



'A threat to us': The interplay of insecurity and enmity narratives in left-wing populism

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Abstract

Left-wing populists are understudied in populism research and little is known on how enmity and insecurity narratives interplay in their rhetoric. Using a narrative framework to capture insecurity in the 'enemification' of elites, this article examines left-populist Jean-Luc Mélenchon and La France Insoumise. The analysis reveals a multifaceted construction of national, supranational and international elites as sources of insecurity, based on (a) the threats they pose, (b) the uncertainty they generate and (c) their failure to protect citizens. The article makes two contributions to the populism and International Relations literatures. First, it provides empirical evidence to contest the hypothesis that left populism promotes pluralist agonism rather than antagonism. Second, it shows how populists across the spectrum can use insecurity-centred narratives to delegitimise elites from speaking security and promote an agenda centred on popular sovereignty.

Keywords

insecurity, La France Insoumise, left populism, Mélenchon, narratives

Introduction

The relevance of insecurity for populist success has been highlighted in a number of scholarly works, both on the so-called 'demand' and 'supply' sides of populism research. On one hand, scholars have shown how grievances, anxieties and ontological insecurities at the heart of advanced post-industrial societies drive citizens closer to populist parties (Grande and Kriesi, 2012; Kinnvall, 2018; Kinnvall et al., 2018); on the other hand, narratives of insecurity (Béland, 2019; Bonansinga, 2021), fear (Wodak, 2015) and crisis (Homolar and Scholz, 2019; Moffitt, 2015) have been found to play a distinctive role in the discursive repertoire of populist actors.

The empirical research focus, however, is often on a specific manifestation of populism – its radical right subtype. In more general terms, 'populism' denotes a vision of politics as the moral struggle between a good 'people' and a self-serving 'elite' accused of depriving the former of its very democratic power and sovereignty (Mudde, 2004). Since the populist

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belief system is quite simplistic and rudimentary, it usually self-attaches to other ideologies that give content to and characterise its appeals. The populist radical right is therefore a specific subset of populism, which combines people-centrism and anti-elitism with strong nativist and authoritarian claims (Mudde, 2007).

Among its defining characteristics, the populist radical right is associated with the construction and delineation of common ‘enemies’ (Kinnvall, 2014; Sakki and Pettersson, 2016) usually through insecurity-centred discourse (Béland, 2019; Bonansinga, 2019; Kurylo, 2020; Wodak, 2015). As this fosters a climate of division, hostility, suspicion and mistrust, the populist radical right is often considered dangerous for the sustainability of the societal fabric (Kinnvall, 2014). In contrast, radical left populism in Europe is regarded as a progressive and inclusive force that does not share any value with its radical right counterpart (Mouffe, 2018). Specifically, some scholars appear to think of (in)security as an ideational tool that differentiates between the two radical varieties, arguing that while the radical right constructs ‘migration or security crises [. . .] left-wing populisms locate crisis in the social-economic order’ (Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis, 2019: 9)

This article questions whether the populism–insecurity nexus is indeed exclusive to the populist right. It argues that all populism varieties construct the people versus elite struggle as a *relationship of insecurity*, that is, through an insecurity-centred language that narrates elites as essentially *threatening* the people. This entails that a link between insecurity and enmity narratives is characteristic of all populisms, with the left–right ideological positioning providing additional content to populist claims. While the populist left does not construct ‘outsiders’ as existential threats to the nation, its impact on democratic sustainability should not be underestimated. By projecting an idea of elites in power as working intentionally against the people’s security interests, left populists can further feed the existing climate of division and affective polarisation.

To understand whether and how left populists ground their anti-elite critique in insecurity narratives, the article examines the case of the French political party La France Insoumise (LFI) and its leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon, a case of established and successful European left populism (Cautrès, 2017; Chiocchetti, 2020; Marlière, 2019; Shields, 2021). The examination of their anti-elitism at the national, supranational and international levels reveals a multidimensional representation of elites as dangerous and as producing a number of insecurities. The latter are used to justify signature proposals to restore popular sovereignty, showing how insecurity narratives help Mélenchon and his party to delegitimise elites and promote a domestic and foreign policy agenda that is first and foremost populist.

