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# Mainstreaming, Gender, and Communication in France

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## Mainstreaming, Gender and Communication

France/D5.2

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This document is available for download at <https://dradproject.com>.

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## About the Project

D.Rad is a comparative study of radicalisation and polarisation in Europe and beyond. It aims to identify the actors, networks, and broader social contexts driving radicalisation, particularly among young people in urban and peri-urban areas. D.Rad conceptualises this through the I-GAP spectrum (injustice-grievance-alienation-polarisation) so as to move towards measurable evaluations of de-radicalisation programmes. Our intention is to identify the building blocks of radicalisation, which include a sense of being victimised; a sense of being thwarted or lacking agency in established legal and political structures; and coming under the influence of “us vs them” identity formulations.

D.Rad benefits from an exceptional breadth of backgrounds. The project spans national contexts, including the UK, France, Italy, Germany, Poland, Hungary, Finland, Slovenia, Bosnia, Serbia, Kosovo, Israel, Iraq, Jordan, Turkey, Georgia, Austria, and several minority nationalisms. It bridges academic disciplines ranging from political science and cultural studies to social psychology and artificial intelligence. Dissemination methods include D.Rad labs, D.Rad hubs, policy papers, academic workshops, visual outputs and digital galleries. As such, D.Rad establishes a rigorous foundation to test practical interventions geared to prevention, inclusion and de-radicalisation.

With the possibility of capturing the trajectories of seventeen nations and several minority nations, the project will provide a unique evidence base for the comparative analysis of law and policy as nation-states adapt to new security challenges. The process of mapping these varieties and their link to national contexts will be crucial in uncovering strengths and weaknesses in existing interventions. Furthermore, D.Rad accounts for the problem that processes of radicalisation often occur in circumstances that escape the control and scrutiny of traditional national frameworks of justice. The participation of AI professionals in modelling, analysing, and devising solutions to online radicalisation will be central to the project’s aims.

## Executive Summary

This report provides empirical evidence to masculinist gender representations with an aim to contribute to the study of the relationship between mediated hegemonic gender representations and violence and extremism in an age of changing gender norms. It analyses the online drivers of far-right radicalisation and of deradicalisation in France. The report examines the online activity of the two most influential political leaders of the French far-right in the last presidential elections, and of a far-right activist whose online content plays out in the socio-cultural realms of French Internet. Their messages illustrate the intimate connections, shown in previous studies, between far-right ideology and misogynist narratives, and the refinement of their strategies. The study of feminist and anti-masculinist online discourse in this report includes campaigns initiated by social justice organisations fighting for equality, a left-wing political party, as well as by individual activists.

First, the report critically engages with how three public and political agents of radicalisation use social media platforms with the aim of understanding how extreme narratives are expressed online using visual and other communicative tools. This part shows how these agents of radicalisation disseminate their messages on social networking sites and how online audiences respond to them. Second, the report examines three collective stakeholders of deradicalisation who offer counter-narratives and strategies online against forms and pathways of radicalisation. It studies how organisations involved in deradicalisation respond to hegemonic gender presentations. Third, analyse “citizen communication” against hegemonic gender representations. This analysis shows how ordinary users’ practices and digital cultures fight against hegemonic gender representations through individual content production and its circulation on social media platforms. The concluding part uses the I-GAP framework to reflect on the ways in which the circulation and consumption of the chosen media objects bolster or decrease alienation, othering, polarisation, and grievance.

We demonstrate the intimate connections between far-right ideology and misogynist narratives and show how the far-right mobilises feminist vocabulary against immigrants and Muslims. We also point to the challenges deradicalisation campaigns, such as counter-speech, encounter in the fight against the surge of far-right extremism.

## Introduction

Heightened preoccupation with the image and function of masculinity in the family, society, and politics is characteristic of far-right ideology. This trait is not exclusive to France and is cornerstone to the “new” right ideologies: “Notwithstanding national differences across Europe, gender and sexuality have for a long time been important pillars of radical right-wing ideologies – like a gender binary which is perceived as natural and is combined with a traditional gendered division of labour in the heterosexual model of the male breadwinner and the woman as mother.” (Sauer, 2019, p. 173). Contemporary far-right political parties and activists follow the same course: “recent right-wing populist mobilization is a gendered movement, which fosters masculinist identity politics at the intersection of gender, class, religion, ethnicity, and sexuality” (Sauer, 2020, p. 23). Moreover, masculinist discourse makes for a significant part of their agenda: “Already at first glance the importance of gender relations seems to be indicated by the right-wingers’ obsession with gender, i.e. their mobilization against the concept of gender for the last ten years, their construction of an endangered masculinity, and their framing of a ‘crisis of masculinity’” (Sauer, 2020, p. 24). Highlighting masculinist ideology has turned out to be a successful strategy to attract audiences disenchanted with the “fundamental neoliberal transformations of gender regimes, especially in Western bread-winner-oriented societies” (Sauer, 2020, p. 29).

The French case is particularly revealing of the role masculinist discourse plays in the far-right agenda and is instructive for comparative analysis of far-right platforms elsewhere. In recent decades, France has seen the development of a “right-wing ideology inspiring ultra-conservative, nationalist, racist, and neo-Nazi organizations and parties in many countries.” The French far-right political parties and organisations, such as the National Rally (*Rassemblement National*, formerly known as *Front National*) or *La Manif pour tous* (a political organisation opposing same-sex marriage and adoption by same-sex couples, which later became a political party) make conscious “strategic use of sexual politics,” which in turn has “a significant impact on political changes in France regarding a normalization of anti-immigrant” politics that lead “to a mainstreaming of their political views and values” (Möser and Reimers, 2022, p. 98). Despite their adherence to misogynist norms, far-right movements in France have managed to close what is known as the “Radical Right Gender Gap” and find support among women. The major success in attracting female voters was achieved by Marine Le Pen, who replaced her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, at the head of the Front National party. While “gender was the second-best predictor of [...] electoral support, after education, in every presidential election where [Jean-Marie Le Pen] was candidate from 1988 to 2007,” Marine Le Pen “managed to garner the same level of support in her male and female constituencies” for three consecutive presidential elections (in 2012, 2017, and 2022) (Mayer, 2015, p. 396, 2022a).

This report provides empirical evidence to masculinist gender representations with an aim to contribute to the study of the relationship between mediated hegemonic gender representations and violence and extremism in an age of changing gender norms. It examines the online drivers of radicalisation and of deradicalisation in France. First, the report critically engages with how three public and political agents of radicalisation use social media platforms with the aim of understanding how extreme narratives revolving around misogyny, homophobia, sexism, and transphobia are expressed online using visual and other communicative tools. This part shows how these collective agents disseminate their messages on social networking sites, how they attempt to recruit participants and how their audiences respond to them. Marine Le Pen, whose sophisticated public image of a “Daughter, Mother, Captain” embodies both feminine and masculine virtues (Geva, 2020), is the first radicalisation object of our study. Her steadily growing success makes her the most prominent and sophisticated contemporary political leader on the far-right, and an important radicalisation stakeholder. Advancing the strategy of “de-demonisation” of her political party and aiming to “replace the right” in France (Mestre, 2022), Le Pen won second place in the first round of the 2022 presidential elections and gained more than 41% of the votes in the



second. The second stakeholder of radicalisation studied in this report is Éric Zemmour, another presidential candidate in the 2022 elections. While failing to attract large audiences to his far-right platform (finishing fourth in the first round with 7.1% of votes), Zemmour led a more radical campaign than Le Pen, and is generally known as an “ultra conservative with regard to gender and sexuality issues, and is even openly sexist and misogynist at times” (Mayer, 2022b). Finally, the third source of radicalisation analysed in the report is Papacito, an extreme-right social media influencer, self-described as a ‘professional polemicist’ and ‘humorist’, who “displays sympathy for the ideas of Jean-Marie Le Pen and Éric Zemmour” (Boursier, 2021). Papacito is known for his “fascist far-right antifeminist” humour and has been accused of expressing sexist, homophobic, and racist views. He is among “the most visible right-wing video influencers affiliated” with the popular culture subpart of the French “*fachosphère*”, a set of online sites and social media accounts engaged in extreme right activism (Vey and Perrier, 2022; *La Depeche*, 2021). One study concludes that Papacito represents “a discourse of crisis of masculinity aligned with fascist ideology in which gender is not an accessory element but is central and fundamental: the feminisation of society is the starting point of the peril of the nation that calls for ethno-racial purification” (Vey and Perrier, 2022, p. 81).

Second, the report examines three collective stakeholders of deradicalisation who offer counter-narratives and strategies online against forms and pathways of radicalisation. It studies how organisations involved in deradicalisation respond to hegemonic gender presentations. Finally, we also analyse “citizen communication” against hegemonic gender representations. This analysis examines ordinary users’ practices and digital cultures against hegemonic gender representations underpinning, harnessing, and foregrounding radicalisation, and looks at their do-it-yourself media production and circulation on social media platforms. Civil society activists, NGOs and even unorganized individuals “all have a potential role to play in challenging hate speech and forms of extremism that misinformation operations around elections promote” (Davey, Saltman and Birdwell, 2018). The three collective stakeholders of deradicalisation chosen for our study are the association *Osez le féminisme !* (“Dare feminism!”) promoting “gender equality and on the fight to eliminate all forms of male violence against girls and women”; the association Inter-LGBT, active against homophobic and transphobic discrimination; and the *Féministes Insoumis·es* (“Feminists Unbowed”) the feminist activist subgroup of the French left party, *La France Insoumise*. Finally, the concluding part uses the I-GAP framework to reflect on the ways in which the circulation and consumption of the chosen media objects bolster or decrease alienation, othering, polarisation, and grievance.

The main social media platform used to study radicalising and deradicalising speech on social media is Twitter. This medium was chosen because of its role “as a stage for dissemination, interaction, mobilisation and building the personality of influencer/leaders and as a strategic tool for the selection of issues and for propaganda and fake news” (Pérez-Curiel, 2020). It has been observed that “the presence and activity of the main political leaders on Twitter are increasing exponentially and the topics that they address in their tweets are being virally shared by digital users and making it to the home pages of the digital press. The use that politicians like Marine Le Pen [make of] Twitter is allowing these influencer/leaders to circumvent the traditional media and to engage their followers in a much more direct fashion” (Pérez-Curiel, 2020). But the dissemination of deradicalising content on Twitter was also shown to be effective. It has been, for instance, empirically demonstrated that “[c]itizen-generated counter speech is a promising way to fight hate speech and promote peaceful, non-polarized discourse” and that organised counter speech “may help curb hateful rhetoric in online discourse” (Garland *et al.*, 2022). However, to study the masculinist gender representations published by Papacito this report uses his posts on the Telegram platform. While still present on some mainstream online platforms, Papacito’s Twitter account was suspended in January 2021 (*Six choses à savoir sur Ugo Gil Jimenez, alias Papacito, youtubeur et ‘influenceur’ d’extrême droite*, 2021), and his most hateful content inciting to violence is published on less popular or non-strictly moderated social media.

## Methodology

The report employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) to study the presence of masculinist and other symbolic representations of hegemonic violence and radicalisation in the French social media. CDA “focuses on the role of language in society and political processes” and shows how it is employed “to legitimize, maintain, and naturalize forms of social power and inequality” (Bouvier and Machin, 2018). We use this method to analyse the nature and level of sophistication of hegemonic gender presentations underpinning radicalisation in France. The I-GAP framework developed for the D.Rad project complements the CDA in the concluding section of this report by analysing the potential impact of this speech on radicalisation in French society.

