’ by tapping into their fear and concerns. While there is agreement that populism stresses the urgency of some security issues,<sup>56</sup> less unanimous is the scholarly debate on populists’ use

<sup>48</sup>Mélenchon, ‘Mélenchon et Le Pen se combattent sur un plateau de télé’ (2 June 2012), available at: {<http://www.jean-luc-melenchon.fr/2012/06/02/melenchon-et-le-pen-se-combattent-sur-un-plateau-de-tele/>}.

<sup>49</sup>Bonansinga, ‘A threat to us’, p. 512. Slaven agrees that populists ‘articulate securitarian concepts through a moralized anti-elitism that impugns elite authority, portraying governing elites as corruptly inert toward threats facing “the people”’ (Slaven, ‘Populism and securitization’, p. 1).

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>51</sup>Katsambekis and Kioupiolis (eds), *The Populist Radical Left in Europe*; Charalambous and Ioannou (eds), *Left Radicalism and Populism in Europe*.

<sup>52</sup>Pablo de Orellana and Nicholas Michelsen, ‘Reactionary internationalism: The philosophy of the New Right’, *Review of International Studies*, 45:5 (2019), pp. 748–67. See also recent studies on Trump published by Wojczewski (‘Enemies of the people’); Georg Löflmann, ‘“Enemies of the people”: Donald Trump and the security imaginary of America First’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 24:3 (2022), pp. 543–60.

<sup>53</sup>Chryssogelos, ‘State transformation and populism’, pp. 23–4. See also Destradi and Plagemann, ‘Populism and international relations’, pp. 720–7.

<sup>54</sup>Wojczewski, ‘Enemies of the people’, p. 15.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., pp. 14–15.

<sup>56</sup>Alexandra Homolar and Ronny Scholz, ‘The power of Trump-speak: Populist crisis narratives and ontological security’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 344–64; Wojczewski, ‘Enemies of the people’, pp. 5, 6, 13; Patrick Müller and Charlott Gebauer, ‘Austria and the global compact on migration: The “populist securitization” of foreign policy’, *Comparative European Politics*, 19 (2021), pp. 760–78.



of affective mood and emotional language. This feature raises debate between authors highlighting the emotive appeal of populist security narratives<sup>57</sup> and others who argue that the distinction between populist parties' emotional register and mainstream parties' rational and technical language is problematic since it risks dismissing populist grievances as irrational and illegitimate.<sup>58</sup> However, there is more agreement over the argument that populists often accompany the sense of urgency with the creation of a situation of fear, predicated on the existence of existential threats to the people.

This section has explained that thick ideologies are essential to decide whether Muslims are a threat to populists. It has also recalled the three pivotal traits of populist securitisation: 'anti-elitism', 'sense of urgency', 'farmongering', which I retained from existing research.<sup>59</sup> The rest of the paper investigates if Mélenchon has desecuritized Islam, if his desecuritisation has been managerial or transformative, and if he has desecuritized by using the same traits that populists use to address security issues. In doing so, it contributes to the debate on populist securitisation, which lacks strong empirical findings regarding desecuritisation. Populists desecuritize when the securitisation of some issues represents an elitist move that allegedly undermines the interests of the people.<sup>60</sup> Still, the concept of securitisation has seamlessly caught more attention because of some elements it shares with populism, such as antagonism, exceptionality, and existentiality.<sup>61</sup>

## Research design and methodology

I have selected Mélenchon as a case study since both Mélenchon and his party LFI are considered expressions of left-wing populism. Following the definition provided by Cervera-Marzal,<sup>62</sup> six key elements feature in left-wing populism: (1) critique of neoliberalism; (2) translation of the cleavage 'right-left' into 'people-oligarchy'; (3) charismatic leadership; (4) alliance with social movements; (5) affective politics; (6) reinterpretation of concepts usually appropriated by the Right (e.g. sovereignty). The selection is motivated for exploratory purposes to ascertain whether Mélenchon has desecuritized Islam and through what language he did it. Additionally, the selection is also significant because LFI has been the most-voted party on the French Left in the 2022 presidential (21.95%) and legislative (13.82%) elections. I focus on Mélenchon's texts and not on the political formations that he has created in the last 10 years. I acknowledge that Mélenchon's stances do not necessarily represent all MPs from LFI. However, like other populist parties, LFI is organised around quite a centralistic structure in which Mélenchon carries substantially more weight in the policy agenda and the co-optation of party leaders, while militants hold fewer decision-making powers.<sup>63</sup> Thus, scholars have more consistently analysed Mélenchon's populist language<sup>64</sup> and arguments on security;<sup>65</sup> but no academic studies are available on whether Mélenchon has desecuritized Islam.

<sup>57</sup>Löfflmann "‘Enemies of the people’", p. 547. See also Homolar and Scholtz, 'The power of Trump-speak', p. 344; Bogdana Kurylo, 'The discourse and aesthetics of populism as securitisation style', *International Relations*, 36:1 (2022), pp. 127–57 (pp. 139–41).

<sup>58</sup>Donatella Bonansinga, 'Who thinks, feels: The relationship between emotions, politics and populism', *Partecipazione e Conflitto*, 13:1 (2020), pp. 83–106 (p. 85).

<sup>59</sup>Mainly on the three categories identified by Wojczewski, 'Enemies of the people', pp. 14–15, which find broad consensus in the literature.

<sup>60</sup>Wojczewski, 'Enemies of the people', p. 15, 22.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 6; Slaven, 'Populism and securitization', p. 7.

<sup>62</sup>Cervera-Marzal, *Le populisme de gauche*, p. 12. His definition is built on the works of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, especially on Mouffe's *For a Left-Wing Populism* (London: Verso, 2018), pp. 87–112.

<sup>63</sup>Castano, 'Populismes de gauche en Europe', p. 157; Cervera-Marzal, *Le populisme de gauche*, pp. 37–8.

<sup>64</sup>Chiocchetti, "‘Make way for the people!’"; Marlière, 'Jean-Luc Mélenchon and France Insoumise'.

<sup>65</sup>Bonansinga, 'A threat to us'.

It is important to clarify that I have explored Mélenchon's opinions on Islam, rather than on Islamism.<sup>66</sup> While I acknowledge that Mélenchon has, unsurprisingly, condemned the terrorist attacks committed by groups defined as radical Islamist or jihadist (not only against France, but also in other Middle Eastern and North African countries),<sup>67</sup> my findings are related to the securitisation or desecuritisation of Islam's cultural and religious traits that most French political parties have often described as incompatible with French Republican values.<sup>68</sup> These attitudes can be judged as Islamophobic following the definition coined by the Runnymede Trust, which defines Islamophobia as:

Any distinction, exclusion, or restriction towards, or preference against, Muslims (or those perceived to be Muslims) that has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.<sup>69</sup>

I have identified 106 written and oral interventions in which Mélenchon partly or fully discusses issues related to Islam. These texts and videos were published on two blogs ([jean-luc-melenchon.fr](http://jean-luc-melenchon.fr) and [melenchon.fr](http://melenchon.fr)) from 2009 to 2022. Of these texts, 58 are blog posts; 21 are interviews on radio, TV, and in newspapers; 7 are parliamentary interventions; 6 are conferences (including press and party conferences); 5 are communiqués; 5 are TV and radio debates; 2 are newspaper articles; 1 is a speech at a party congress; and 1 is a speech released in an electoral campaign. I have selected the relevant texts on the (de)securitisation of Islam in France by using the following keywords: *Islam, jihad, Muslim, immigration, migrant, racism, terrorism*. I focus on this period to cover the three presidential elections in which Mélenchon has competed: 2012 (11.1% of the votes); 2017 (19.58%); and 2022 (21.95%).