The article makes two contributions to the populism literature and to International Relations studies on the (in)security dimension of populism. The first contribution is developed by showing how Mélenchon and LFI utilise a language of insecurity to construct a variety of elites as enemies to eliminate; in doing so, the article provides empirical evidence to contest the hypothesis that left populism necessarily engages in the promotion of pluralist agonism. The second contribution is developed by unpacking the theoretically underdeveloped relationship between left populism and insecurity narratives, hence evidencing how distinctions on left and right populism based on ‘socio-economic concerns’ for the former and ‘security concerns’ for the latter may be too artificial. In fact, the article shows how 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.

Insecurity and the populist left: An unusual suspect

Although conceptualising the phenomenon from a variety of different lenses, scholars agree that the distinctive feature of populist politics is an interpretation of the social conflict as a struggle between a virtuous people and a self-serving elite (Moffitt, 2020; Mudde, 2004). Populism comes attached to ‘host’ ideologies and in Europe, it is radical right populism, with its authoritarian and nativist expressions, that has received more analytical attention. Radical left populism (March, 2011; March and Keith, 2016) is a variety of populism that combines the people-elite struggle with an inclusionary understanding of the ‘people’ and a left-wing agenda centring on a critique of capitalism, the denunciation of inequalities and the advocacy for social rights (March and Mudde, 2005). The study of left-wing populism in Europe builds on a wide array of scholarship on Latin American populism, which displays predominant inclusionary features but also a drift towards authoritarianism (de la Torre, 2017; Weyland, 2013).

In Europe, radical left populism is still relatively understudied compared with the radical right (Font et al., 2019; March, 2017), despite the success of Podemos and Syriza that has prompted an increased academic interest (Kioupkiolis, 2016; Kioupkiolis and Katsambekis, 2018; Ramiro and Gomez, 2017). The lacuna in our comparative knowledge of left populism, vis-a-vis its right-wing counterpart in Europe, is one of the reasons why it is still unclear to what extent European populists are similar in essence or markedly distinct (for a comparison of European and Latin American populisms, see Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). As March (2017) argues, the so-called *populism trumps ideology* thesis claims that, despite being ‘coloured’ by diverging thick ideologies, the ideological core of left and right populists is on the people-elites struggle (Clark et al., 2008; Halikiopoulou et al., 2012; Rooduijn and Akkerman, 2017). On the contrary, the *ideology trumps populism* thesis argues that, although their similar focus on the people vs elites struggle, the ‘thick’ ideological differences remain hegemonic; it is the left–right divide that determines the ‘content’ attributed to the people and the elites, and therefore the very essence of each strand of populism (Katsambekis, 2017; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014).

This article uses the relationship between left populists and insecurity as an additional analytical tool to address this conundrum. To put it differently, the focus on insecurity represents a piece of the puzzle (among others) that can help refine extant theorisations on the underpinnings (whether similar or diverse) of different populism varieties.

While the populist right has been consistently studied in relation to insecurity narratives – with a different focus on practices of securitisation and threat construction (Bonansinga, 2019; Kurylo, 2020; Wojczewski, 2020), crisis narratives (Homolar and Scholz, 2019), a politics of insecurity (Béland, 2019) and a politics of fear (Wodak, 2015) – few studies have approached the question from the perspective of left populism (Bonansinga, 2021). Left-wing populism is regarded as a progressive force that builds an inclusive discourse around ‘the people’, as opposed to the discourse of the radical right, which draws boundaries of belonging along exclusionary nativist lines (Mouffe, 2018). Mouffe’s (2018: 91) argument that left populism encourages a healthy and pluralist agonism (i.e. a struggle between adversaries) rather than antagonism (a struggle between enemies) seems to lead to the hypothesis that left populists hold a value-based incompatibility against the use of divisive, insecurity-based rhetoric. This hypothesis, however, has not been substantiated empirically. In fact, recent empirical evidence has shown that left

populists can frame a variety of themes through the lenses of insecurity while following ideological lines (Bonansinga, 2021).