To present a multifaceted portrait of the online masculinist and counter-masculinist discourse, we address the communicative tools used by three types of stakeholders: collective agents of radicalisation, institutional agents of deradicalisation, and non-institutional (or “citizen”) engagement against expressions of gendered radicalisation. Through this analysis we aim to achieve a better understanding of how extreme narratives are expressed and disseminated online, how state and non-state organisations tackle hegemonic gender presentations, and how individual, activists and influencers mobilise or spontaneously respond to these online expressions.

This report does not seek provide a representative sample of extreme right discourse, but rather explores the themes of gendered radicalisation in two mainstream political cases and one marginal case. The scope of this report is restricted to far- and extreme-right expressions of and responses to gendered radicalisation on Twitter and Telegram posts of an extreme-right online influencer whose violent messages do not pass the content moderation of mainstream online media. The criteria for the selection of these stakeholders of radicalisation and deradicalisation is the level of their contribution to the proliferation of misogynist and homophobic stereotypes, visibility in the political sphere, level of online engagement and generation of social media traffic, impact on public opinion, effect on perceptions of injustice, grievance, alienation polarisation in French society (I-GAP factors), and contribution to the intensification or de-escalation of radicalisation processes. Marine Le Pen, Eric Zemmour, and Papacito are the most notable representatives of the mainstream, populist, and violent-influencer French far-right, respectively. The three case-studies of institutional agents of deradicalisation are typical of activist groups attempting to generate counter-speech content on Twitter. Two of the organisations – one of which is part of the French left party, *La France Insoumise* – advance feminist agendas whereas the third fights against LGBTQ+ discrimination. The choice of ordinary users was based on their use of the most popular feminist hashtags on Twitter in recent years. The Twitter and Telegram posts analysed in what follows were published in French. The translation was made by the authors of this report.

## Mediated hegemonic gender presentations and its relationship to radicalisation in France

In recent years, “politically and sexually conservative positions have [...] become increasingly vocal and their support seems to be growing in larger parts of [the French] society.” This transformation is linked to the growing popularity in France of “ultra-conservative, nationalist, racist, and neo-Nazi organizations and parties” (Möser and Reimers, 2022; See also, Sawyer and Zinigrad, 2021c). Among the most influential far-right political movements “involved in different forms of nationalist sexual politics” in the last decade are the National Rally party (chaired by Marine Le Pen until November 2022) and the organisation *La Manif pour tous* (“Protest for all”, *LMPT*).

*LMPT* was created in 2012 with the aim of subverting the reforms, initiated by François Hollande, legalising same-sex marriage and adoption by same-sex couples in France. The

movement managed to mobilize hundreds of thousands to take part in, at times violent, mass protests prior to and after the changes were approved by the French Parliament and turned into a political party in 2015 (Clavel, 2013; *Le Monde*, 2015). *LMPT* is known to be affiliated with masculinist, far-right nationalist Christian fundamentalist and neo-Nazi organisations (Möser and Reimers, 2022). It “marked a new era in the political organisation of Catholic conservatism in France [and was] also one of the best-organised movements in a European, and now global, wave of ‘anti-gender’ activism, a conservative backlash against legislating sexual and gender equality, and against researching and teaching about sexual and gender diversity” (Geva, 2019, pp. 393–394).

The mass support of *LMPT* is directly linked to other processes of radicalisation in French society such as the rise in extreme right violence and the rise in popularity of Le Pen’s far-right party:

Homophobic attacks tripled [in 2012] in France [...] and in 2013, neo-Nazis killed 19-year-old antifascist Clément Méric in the centre of Paris. The politics of acceptance towards neo-Nazi structures is partly responsible for this explosion of violence as well as the electoral success of the Front National party that made it to the second round of the presidential election in 2017. It made neo-Nazi positions discussable in the media, a process that current party leader Marine Le Pen herself has called “dediabolization”, in taking up a political strategy consisting of a discursive change to avoid open hate speech in FN campaigning in order to gain political power (Möser and Reimers, 2022, p. 99)

More generally, *LMPT*’s political goals reflect some of the broader discussions polarising the French public opinion, such as gender theory:

In addition to flattening the concept of gender, as if there were uniform consensus regarding its meaning amongst intellectuals and advocates of same-sex marriage, *la théorie du gender* was described within *LMPT* [...] circles as a foreign idea forced upon France. By describing the concept as an ‘ideology’ they suggested that gender theory was disseminated through a heteronymous structure of knowledge-production, where the proponents of gender theory were not ‘real’ intellectuals since they expressed ideas that were neither universal, nor autonomously produced [...] This over-precipitate circulation of knowledge was irresponsible in that a ‘psychiatric’ concept, which supposedly had originated in diagnoses of mental illness, had circulated back into the French school system. [...]

These accounts also alleged an authoritarian structure of knowledge production and circulation, as if the proponents of same-sex marriage and gender theory were thoughtless actors rapidly – and hence unreflectively – following the dictates of a hierarchy from above. This view of gender theory did not recognise, or showed no awareness of, the slow, and sometimes acrimonious, nature of academic debates within and between feminism and Queer theory, the complex relationship between the LGBTQ rights movement and the university, and the similarly complex relationship between social movements, academia, and the law (Geva, 2019, pp. 412, 414).

The protests against same-sex marriage and adoption coincided with polemical political statements and protests against the inclusion of “gender theory” in school and university curricula. Thus, in 2013,

right-wing actors and organizations publicly attacked gender studies programmes and scholars. Gender studies were accused of being political,

denying the biological difference between men and women and aiming at the destruction of the heterosexual family [...] In a mediated coup, a day of rage (Journée de colère) conservative activists sent text messages to parents asking them to withdraw their children from school for a day to protest an official teaching brochure helping teachers face the diversified situation in classrooms [...] the brochure sensitized teachers not to reproduce heterosexist stereotypes in their teaching and avoid discrimination of children from non-normative families (Möser and Reimers, 2022, pp. 101–102).

This “day of rage” revealed the underlying connections between misogynist, homophobic and racist values shared by far-right activists by making “gender a threatening conspiracy brought upon the French by the Jews. [The] demonstration was marked by such a strong antisemitic outburst that even president Hollande called it out the next day” (Möser and Reimers, 2022, p. 102).

Another crucial episode in the evolution of the French far-right’s agenda in the last decade is the shift of the National Rally/Front party from explicitly conservative and misogynist to seemingly tolerant and progressive views towards women. As part of her successful campaign to “de-demonise” her party, Marine Le Pen started presenting it as a defender of women’s and gay rights against supposed Muslim misogyny. This “accent on sexual politics has strongly contributed to the political success of far-right parties and organizations in France thereby mainstreaming their values in French society.” Le Pen’s public statements along these lines have also “allowed for a high visibility of right-wing positions in French media, [and] produced an open and out racism as well as homophobia that go hand in hand with the supposed ‘dediabolization’ of far-right positions” (Möser and Reimers, 2022, pp. 100–101).

Voters who were not drawn to Le Pen’s party due to class differences or because of their disenchantment with the National Rally’s relatively moderate new platform were offered a political alternative by the Eric Zemmour’s presidential campaign in 2022. Zemmour appealed “more to upper and upper middle class voters, as well as to elderly citizens, and traditional Catholics” but in contrast with Le Pen “[repelled] women, especially the younger ones, gaining his best scores among elderly men” (Mayer, 2022b). Among this electorate Zemmour found support among those French “who hold more conservative views[,] feel increasingly alienated and fear being turned into ‘strangers in their own country.’ [...] At this ‘tipping point,’ the fear of these conservative voters trigger authoritarian and ideological radicalisation reflexes that, in turn, translate into a new sense of power” (Bristielle and Guerra, 2021, p. 33).

Perhaps most notably, the last two decades saw an extensive growth in the activity of the French far-right online. Making highly successful use of all online platforms, from news websites to blogs and videos and from mainstream to fringe social media, the far-right sees the Internet as “a providential development lever that allows it to compensate for its lesser presence in the traditional media” and reach their audiences without mediation or strict content moderation tools (Albertini and Doucet, 2016). The so-called online “*fachosphère*” (or “fascist sphere”), comprising a rich variety of ideologies and extreme-right groupes, such as “National Socialists, neo-Nazis or neo-fascists, revisionists, racist or anti-Semitic groups, skinheads and extremist hooligans, nativists or identity-based groups, paramilitary groups and xenophobic or anti-migrant groups” (Alava, Chaouni and Charles, 2020, p. 2516) constantly attracts new audiences. If in 2007, the *fachosphère* represented 4.9% of French political websites, in 2012 its share increased to 14% – in third place behind the left (46.8%) and right (18.1%) online presence, and the medium with the biggest growth in this time interval – and in 2016, sixteen of the *fachosphère* websites ranked “among the 30 most consulted political platforms in France” (Albertini and Doucet, 2016; Ardines, 2018).

This “loose association of bloggers, YouTube monologists, and smaller political groups which do not exhibit formal organizational structures [...] targets primarily disenfranchised

social groups, in particular, young voters, who are increasingly moving away from traditional media and political affiliations” (Frigoli and Ivaldi, 2018). Adopting the “communication tools of modern mass media, producing talk-shows, music, and entertainment, often adopting the soft humorous tone and political jokes which have become predominant in mainstream broadcasting”, the *fachosphère* is particularly attractive due to its great potential in radicalising its audience. On the one hand, the radical sphere provides mainstream intellectuals and media pundits with a seal of political ‘subversiveness’, which is key to maintaining their profile as outsiders, while simultaneously allowing them to appear somewhat more ‘moderate’. On the other hand, leading right-wing intellectuals help diffuse extremist ideas and theses into the mainstream, thus expanding the space of opportunity for radical right mobilization.

## An analysis of media presence, production, and circulation of collective agents of radicalisation

The radicalisation stakeholders studied in this report owe their popularity in large part to the abovementioned proliferation of online media in France. The National Rally/Front party started employing online media for its campaigns as soon as 1985 by opening sites on the Minitel system, the French online service that preceded the World Wide Web and the party’s ideas are widely diffused by the *fachosphère*. The NR is “currently at the centre of this informal, heterogeneous, and porous interaction network which produces a specific set of discursive opportunities and shared collective identities, thereby providing the FN with intellectual assets, mobilization initiatives, and grassroots activists” (Albertini and Doucet, 2016; Frigoli and Ivaldi, 2018). Éric Zemmour, a reactionary polemicist and writer turned presidential candidate, has also mastered the use of online tools and employed digital strategy teams who ran websites and operated volunteers generating content on social media to bolster his popularity. During his political campaign, his “social media presence has exploded [...] generating more engagement online at one point than any other candidate, including the French President Emmanuel Macron” (HOPE not hate, 2022). Finally, Papacito is “among the most visible right-wing video influencers affiliated with the “*dissidense*” subcategory of the *fachosphère* that is “resolutely oriented towards popular culture” (Vey and Perrier, 2022, p. 65).

This section engages in a critical discourse analysis of tweets published by Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour during their 2022 presidential campaign, as well as of Telegram messages by Papacito posted around the same time, which are representative of their ideology regarding gender issues and their use of masculinist rhetoric. To demonstrate the propagation of these messages and the support they receive among far-right audiences, the report analyses also users’ responses to the tweets of Le Pen and Zemmour.