My empirical analysis has two aims: to investigate if Mélenchon has prioritised the desecuritisation of Islam over its securitisation; and to identify the discursive categories of desecuritisation and the populist traits used by Mélenchon. The analysis has followed the methodology used by other scholars who investigate the presence of Islamophobic and racist vocabulary in Western political parties, as done for instance by Moosavi's research on orientalism in the British Labour Party<sup>70</sup> and by Wodak's research on antisemitism and racism in the Freedom Party of Austria.<sup>71</sup> I have opted for discourse analysis to gather a closer reading of the text, in line with the argument that language is highly revealing about socio-political processes and hierarchies.

I have manually divided each text into different sentences and then coded the relevant sentences (those mentioning one of my keywords) into categories of desecuritisation and populism. It is important to remember the 106 texts are not associated only with one category of desecuritisation or one populist trait. Each text can contain sentences belonging to more than one category. For instance, in an interview released to the magazine *L'Obs* on 14 October 2021,<sup>72</sup> Mélenchon advances desecuritising arguments belonging to both the management and the transformative categories. Accordingly, he denies that deprived suburban areas are preyed on by Islamists and argues that

<sup>66</sup>Islamism is used to describe political movements and groups active in Muslim-majority countries that have tried to 'substitute secular states with Islamic states' with the purpose of eradicating injustice, as explained by Margot Badran in 'Political Islam and gender', in John Esposito and Emad El-Din Shahin (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Islam and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 112–23 (pp. 112–13).

<sup>67</sup>Mélenchon, 'Reconstruire l'État' (24 November 2015), available at: <https://melenchon.fr/2015/11/24/reconstruire-letat/> and 'Je suis le bulletin de vote stable et sûr'; 'L'Europe est menacé d'un embrasement général' (18 November 2017), available at: <https://melenchon.fr/2017/11/18/leurope-menacee-dun-embrasement-general/>.

<sup>68</sup>Mavelli, 'Between normalisation and exception'.

<sup>69</sup>Runnymede Trust, 'Islamophobia: Still a challenge for us all' (2017), p. 1.

<sup>70</sup>Leon Moosavi, 'Orientalism at home: Islamophobia in the representations of Islam and Muslims by the New Labour government', *Ethnicities*, 15:5 (2015), pp. 652–74.

<sup>71</sup>Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean* (London: SAGE, 2015).

<sup>72</sup>Mélenchon, 'Je ne plaisante pas, je vais être élu' (14 October 2021), available at: <https://melenchon.fr/2021/10/14/je-ne-plaisante-pas-je-vais-etre-elu-interview-dans-lobs/>.

instead their condition of insecurity derives from poverty, low salaries, and the presence of organised crime. I consider this as a form of managerial desecuritisation in which one security threat is replaced by another one. Additionally, Mélenchon also maintains that we should stop talking about Muslims as ‘second or third generations of immigrants’ but rather recognise that they are first and foremost French citizens, his aim being to convey an anti-racist message against all the attempts to divide the French people across religious lines. This modality of desecuritisation is transformative because it tries to emancipate Muslims from discriminated subjects to citizens granted with equal rights and prerogatives. Let me now present my findings.

### Findings 1: Management and transformative desecuritisation

In agreement with the literature on left-wing populism, my analysis reveals that Mélenchon has indeed desecuritized Islam in the period from 2009 to 2022. However, the findings unpack a complex picture: of the two discursive categories of desecuritisation identified by the literature, the management one prevails in 60 of 106 texts (56.6%), whereas the transformative appears in only 26 texts (24.5%). The other 30 texts mostly discuss Islam in relation to French *laïcité* and spell out the position of LFI regarding issues surrounding Muslims, but do not explicitly call for the desecuritisation of Islam.

#### Management

The first discursive category of desecuritisation is management, which emerges in 60 of 106 texts. As explained earlier in the theoretical framework, this modality is predicated on the argument that Muslims are not a security threat for at least two reasons: either because securitisation is an ineffective way to deal with the issue or because other security threats are more concerning than Muslims.

Among statements expressing management desecuritisation, 10 out of 60 (16.6%) include the argument that Islam is not a security threat because treating it as such is an ineffective strategy for dealing with religious-inspired terrorism. This form of desecuritisation speaks to the ‘objectivist’ and ‘instrumental’ ways of desecuriting identified by Huysmans, as illustrated earlier in the paper.

The first evidence of such statements emerges in an article published for the magazine *Marianne* on 7 October 2013, in which Mélenchon took issue with the posture adopted by the government after recent terrorist incidents (Toulouse and Montauban shootings and La Défense stabbing). While the country expected a ‘discerning response’, Mélenchon explained that the Government reacted ‘feverishly’ through ‘a flight into a state of emergency, hysterisation of the security climate, warlike vocabulary, vengeful posturing’, whose consequences are ineffective because they will worsen the religious fracture between Muslims and non-Muslims. Likewise, Mélenchon found it troubling that French lawmakers moulded their counterterrorism efforts on the US model (defined as ‘atlantiste’) and imported the imprecise concept of ‘fight against radicalization.’<sup>73</sup>

These arguments were reiterated in some articles and interviews released by Mélenchon after the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attacks. On 14 January 2015, Mélenchon argued that extraordinary counterterrorism laws like the US Patriot Act are ineffective and liberticide and recalled that, since 2001, French lawmakers have issued eight counterterrorism laws unable to prevent mass shootings from occurring. Hence, it is better to avoid what he defines as ‘securitarian escalations.’<sup>74</sup> Likewise, a later speech lamented that the counterterrorism policy formulated by the Socialist-guided Cabinet

<sup>73</sup>Mélenchon, ‘Pour une politique antiterroriste de la raison’ (7 October 2013), available at: <https://melenchon.fr/2016/11/04/politique-antiterroriste-de-raison/>.