Building on this preliminary evidence but moving beyond the mere focus on insecurity ‘themes’, the present article proposes an alternative hypothesis suggesting that the relationship between left populism and insecurity is much more complex and fundamental. In doing so, the article argues that the construction of a *relationship of insecurity* is crucial in the rhetoric of these parties, too. Although left populists do not engage with exclusionary and threat construction practices towards migrants and minorities, these actors can build their discourse on the premise that an outgroup (an ensemble of politicians, international organisations and the media, vaguely conflated under the label ‘the elites’) is *fundamentally threatening* the people. As Chernobrov (2019) argues, enmity narratives towards the elites capture the underlying connection between anti-elitism and the construction of insecurity, as they present audiences with the variety of dangers that elites pose or are to be blamed for. Like the populist radical right, left populists do not simply present a divide between the people and the elites: they frame any interaction between the two as a *relationship of insecurity* whereby a threatening minority renders the everyday existence of the people essentially insecure. In short, rather than a pluralist agonism, constructing elites as dangerous for the people puts a confrontational logic at the heart of contemporary politics, hence moving beyond political rivalry to the construction of enemies.

The next section introduces a narrative toolkit to capture the insecurity underpinning of anti-elitism discourse.

Narratives of elite enemification

To understand whether and how the elites of left-wing populism are constructed as ‘dangerous’, this article brings together a series of narratives that capture the polysemy of insecurity and the ways it can be embedded in anti-elitism narratives, resulting in processes of *enemification*. Narratives are here understood as sense-making and sense-giving devices that structure information, establishing cognitive and normative maps to understand the political world (Kinnvall, 2004; Kinnvall et al., 2018; Steele and Homolar, 2019).

The framework (see below) includes but also goes beyond ‘narratives of threat’ to highlight that this is not the only way insecurity can be infused in political communication. Indeed, as Huysmans (2006: 3) argued, making threats the kernel of security ‘is too one-dimensional’. The narrative model captures additional meanings associated with insecurity, most notably uncertainty and the need for protection (for a review: Bourbeau, 2015) allowing us to pick up a variety of narratives that can be interpreted as (re)producing insecurity in discourse but that would remain unintelligible under a threat-only-framework. Hence this allows a more fine-grained analysis of the communication dynamics that concern insecurity construction in populist anti-elitist discourse. The model includes three insecurity narratives, which are presented below alongside examples of how these are usually found in radical right populism.

The first is the *threat narrative*, which centres around a language of insecurity that explicitly posits elites as existential threats to citizens. This narrative taps into the traditional association of insecurity with the ‘presence of threats’ (Wolfers, 1952); in discursive form, it places emphasis on references to dangers, risks, perils and menaces. The populist right has been found to adopt this narration especially in regard to minorities by portraying them as ‘threats to us’, most commonly the nation or the heartland (Wodak, 2015: 2).

The second narrative is the *instability narrative*, which taps into the meaning of insecurity as uncertainty by portraying elites as drivers and causes of a precarious present. This narrative highlights that we do not only evoke insecurity when talking about dangers but also when underlining how uncertain, unstable and precarious a certain referent object is or will become. The construction of uncertainty in the future is an especially powerful narrative tool often used by populists, because it taps into individuals' need to ensure not only their security of being (in the present) but also their security of becoming (Kinnvall, 2018). This discursive practice is indeed used to construct domestic politics as in a state of profound crisis and emergency, which heighten concerns, uncertainties and anxieties about the future (Moffitt, 2015).

Finally, the *failure to protect narrative* frames insecurity in an indirect way: rather than labelling certain issues explicitly as 'dangers', it emphasises how the people need protection from them – a protection that, however, fails to materialise. Indeed, when we claim that something needs protecting, we are essentially (although indirectly) stating that a condition of insecurity of some sort surrounds it. With this narrative, radical right populists usually accuse and blame elites in power for failing in their basic duty to ensure and provide security to citizens (Wojczewski, 2020).