### Marine Le Pen and the National Rally Party

One empirical study Marine Le Pen, identifies “three gendered themes which permeated [the National Rally’s] discourse and its symbolic ecology,” two of which emphasize Marine Le Pen’s “feminine virtues, whereas the third emphasized her masculine virtues”:

The first theme is of [Marine Le Pen] as a political daughter. She was seen as carrying the history of France, and the history of the party, in her very being. However, others rather saw [Marine Le Pen] as a symbol of the future. The second theme therefore highlights how [RN] supporters identified with [Marine Le Pen] as a “matriarchal avant-garde.” Finally, the third theme shows how [RN] supporters admired MLP for her masculine virtues, in her physicality, her “authority,” and even her “virility” (Geva, 2020, p. 3).

Le Pen’s feminine symbolism escapes the cliché of a conservative mother or matriarch. Her image incorporates elements of feminist vocabulary and discourse while carefully detaching her political agenda from what she considers “radical” feminist views.

Consider a tweet from April 2021 from Le Pen’s official account with an excerpt of her TV interview on the right-wing network BFMTV where she was asked whether she is a feminist. The tweet’s text contains the core of her elusive response: “YES I am a feminist, but not a neo-feminist. I do not express hostility towards men. We must build a society of respect. Men are partners, not enemies.”



Fig. 1: Marine Le Pen on feminism

This message gained more than 1,200 likes, more than 360 retweets, and a relatively small number of positive and negative responses. The positive comments to the tweet demonstrate that Le Pen’s supporters buy into her neologisms. Other responses suggest that Le Pen’s reply is a “dog whistle” that is easily decoded by her audience as well as her opponents. Her reference to “feminism” is translated as appealing to traditional, conservative values, whereas the “neo-feminist” term is understood as a general derogatory term addressed at more liberal factions to the left of NR.

A typical positive response approves of Le Pen’s statement by reproaching those who support “Neo-feminist separatism under the guise of feminism. They revive old legitimate fights to crystallize an electorate, even if it is at the expense of social cohesion. In short, the populist policy of [Emmanuel] Macron – [Marlène] Schiappa [former Secretary of State of the Secretariat of Equality between Women and Men and the Fight against Discrimination; author of the 2018 ‘Act strengthening action against sexual and gender-based violence’].”



Fig. 2: A comment on “neo-feminism”

Le Pen’s distinction between feminists and “neo-feminists” is dissolved into a general rejection of feminist views in a comment, saying: “And BANG.... in the face of Alice Coffin [a radical feminist, French journalist, gay activist and elected politician of the Council of Paris since 2020]!! Yes, men and women, we are different and complementary.... wanting to oppose each other is stupid and deadly on the part of these salon feminists who HATE men so much that they only want one thing: to be like them!”. This response reflects a dismissive attitude towards radical feminist claims, presenting them as groundless and motivated by sentiment rather than ideology and different worldview.



Fig. 3: A comment on feminism

Another response seconds Le Pen’s statement with an even more radical statement. It suggests that Le Pen “would have done better to say neofascist” instead of “neo-feminist.” This comment suggests that Le Pen’s portrayal of feminist views as extreme assists her in transferring the label of a fascist from herself and her party – founded by Jean-Marie Le Pen, Marine’s father and a notorious far-right nationalist and negationist – to her opponents on the left.



Fig. 4: A comment on “neo-fascism”

The most popular reply that to Le Pen’s tweet (with 24 likes), manifesting the appropriation of the human rights discourse by the far-right, asserts that “we can trust” Marine Le Pen “to defend women’s rights.”



Fig. 5: A comment about Le Pen

Another user thanks Le Pen for “differentiating between feminists and neo-feminists. It is absolutely necessary to make the distinction. The former would feel insulted at the sight of the turn it took.” In response, an opponent states: “Simone Veil may be rolling over in her grave seeing this.”



Fig. 6: Comments on feminism

Negative responses to the tweet include repudiations of Le Pen’s feminist views. One of the comments links to and quotes the title of a magazine article questioning her feminist agenda (“Marine Le Pen, ‘feminist’? A scam!”). The article includes a quote of the coordinator of Le Pen’s 2017 presidential campaign: “No, I don’t think she would call herself a feminist. Feminism is these extremist and outrageous movements of the 70s which had their raison d’être given the context of the time and the lack of women’s rights, but now these movements cannot continue to demand things already granted.” (Lorriaux, 2017)





Fig. 7: A comment on Le Pen's feminist views

At the same time, Le Pen is also criticized from the far-right, which may suggest that her attempts to attract more moderate audiences by even the slightest references of feminism are considered a duplicity by supporters. One of the comments complains: "Poor thing, she no longer looks like a Le Peniste by dint of contorting herself in debility. No chance against Macron..."



Fig. 8: Far right critique of Le Pen

Ultimately however, Le Pen's tweet is illustrative of the ingenuity of her highly successful political campaign in the legislative elections of 2022, which gained her party 89 seats in the French National Assembly (Trippenbach, 2022). The equilibrium between masculine and feminine presentations of Le Pen as a strong yet feminine leader, is demonstrated here in two ways. First, in terms of political views, Le Pen positions herself as both a feminist and a woman who does not challenge patriarchal agendas. Second, her distinction between legitimate and extreme feminism and own association with the former seems like an attempt to show she is a strong leader who is ready to protect men from "neo-feminists" but is still a woman. A vivid interpretation of this ambivalence appears in one of the first comments on Le Pen's tweet, which uses feminine symbolisms – Le Pen in a pink suit next to a painting of a bouquet of pink flowers – alongside the statement: "Combative But not Arrogant."



Fig. 9: Le Pen: Combative but not arrogant

Le Pen's nurturing of both feminine and masculine identities, "as daughter, mother, warrior, maiden, seductress, captain, and commander; Joan of Arc, Napoleon Bonaparte and Charles de Gaulle," has been identified in previous studies (Geva, 2020, p. 16) (See also, (Di Silvestro and Venuti, 2021, pp. 70–72). Aside from the electoral success of this strategy, her manoeuvring between symbolic presentations of hegemonic masculinity and femininity was also shown to be helpful in binding "the radical right to populism":

[T]hrough the feminine sign of mother to young adherents, and daughter to older adherents, she could embody being of the people and not merely a professional politician (the populist tropes), and could be seen as embodying French history and blood (the radical-right tropes). With the masculine sign of captain, she could battle to defend the nation (the radical-right trope), with militaristic repertoires that signified her distinction from elites and her anti-technocratic leadership style (the populist trope) (Geva, 2020, p. 17).

Le Pen's superficial declarations of adherence to feminism, such as in the above tweet, ambiguate the content of feminist values and attempt to attract moderate female audiences to the National Rally's far-right platform. The dissemination of these ideas on social media is likely to have helped her in gaining higher support among female voters in the last three presidential elections and shift the mainstream right-wing electorate towards her party's platform.

## Eric Zemmour

Despite attempts to conceal and somewhat tame down his extreme right views during his failed 2022 presidential campaign, Eric Zemmour "is ultra conservative with regard to gender and sexuality issues, and is even openly sexist and misogynist at times" (Mayer, 2022b). Zemmour's fusion of ultra-nationalist program with sexism is an old practice among French nationalists. His views align with the French influential strand of nationalist antifeminism dating back to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and advanced by prominent nationalist public intellectuals and writers. As one analysis explains:

The rhetoric of [French] nationalism is itself heavily freighted with gender issues: an analysis of the language and practices of both the anti- and pro-republican nationalists in early Third Republic France [1870-1940] reveals them to be highly sexualized, and often profoundly anti-feminist, if not altogether misogynous. Their claims and counterclaims depend significantly on assertions about sexual hierarchy, domination and submission, manliness and womanliness, and on notions about the elaboration of the roles and respective contributions of French women and men, which women actively contest or qualify. The tracts of the authoritarian high priests of French anti-republican nationalism, Maurice Barrès, Paul Déroulède and Charles Maurras, not to mention those of their acolytes, are replete with arguments about virility, about masculine energy, which sporadically reveal resentment of women who resist staying in their assigned places as men's muses or the objects of their desires. They exude alarm about the 'femininity' or 'effeminacy' of intellectual culture, and castigate men who do not command and women who do not obey (Offen, 2003, pp. 195–196).

Zemmour ties himself to the intellectual roots of the French far-right and has explicitly endorsed the vision of Maurras in a 2014 book, saying "Maurras once exalted the forty kings who made France; we must now recount the forty years that have defeated France" (Blanc, 2017, p. 146). Yet, Zemmour's views and strategies differ from those of his role model. Maurras, a radical antisemite, associated femininity and Judaism with the demise of "the nation" and claimed that "a manly, nationalist 'authenticity' should fight the feminine, Judaized, modern globalism of his time" (Weitzmann, 2019). The polemics of Zemmour, himself of

Jewish origin, are directed predominantly against Muslims and his previous unabashedly misogynist statements (see below), have recently been replaced by more tamed and concealed anti-feminist discourse. In some statements, Zemmour has resorted to “dog whistle” expressions identical to those of Marine Le Pen, with whom he competed for the spot of the most extreme-right presidential candidate in 2022.

For instance, on 9 March 2022, Zemmour tweeted a speech – where he states, among others, that throughout his adolescence he was considered “the feminist of the house” – accompanied by a statement distinguishing feminism from “neo-feminism”: “If it's wanting equal rights between men and women, then I'm a feminist. But if it's pitting women against men, I don't want this neo-feminism”. Although ultimately, such attempts to appeal to female voters during his presidential campaign were not successful (Mayer, 2022b, 2022a), Zemmour’s pseudo-feminist statements are illustrative of the evolution of radical right misogyny into a more moderate and subtle messages meant to increase the camp’s electoral power.



*Fig. 10: Zemmour on feminism*

Another, more sophisticated, strategy employed by Zemmour during his 2022 electoral campaign, was attempting to pit feminists against Muslims. Presenting himself as a “true” feminist Zemmour currently presents himself as a fighter for the liberation of women from oppressive Muslim practices. He has denounced violent attacks against women that do not

conform to religious Muslim dress codes and argued that Muslim women must be guaranteed the freedom to not wear hijabs and burqas. His statements for the “protection” of Muslim women frequently include critiques against generic feminist stereotypes that allegedly ignore the violations of women’s rights when these are linked to Islam. This strategy is typical of recent rebranding efforts of the far-right as defenders of women, gays and Jews against various threats it assigns to Muslims and Islam. For instance, Marine Le Pen’s 2013 presidential programme implied that “Islamists were the only force in France attacking women’s rights” (Möser and Reimers, 2022, p. 99). More generally, “gender and sexual politics are taken by conservatives as proof of modernity creating a sexual modernity in which especially Muslim communities are stigmatized as un- or premodern based on their alleged opposing gender norms” (Möser and Reimers, 2022, p. 89). Zemmour’s messages vividly illustrate this strategy.