<sup>74</sup>Mélenchon, ‘Le délit de blasphème existe en France’ (14 January 2015), available at: <http://www.jean-luc-melenchon.fr/2015/01/14/le-delit-de-blaspHEME-existe-en-france-hollande-voulait-meme-le-mettre-dans-la-constitution-avec-le-concordat-qui-le-contient/>.

was ‘dangerous and ineffective’<sup>75</sup> and would require increased intelligence resources to intercept telephone and electronic communications and to mass surveillance. The ‘Law consolidating the respect of Republican principles’ was also defined ‘useless and ineffective’<sup>76</sup> in 2021 and accordingly voted against by the 17 MPs of the LFI parliamentary group. Adopted in July 2021, this law was first named the ‘Anti-separatism Law’ because its logic was to tackle the alleged increasing ‘separation’ of religious communities from French Republican values. It aimed to strengthen the neutrality of the civil service, the fight against online hatred, and the protection of public employees like teachers.<sup>77</sup> Further evidence of instrumental desecuritisation can be elicited from a speech in September 2020, when Mélenchon denounced again the ‘inflation of security policies whose efficacy has never been tested’<sup>78</sup> and called for the use of a rational approach to tackle terrorism.

Mélenchon has frequently claimed that securitarian approaches increase general anti-Muslim feelings. Hence, their outcomes are ineffective because what is labelled as ‘terrorism’ is neither exclusively related to Islam nor linked to the degree of religiosity of Muslims.<sup>79</sup> The stigmatisation of all Muslims as suspects should be avoided as it plays into the hands of jihadist preachers, ready to exploit European Muslims’ resentment.<sup>80</sup> Mélenchon has decoupled the link between Islamic practices, radicalisation, and terrorism that other political parties have not questioned. LFI’s leader recalled that 90 per cent of foreign fighters leave for personal reasons rather than religious ones, according to the data gathered by French anti-terrorism magistrates.<sup>81</sup> The emphasis on individual factors does not deny the existence of jihadist ideologues but equips electors with a wider contextualisation of the multiple reasons that compel people to embrace armed violence in the name of Islam. Attacks such as the ones committed in France cannot be framed as the inevitable outcome of intensified religious practice. Many terrorists, Mélenchon argued, barely know the principles of Islam; their violence can be more correctly explained by issues related to energy security and the ‘ongoing war in the Middle East’.<sup>82</sup> Thus, Mélenchon has refused the argument that Islam is ‘radicalising’ because of the circulation of Salafist ideas that have gained momentum among French Muslims.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, he has pinpointed that the majority of French Muslims are buying into neither jihadist propaganda<sup>84</sup> nor antisemitism.<sup>85</sup>

A second argument that emerges even more in the category of management desecuritisation revolves around the replacement of Muslims with other security threats. This subcategory appears in 45 per cent of the texts – 27 out of 60 – and conceptually resonates with one of the modalities proposed by Hansen, discussed in my literature review. Mélenchon identifies multiple sources of

<sup>75</sup> Mélenchon, ‘Projet de Loi sur le renseignement: dangereux et inefficace’ (24 April 2015), available at {<http://www.jean-luc-melenchon.fr/arguments/projet-de-loi-sur-le-renseignement-dangereux-et-inefficace/>}.

<sup>76</sup> Mélenchon, ‘Vous stigmatisez les musulmans avec une loi inutile et dangereuse: Discours sur la laïcité et l’unité Républicaine’ (1 February 2021), available at: {<https://melenchon.fr/2021/02/01/en-direct-discours-sur-la-loi-separatisme-a-lassemblee-nationale-pjlprincipesrepublicains/>}.

<sup>77</sup> Charles Develennes, *The Macron Régime: The Ideology of the New Right in France* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022), p. 5.

<sup>78</sup> Mélenchon, ‘Il faut refonder la police’ (14 September 2020), available at: {<https://melenchon.fr/2020/09/14/en-direct-securite-retour-a-la-raison-securitelfi/>}.

<sup>79</sup> This argument is widely shared among critical terrorism scholars. See, for instance, Richard Jackson, ‘Constructing enemies: “Islamic terrorism” in political and academic discourse’, *Government and Opposition*, 42:3 (2007), pp. 394–426.

<sup>80</sup> Mélenchon, ‘L’extrême droite et les islamistes ont un intérêt commun: couper la société en deux camps’ (4 December 2015), available at {<https://melenchon.fr/2015/12/04/extreme-droite-et-islamistes-ont-interet-commun/>}.

<sup>81</sup> Mélenchon, ‘Reconstruire l’état’.

<sup>82</sup> Mélenchon, ‘La présidentielle, ce n’est pas le PMU’ (26 August 2016), available at: {<https://melenchon.fr/2016/08/26/presidentielle-nest-pmu-interview-sud-ouest/>}.

<sup>83</sup> Gilles Kepel, *Terreur dans l’Hexagone: Genèse du jihad français* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015).

<sup>84</sup> Mélenchon, ‘Je suis le bulletin de vote stable et sûr; L’Europe est menacé d’un embrasement général; Vous ciblez ENCORE l’Islam: hypocrites de la laïcité!’ (3 December 2020), available at: {<https://melenchon.fr/2020/12/03/vous-ciblez-encore-lislam-hypocrites-de-la-laicite/>}.

<sup>85</sup> Mélenchon, ‘Coup d’œil de retour’ (16 August 2015), available at: {<http://www.jean-luc-melenchon.fr/2015/08/16/coup-doeil-de-retour/>}.

insecurity which should replace Islam as the main security threat: transnational finance and banks, ultra-rich individuals, unemployment (especially for young people and students), environment, the far-right, gender-based violence, deaths in the workplace, consumerism, Covid-19, and petty crime. In addressing the effects of the Eurozone crisis, Mélenchon has underlined that immigrants and Muslims were unfairly scapegoated instead of the real culprits – bankers.<sup>86</sup> Besides, that the enemy is not the Muslim, but transnational finance, is a leitmotiv that he has often repeated in the last 10 years.<sup>87</sup> On 27 October 2014, Mélenchon accused French ‘oligarchies’ of contributing to the French identity crisis, as they:

explain that the problem is the immigrant, not the financial sector. Yesterday, they blamed Jewish folks, today the Muslims. The aim is simple: divide the people and divert their attention so that the oligarchy can keep on getting richer. This is the traditional function of the far right.<sup>88</sup>

In August 2016, during a summer marked by intense debates on the prohibition of burkinis (a full-body swimsuit made for Muslim women) on French beaches, Mélenchon replaced Islam with other security threats at least on two occasions. On 9 August, he claimed that ‘the most urgent problems are not Islam or the public debt, but consumerism and ecological debt.’<sup>89</sup> Three weeks later, he reminded that while the Earth Overshoot Day had been brought forward to 8 August, mass media and politicians’ debates mostly revolved around the burkini, as a sign that their purpose was to divert popular attention from what matters, namely economic issues and capitalism.<sup>90</sup> This attitude stood out compared to other politicians on the Right (such as Marine Le Pen)<sup>91</sup> and the mainstream Left (such as Prime Minister Manuel Valls),<sup>92</sup> who instead approved the ban on burkinis in the name of *laïcité* and gender equality.