What is the key function of these narratives? As the literature on ontological security suggests, narratives are key devices for the individual to understand the political world. The concept of ontological security is labelled as such because it concerns individuals' own 'being' and refers to their need to have a stable, safe and secure 'sense of self' (Giddens, 1991). The enemification narratives presented here organise a coherent 'story' that centres on two key characters, the elites and the people, and posits them in a specific relationship of insecurity, respectively, as enemies and victims. These narratives identify a specific problem at hand, that is, the elites 'are essentially dangerous because they threaten, cause uncertainty and fail to protect the people'. They thus provide a linear story that accounts for and helps make sense of the insecurities, anxieties and grievances that individuals experience in the complexity of post-industrial societies. Enemification narratives can help satisfy personal needs for ontological security because they pinpoint the process causing insecurity and the actors that are to be blamed, providing a path to security restoration which entails the removal of the elites in power, as advocated by populists. Since political narratives are important in shaping how citizens understand and make sense of the socio-political world, systematically representing elites in power as, by definition, dangerous to the people, is politically and socially consequential. This logic of enemification creates an atmosphere of general distrust and is likely to foster affective polarisation (Iyengar et al., 2012) into two opposite camps which cannot possibly reconcile their alleged conflicting interests and loyalties.

Case study and analysis

The enemification narratives framework is applied to a prototypical example of left-wing populism in Europe: the French party LFI and its leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon (Cautrès, 2017; Chiocchetti, 2020; Marlière, 2019; Shields, 2021).

The ideological core of LFI and Mélenchon is considered 'populist' because, as per Mudde's (2004) widely accepted definition, it revolves around the combination of people-centrism, anti-elitism and the reclaiming of popular sovereignty. Mélenchon and LFI appeal to 'the people' (*les gens*), as the ordinary citizens humiliated and deprived by the country's political, financial and media elites characterised as an 'oligarchic caste'

(Birbaum, 2017; Soare and Stambazzi, 2017). The campaign slogans for the 2017 presidential elections summarise the action plan laid out by the party and its leader to restore popular sovereignty: the call for a citizens' revolution through voting (*révolution citoyenne*), which would clear off the establishment entirely (*dégagisme*). Important for the purpose of this study is that Mélenchon and LFI are examples of *left* populism. Their populist thin-ideology comes attached to a host (or thick) ideology of eco-socialist-anti-neoliberal inspiration that is perfectly in line with the rest of the European radical left tradition (Chiocchetti, 2020).

Their externally aimed communication is analysed by focusing on the party programme for the 2017 presidential elections (*L'Avenir En Commun*), the leader's blog (*L'Ere du Peuple*) and editorials from the party newspaper (*L'Heure du Peuple*; from the end of 2020: *L'Insoumission Hebdo*). The period under examination (2016–2019) allows to delve into the party's and its leader's articulation of elites, from the very foundation of the party (2016) throughout key events such as the 2017 presidential election and the 2019 European Parliament election. The analysis was conducted by converting the narrative framework into keywords¹ for an Nvivo Text Search Query. Only texts containing at least one of the keywords were retained and qualitatively assessed to establish when insecurity narratives centred on elites as their object of accusation.

Mélenchon and LFI

The sections below categorise and present the findings based on three dimensions of elite enemification that have emerged from the analysis: the nation, supranational and international levels.

The national level

As with other populists, regardless of ideological distinctions, the national level of Mélenchon's and LFI's anti-elitism manifests itself with attacks on the French establishment, usually addressed with derogatory terms such as the word *caste* (Ivaldi et al., 2017).

At this level of analysis, the threat narrative assumes both a direct and indirect form, as elites are represented as a danger per se and as responsible for a number of threats. For instance, in a rather direct fashion, Macron and his entourage are accused of having endangered key sectors of the French economy and of being generally 'dangerous for the country' (Mélenchon, 2017d), while the 'extreme right of Marine Le Pen' is articulated as a key national menace (Mélenchon, 2017g). Indirectly, the establishment is portrayed as a producer of insecurity via practices of blame attribution, which pinpoint national elites as the cause behind certain perils. For instance, the 'madness and irresponsibility' of the ruling elites is considered as the 'main cause' for the 'violent' and 'serious' problem that Germany poses to Europe (Mélenchon, 2017c). Similarly, the formerly governing left (*Parti Socialiste*) was identified as 'directly responsible' for the health threat that pollution poses (LFI, 2016f). Some elite members are also targeted individually: for example, the former minister for food and agriculture (and currently economy minister) Bruno Le Maire is accused of having personally 'endangered both the citizen and the consumer' with his decisions to de-potentiate food security services (LFI, 2018c). These direct and indirect narratives show how the totality of the French establishment, from left to right, from governing parties to oppositions, is narrated in relation to ideas of danger.