Consider one of Zemmour’s tweets on the “Mila” affair. In January 2020, a French sixteen year old female teenager was submitted to an online hatred campaign and received multiple death threats for posting a Islamophobic video on Instagram (BBC News, 2021; AFP with Euronews, 2022). Commenting on the threats and no longer bothering to distinguish feminists from “neo-feminists,” Zemmour stated on June 22, 2021: “#Mila: Whenever there’s Islam at stake, feminists run amok. They are very good at insulting the patriarchy, which has long since disappeared, but when there is a real threat to a young woman, then there is no one there. #Facealinfo [i.e.: Facing the news].”



Fig. 11: Zemmour on the Mila affair

The tweet gained more than 1,000 retweets, about 3,300 likes and many supportive responses. Some of the replies to this statement demonstrate the escalation of inciting online content. Mirroring Zemmour’s simplistic caricature of feminism, an account named “The Young with Zemmour” replied to this tweet with a more transparent and general attack against progressive values and against Islam. The image is an exaggerated stereotypical drawing of two women: one with feminist and LGBTQ+ features holding a stick with a placard of a Muslim woman with a rainbow-colored hijab; the other a fully covered Muslim woman with a niqab,

holding a spike with a severed head of a woman with a rainbow-colored haircut (see Fig. 12). This drawing combines a vilified portrayal of Muslim women as violent fanatics with a rebuke of the alleged blindness of liberal activists towards the incompatibility of Islam with liberal principles.

An approving comment to the drawing reiterates Zemmour's message against the alleged perversity of liberal tolerance by stating that this is an outcome of "[w]hen the intersectional woke starts to screw up." The use of "trigger" keywords such as "woke" and "intersectionality" seems to imply a general rebuke of any critical discourse of systemic patterns of inequality, irrespectively of its relation to Islam. Zemmour's supporters seem therefore to understand that his "feminist" statements are in fact devoid of any progressive substance.

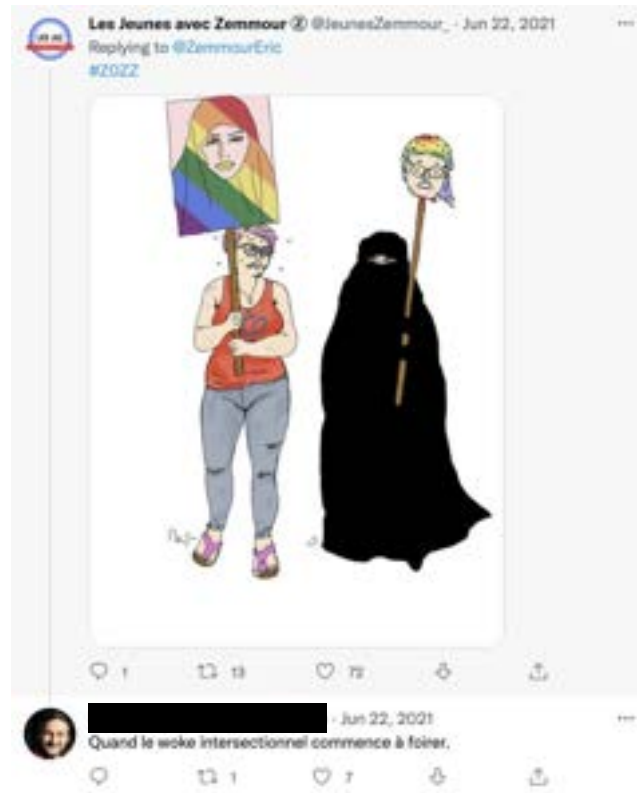


Fig. 12: The young with Zemmour

Another comment combining anti-feminist and anti-Muslim statements proclaims that feminists "attack those against whom they risk nothing! They know perfectly well that to attack Islam is to put their lives at stake, in addition they will be treated as racists and also socially destroyed 😊 They are in submission to Islam!". In a negative response to this tweet, one user attempted to provide a fact-check on Zemmour's manipulative message by linking to a newspaper article titled "Mila Affair: Associations condemn, without being heard" with the subtitle: "Feminist and LGBT collectives have defended Mila, denouncing and fearing a recovery from the far right." Although the presentation of raw facts that exposes misinformation is a recurrent but not necessarily effective, counterspeech technique. An empirical study indicates, for instance, that fact-checking has not affected policy conclusions or support of voters for candidates in the French presidential elections (Barrera *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, Zemmour's messages seem therefore to have achieved their goal of mobilising support irrespectively of their deceptive content.

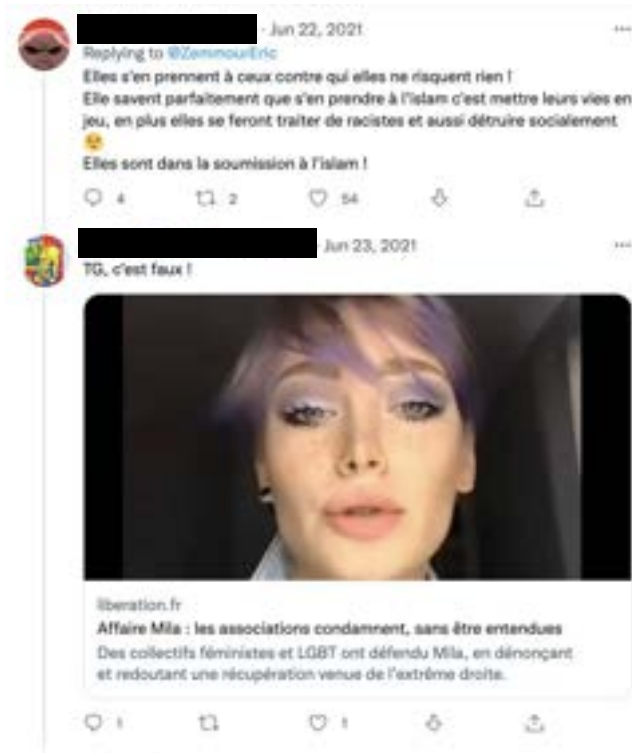


Fig. 13: Comments on Zemmour

Other attempts to denounce feminism by pointing to a purported betrayal of women includes the use of violent representations of the Parisian suburbs, the residence of many second and third-generation Muslim immigrants, and self-representation as the “true” protector of women. In a tweet from June 10, 2021, Zemmour wrote: “Feminism has allied itself with the worst enemy of women, that is to say this imaginary of the hyper-violent suburbs which locks up women.” This message, once again, illustrates the intersection of extreme right conceptions about feminism, migration, race, and religion.



*Fig. 14: Zemmour on feminism and violence*

The appropriation of women’s voices and attempts to speak on their behalf while arguing that feminists mislead women and misrepresent their interests is only one, and comparatively subtle misogynist tool in Zemmour’s contemporary arsenal of paternalist patterns of behaviour. Silencing feminist speech is an expression of a desire to re-establish a hierarchy where women are subject and represented by men. Resorting to sexist discourse along with Islamophobic representations that, as seen in one of the comments to Zemmour’s tweets, occasionally provoke attacks against LGBTQ+ collectives is not a coincidence. All three are perceived by the far-right as the forefront threats to hegemonic masculinity. In France:

Reactionary and masculinist thought revolves around the denunciation of three phenomena deemed toxic: the rise of a “second feminist wave” and its consequences on the family unit, the labor market and the gender distribution of roles; legislative changes affecting same-sex couples [...] and the normalization of homosexuality, seen as aggressive and a symbol of the power of the “LGBT lobby”; the consequences of immigration and the supposed “Islamization of society”, an expression of warrior virility and a symbol of a civil war in the making (Studnicki, 2021, p. 157).

One of the most hyperbolic expressions of such “warrior virility” and concern about the “feminisation” is found in the online content produced by Papacito, who professes the “racist and sexist idea that the [French] nation, too feminised, would be at the mercy of the violence of non-white [and] too viril masculinities” (Vey and Perrier, 2022, p. 70).

## Papacito

Ugo Gil Jimenez, or Papacito, is an extreme-right propagandist who uses social media to spread messages of forthright, non-apologetic and unsubtle violence. His political agenda has been described as “anti-republican, royalist, masculinist and which joins a certain number of

characteristics specific to the most radical fringes of the extreme right such as the opposition to the rule of law and the promotion of violence” (Boursier, 2021). The intensification of Papacito’s views is typical of other extreme-right social media “influencers”, whose path “began by displaying anti-feminist positions, before switching to masculinism, considering that ‘virility is in danger,’ then they end up [turning] towards ‘anti-social egalitarianism’ and ‘white supremacism,’ through the migration issue” (Cassini, 2022). Papacito makes use of mainstream online platforms like YouTube, but his most provocative and inflammatory content is uploaded to less regulated platforms, such as Telegram. His “YouTube videos [...] constitute a showcase which then makes it possible to direct the viewer to [...] more discreet platforms where the message broadcast is much more radical because it is not as controlled” (Boursier, 2021). His subversive discourse is particularly effective due to the use of humour, “which invites to laugh at the form rather than at the content [...] while denying the political character of a free’ violence” (Vey and Perrier, 2022, p. 81; See also, Sawyer and Zinigrad, 2021a).

Papacito appeared on the radar of the French mainstream media in June 2021, when Jean-Luc Mélenchon, founder of the left populist party *La France Insoumise* (LFI), announced he would file a police complaint for incitement to murder against Papacito. The announcement followed a publication of a YouTube video in which Papacito depicted the fictitious murder of an LFI activist. In the video Papacito says: “there are 6% of people who vote for Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s party in this country, maybe they will be helpless if something unexpected happens in the next few years,” and then quips: “What can we do for these people?” He then declares he wants to “see if the gear of a guy who votes Mélenchon allows him to resist a potential terrorist attack on the territory” and shoots with a shotgun, together with his interlocutor in the clip, and then also stabs, a mannequin representing an LFI voter. In a tongue in cheek comment, Papacito explains that “of course, the purpose of this video is not to push you toward violent action, it is purely experimental.” The video was deleted from YouTube one day after being uploaded but not before gaining more than 100,000 views (*Jean-Luc Mélenchon veut porter plainte après la diffusion d’une vidéo mettant en scène le meurtre d’un électeur de La France insoumise*, 2021; *Six choses à savoir sur Ugo Gil Jimenez, alias Papacito, youtubeur et ‘influenceur’ d’extrême droite*, 2021; *Le Parisien*, 2021). The nineteen-minute-long full version of the video is however still available on Papacito’s Telegram Channel where it has been viewed more than 8,000 times. Papacito reposted the video from another Telegram channel and addressed it to “latecomers,” adding that “YouTube censored the video following Bolshevik media pressure” (the word “YouTube” is deliberately misspelled to resemble a curse). The clip itself is titled “Is leftism bulletproof? PAPACITO feat. CODE RHEINO; The backup video (funny as well).”





Fig. 15: Papacito on “leftism”

The video begins with a series of random, apparently exaggerated, and stereotypically masculinist representations of Papacito as a boxer, knight, fighter, an Iraqi soldier, or an avid carnivore. The use of these images is ambivalent and may have a double purpose: appealing to younger audiences attracted by the demonstration of brute force and sending a more sophisticated satirical message to more mature viewers who may appreciate Papacito’s humour while adhering to his violent and inciting content.

Following the intro, the video shifts to the scene with the LFI mannequin where Papacito and his companion are dressed in quasi-improvised military gear and appear on the background of a wall of automatic weapons.