Replacement also marks some debates on the so-called Anti-separatism Law, which Mélenchon considers stigmatising against Muslims<sup>93</sup> and ignoring other more urgent forms of separatism, such as ‘that of the rich who abandon the rest of society and that of the liberals who are pushing the State and public services out of neighbourhoods.’<sup>94</sup> On another occasion, Mélenchon evokes the different separatisms existing in France, including the social separatism of rich people; the religious separatism in Alsace-Moselle, whose different state–church relations are a threat to *laïcité*; and the institutional separatism of EU laws.<sup>95</sup> These arguments strongly confirm the hypothesis that left-wing populists securitise national and transnational economic elites (often defined as ‘oligarchies’), portrayed as a threat to the ‘people’, in which Mélenchon includes Muslims.

<sup>86</sup>Mélenchon, ‘Ce qui coûte cher c’est le capital, pas le travail’ (15 October 2013), available at: {<http://www.jean-luc-melenchon.fr/2013/10/15/ce-qui-coute-cher-cest-le-capital-pas-le-travail/>}.

<sup>87</sup>Mélenchon, ‘Mélenchon et Le Pen se combattent sur un plateau de télé; ‘Hollande a volé et perverti les mots’ (17 October 2014), available at: {<http://www.jean-luc-melenchon.fr/2014/10/17/hollande-a-vole-et-perverti-les-mots/>}.

<sup>88</sup>Mélenchon, ‘Comment pouvait-on prévoir l’ampleur des mensonges de Hollande?’ (27 October 2014), available at: {<http://www.jean-luc-melenchon.fr/les-bonus-du-livre-lere-du-peuple/#iii>}.

<sup>89</sup>Mélenchon, ‘L’alerte maximale du 8 Août’ (9 August 2016), available at: {<https://melenchon.fr/2016/08/09/lalerte-maximum-8-aout/>}.

<sup>90</sup>Mélenchon, ‘La présidentielle, ce n’est pas le PMU’.

<sup>91</sup>Le Point, ‘Burkini: pour Marine Le Pen, “c’est de l’âme de la France dont il est question” (17 August 2016), available at: {[https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/burkini-pour-marine-le-pen-c-est-de-l-ame-de-la-france-dont-il-est-question-17-08-2016-2061955\\_20.php#11](https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/burkini-pour-marine-le-pen-c-est-de-l-ame-de-la-france-dont-il-est-question-17-08-2016-2061955_20.php#11)}.

<sup>92</sup>FranceInfo, ‘Pourquoi le burkini est un casse-tête pour le Parti socialiste’ (19 August 2016), available at: {[https://www.francetvinfo.fr/societe/religion/laicite/polemique-sur-le-burkini/pourquoi-le-burkini-est-un-casse-tete-pour-le-parti-socialiste\\_1595015.html](https://www.francetvinfo.fr/societe/religion/laicite/polemique-sur-le-burkini/pourquoi-le-burkini-est-un-casse-tete-pour-le-parti-socialiste_1595015.html)}.

<sup>93</sup>Mélenchon, ‘Vous stigmatisez les musulmans avec une loi inutile et dangereuse’.

<sup>94</sup>Mélenchon, ‘Il y a des pulsions totalitaires’ (1 March 2020), available at: {<https://melenchon.fr/2020/03/01/il-y-a-des-pulsions-totalitaires-interview-dans-le-jdd/>}.

<sup>95</sup>Mélenchon, ‘Vous stigmatisez les musulmans avec une loi inutile et dangereuse’.

Finally, Mélenchon has often denounced the double standards emerging when many politicians and media use the word ‘terrorism’ only in relation to jihadism, while they are reluctant to do so when violent attacks are committed by far-right individuals.<sup>96</sup> This argument represents another form of replacement since it flags white supremacist and racist ideologies as a more concrete source of insecurity compared to Muslims. Mélenchon has frequently recalled the distinct media coverage that violent attacks receive. Men of Muslim background are portrayed as acting in the name of a radicalised version of Islam (as in the Nice 2016 terrorist attack), whereas white supremacists are described as ‘lone wolves’<sup>97</sup> or as people with mental health issues (like in the Bayonne mosque shooting in 2019).<sup>98</sup> Mélenchon has tried to safeguard Islam from the essentialist accusations of radicalisation that are made after jihadist attacks. Likewise, Mélenchon has also lamented that Muslims are usually asked to condemn violence committed in the name of Islam, while the same request is not usually made of Christians.<sup>99</sup>

### *Transformative*

Let me now present the most relevant findings of the ‘transformative’ category of desecuritisation, present in 24.5% of the texts (26 out of 106). This category shares resemblances with those identified by Hansen (‘rearticulation’), Huysmans (‘ethico-political’), and Aradau (‘emancipation’): all of them agree that these varieties of desecuritisation do not reject securitising vocabulary because it is ineffective, but because it is dangerous. Instead, transformative forms of desecuritisation actively support the empowerment of securitised subjects and the transformation of their place in society. In the case of Muslims, the first important signal of a transformative discourse emerges in Mélenchon’s criticism of French counterterrorism policies, since he argues that the discourse on the ‘war with Islamism or jihadism’<sup>100</sup> is dangerous because it fractures French society by stigmatising the whole Muslim community for the actions of a violent minority. After Charlie Hebdo, he declared that France should respond to terrorist hatred with loving behaviour<sup>101</sup> and recalled the words of the Mayor of Oslo after the Utoya massacre (2011): ‘We will punish the culprit. The punishment will be more generosity, more tolerance, more democracy.’<sup>102</sup> We should carefully interpret these words not as a justification, but as an invitation to comprehend the socio-political reasons behind violent attacks. Although in that period Mélenchon was still reluctant to use the concept of Islamophobia, he was already aware that terrorism should not be fought through liberticide policies and discrimination, which risk portraying all Muslims as potentially violent.

The second powerful sign of transformative desecuritisation emerges in Mélenchon’s position on immigration. A rather tolerant approach towards ethnic diversity marked Mélenchon’s speech in Marseille in 2012 when he proudly claimed that France is a universalist nation based on the hybridisation of different races.<sup>103</sup> This posture aligns with Mélenchon’s frequent attempts to deconstruct

<sup>96</sup> Monica Colombo and Fabio Quassoli, ‘“Is this terrorism?” The Italian media and the Macerata shooting’, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 15:4 (2022), pp. 759–81; Alice Martini, ‘Global silences as privilege: The international community’s white silence on far-right terrorism’, *Security Dialogue*, 54:3 (2023), pp. 252–71.

<sup>97</sup> Marie Breen-Smyth, ‘The lone (white) wolf, “terrorism” and the suspect community’, in Alice Martini, Kieran Ford, and Richard Jackson (eds), *Encountering Extremism: Theoretical Issues and Local Challenges* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), pp. 74–97.