Mélenchon and LFI also portray the establishment as a source of instability. President Macron is defined on many occasions as ‘the president of disorder’, embodying ‘the chaos of liberalism, its economic disorder with sluggish growth and its social disorder with exploding inequalities and precariousness’ (LFI, 2018a). Before the 2017 presidential election, the country was depicted as ‘insecure, harassed and despised on a daily basis’ (LFI, 2016e), with the ‘so-called “competent” who govern do(ing) nothing other than creat(ing) the conditions for chaos’ (Mélenchon, 2017m). Immediately after Macron’s victory, the implementation of his political programme was framed as a further source of instability (LFI, 2017c; Mélenchon, 2017n) and already in 2019 the 2022 presidential election was projected as:

an election of political crisis; that is, in a country *in crisis* and to resolve *the crisis* that Macron will have added to the one we already knew before his arrival. (Mélenchon, 2019b, emphasis added)

Media and financial elites are also linked to the production of insecurity. The ‘oligarchy’, as the party and its leader call it, is narrated as fully responsible but ‘unpunished’ for the ‘plagues’ that befall on the country, most notably unemployment and economic precarity (LFI, 2016g). Mélenchon (2017h) uses the media as a symbol of the ‘political decomposition’ affecting the country, where billionaires control the media and hence the national debate, producing a ‘particularly unsettling time for democracy’. The media (labelled ‘media party’) is considered as ‘the main adversary on the ground’, which ‘must be fought relentlessly’ (Mélenchon, 2017f, 2018d), with its investigative work considered as ‘dangerous dirty tricks’ against which ‘law and order’ should be ‘restored’ (Mélenchon, 2019c).

Finally, national elites are constructed as enemies following the failure to protect argument, although less recurrently. This narrative targets the elites’ failure to protect against a variety of dangers. On several occasions, LFI (2017b, 2018c) denounced the government’s ‘alarming insufficiency’ in protecting citizens’ health and the environment against polluting agents. Furthermore, the media is accused of failing to protect liberty and democracy (Mélenchon, 2018e). Importantly, the failure to protect narrative links elites’ failure to a conscious endeavour. Either because of their inability, unwillingness or disinterest in tackling contemporary threats, the elites are said to consciously generate insecurity. Political and economic elites, for instance, are often referred to as ‘dangerously impermeable’ to ecological threats (LFI, 2016c).

The supranational level

The European Union (EU) is the obvious target of elite enemification at the supranational level. Left-populist actors in Europe have grown increasingly Eurosceptic and combine a strong critique of European institutions with staunch calls for reforms (Halikiopoulou et al., 2012).

Mélenchon and LFI call EU leaders ‘tyrants’ and overall address the EU as a ‘dictatorship’ (L’Avenir En Commun, 2016). They emphasise a variety of socio-economic, political and military threats that supranational elites pose. Economically, the elites from Brussels are accused of endangering national economies by imposing austerity, regarded as the most direct ‘threat to European people’ (LFI, 2018b). Socially, supranational elites are blamed for endangering peace and the societies of Europe ‘by nurturing yesterday’s extinct nationalisms and by pitting peoples, regions and social categories against one

another' (Mélenchon, 2017c). Politically, and using sanctions against Poland as a case in point, the EU is posited as a serious threat to member states' sovereignty. In Mélenchon's own words:

The Union gives itself the right to assess what is a good reform of the judiciary and a bad one [. . .]. It threatens sanctions, not to apply them, but to demonstrate its right to threaten. (Mélenchon, 2017a)

Mélenchon's construction of the EU as an enemy also taps on the domain of military security. The EU is portrayed as an 'aggressor' that 'evidently threatens Russia' with 'an irresponsible and aggressive policy' to which Russia could only 'naturally' react as aggressively (Mélenchon, 25 November 2016). Similarly to NATO (see next section), the EU is systematically linked to the threat of military confrontation, with Mélenchon (2017i) labelling the Union a 'warmonger' whose plans for a common defence policy are simply a way 'to prepare for war'. For Mélenchon (2017j), the geopolitical situation in Europe is 'dangerous, because any provocation could rekindle the fire'.