Fig. 16: Papacito – boxer



*Fig. 17: Papacito – knight*



*Fig. 18: Papacito – fighter*



*Fig. 19: Papacito – soldier*



*Fig. 20: Papacito – carnivore*



*Fig. 21: Papacito in uniform*



*Fig. 22: Papacito with weapons*

The video shows the shooting scene amidst the discussion sequences and ends with Papacito stabbing the mannequin multiple times and sarcastically proclaiming it to be “purely scientific.”



*Fig. 23: Papacito: execution of a mannequin*



*Fig. 24: Papacito: stabbing a mannequin*



*Fig. 25: Papacito: "Purely scientific"*

An eight-second clip of the shooting scene was later posted separately on Papacito's Telegram channel and has been viewed thus far more than 9,500 times. In other Telegram posts, Papacito substitutes violent images with homophobic, misogynist and other masculinist symbolisms to express support for far-right activists, ridicule the left, or criticize government policies. For instance, a message from November 11, 2021, with more than 13,000 views, shows a drawing of a woman with the stereotypical features of a feminist exclaiming "Down

with the patriarchy!” at two typecasts of men. In response, the flabby and melancholic older man who wears glasses and “reads [the left newspaper] *Libération*” replies with “sorry” whereas the fit, cheerful young man reading the extreme-right newspaper “*La Furia*,” retorts with “Shut your gab!”



Fig. 26: Papacito on the left

In another post, from July 19, 2021, referring to the COVID-19 vaccines, Papacito explains that “The vaccination rate is inversely proportional to the testosterone level (cf: women, the old, leftists, macronists, conversanians [supporters of Daniel Conversano, a white supremacist with whom Papacito appears to have “pretty insurmountable line difference” (*Papacito — Wiki Dissidence, 2022*)], the fat, non-athletes, etc.).

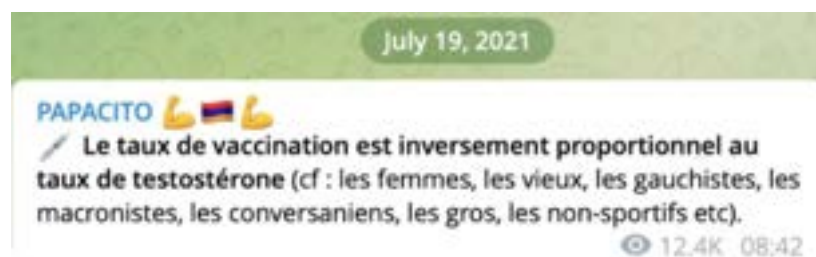


Fig. 27: Papacito on vaccines

Finally, some of Papacito’s posts using similar masculinist symbolisms include self-irony, which supposedly only strengthens his image in the eyes of his followers. Consider a repost on Papacito’s Telegram channel of a variation on the popular “Virgin vs. Chad” meme, which was viewed by more than 14,000 followers and is one of the more politically explicit messages in his channel.<sup>1</sup> The image is a caricature of two far-right figures: Julien Rochedy

<sup>1</sup> The meme “refers to a series of illustrations comparing various ‘virgin’ men with low self-confidence to their Chad [...] counterparts. After an MS Paint depiction of the walk began circulating online in

and Florian Phillipot. Phillipot is the positive figure presented as the Chad (or “stud”) who is “not vaccinated”, “refuses the antisemitism blackmail,” and “was fired from [Marine Le Pen’s National Front party] for being too radical.” The “Virgin Rochedy,” on the other hand, “may be vaccinated,” “has no children,” makes three-hour long videos on Nietzsche,” and, markedly, “Drinks shots with the cuck [insult term] Papacito.”



Fig. 28: Papacito on the far-right

The use of humour and satire to enhance the spread of violent and hateful messages is shown to be a highly efficient tool of radicalisation (Vey and Perrier, 2022). It has been successfully mastered and employed in previous decades by such extreme-right figures as Diéudonné a famous French comic still active in France (Sawyer and Zinigrad, 2021a).

The examined posts by Le Pen, Zemmour are emblematic of several trends in the current ideology and strategies of the French far-right. They demonstrate how far-right politicians are shifting towards the appropriation of human rights and feminist vocabulary in an attempt to diffuse their ideas among the mainstream center-right electorate and female audiences. They show how their programmes do not in fact adjust to ideas of gender equality but rather maintain masculinist narratives while instrumentalising progressive discourse to normalise and mobilise more support for anti-immigrant and Islamophobic policies. By proxy, the successful mainstreaming of far-right ideas renders conceivable more extreme expressions of racism, Islamophobia, and misogyny in the French society, such as those of Papacito. The softening of Papacito’s violent content by light and humorous tones represents another dimension of far-right activism. His posts do not call for political mobilisation and do not adhere to the contemporary leaders of the French political far-right. The hatred and simplicity of his messages facilitate violent processes of radicalisation by fostering polarisation and dehumanisation of the Other. The next section examines collective attempts to oppose such far-right narratives, the online propagation of which has shown to be highly efficient, by online counter-speech.

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March 2017, other illustrations of ‘virgin’ behaviors began appearing on the /r9k/ board on 4chan.” Chad “is Internet slang for a sexually-active alpha male [that] started out as a term used by incels [...]” (*Virgin vs. Chad*; Strong Social).

## An analysis of media presence, production, and circulation of stakeholders of de-radicalisation

The French government has attempted, with highly limited success, to tackle the spread of far-right disinformation or hate-speech with online content moderation mechanisms, sanctions against social media platforms and report protocols (Sawyer and Zinigrad, 2021a). An alternative to these tactics is the “counter-speech” response, increasingly resorted to by NGOs and other activists, which aims to disprove, ridicule, or offer a credible and appealing alternative to far-right narratives. One study suggests defining successful counter-speech in two ways:

The first is speech (text or visual media) that has a favorable impact on the original (hateful) Twitter user, shifting his or her discourse if not also his or her beliefs. This is usually indicated by an apology or recanting, or the deletion of the original tweet or account. The second type of success is to positively affect the discourse norms of the ‘audience’ of a counterspeech conversation: all of the other Twitter users or ‘cyberbystanders’ who read one or more of the relevant exchange of tweets (Benesch *et al.*, 2016).

Recommended counter-speech strategies include warning of consequences, shaming and labelling, empathy and affiliation, humour, images, hostile or aggressive tones and insults, fact-checking, and harassment and silencing (Benesch *et al.*, 2016). Addressing far-right online content with these tools has advantages over censorship but also certain shortcomings. Counter-speech is “faster, more flexible and responsive, capable of dealing with extremism from anywhere and in any language and retains the principle of free and open public spaces for debate” (Bartlett and Krasodowski-Jones, 2015).

Studies specifically emphasize the importance of counter-speech of civil society in the “battle of ideas” against the far-right: “Civil society activists, NGOs and general citizens all have a potential role to play in challenging hate speech and forms of extremism that misinformation operations around elections promote” (Davey, Saltman and Birdwell, 2018). In what follows, we provide examples of such counter-speech campaigns launched by three French organisations – *Osez le féminisme !*, Inter-LGBT, and *Féministes Insoumis·es* – that are among the most active and visible collective agents of masculinist deradicalisation online.

### Osez le féminisme !

One of the groups using the shaming, labelling, and fact-checking counter-speech techniques is the left association *Osez le féminisme !* (“Dare feminism!”) established in 2009 on the principle of “promotion of gender equality and on the fight to eliminate all forms of male violence against girls and women.” (*Nos valeurs – Osez le féminisme !*). The group is active on social media such as Facebook and Instagram and has 61,9K followers on Twitter, which is greatly inferior to Zemmour’s 390K and Le Pen’s 2.8 million followers. Nevertheless, the *féministomètre* campaign, evaluating the platforms of all the candidates in the 2022 presidential elections and qualifying Marine Le Pen and Eric Zemmour as the only two misogynist candidates, proved relatively successful. Published on Twitter by *Osez le féminisme !* ahead of the 2022 International Women’s Day, the *féministomètre* gained more than 1,500 likes and 1,350 retweets.



Fig. 29: Féministomètre

The main tweet was followed by a detailed individual analysis of the program of each candidate, which partially deconstructs Le Pen's and Zemmour's misleading discourse. Marine Le Pen's platform is characterized in the tweet by "Instrumentalisation of women's rights for racist purposes (measures against foreign women, obsession with the [Islamic] veil, etc.) [and opposition to] the law on prostitution [which eliminates penalties for sex workers and criminalises only the solicitation of sex], which she describes as 'moralistic.'" The text on the poster attached to the tweet further specifies that Le Pen "only mentions women's rights when it serves her racist political agenda. Her stigmatising positions on so-called "comfort abortions," long-standing support for masculinist leaders, and her program on immigration, which would significantly harm foreign women residing in France, make her a real danger for women".





Fig. 30: Misogynist Le Pen

Similarly, Eric Zemmour is described as a “[d]angerous candidate defending the inferiority of women, and the right of men to access women’s bodies (rape, prostitution...),” who advances “[r]eactionary family politics,” and is subject to an “[a]ccusation of sexual assault.” According to the tweet, Zemmour “constantly attacks women and advocates male superiority and rape culture. Prosecuted for advocating racial hatred, considering that migrants are ‘rapists’, he exploits women’s rights for racist purposes. His hateful and masculinist agenda would seriously harm women’s rights.”



Fig. 31: Misogynist Zemmour

The tweets received multiple comments attacking the association (e.g.: “you globalists don't have a monopoly on feminism. you only represent yourself, and rather globalism than feminism for that matter”), questioning the results (e.g.: “Marine Le Pen, a woman, is a misogynist? It's ridiculous. Completely idiotic. And I will not vote for her”) or reiterating their support for the negatively evaluated candidates (e.g.: “Zemmour president”). This further indicates that the campaign may have reached some segments of its target audience that is opposed to feminist values and succeeded to engage in a conversation.





Fig. 32: Comments on Zemmour's feministometre

## Inter-LGBT

Another group engaged in a similar online counter-speech campaign, with a focus on the LGBTQ+ community, is Inter-LGBT: a “Lesbian, gay, bi and trans” association created in 1999 to fight “against discrimination based on mores, orientation or gender identity, within the framework of the promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms” (*Présentation de l'Inter-LGBT – Inter-LGBT*). Its activity on Twitter includes advertising its public events and demonstrations as well as information and awareness campaigns. Shortly before the second round of the 2022 French presidential elections, the Twitter account of Inter-LGBT published a series of posters using the shaming and labelling counter-speech strategies against Marine Le Pen and her party. The posters branded Le Pen and members of the National Rally as extreme right and presented their views on such issues as women’s LGBTI+ rights. Writing five days before the elections, the association reminded its followers “how the far right is the opposite of our values and against women’s rights,” adding “#NotOneVoteForLePen next Sunday!” The tweet featured three images with quotes of Marine Le Pen and two of her party members on abortion and on the use of assisted reproductive technology (ART) for gay couples and single women. The apparent goal of this message is a form of fact-checking and public shaming. It informs the Inter-LGBT followers on Twitter and possibly broader audiences about the anti-feminist, homophobic agenda of far-right organisations, such as the National Rally or *LMPT*, based on their own explicit statements. Beyond convincing the already convinced, these images may also aim to warn the centre-right voters potentially susceptible to far-right campaigns that the institutionalisation of far-right views in the French society and the more moderate statements made by far-right activists and politicians are a mere strategy of mobilising support.