<sup>98</sup> Mélenchon, ‘Vous stigmatisez les musulmans avec une loi inutile et dangereuse’.

<sup>99</sup> Mélenchon, ‘Comment pouvait-on prévoir l’ampleur des mensonges de Hollande?’ (27 October 2014), available at: <http://www.jean-luc-melenchon.fr/les-bonus-du-livre-lere-du-peuple/#iii>; ‘Les athées en ont par-dessus la tête des querelles religieuses’ (24 January 2015), available at: <http://www.jean-luc-melenchon.fr/2015/01/24/les-athees-en-ont-par-dessus-la-tete-des-querelles-religieuses/>.

<sup>100</sup> Mélenchon, ‘Pour une politique antiterroriste de la raison’.

<sup>101</sup> Mélenchon, ‘Chagrin et réplique républicaine’ (8 January 2015), available at: <http://www.jean-luc-melenchon.fr/2015/01/08/chagrin-et-replique-republicaine/>.

<sup>102</sup> Mélenchon, ‘Le délit de blasphème existe en France’.

<sup>103</sup> Mélenchon, ‘Discours sur les plages du Prado à Marseille’ (14 April 2012), available at: <http://www.jean-luc-melenchon.fr/2012/04/14/discours-sur-les-plages-du-prado-a-marseille/>.

the ‘great replacement’ conspiracy theory, peddled by far-right personalities like the Le Pen family and Éric Zemmour, who claim that Muslim immigrants are increasingly invading France and replacing white native French people.<sup>104</sup> Against the far-right purpose of fuelling ‘ethnic civil wars’ in France by pitting Muslims against non-Muslims,<sup>105</sup> Mélenchon has proposed a radically different view of the French polity based on enriching the coexistence of plural ethnic groups. Over the years, Mélenchon has engaged with the concept of creolisation to describe the objective fact that cultures have historically been blending and that it is thus impossible to claim a pure assimilation of minorities. In this respect, Mélenchon has even argued that French national culture is the fruit of the creolisation that occurred in European history.<sup>106</sup>

Some ambiguous aspects still mark Mélenchon’s transformative desecuritisation. First, creolisation is not synonymous with the multicultural model embraced by Anglo-American countries: as the next section explains, Mélenchon has persistently criticised the public presence of the headscarf, which contrasts with French Republican and secular values that are part of his thick ideology. Second, scholars recall a partial toughening of Mélenchon’s agenda on immigration in the run-up to the 2017 presidential elections, when he used more cautious arguments (e.g. fighting against the root causes of immigration and for the right of everybody to live in their countries) compared to 2012, when his programme stated that immigration was ‘not a problem.’<sup>107</sup> The reasons for this partial U-turn, however, seem to be tactical, as they aimed to lure some segments of lower-class electors who might vote Le Pen to curtail immigration. Over the decade 2012–22, Mélenchon has rarely bought into right-wing dog-whistling. When he opposes unchecked freedom of movement, his key target to securitise remains neoliberal capitalism, blamed for its disastrous social and environmental impact.<sup>108</sup>

## Findings 2: Traces of securitisation of Islam

While the overwhelming majority of Mélenchon’s texts reveal a clear ambition to desecuritize Islam, 10 of 106 texts contain some statements that can be read as Islamophobic, specifically when it comes to the debate on Muslim headscarves. This aligns with his past voting behaviour when he was senator for the Parti Socialiste (1986–2000 and 2004–10). Accordingly, in 2004, Mélenchon voted to approve the law prohibiting visible religious signs in state schools, which received unanimous support across the Senate. Likewise, Mélenchon endorsed the law banning the full-face veil in public in 2010, by expressing scepticism about Muslim women who may willingly choose to wear the niqab. Despite research confirming women’s unconstrained agency and multiple preferences in opting for full-face veils,<sup>109</sup> Mélenchon has argued that ‘servitude, even if voluntary, is neither more acceptable nor more legitimate.’<sup>110</sup> This argument is broadly spread among French left-wing,

<sup>104</sup>Mélenchon, ‘Zemmour se lâche en Italie: déporter cinq millions de musulmans? Ça peut se voir!’ (15 December 2014), available at: <http://www.jean-luc-melenchon.fr/2014/12/15/zemmour-se-lache-en-italie-deporter-cinq-millions-de-musulmans-ca-peut-se-voir/>.

<sup>105</sup>Mélenchon, ‘Le Pen: le masque tombe’ (21 May 2014), available at <http://www.jean-luc-melenchon.fr/2014/05/21/le-pen-le-masque-tombe/>.

<sup>106</sup>Mélenchon, ‘“La creolisation n’est pas un projet ou un programme, c’est un fait”: Tribune dans L’Obs’ (25 September 2020), available at: <https://melenchon.fr/2020/09/25/la-creolisation-nest-pas-un-projet-ou-un-programme-cest-un-fait-tribune-dans-lobs/>.

<sup>107</sup>Cervera-Marzal, *Le populisme de gauche*, p. 223. Marlière, ‘Jean-Luc Mélenchon and France Insoumise’.

<sup>108</sup>Mélenchon, ‘Ce qui coûte cher c’est le capital, pas le travail!’ ‘Discours de clôture du congrès du Parti de Gauche’ (5 July 2015), available at: <http://www.jean-luc-melenchon.fr/2015/07/05/discours-de-cloture-du-congres-du-parti-de-gauche/>. See also Cecile Alduy, *Ce qu’ils disent vraiment: Les politiques pris aux mots* (Paris: Seuil, 2017), p. 355.

<sup>109</sup>Haleh Afshar, ‘Can I see your hair? Choice, agency and attitudes: The dilemma of faith and feminism for Muslim women who cover’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 31:2 (2008), pp. 411–27.

<sup>110</sup>Mélenchon, ‘Je parle du voile intégral’ (7 January 2010), available at: <http://www.jean-luc-melenchon.fr/2010/01/07/je-parle-du-voile-integral/>; ‘VIDÉO: Pour la paix civile: pas de guerres de religions!’ (3 February 2021), available at: <https://melenchon.fr/2021/02/03/video-pour-la-paix-civile-pas-de-guerres-de-religions/>. For further discussion, see

liberal, and feminist intellectuals<sup>111</sup> and was reiterated during the parliamentary debates on the so-called Anti-separatism Law, promoted by President Emmanuel Macron after the killing of teacher Samuel Paty.<sup>112</sup> Although Mélenchon expressed his fierce opposition to the Anti-separatism Law, he still argued that ‘wearing a headscarf, or forcing someone to wear one, can be seen as an intolerable sign of submission’<sup>113</sup> and agreed that public service workers (for instance, bus drivers) should not wear religious symbols because it would ‘give a signal to users of the public service that humiliates them’ because ‘every religion is a heresy for the other’,<sup>114</sup> which shows Mélenchon’s persistent bias against religion. However, in the same speech, he also clarified that the veil should be fought ideologically rather than through liberticide laws.