At this level of analysis, the instability narrative is used to construct the EU as a context of diffuse uncertainty. The EU is not portrayed as an active creator of instability, but it is still linked to insecurity-evoking ideas by discourses emphasising its precarious political state. For instance, it is presented in a 'global context of political crisis' and described as 'falling apart', swept by a 'whirlwind' of racism, communitarianism and authoritarianism (Mélenchon, 2019a, 2019g). While Brexit is regarded as simply a 'symptom' of this 'disintegration', Mélenchon projects an image of Europe in the short term as one of 'turbulent times' and 'great turmoil' (Mélenchon, 2019e). However, elites are still blamed for creating this destabilisation, as both 'the neoliberal policies that destroy societies' (Mélenchon, 2019d) and the 'German imperium' are identified as the main causes (Mélenchon, 2019f). Germany, in particular, is often identified as a cause for concern; Mélenchon uses the expression 'German Europe' recurrently in his blog as a shortcut to argue that supranational elites work to reinstate Germany's dominance across the continent, against the security interest of all Europeans.

Finally, supranational elites are linked to the failure to protect narrative. Mélenchon and LFI build this argument linking sarcasm and the idea that the EU does not care about addressing crucial threats but rather acts against the general interest:

The ecological catastrophe is threatening the only ecosystem compatible with human life? Who cares, the EU and Emmanuel Macron decide to further accelerate the world disorder by signing new, climate-killing free-trade agreements. [. . .] Is finance leading to another generalised crisis? Who cares, this is the moment when the EU chooses to bring to the presidency of the European Central Bank Christine Lagarde, head of one of the main crisis-makers, the IMF! (LFI, 8 July 2019)

Again along sarcastic lines, the EU is also addressed in quotation marks as the 'Europe who protects us', before detailing the number of ways supranational institutions fail in living up to this promise. For instance, the narrative appears in relation to agricultural standards that, according to the party, are not apt to guarantee the 'most elementary' health protection to the people of Europe (LFI, 2017b). Besides the physical security of its citizens, the EU is also accused of being incapable of defending the values it claims to adhere to (Mélenchon, 2017e).

Generally, the failure to protect narrative is linked to an idea of the EU as a source of ‘regression’ for member states, forcing them to go backwards in terms of political advancements as well as social and labour protections. In Mélenchon’s own words, the EU is a ‘wonderful machine to go back in time’ (Mélenchon, 2017i).

The international level

Mélenchon’s and LFI’s practices of elite enemification have an important international dimension. The main targets that emerged at this level of analysis were, in line with the available scholarship (see, for example, Destradi and Plagemann, 2019; Wajner, 2021), intergovernmental organisations, most notably NATO, and a number of states and leaders.

The threat narrative at this level of analysis mainly targets Donald Trump, the United States and a series of foreign powers. Trump was depicted as a multifaceted threat endangering a number of referent objects. For example, he was posited as a threat to peace, both in Europe with his ‘warlike provocations in all of Eastern Europe [. . .] and Russia’s external fronts’ (Mélenchon, 2017b), and the world with his attitudes towards the Iranian deal (LFI, 2019). In addition, Trump figured prominently as an environmental threat (LFI, 2017a), with his denial to comply with the Paris agreement labelled a ‘crime against humanity’ (Mélenchon, 2017b). The threat narrative on the United States overlaps with that on China on two key domains: first, both countries are represented as environmental threats due to the ‘ecological irresponsibility’ of their ‘free-trade obsession’ (LFI, 2016d); second, they are presented as sources of financial insecurity, because their increasing debt is deemed as a ‘threat’ to the world economy (Mélenchon, 2018c). In addition to the United States and China, the Gulf monarchies and especially Saudi Arabia are singled out as international threats, under the accusation of providing access to weapons for terrorists; they are also considered dangerous to the planet overall because of their ‘climatic crimes’ (LFI, 2016a, 2016b).