Fig. 33: Inter-LGBT 1



Fig. 34: Inter-LGBT 1.1<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “The extreme right and the right to abortion is:

‘Aborting three or four times in a row should not weigh in financial terms on the national community, at the time where one in three French do not take proper care of themselves’ (Marine Le Pen, France 2, 2012).

‘If I have a budgetary choice to make between not reimbursing abortion which is an act that can be avoided, given that anyway there are many means of contraception in our country, and to have to reimburse acts which cannot be avoided and which allow French that suffer to take care of themselves, I would choose the second option’ (Marine Le Pen, TF1, March 2012).”



Fig. 35: Inter-LGBT 1.2<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “The extreme right and [the use of] ART for everyone is:

[The extreme right] voted against the bioethics law, which includes a section opening ART to lesbian and single women (June 2021).

‘Setting up a legal lie inscribing in marble what remains a biological impossibility is not protecting the child, nor protecting their rights. The child is the fruit of a father and a mother. A child has the right to have a father’ (Marine Le Pen, National Assembly, September 2019).

‘Me it’s rather Manif pour tous [Manifestation for all: a group of French political associations organizing demonstrations against the use of ART for all] (...). I actually paraded in the street against this bill, against marriage for all but more for the openness to ART and surrogacy which this bill entailed’ (Jordan Bardella, i24News, April 2018).

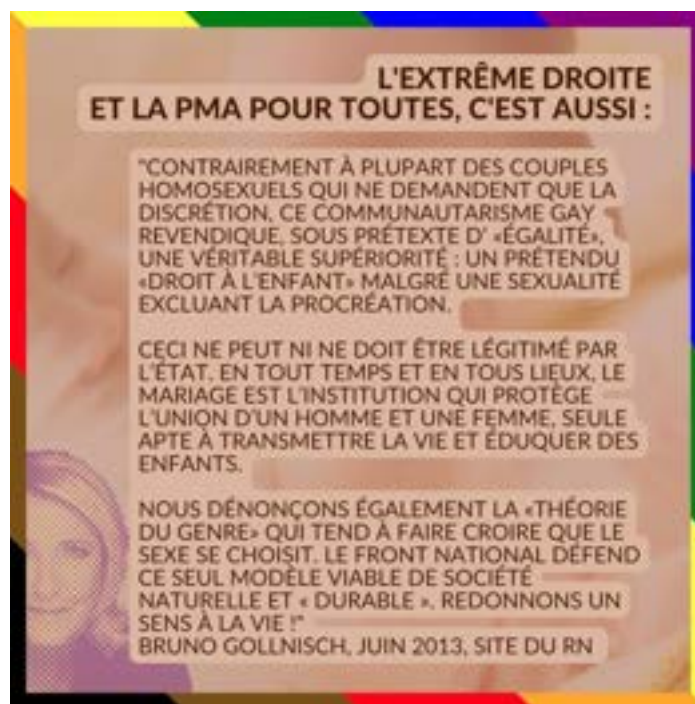


Fig. 36: Inter-LGBT 1.<sup>4</sup>

With only twenty-two likes, eighteen retweets, and no comments, it seems, however, that the anti-Le Pen campaign has not been successful. The Inter-LGBT account has more than 27,000 followers, which suggests either that its audience is not interested in electoral campaigns or, more generally, that Inter-LGBT supporters reject far-right views irrespectively of any specific statements made by its leaders.

### Féministes Insoumis·es

The third collective agent of deradicalisation studied in this report was chosen due to its affiliation with an established political party. The *Féministes Insoumis·es* (“Feminists Unbowed”) Twitter account is operated by activists of the French left party, *La France Insoumise* (LFI). The account has only a few hundred followers (507 vs. 180K followers of LFI’s main Twitter account) and is less active in comparison with the tweeting of the NGOs mentioned above. Nevertheless, some of its tweets include fact-checking information, occasionally accompanied by graphic visualisations that targets younger audiences. Consider an ironic tweet from March 2017, which received relatively higher attention (26 retweets and 13 likes) announcing: “Stop with your feminism, women are already = men!” Yeah it’s true that the list is not long... #féministesinsoumis·es.” The tweet is accompanied by a drawing of a young woman apparently stunned by a long list of crimes and other injustices committed

<sup>4</sup> “The extreme right and [the use of] ART for everyone is:

‘Unlike most homosexual couples who ask only discretion, this gay *communautarisme* [for the meaning of this term in France, see Sawyer and Zinigrad, 2021b] claims, under the pretext of ‘equality’, a true superiority: an alleged ‘right to a child’ despite a sexuality excluding procreation. This cannot and should not be legitimated by the state. At all times and in every place, marriage is the institution that protects the union of a man and a woman, the only one able to transmit life and educate children.

We also denounce the ‘gender theory’ which tends to believe that sex is chosen. The National Front [former name of the National Rally party] defends this only viable model of a natural and ‘sustainable’ society. Give meaning to life!’ (Bruno Gollnisch, June 2013, National Rally website).

against women. Among the items on the list are: femicide, rape, wage inequality, forced marriages, slut-shaming, and representation in the media.



Fig. 37: *Féministes Insoumis-es 1*

The *Féministes Insoumis-es* also retweets shaming counter-speech messages of LFI party members. For instance, in July 2018, the account retweeted a message of Danielle Simonnet condemning the French public service radio, *France Culture*, for giving the floor to Jean-Pierre Cattenoz, the archbishop of Avignon, who expressed hostility toward gay marriage, compared abortion with the Holocaust and was quoted saying: “I have never met an L, a G, a B, a T and, it seems now, a Q. I do not know and see only human persons with all the richness of their femininity and their masculinity, inscribed in their flesh and even in their deepest being,” and “Abortion is the most abominable crime there is because the victim does not even have the possibility of crying out his own suffering” (Mathoux, 2018). Simonnet posted a link to a newspaper article recounting the interview with the archbishop and added: “A homophobic, anti-abortion sermon, comparing abortion to the Shoah, on @franceculture, a public service radio! It's not up to public service radio and TV to broadcast worship, what's more, fundamentalists, it must stop!”



Fig. 38: *Féministes Insoumis-es 2*

This tweet gained more than one hundred likes and 90 retweets, and stirred a lively debate in the comments. Tweets in support of Simonnet’s criticism suggested filing a complaint against the radio to the French government body responsible for the regulation of electronic media; others invoked the French fundamental principle of secularism to say that the interview violated the separation of Church and State (“where is the *laïcité*?”).







Fig. 39: Comments on *Féministes Insoumis-es*

But most of the posted responses were in support of Cattenoz. Some of them focused on the substance of the archbishop’s interview, others defended his and the radio station’s freedom of expression. Thus, one tweet posted a quote by Pope Francis against abortion (“Abortion is not a lesser evil, it is a crime. Taking one life to save another is worthy of the mafia. It’s a crime. It’s absolute evil”) accompanied by the statement: “Congratulations to Bishop Cattenoz, our modern-day ‘Bishop Von Galen’ [a German bishop opposing Nazi euthanasia during WWII]. Shame on politicians, who prostitute themselves in the culture of death.” This message is similar in style and substance to tweets and other online content published by the leaders and supporters of the French *LMPT* movement, which has links to both fundamentalist Christian and neo-Nazi organisations (Gunther, 2019; Möser and Reimers, 2022).



Fig. 40: Comments on *Féministes Insoumis-es 2*

Another reply included a picture of Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio de Janeiro with a thread in praise of disagreement and discussion:

He is a priest and he owes you nothing. This radio is plural and represents EVERYONE, we can talk about it, I listen to it. It is not paid by your taxes and in no case are you authorized to judge the word of one of our Catholic priests of the Church of France.

*France Culture* broadcasts programs by theatre and cinema actors of a very exceptional level. Their journalist[s] brilliantly dissect the works in a suave voice. Also *mise en abymes* in heterogeneous places of people passionate about their field with an extraordinary soundtrack.

I talk to people who don't share my opinions or my faith or my tastes as long as we are mutually interested. It is allowed to love life to be interested in others and especially to learn every day. Thank you *France Culture*.



Fig. 41: Comments on *Féministes Insoumis-es 3*

Judging by the relative politeness of the exchanges in response to Simonnet, her tweet may be considered a moderately successful counter-speech that managed to keep the conversation civil (Benesch *et al.*, 2016).

The media objects examined in this section offer a glimpse into the tools employed by collective agents of deradicalisation to counter anti-feminist and homophobic discourse. Their online content indicates that fact-checking and shaming are among the more common and effective techniques of mobilization. Likewise, visual representations of information (e.g., by drawings) facilitates the dissemination of messages and even a minimal level of data analysis (e.g., ranking presidential candidates based on their political platform) seems to raise more interest than mere quotes that are not accompanied by commentary (e.g., the Inter-LGBT campaign). The efficiency of such counter-speech in deradicalising extreme voices is limited and, in some circumstance, may even be counter-productive (Bartlett and Krasodomski-Jones, 2015). However, users engaging in sensible and rational conversations on divisive topics (e.g., feminism and freedom of speech) do exhibit a potential for decreasing polarisation and sentiments of grievance even through social media.

The next section of the report looks at individual initiatives of French Twitter users engaging in feminist educational campaigns or protests against sexist social norms and violence against women in the public sphere, and especially in universities.

## An analysis of media presence, production, and circulation of ordinary users against radicalization

One of the main ways in which ordinary Twitter users might have an impact on the discourse against misogynist radicalisation is inventing or, later on, using hashtags that become trending and manage to disseminate powerful feminist or anti-masculinist messages: “hashtag feminism engages in a performative politics of visibility, in which one person’s narrative, when shared and connected with many others, makes power visible so that it might be deconstructed and challenged. Like the discursive activism of previous generations, hashtag feminists’ performative speech popularizes alternative epistemologies for interpreting and responding to injustices” (Clark-Parsons, 2021). In what follows we study the use of three popular hashtags on the French Twitter that intersect with similar global deradicalisation campaigns but are adapted to the specificities of the French culture and audience.

### #LesPrincessesOntDesPoils

One such successful French individual initiative has focused on deconstructing the masculinization of body hair under the hashtag #LesPrincessesOntDesPoils (“Princesses have body hair”). The hashtag was first used on Twitter by a 16-year-old artist (whose account was subsequently deleted). After apparently ‘suffering enormously’ because of the unrealistic beauty standards at her school, she began encouraging users to send in images of their body hair on Twitter [...]. Within days, the hashtag was overflowing with photos of girls with unshaven leg hair and grown-out pits” (Sisley, 2016). The campaign reached wide international awareness and was endorsed by such figures as Miley Cyrus and Madonna but at the same time was subject to multiple attacks and hateful responses (Sisley, 2016). The negative responses, however, signal that the initiative stirred lively debates and hence is likely to have had an overall positive impact on young women’s body image and has contributed to a change in patriarchal representations of female beauty and the disruption of the gender binary myth. Nowadays the #LesPrincessesOntDesPoils hashtag is no longer trending but is still used on Twitter by activists and advocates of women’s rights. For example, a tweet from July 2021 used the hashtag along with the slogan “No shave, no shame” accompanied by a drawing of unshaved female legs together with feminine symbolisms of flowers and high heels.