Mélenchon attacks the different manifestations of the veil because of his hostility against religion and a strong respect for *laïcité*, the French version of secularism. *Laïcité* is a relevant concept that informs the French Republican model of citizenship, which is in principle universal and non-discriminatory towards minorities. It is not a mere synonym of secularisation. As Roy explains: ‘Secularisation is not antireligious or anticlerical: people merely stop worshiping and stop talking about religion; it is a process. *Laïcité*, on the contrary, is explicit: it is a political choice that defines the place of religion in an authoritarian, legal manner.’<sup>115</sup> Despite the proclaimed non-discriminatory scope, *laïcité* is also believed to misrepresent national French values as if they were universal principles and to be a political regime of exclusion that targets specific religious groups, such as Muslims, whose religious practices have been more visible in the public sphere compared to other minorities.<sup>116</sup> According to Alouane,<sup>117</sup> the debate on *laïcité* is tightly entrenched with the protection of French identity and majority nationalism against minority groups, whose religious freedom and clothing choices are limited in the name of a secular public order. This is evident in how right-wing parties have hijacked secularism to disproportionately target Muslims, spreading the idea that Islam clashes with secular principles, differently from Christianity. Mélenchon has vehemently denounced the right-wing weaponisation of *laïcité* and its accommodating strategy towards Christians.<sup>118</sup> He has frequently argued that his programme is the only one defending a more equal version of *laïcité* that puts all religious minorities on the same plane, avoids a favourable treatment of Christianity, and equally applies to all French territory – thus abolishing the Concordat in Alsace-Moselle that grants special status to certain religions.<sup>119</sup>

While Mélenchon’s attachment to *laïcité* does not lead him to attack Muslims directly, it can be an obstacle to the full desecuritisation of Islam, due to the non-recognition of what many worshippers perceive as a key individual and religious freedom, like wearing the hijab. Hence, the thicker ideological component in Mélenchon’s left-wing populism leads to the inclusion of Muslims in the political community on the grounds of anti-racism, but only as long as Muslims accept hiding their religiosity within the private sphere. Mélenchon’s ambivalent positions are best exemplified by his attitude to the use of the word Islamophobia, which for a long time was excluded

Christian Joppke and John Torpey, *Legal Integration of Islam: A Transatlantic Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), pp. 33–4.

<sup>111</sup>John Bowen *Why the French Don’t Like Headscarves. Islam, the State, and the Public Space* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>112</sup>Paty was a secondary school teacher who was beheaded by a Chechen refugee of Muslim background, who attacked Paty because he had previously displayed some cartoons about the Prophet Muhammad during a class.

<sup>113</sup>Mélenchon, ‘Vous stigmatisez les musulmans avec une loi inutile et dangereuse.’

<sup>114</sup>Mélenchon, ‘VIDÉO: Pour la paix civile: pas de guerres de religions!’

<sup>115</sup>Olivier Roy, *Secularism Confronts Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 7–8.

<sup>116</sup>Mavelli, ‘Between normalisation and exception.’

<sup>117</sup>Rim-Sarah Alouane, ‘Freedom of religion and the transformation of public order in France’, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 13:1 (2015), pp. 31–38 (p. 32).

<sup>118</sup>Mélenchon, ‘Nous sommes la Gauche décomplexée’ (12 April 2011), available at: <http://www.jean-luc-melenchon.fr/2011/04/12/nous-sommes-la-gauche-decomplexee/>; Jean Castex bigot d’État’ (20 October 2021), available at: <https://melenchon.fr/2021/10/20/jean-castex-bigot-detat/>.

<sup>119</sup>Mélenchon, ‘Laïcité et concordat’ (24 February 2012), available at: <http://www.jean-luc-melenchon.fr/2012/02/24/interview-dans-le-magazine-la-vie/>.



from his vocabulary. This voluntary omission depends on Mélenchon's belief that accusations of Islamophobia can hide legitimate critique against religion. This is the argument of philosopher Henri Peña Ruiz (a member of Mélenchon's former party Parti de Gauche), who posits that it is fair to be Islamophobic because a critical attitude towards religion is a cornerstone of *laïcité*.<sup>120</sup> This does not mean to normalise racism against Muslim worshippers. According to Peña Ruiz, Islam can be targeted because it derives from an individual choice, while ethnic origins are part of a natural heritage that cannot be modified.

Yet this argument downplays the fact that Islamophobia has become an inherently racialised phenomenon and that the abstract arguments against Islamic practices end up in concrete discrimination and violence against Muslims, especially women. The analytical distinctions between Islam as *fundamentalist religion* and Muslims as *subjects* are troublesome, as they are entangled in overlapping dimensions of 'otherness'.<sup>121</sup> Nonetheless, as I will recall in the conclusions, Mélenchon's position on *laïcité* and on the word Islamophobia has evolved.

### Findings 3: Populist traits

In line with Bonansinga's findings,<sup>122</sup> my analysis reveals that Mélenchon shows three key populist traits ('anti-elitism', 'sense of urgency', and 'fearmongering') in 53 out of 106 texts.

Desecuritisising Islam in a populist way implies that Muslims are part of the 'people' and that the latter is a referent object to secure against malevolent elites, as pointed out by 22 of 53 texts. However, since Mélenchon is a left-wing populist, the decision to include Muslims is premised on socio-economic criteria, rather than cultural or religious. Among the political elites, over the period under scrutiny, Mélenchon has often called out right-wing and mainstream Left parties, who treat Muslims as an inner enemy following the paranoid logic of the 'clash of civilizations'.<sup>123</sup> More recently, the far-right and Macron embodied the targets of his interventions, as both 'fear the social solidarity of the people, so they constantly inject the venom of division' and agree that 'everything is the fault of Muslims'.<sup>124</sup> The EU agency Frontex is also attacked for its violations of human rights and its xenophobic attitude against immigrants, which results from the 'dream' of the 'Eurocrats': namely, to build 'a fortress Europe'.<sup>125</sup> Among the economic elites, I explained earlier that Mélenchon treats banks and financial oligarchs as scapegoats for the social divisions for which, instead, conservative politicians blame Muslims. In a debate with Marine Le Pen on 14 February 2011, when discussing immigration, Mélenchon declared that 'capitalism destroys traditional structures' and that 'we Europeans are the first responsible of this situation because of free trade and economic partnership agreements'.<sup>126</sup> Moreover, in November 2020 he reiterated that 'the people who are busy fighting religious dogmas have no energy left for the class struggle against the oligarchy and finance',<sup>127</sup> arguing that anti-Muslim hate is a functional strategy mobilised by the elites to hide the real source of insecurity.

<sup>120</sup>Ongün Emre, 'No, we don't have the right to be Islamophobic', *JacobinMag* (10 September 2019), available at: <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/09/france-insoumise-islamophobia-racism-melenchon-pena-ruiz>.

<sup>121</sup>José Casanova, 'Religion, European secular identities, and European integration', in Timothy Byrnes and Peter Katzenstein (eds), *Religion in an Expanding Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 65–92.