A mix of threat and instability narratives is used to project an enemy image for NATO. For Mélenchon and LFI, the ‘threat of a generalised war looms on the world, under everyone’s eyes’ (Mélenchon, 2018b) and NATO is a crucial player in this uncertain and threatened world, most notably as the very cause of its insecurity. NATO is presented as an ‘extremely aggressive’ organisation, ‘harmful’ to both the French and European people (Mélenchon, 2018a). Its dangerous character is linked to the instability it causes across the globe: the organisation is in fact portrayed as an intentional driver of conflict and destabilisation, whose disruptive behaviour causes unfair war and the death of harmless civilians. Mélenchon (2019f) also blames the ‘disorders caused by NATO and its wars’ for the ‘problem of immigration’ in Europe. Hence the threat and instability narratives interlink, producing a representation of NATO as a source of military and human insecurity.

Two additional targets are unequivocally tied to the instability narrative. On the occasion of the 2018 G20 summit in Buenos Aires, Mélenchon (2018f) described the cooperation forum as ‘illegitimate’ and ‘incapable of producing an international order’. This is because the ‘multilateralism of the powerful’ – which he sees as a combination of the EU’s ‘endless free trade obstination’ and of Trump’s ‘savage, aggressive protectionism’ – simply leads to ‘chaos’ (Mélenchon, 2018f). A similar argument is adopted when articulating finance as a cause of ‘extreme instability’ for the global system and a ‘permanent

parasitism on productive economy' that threatens to 'drag everyone into the abyss' (Mélenchon, 2018c).

A populist interpretation of domestic and international affairs

The analysis of Jean-Luc Mélenchon's and LFI's external communication has shown how these actors use insecurity-centred narratives to construct not only national elites, but also the media, the EU, international leaders and organisations as producers of insecurity. Overall, this process of enemification suggests that the idea of 'dangerous elites' may be used as a tool to contextualise and 'personify' the insecurities induced by more complex challenges. Furthermore, this way of representing the elites results in a distinctive way of interpreting domestic and foreign affairs, one that is first and foremost populist.

This becomes apparent when considering the party's signature proposals at the national, supranational and international levels. Respectively, Mélenchon and LFI propose (a) a 'citizens revolution' to terminate the current 'presidential monarchy', (b) withdrawing from the EU (as a 'Plan B') and (c) from NATO (*L'Avenir En Commun*, 2016). These positions are advocated precisely in relation to the 'dangers' that the corresponding national, supranational and international elites are said to pose. Importantly, they are advocated as a solution to defend and regain popular sovereignty. By linking the elites to the production of insecurity and advocating for popular sovereignty as the measure to address it, Mélenchon and his party delineate a clear relationship of insecurity between some 'dangerous elites' and a 'sovereign people'. Hence it is the ideational interplay between insecurity, anti-elitism and the defence of popular sovereignty that offers a clear direction for interpreting and communicating national and foreign policy priorities, making populism the guiding ideational resource behind them.

Insecurity narratives help the party problematise the concept of sovereignty, at the core of its populist ideology. As the need to regain popular sovereignty is presented in relation to a number of insecurity issues, from food security to economic anxieties, the party shows that the ability for the people to 'take back' their power applies well beyond 'political' sovereignty and the control of representative institutions. Through insecurity narratives, LFI illustrates the need for the people to control how decisions are made in the industrial, energetic and agricultural sectors as well as at the supranational and international levels. Hence insecurity narratives are functional to both delegitimising elites from 'speaking security' and extending a key populist pillar of the party's ideology – popular sovereignty – to a variety of domains.