Fig. 42: #LesPrincessesOntDesPoils 1

The gradual change in public opinion generated by such messages can be observed in a tweet from September 2019 that pays homage to the campaign's initiator:

2016: #lesprincessesontdespoils was gaining momentum on the networks thanks to @[...] and I admired the courage of all these women who assumed their hairiness

2019: it's been a year now that I gradually dare to accept my body as it is



Fig. 43: #LesPrincessesOntDesPoils 2

The tweet included a sequence of three drawings of a woman with the captions: “Ooh! I should shave my legs!”; “And when should I do my armpits ?”; “Not right away!”



Fig. 44: #LesPrincessesOntDesPoils 2.1



Fig. 45: #LesPrincessesOntDesPoils 2.2



Fig. 46: #LesPrincessesOntDesPoils 2.3

The success of this and other awareness campaigns is noticeable in a successive tweet by the same author: “I know it's far from something new now to see girls who proudly show off their hair but it's my little personal pride of the summer.”



Fig. 47: A comment on #LesPrincessesOntDesPoils

The hashtag is also used in a broader context, as one of the causes advanced by feminist activists, but may also be instrumentalized for commercial purposes. For instance, the #LesPrincessesOntDesPoils hashtag is mentioned among other advocacy campaigns, such as #journeedesdroitsdesfemmes (“women’s rights day”) or #manspreading in a retweet of a satirical drawing criticizing the duplicity in the celebration of the International Women’s Day. The drawing is titled “March 8: A day of discounts for women.” It portrays a rapidly deteriorating dialogue between a benevolent sexist and a woman that tries to assert her rights:

- It’s Women’s Day!
- International Women's Rights Day...
- We offer you -50% on make up!
- We would like to talk about equal pay for example...
- With all these good promotions it compensates for your salary!
- This is scanda...
- Feminazi!!!!!!! (a little trick when you have nothing more to say)

The retweet added that the drawing is “a very nice cartoon that sums it all up.” Yet, this approbatory message is significantly discredited by the fact that the retweeting account is owned by an online store of beauty products. This example illustrates the processes of

commodification of feminist (and other) emancipatory social movements that flourish in neoliberal climates and especially so on social media platforms (Baer, 2016).



Fig. 48: A comment on #LesPrincessesOntDesPoils 2

## #BalanceTonPorc

The equivalent of the American #MeToo campaign in France is the hashtag #BalanceTonPorc (“denounce/squeal on your pig.” For the origins and relevance of pig references in the French culture, see e.g., Har-Peled, 2018; Tillier, 2016). Coinciding with the rise in popularity of the hashtag #MeToo, the French initiative started with the aim of raising public awareness to the pervasiveness of misogynist social norms and tacit normalisation of sexual harassment. It was invented in 2017 by a New-York based journalist who used Twitter to accuse a French TV executive of making sexually offensive comments. The rebuke was followed by the call: “#balancetonporc!! you also tell by giving the name and the details of a sexual harasser that you have known in your job. I’m waiting for you” (France 24, 2019; News Wires, 2021; Sebag and Miller, 2022). Among the positive impacts of such online activism are “providing important spaces for a wider range of women and girls [...] to participate in public debates on sexual harassment, sexism and rape culture [and] also making women’s and girls’ voices and

participation *visible* in ways that can generate the type of ripple effect we have witnessed in the aftermath of #MeToo, where many powerful, (mainly white) men are being held accountable for historic instances of abuse and harassment” (Mendes, Ringrose and Keller, 2018).



Fig. 49: #BalanceTonPorc 1

The French hashtag continues to be popular on French Twitter and has inspired other campaigns, such as the hashtag #BalanceTonMetro, which “emerged as a means for women to denounce sexual harassment and assault experienced on Paris’s metro system and other public transport” (France 24, 2019), and the 2018 song *Balance ton quoi* (“Denounce/squeal on your what”) by the Belgian artist Angèle, which has become a “feminist anthem” (HREF, 2020; Willsher, 2021).



Fig. 50: Angèle

#BalanceTonPorc is used on Twitter in a broad range of cases, from repudiations of attempts to undermine the legitimacy of judicial proceedings against famous sex offenders to denunciations of anonymous sexist remarks. An example of its potential function as a social media lighthouse calling for users to discuss important issues related to sexual harassment is a recent tweet about the ongoing affair of Tariq Ramadan. In the last four years, Ramadan, a former professor of Islamic studies at Oxford University and a well-known public figure, was indicted and is awaiting trial on five charges of rape. In July 2022, the French public prosecutor office committed Ramadan to stand trial for four of these charges (Kovacs, 2022; *Le Monde*, 2022). Shortly after, an account with a picture profile of the hashtag #FreeTariqRamadan posted a message in Ramadan’s defence and with a mention of his Tweeter account, which has more than 700,000 followers:

Professor @TariqRamadan is definitely a person who unsettles. The whole dossier demonstrates his innocence. The many proofs of the lies of the plaintiffs are there [sic]



Obstinately with ferocity the “justice” would like to break, punish, condemn the brilliant Muslim intellectual that he is



Fig. 51: Tariq Ramadan 1

This and other similar apologetic statements insinuating that the accusations against Ramadan are political and are motivated by his Muslim heritage are partially linked to the now gradually increasing sentiments of injustice, grievance, and alienation French Muslims experience in respect of their government’s politics of *anti-communautarisme* and more recently, *anti-separatisme* (Sawyer and Zinigrad, 2021c). Ramadan’s case is also particularly sensitive because of its intersectional character. As stated by a Muslim feminist activist:

For Muslims, [the Ramadan affair has] served as a reminder that we Muslim women are caught between a rock and a hard place — a trap presenting near-impossible obstacles for exposing sexual violence.

The rock is an Islamophobic right wing in other cultures that is all too eager to demonize Muslim men. [...] An ascendant right wing in European politics meanwhile jumps to connect any reports of misconduct by Muslim men to their Muslimness and to Islam as a faith rather than to their maleness and the power with which patriarchy rewards it around the globe. [...]

The hard place is a community within our own faith that is all too eager to defend Muslim men against all accusations. Mr. Ramadan’s defenders have dismissed the complaints against him as a “Zionist conspiracy” and an Islamophobic attempt to destroy a Muslim scholar. Too often, when Muslim women speak out, some in our “community” accuse us of “making our men

look bad” and of giving ammunition to right-wing Islamophobes.” (Eltahawy, 2017).

In response to this tweet, one user posted a screenshot of a news article reporting on the referral of the case to trial and added the following text with a mention of Ramadan’s account and of the hashtags #BalanceTonPorc and #MeToo: “Finally the serial rapist @TariqRamadan goes to the assizes. This message was followed by several tweets with links to other newspaper articles on the same topic.



Fig. 52: Tariq Ramadan 2



Fig. 53: Comments on the Ramadan affair

Another use of the #BalanceTonPorc is made on Twitter for the purposes of shaming sexual predators. For instance, a tweet from August 2022, shows a screenshot of a private message on Tweeter, saying “mmm, oh yea? Aren’t you hot with all those clothes? Remove a little and let’s see baby.” The image is accompanied by the text: “Are these your Tweeter users? #balancetonporc.” While not publishing the name of this private message’s author, this tweet publicly denounces this form of online sexual harassment, attempts at enabling other users to do the same, and ultimately showing the extent and severity of this phenomenon.



Fig. 54: #BalanceTonPorc 2

A more elaborate criticism of misogynist content in relation with the INCEL phenomenon was voiced in August 2022 by another user in the context of Facebook’s policy of content moderation. In a series of tweets, the user protested against Facebook’s lax approach to messages reported as offensive but upon examination, “found to not violate any of the community standards,” and analysed the content of several sexist, homophobic and transphobic images that were, reportedly, not removed from Facebook upon request. One of the images, titled “Automatic translator” of “flirt vs. harassment,” shows two men addressing the same phrase – “this dress suits you perfectly” – to a woman. Depending on the men’s looks the woman responds either with “Oh, thank you!” or with “Dirty pig!”. Castigating Facebook for its tolerance of messages undermining the gravity of sexual misconduct, the said Tweeter user superimposed on the image the following text: “expression of contempt, disgust vis-a-vis women, INCEL discourse: conforming to the standard???” and added:

And here is a sample of the reported posts: first, this magnificent shit of incels, on the pseudo double standard of women vis-à-vis men, lolll women just want a handsome guy otherwise they will #balancetonporc lol...

COMPLIES WITH FACEBOOK STANDARDS???



Fig. 55: #BalanceTonPorc 2

This example of Facebook’s lax “community standards” underscores the “[e]nforcement asymmetry between men and women and the nonpolicing of threats against women on Facebook[, which] represent loci of inequality that while currently underexplored in the existing literature are impactful and consequential” (Nurik, 2019). Similar complaints have been raised against social media platforms, including Twitter, whose users “feel that existing moderation tools on Twitter fail to provide them with adequate protection from online abuse” (Jhaver *et al.*, 2018).

## #SciencesPorcs

The #BalanceTonPorc movement inspired another, more focused, social media campaign launched by university students at SciencesPo, the elite French Institute of Political Studies. Protests against the proliferation of sexist norms at SciencesPo and other French *Grandes Écoles* merits special attention because of the claimed “apolitical” character of these institutions. Such policies of alleged impartiality lead “to the systematic disqualification of any somewhat assumed struggle against sexism – because denounced as political. By doing so, the field is left open to sexist behaviour, supposedly ‘apolitical’ because supposedly humorous, but actually functioning as a powerful deterrent to female students and their possible professional ambitions” (Dejours, 2019).

Complaints about sexual violence on the institute’s various campuses across France started appearing on Facebook and Twitter in January 2021, and quickly amounted to hundreds of testimonies. They were spurred on by the case of Olivier Duhamel, President of the Fondation Nationale de Sciences Politique that governs Sciences Po. Duhamel was accused of having pursued sexual relations with a 14-year-old boy for a number of years in the 1980s. The accusations led to a massive student movement which spread to a wider denunciation of a culture of misogyny and the forced resignation of Duhamel and the President of Sciences Po, who had apparently been informed of the accusations against Duhamel prior to their being made public. The initiative achieved several notable, if limited, successes. It was soon endorsed and given wider exposure on Twitter by representatives of the French government like Marlène Schiappa, then Minister Delegate in charge of Citizenship, who expressed “Full support for student victims of rape who courageously denounce the facts via

#SciencesPorcs #MeToo” in February 2021. It also led to the opening of criminal investigations and disciplinary proceedings for rape and sexual assault at SciencesPo establishments in Grenoble, Toulouse, and Strasbourg.

One of the #sciencesporcs tweets that received much attention in February 2021 was posted by a SciencesPo student in Strasbourg who wrote: “tonight I'm scared because the #sciencesporcs testimonies are blood-freezing. Unconditional support for all the victims, we believe you.” The message got more than five hundred likes and retweeted more than 160 times. It was accompanied by a “[l]ittle sketch of my thoughts as a bonus,” which consisted of a more detailed condemnation of SciencesPo and encouragement to victims of sexual violence:

Tonight I'm ashamed. Today is February 8, 2021 and I am ashamed of my studies. Yet this is not what I was taught, when I entered Sciences Po last September I did not imagine that I could one day be ashamed of what I was doing. Yet this evening it is not with pride that I say “I am at Sciences Po”. Because tonight the testimonies are pouring in, they don't stop. I feel like they will never stop. Each worse than the last. They finally speak, the omerta is over. The silence is broken. It is February 8, 2021 and I am in front of my phone torn between disgust for the culprits, the accomplices and the pride of seeing that the victims dare. However, my disgust takes over before giving way to immense anger.