<sup>122</sup>Bonansinga, 'A threat to us'.

<sup>123</sup>Mélenchon, 'Avant de passer devant le jury et de rentrer vraiment' (31 August 2013), available at: <http://www.jean-luc-melenchon.fr/2013/08/31/avant-de-passer-devant-le-jury-et-de-rentre-vraiment/>.

<sup>124</sup>Mélenchon, 'Le système néolibéral atteint sa limite' (19 September 2020), available at: <https://melenchon.fr/2020/09/19/le-systeme-neoliberal-atteint-sa-limite-interview-dans-la-provence/>.

<sup>125</sup>Mélenchon, 'En Europe, la pêche aux réfugiés est ouverte' (8 July 2016), available at: <https://melenchon.fr/2016/07/08/europe-peche-aux-refugies-ouverte/>.

<sup>126</sup>Mélenchon, 'Débat Jean-Luc Mélenchon: Marine le Pen' (14 February 2011), available at: <http://www.jean-luc-melenchon.fr/2011/02/14/debat-jean-luc-melenchon-marine-le-pen/>.

<sup>127</sup>Mélenchon, 'Ce que l'unité du pays veut dire' (2 November 2020), available at: <https://melenchon.fr/2020/11/02/ce-que-lunite-du-pays-veut-dire/>.

The second populist trait is the ‘sense of urgency’ that I retraced in 20 out of 53 texts. The sense of urgency surfaces when Mélenchon securitises issues that deserve more political and media attention than Islam, such as the environment.<sup>128</sup> Likewise, Mélenchon has defined as urgent the resistance to what LFI considers an authoritarian backsliding of the Macron presidency, evident in the Anti-separatism Law and in the governmental campaign against academics accused of being too ‘woke’ and ultimately sympathising with radical Islamists.<sup>129</sup> Moreover, Mélenchon underlined that it was urgent to reject the counterterrorism reforms promoted by the Socialist cabinets between 2013 and 2015, which risked furthering the division between Muslims and non-Muslim French citizens and being hijacked to criminalise other forms of political dissent, such as eco-activism.<sup>130</sup>

The third populist trait, ‘fearmongering’, can be elicited in 33 out of 53 texts. Mélenchon stokes fear about enemies that are not defined on racial criteria, but on socio-economic and political ones. Among the enemies, Mélenchon has vehemently condemned: former President Sarkozy, accused of moving an existential threat to French *laïcité* and citizenship regime;<sup>131</sup> Valls, because the martial tones he used against Muslim ‘inner enemies’<sup>132</sup> could threaten the social cohesion of the people; neoliberal capitalism, in which ‘everyone against everyone is destroying all social ties and spreading growing suffering throughout our country at every level of society.’<sup>133</sup> Since 2017, Mélenchon has increasingly accused Macron of an authoritarian drift manifested in policies that contribute to the normalisation of Islamophobic ideas. In 2021, Macron was defined as the ‘arsonist who unleashed the demons of war’<sup>134</sup> because he contributed to cleaving French people across religious lines, ultimately facilitating the growth of Marine Le Pen. Macron and the Renaissance-led Cabinets were also described as a morally corrupt elite, ‘la Macronie’, which ‘wants to control everything, including academic research’<sup>135</sup> through a ‘thought police’<sup>136</sup> which puts the people in danger and leads to the censorship of valid studies on racism and Islamophobia in France. Finally, Mélenchon has consistently warned about the perils of far-right politicians and called for the dissolution of violent groups in 2012,<sup>137</sup> after the worksite of a mosque was occupied, and again in 2020 and 2021.<sup>138</sup>

## Conclusion

The paper has contributed to securitisation theory and research on populism and securitisation by showing that desecuritisation is influenced by partisan ideologies; among these, populism constructs and deconstructs security distinctly. Through a discourse analysis of Mélenchon’s texts, I have argued that left-wing populist parties tend to desecuritize Islam, but not always in a transformative way that leads to the recognition of Muslims’ religious freedoms.

<sup>128</sup> Mélenchon, ‘L’alerte maximale du 8 Août’; ‘La présidentielle, ce n’est pas le PMU’; ‘“Le système néolibéral atteint sa limite”’.

<sup>129</sup> Mélenchon, ‘Pour une réplique unie contre la police de la pensée et la derive autoritaire du regime macroniste’ (24 February 2021), available at: <https://melenchon.fr/2021/02/24/pour-une-replique-unie-contre-la-police-de-la-pensee-et-la-derive-autoritaire-du-regime-macroniste/>.

<sup>130</sup> Mélenchon, ‘Pour une politique antiterroriste de la raison’; ‘Reconstruire l’État’; ‘L’État d’urgence c’est donc ça’ (30 November 2015), available at: <https://melenchon.fr/2015/11/30/etat-urgence-etait-donc-ca/>.

<sup>131</sup> Mélenchon, ‘Hallucinations’ (20 February 2011), available at: <http://www.jean-luc-melenchon.fr/2011/02/20/hallucinations/>.

<sup>132</sup> Mélenchon, ‘Avant de passer devant le jury et de rentrer vraiment’.

<sup>133</sup> Mélenchon, ‘Je suis le bulletin de vote stable et sûr’.

<sup>134</sup> Mélenchon, ‘J’appelle le camp de l’égalité à faire bloc face à l’extrême droite’ (30 March 2021), available at: <https://melenchon.fr/2021/03/30/appelle-camp-egalite-bloc-extreme-droite/>.

<sup>135</sup> Mélenchon, ‘Macron-Vidal: le nouvel obscurantisme d’État’ (17 February 2021), available at: <https://melenchon.fr/2021/02/17/revue-de-la-semaine-131-darmanin-le-pen-islamogauchisme-vidal-et-luniversite/>.

<sup>136</sup> Mélenchon, ‘Macron et Vidal veulent une police de la pensée’ (18 February 2021), available at: <https://melenchon.fr/2021/02/18/video-macron-et-vidal-veulent-une-police-de-la-pensee/>.

<sup>137</sup> Mélenchon, ‘La violence de l’extrême droite vient de franchir un seuil incompatible avec la République’ (20 October 2012), available at: <http://www.jean-luc-melenchon.fr/2012/10/20/la-violence-de-lextreme-droite-vient-de-franchir-un-seuil-incompatible-avec-la-republique/>.

<sup>138</sup> ‘Vous ciblez ENCORE l’islam: hypocrites de la laïcité!’; ‘J’appelle le camp de l’égalité à faire bloc face à l’extrême droite’.