The emphasis on defending popular sovereignty can explain why competing populisms often endorse similar positions, especially against NATO and the EU. Populists across the spectrum contest these organisations, not as institutions, but first and foremost as the embodiment of 'dangerous elites' illegitimately ruling against the general interest and common sense. It is against this backdrop of insecurity that they advocate for restituting sovereignty back to the people. Interpreting the existing security order (as embodied by the corresponding elites) as harmful, threatening and disruptive helps populists shape their foreign policy positions and the direction they wish to give to their respective countries' security agenda (see also Wojczewski, 2020). However, populists are brought together by their emphasis on sovereignty defence as the driving motive behind their policy positions. As Chryssogelos (2017) remarks, the *exact* content of populists' foreign policy depends on factors such as their thicker ideologies, institutional structures and

domestic politics; however, populism *in itself* can provide strategic direction to actors' interpretation of domestic and international affairs.

The thick ideologies attached to populism certainly provide additional content to articulate populist claims. Mélenchon, for instance, labels his protectionist agenda as 'fair and solidary' (*protectionnisme solidaire*), clearly in line with the internationalist tradition of the radical left and far from the nativist 'America First' protectionism advocated by the Trump presidency. Mélenchon and his party also take particular issue at finance and neo-liberal elites, a position informed by their anti-capitalist critique. Nevertheless, the data clearly show the construction of elites as enemies goes well beyond economic reasoning; what seems to matter the most is not the *type* of elites but the *insecurity* they are thought of producing. Recognising that populists may have competing motivations for attacking elites should help us challenge the reified association of left populism with the targeting of financial elites, corporations or the wealthy, showing how these classifications may oversimplify the empirical reality and neglect left populism's antagonistic relationship with a variety of enemies.

Conclusion

The article has shown that French political leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon and his party LFI, established examples of left populism in Europe, solidly ground their anti-elitism in insecurity narratives. The analysis has evidenced how they perform an 'enemification' of various establishments by mobilising a multidimensional image of national, supranational and international elites as sources of insecurity.

The article contributes to the populism literature and to International Relations studies on the (in)security dimension of populism in two ways. The first contribution is developed by showing how Mélenchon and LFI utilise a language of insecurity to construct a variety of elites, leaders and institutions as enemies; in doing so, the article provides empirical evidence to contest the hypothesis that left populism necessarily engages in the promotion of healthy and pluralist agonism. The actors under examination here have shown how populists across the political spectrum can use insecurity as an ideational resource to construct the struggle 'people vs elite' as a 'relationship of insecurity', that is, one whereby the existence of the former is threatened by the latter in a variety of ways. The second contribution is developed by unpacking the theoretically underdeveloped relationship between left populism and insecurity narratives; the article thus evidences how distinctions of left and right populism based on 'socio-economic concerns' for the former and 'security concerns' for the latter may be too artificial. As we have seen, insecurity can be embedded in political narratives in different ways and it is not a distinctive feature of the populist right. On the contrary, insecurity narratives are a vital resource different populists seem to use to both delegitimise elites in power and promote a populist agenda centred on popular sovereignty. By evidencing the number of ways the elites work against citizens' own security, these narratives discredit elites' motives, competencies and ideas, and support the populist case for extending popular sovereignty to various policy domains.

These contributions suggest that all populism varieties may be built on ideational 'premises of insecurity' which become manifested in these actors' perception and representation of outgroups as fundamentally *threatening*. While host ideologies can colour the enemification process with additional content, it is populism *per se* that may inherently and ideationally link to insecurity.

Before concluding, it is important to acknowledge that having focused on a case study, the article is certainly limited in the generalisation of its results. However, Mélenchon and LFI represent an established case of European left populism, unambiguously espousing the people-centrism, anti-elitism and focus on popular sovereignty at the basis of the populist tradition (Marlière, 2019) and combining it with the equality, anti-neoliberalism and social rights agenda typical of the radical left in Europe (Chiocchetti, 2020). The findings emerging from their analysis can therefore travel to other European contexts for testing on additional relevant left populist actors.

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Notes

1. Nvivo Text Query Search – Keywords (English translation, alphabetic order): *chaos, crisis, danger, defend, destabilise, disorder, endanger, harm, insecurity, instability, menace, peril, precarity, preserve, protect, risk, security, threat, threaten, uncertainty.*

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