How ashamed I was to have dreamed of Sciences Po, how ashamed I was to have imagined that this school could be spared. I want to blow up everything, to stop letting go of all this impunity. But above all I'm afraid, afraid that it will happen to me, that my friends will be concerned. I'm afraid for others and I'm afraid for myself, but above all I'm afraid for tomorrow's society.

Isn't this school supposed to advocate progressive values and train the elites of tomorrow? The “national elites” as they so often tell us. But what will our elites be if they learn at school that they can attack, rape, humiliate and harass with impunity? What will our elites be if they learn to be silent in the face of crimes? What will our elites be if we teach them silence for the benefit of reputation for 5 years?

So I say it loud and clear, victims of violence we believe you. It is not because an administration tries to silence you that you are not legitimate. It is not for the benefit of a reputation that your experiences will be stifled. Victims of violence, we read you, we hear you and we believe you. It's over, we won't be silent anymore.



Fig. 56: #SciencesPorcs 1

Expanding beyond its initial scope, the #sciencesporcs has been employed for attempts to change the institutional culture of other higher education establishments in France. In February 2021, a student at the HEC Paris business school, another French *grande école* tweeted: “In the midst of the #sciencesporcs revolution, @HECParis threatens to sue me for defamation for associating its name with the notion of rape culture. Total absence of [self-]questioning and class 🤝.” The message, which received more than 670 likes and 250 retweets, was accompanied by a letter from a law firm representing HEC threatening to sue the student for defamation.



Fig. 57: #SciencesPorcs 3

The tweet stirred a lively debate on the affair, provoking messages of support (such as “Support in the face of the lack of questioning and this desire to silence those who denounce this culture of rape”) and calls for further engagement on social media (“If they file a complaint against you, it will be necessary to put them in the sauce on Twitter. They will have their reputation as a sexist school, if they want it!”) alongside some negative responses (“Rape culture, is this scientific reality or a pseudo catch-all notion?”).







Fig. 58: Comments on #SciencesPorcs

Other users used #sciencesporcs to draw attention to the pervasiveness of patterns of sexism and sexual harassment in social spheres other than higher education. For instance, Patrick Lamassoure, a French editorial cartoonist and illustrator better known by his pseudonym *Monsieur Kak*, twitted the #sciencesporcs hashtag with a satirical cartoon depicting a fictional conversation between a female student and a male director of a generic French *grande école*. The student reports being subject to “machismo, harassment and sexual assault” only to hear in response: “our role is to prepare you for corporate environment.”



Fig. 59: SciencesPorcs 3

Under certain circumstances, social media platforms “can evolve into communities whose members share information, experience a sense of belonging, and provide mutual support [...] to members of minority social and political groups such as homosexuals, racial minorities, and feminists” (Herring *et al.*, 2002). Twitter hashtags fulfil similar functions: they generate “awareness and visibility for sexism issues” but are also “able to create among their users a sense of solidarity and of common destiny that does not only “foster awareness among the general public [but] can also become “*ad hoc* online community in which participants found a space of social support” (Golbeck, Ash and Cabrera, 2017). The use of hashtags examined in this section illustrate these observations but also emphasize the role of social media in activism and mobilisation. All three hashtags aim to establish an open forum for the expression of grievances and a collaborative public space of discussion but also aim to generate social change, be it in regard of prevalent stereotypes of the female body or of misogyny and sexual violence on university campuses, workplaces or online. Social media campaigns challenging dominant hegemonic norms, including by the use of hashtags, are able to achieve “a broader influence through reaching a mainstream, not actively feminist, audience” (Turley and Fisher, 2018), and by proxy, discourage processes of masculinist radicalisation.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Our report analyses the propagation of masculinist, anti-masculinist speech on social media platforms. It examines the online activity of the two most influential political leaders of the French far-right in the last presidential elections, and of a far-right activist whose online content plays out in the socio-cultural realms of French Internet. Their messages illustrate the intimate connections, shown in previous studies, between far-right ideology and misogynist narratives, and the refinement of their strategies. Aspiring to mobilise more support, Le Pen and Zemmour dilute their openly anti-feminist discourse with pseudo-feminist rhetoric with the aim of attracting more female and mainstream right voters. Another trend evident in our report is the far-right mobilisation of feminist vocabulary against immigrants and Muslims. Pledges to protect women's rights are meant to appeal to enthusiasts of their Islamophobic agendas by essentialising Islam as incompatible with feminist norms. Our analysis of tweets by Marine Le Pen, Zemmour, and their followers, demonstrates the relative success of these approaches, and goes on to explain why Marine Le Pen's programme is highly efficient in appealing to female voters. We show concrete examples of the multifaceted public image of a powerful woman, at once maternal and authoritative, which makes her candidacy more acceptable to women than Zemmour or any other (male) leader of the European far-right.

The ideas and style characteristic of Papacito's online activity are an example of more extreme-right and less apologetic masculinist discourses found on the fringes of the French *fachosphère*. While formally banned from some mainstream online media service, his often straightforwardly violent messages, enmeshed in misogyny, homophobia, antisemitism and conspiratorialism, are readily available on Telegram and other alternative platforms. The messages examined by us also exemplify the humorous, even self-ironic presentation of his violence, which further contributes to his popularity and exposure to younger audiences seeking online entertainment rather than information, news, or political content. Together with politicians and other online influencers Papacito contributes to the rich universe of masculinist representations that contribute to the discrimination, oppression and violence against women, queers and other targets of the far-right. Notwithstanding occasional (and reciprocal) expressions of support Papacito is not formally associated with any of the political leaders of the French far-right, but their activity on the *fachosphère* is aligned and mutually reinforcing. Using varied forms of masculinist speech, they nurture sentiments of grievance (e.g., against those caricaturised as neo-feminists, hyper-sexualised Muslim men or feminine left activists) among different segments of the French population and intensify social, political, and cultural polarisation in French society. In turn, these feelings facilitate processes of far-right radicalisation we explored in previous reports (Sawyer and Zinigrad, 2021c, 2021d, 2021b, 2021a).

The study of feminist and anti-masculinist online discourse in this report includes campaigns initiated by social justice organisations fighting for equality, a left-wing political party, as well as by individual activists. Most of the examined samples consisted of messages using a wide variety of counter-speech strategies – such as labelling, shaming, fact-checking, warning of consequences, insults, and use of caricatures, drawings, images, and charts – in response to far-right political programmes, hate speech, and the culture of silence surrounding violence against women. Another example involved a positive campaign about body hair acceptance typical of content aiming to educate the general public rather than reacting to negative communications. While positive feminist campaigns provide information to audiences potentially interested and sympathetic to such content, it is more difficult to measure the impact of counter-speech replies to masculinist rhetoric or correlate them with processes of deradicalisation. Indeed, some of the examined counter-speech tweets earned wide exposure and furthermore, engaged online users in a substantive dialogue about ethics, rights, or social norms. However, the “echo-chamber” effect on leading social media platforms – which tends to form homogenous communities of users that are isolated from content they might find offensive (Cinelli *et al.*, 2021) – calls into question the efficacy of such techniques. For instance, it is likely that the outreach of the *féministomètre* campaign was limited to followers

of the *Osez le féminisme !* Twitter account and other feminist users who would anyway not have voted for Le Pen or Zemmour. Furthermore, the rather superficial level of most political debates on social media, which end “before meaningful discussion of multiple points of view can occur” (Kruse, Norris and Flinchum, 2018, p. 4) indicates that even the exchanges about the interview of Jean-Pierre Cattenoz on public radio do not have a significant deradicalizing effect. The significance of counter-masculinist discourse is therefore more likely to be expressed in the visibility and encouragement of feminist views among feminist activists and voters.

It is however established that both masculinist and anti-masculinist discourses disseminated online bear an impact on radicalisation and deradicalisation trajectories of individuals associated with far-right ideology. Scholars show that “the core processes of far-right extremism, such as affiliation/disaffiliation, radicalization/deradicalization, and identity-formation, are highly gendered,” and that the ways in which “people join, leave, identify with, and adopt the ideas of far-right parties and movements” must account for different narratives of masculinity (Blee, 2018, pp. 3–4). Our research demonstrates the role and scope of gendered discourse for agents of radicalisation and deradicalisation in France, and underscores the need for further research on the efficacy of online counter-speech in the fight against the surge of far-right extremism.

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## Appendix: Exposure to Media Objects

Media Object	Twitter			Telegram Views	YouTube Views
	Messages	Retweets	Likes		
Fig. 60: Marine Le Pen on feminism	42	396	1221		
Fig. 61: A comment on “neo-feminism”	0	0	0		
Fig. 62: A comment on feminism	0	1	1		
Fig. 63: A comment on “neo-fascism”	0	0	0		
Fig. 64: A comment about Le Pen	1	7	23		
Fig. 65: Comments on feminism	0	1	0		
Fig. 66: A comment on Le Pen’s feminist views	0	0	0		
Fig. 67: Far right critique of Le Pen	0	0	0		
Fig. 68: Le Pen: Combative but not arrogant	0	0	2		
Fig. 69: Zemmour on feminism	111	664	2080		
Fig. 70: Zemmour on the Mila affair	163	1055	3316		
Fig. 71: The young with Zemmour	1	13	72		
Fig. 72: Comments on Zemmour	1	0	1		
Fig. 73: Zemmour on feminism and violence	35	259	1046		
Fig. 74: Papacito on “leftism”				8821	
Fig. 75: Papacito on the left				17.8K	
Fig. 76: Papacito on vaccines				12.4K	
Fig. 77: Papacito on the far-right				14.2K	
Fig. 78: Féministomètre	171	1350	1526		
Fig. 79: Misogynist Le Pen	6	39	37		
Fig. 80: Misogynist Zemmour	29	60	56		
Fig. 81: Comments on Zemmour’s féministomètre	0	0	1		

Fig. 82: Inter-LGBT 1	0	18	22		
Fig. 83: Féministes Insoumis·es 1	0	26	13		
Fig. 84: Féministes Insoumis·es 2	23	91	107		
Fig. 85: Comments on Féministes Insoumis·es	4	1	1		
Fig. 86: Comments on Féministes Insoumis·es 2	0	0	3		
Fig. 87: Comments on Féministes Insoumis·es 3	0	0	0		
Fig. 88: #LesPrincessesOntDesPoils 1	0	0	5		
Fig. 89: #LesPrincessesOntDesPoils 2	2	18	55		
Fig. 90: A comment on #LesPrincessesOntDesPoils	0	0	7		
Fig. 91: A comment on #LesPrincessesOntDesPoils 2	0	0	0		
Fig. 92: #BalanceTonPorc 1	107	365	472		
Fig. 93: Angèle					109M
Fig. 94: Tariq Ramadan 1	5	3	12		
Fig. 95: Tariq Ramadan 2	0	1	0		
Fig. 96: Comments on the Ramadan affair	2	0	0		
Fig. 97: #BalanceTonPorc 2	1	1	5		
Fig. 98: #BalanceTonPorc 2	1	0	0		
Fig. 99: #SciencesPorcs 1	8	162	517		
Fig. 100: #SciencesPorcs 3	28	255	673		
Fig. 101: Comments on #SciencesPorcs	0	1	7		
Fig. 102: SciencesPorcs 3	1	15	44		