Mélenchon's desecuritisation shows three key traits (anti-elitism, sense of urgency, and fear-mongering) that populism uses to address security issues. As part of the people, Muslims should be urgently desecuritized: instead, to be antagonised are other security threats, such as financial capitalism. Yet Mélenchon's populist ideology does not explain if Islam should be desecuritized: this decision depends on Mélenchon's radical left thick ideologies, influenced by anti-racist principles but also by hostility against religion, historically grounded in the French Left. Accordingly, Mélenchon still subscribes to an inflexible version of *laïcité* and does not contest the idea that the veil is an instrument of submission and as such a source of insecurity for women's equality and French Republican universalism. Hence, his desecuritisation is more managerial than transformative, as my findings have revealed. The rearticulation of French polity is ambiguous because it includes Muslims among the 'people' insofar as they do not question the pillars of *laïcité*. While LFI's recent electoral programmes reject the counterterrorism package approved so far in France,<sup>139</sup> they still claim that a strict application of *laïcité* is as necessary as a firm condemnation of Islamophobia.<sup>140</sup> This balance can safeguard political cohesion and avoid religious conflicts.<sup>141</sup>

Despite his past reluctance to use it, Mélenchon seems now to accept that Islamophobia should be used to mean 'irrational impulse that causes sufferers to lose intellectual control'<sup>142</sup> and that Islamophobia 'is just as harmful as antisemitism'.<sup>143</sup> This engagement was evident in Mélenchon's participation in the march against Islamophobia, organised in November 2019 by the New Anti-capitalist Party and by the Collective against Islamophobia in France (dissolved by the French Home Office in 2020 under the suspicion of spreading radical propaganda). Against critics accusing him of being in cahoots with Islamist extremism,<sup>144</sup> Mélenchon justified his participation to express his solidarity with Muslims after the Bayonne Mosque shooting. He also affirmed that the disagreements around a concept had led to 'deny[ing] Muslims the right to be defended from people who are not Muslims'.<sup>145</sup>

Overall, Mélenchon has emphasised the need to overcome religious differences (not to include them) and coalesce around French Republican norms to guarantee civil coexistence.<sup>146</sup> While this is not a call for multiculturalism, it still symbolises the aversion against the stigmatisation of Muslims coming from the Right, Renaissance, and part of the Left. This evolution towards accepting the concept of Islamophobia integrates Mélenchon's anti-racist and progressive socio-economic discourse, which makes of LFI the most credible desecuriting actor for Islam in France. These efforts probably account for Mélenchon's electoral success among voters with a Muslim background. In turn, such growing support partly explains Mélenchon's initial reluctance to use the notion of Islamophobia.

If the desecuritisation of Islam depends on radical left-wing thick ideologies, an intriguing question that needs further research is whether populism alone can be considered a truly desecuriting force. My findings provide a negative answer to this question. Mélenchon's populism neatly splits French polity into two antagonistic blocs: 'people' vs 'elite'. While this discourse has transformative

<sup>139</sup>La France Insoumise, *L'avenir en commun: Le programme de La France Insoumise et son candidat Jean-Luc Mélenchon* (Paris: Seuil, 2017); Jean-Luc Mélenchon, *L'avenir en commun: Le programme pour l'Union Populaire* (Paris: Seuil, 2021).

<sup>140</sup>Mélenchon, 'La haine des musulmans, poison violent de la société' (12 July 2021), available at: <https://melenchon.fr/2021/07/12/la-haine-des-musulmans-poison-violent-de-la-societe/>.

<sup>141</sup>Mélenchon, 'VIDÉO: Pour la paix civile: pas de guerres de religions!' (3 February 2021), available at: <https://melenchon.fr/2021/02/03/video-pour-la-paix-civile-pas-de-guerres-de-religions/>.

<sup>142</sup>Mélenchon, 'Du Venezuela à l'islamo-gauchisme'.

<sup>143</sup>Mélenchon, "Le système néolibéral atteint sa limite".

<sup>144</sup>FranceInfo, 'Accusations d'"islamo-gauchisme": Jean-Luc Mélenchon s'est-il fait piéger en participant à la Marche contre l'islamophobie de novembre 2019?' (9 December 2020), available at: [https://www.francetvinfo.fr/societe/religion/religion-laicite/video-accusations-d-islamo-gauchisme-jean-luc-melenchon-s-est-il-fait-pieger-en-participant-a-la-marche-contre-l-islamophobie-de-novembre-2019\\_4202767.html](https://www.francetvinfo.fr/societe/religion/religion-laicite/video-accusations-d-islamo-gauchisme-jean-luc-melenchon-s-est-il-fait-pieger-en-participant-a-la-marche-contre-l-islamophobie-de-novembre-2019_4202767.html).

<sup>145</sup>Mélenchon, 'La diabolisation permanente' (7 November 2019), available at: <https://melenchon.fr/2019/11/07/la-diabolisation-permanente/>.

<sup>146</sup>Mélenchon, 'Marche contre la haine des musulmans: "la France est notre bien commun"' (10 November 2019), available at: <https://melenchon.fr/2019/11/10/video-marche-contre-la-haine-des-musulmans-la-france-est-notre-bien-commun/>.

effects for Muslims and other marginalised socio-economic groups, it tends to escalate conflictual dynamics against other groups treated as morally corrupt and undeserving enemies. Replacing Muslims with other security threats means that Mélenchon still calls for the securitisation of what he labels as the French establishment and its putative allies, including not only anti-democratic forces like far-right groups<sup>147</sup> but also moderate left-wing parties like the Socialist Party. Such ‘enemification’<sup>148</sup> strategy against other parties, along with the personalisation of the political conflict around the figure of a charismatic leader (Mélenchon), might isolate LFI and obstruct the creation of a solid left-wing coalition,<sup>149</sup> as demonstrated by the fragility of the New Ecological and Social’s People Union.

My analysis does not come without limitations. Methodologically, the discursive categories of desecuritisation are neither fixed nor objective. Instead, they represent the arbitrary product of available scholarly interpretations, which might be enriched through other contributions like this one. For this reason, the issue of replicability is not my central preoccupation, as I mostly want to provide a deep contextualisation of my case study (Mélenchon as instantiation of left-wing populism) and its stance on Islam through a single case study.

Nonetheless, the hypothesis that left-wing populism desecuritises Islam in various ways can be potentially generalised to a larger number of cases to investigate the attitude of other left-wing populist parties (such as Syriza and Podemos<sup>150</sup>) towards Muslims and to ascertain whether their attitude towards religious pluralism is impacted by distinct thick ideologies.

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<sup>147</sup> On the desecuritisation of the discourse on far-right extremism, see Lee Jarvis, ‘Critical terrorism studies and the far-right: Beyond problems and solutions?’, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 15:1 (2022), pp. 13–37.

<sup>148</sup> Bonansinga, ‘A threat to us’.

<sup>149</sup> Philippe Marlière and Philippe Corcuff, *Les tontons flingueurs de la gauche: lettres ouvertes à Hollande, Macron, Mélenchon, Roussel, Ruffin, Onfray* (Paris: Éditions Textuels, 2024), pp. 52–8.

<sup>150</sup> Castaño, ‘Populismes de gauche en Europe’.