

HATE HOPE HATE

THE FRENCH ELECTIONS AND THE ONLINE FAR-RIGHT NARRATIVES ON IMMIGRATION AND ISLAM



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THE FRENCH ELECTIONS AND THE ONLINE FAR-RIGHT NARRATIVES ON IMMIGRATION AND ISLAM

The French election season has once again brought to the forefront debates on French identity, immigration and Muslims in the media. The two far-right parties under Marine Le Pen and Eric Zemmour may trail behind Emmanuel Macron in the polls, but have led the political discourse over the election season and have encouraged far-right narratives into the mainstream. This has been helped by their use of social media to generate discussions and create controversy.

This report examines two case studies, a documentary about the Islamisation of the Northern city of Roubaix, and the free speech controversy surrounding Mila, a 16-year-old

Instagram user. The two incidents were expertly used by Le Pen and Zemmour to promote their worldviews and were also instrumentalised by the far right online to present a binary debate around the issues. This was helped by Twitter polls offering ‘for or against’ positions and the practice of sharing edited clips on several media platforms at once, increasing reach.

Attempts were made to frame the two incidents through the restrictive lens of the dangers of immigration, the incompatibility of France and Islam, as well as conspiracy theories such as the Great Replacement, Eurabia, and Muslim immigrants being sexual predators to varying levels of success.

KEY FINDINGS

- Both Le Pen and Zemmour used the Roubaix documentary to hit out against the encroachment of Muslim practices, linking it to the Islamisation of France and comparing it to authoritarian regimes such as Afghanistan.
- The two candidates’ and their spokespersons’ posts on the issues were heavily promoted online by the far right and used to explain why voting for either of the candidates was necessary to “save France”.
- The online hate and harassment of the Roubaix documentary creators and Mila was also instrumentalised to create a “with us or against us” narrative, used to attack more nuanced positions by Muslim or left-leaning personalities and positioning free speech and Muslims as diametrically opposed.
- The Roubaix documentary allowed more mainstreaming of the far-right Great Replacement theory during election season.
- Le Pen avoided naming the theory directly, likely in an attempt to soften her far-right image during the Presidential elections, however she used coded language to refer to it.
- The Mila affair –which centred on online hate, both homophobic and sexist – was hijacked by the far right to push the incompatibility of French values and Islam.
- Mila’s comments during the election season about sexual harassment was also used by the far right to peddle the image of immigrants as sexual harassers.

A TALE OF TWO FAR-RIGHT PARTIES – WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE?

The French election system relies on two voting rounds that take place every five years. All candidates must secure 500 signatures from elected officials such as mayors to secure a spot on the ballot. In the first round, any candidate can be voted for. If there is no absolute majority, there is a second round of voting between the two candidates with the most votes. In the history of France, there has never been only one round of voting.

Together, Le Pen and Zemmour have been predicted a win of a third of the electorate¹. As rivals, they could split the far right and allow the conservative candidate Valérie Pécresse to overtake them. According to Robert Ménard, mayor of Béziers and ally to both, this makes the French far right the most suicidal in the world.² As recently as 2018, the idea of a political alliance between the two candidates was discussed with Le Pen offering a position to Zemmour within the RN before the talks broke down.³ Despite many similarities in their rhetoric, the two parties have very different roots.

Then called the Front National (FN), Jean-Marie Le Pen had helped unify the far

right after years of division and had helped the party achieve its first electoral win in the town of Dreux, followed by successes in the 1984 European elections. Since Marine Le Pen became leader of the FN in 2011, the party won several municipalities and achieved 25% of the vote in the 2014 European elections. By the 2015 regional elections it had achieved first place with nearly 28% of the vote. During the 2012 Presidential elections Le Pen came in third, and in the 2017 Presidential election she reached the second round. Her supporter base includes a strong working class proportion of society that feels excluded economically and culturally.⁴ However, despite Le Pen’s success in leading the party, the Rassemblement National has lost votes in recent years. There was a general low turnout in France’s municipal elections in 2021. A record two- third of voters did not vote in regional and departmental elections,⁵ and Le Pen’s party was unable to win a single region.

Zemmour on the other hand created his party, Reconquête, to win the 2022 Presidential elections. The party name stems from the Reconquista that expelled Jews and Muslims from Spain in 1492 and 1609, which involved thousands of forced conversions to Catholicisms, torture and massacres. The word Reconquête was also utilised by Generation Identitaire before they were banned in France. Born to Algerian Jewish parents, and raised near Paris, he graduated from an elite university before working in the media. He spent 35 years writing for mainstream papers such as *Le Quotidien de Paris* and *le Figaro*, as well as having a popular talk show on France 2. Zemmour’s influence as both a journalist and television pundit has shaped political debate in the media and he has a long history of courting controversies. He’s been convicted three times for incitement to racial and religious hate speech – he is appealing the third.⁶ There has been little cooperation between the two parties during the election season. Several RN officials have joined Zemmour’s party, believing he had a better chance of winning.

Le Pen’s attempt to appear more mainstream in recent years has been an easy target for Zemmour. He told the Telegraph that Le Pen was “lamentable” and that voting for her “was voting for Macron”.⁷ Meanwhile, Le Pen has accused Zemmour of being “arrogant” and having “degraded” the image of women.⁸ While the two may appear identical when speaking on French identity, the Islamisation of France and Immigration, they differ on other subjects such as the nationalisation of highways, retirement age, taxes and the legal code.⁹

Julien Odoul who is part of the Rassemblement National’s head office – and made headlines when he demanded the headscarf removal of a mother who was accompanying her son on a school trip to a council meeting¹⁰ – said on LCI, “We don’t have the same priorities: Eric Zemmour wants to save the right by dislodging Marine Le Pen. Marine Le Pen wants to save France by dislodging Emmanuel Macron.”¹¹ Like many televised far-right takes, this was re-shared on his Telegram, Facebook and Twitter page to increase reach.



📺 Nous n'avons pas les mêmes priorités : Éric Zemmour veut sauver la droite en délogeant Marine Le Pen. Marine Le Pen veut sauver la France en délogeant Emmanuel Macron. Ce qui se passe à Roubaix et ailleurs nous impose de nous rassembler pour gagner.

👁️ 438 13:15

Julien Odoul on Telegram

Le Pen and Zemmour have both called for a reduction in the social allocations to foreigners and limiting immigration levels to France. However, Zemmour has taken more extreme positions on the issue, which has helped Le Pen sound more reasonable by comparison. She has focused on consumer buying power – which is the top concern according to the polls¹² – in the election, saying, “I obviously consider that immigration and insecurity are serious problems which need urgent answers, but there’s not just that.”¹³ Zemmour, expert in causing controversy, has said that he would create a Ministry of “Re-Immigration” that would deport hundreds of thousands of immigrants over his five-year term. When asked about refusals, Zemmour added he would seize the homes of African leaders and block remittances to their countries if they failed to take back immigrants.¹⁴ That campaign promise drew criticism from Le Pen, who called the proposal “anti-republican” but she refused to call it racist. Zemmour insists he is the only candidate who can unify the French right¹⁵ and has doubled down on France’s main challenges being identity and security.¹⁶

Despite his extreme positions, certain members of the far right are still suspicious of his Jewish and Algerian background. French politician Henry de Lesquen who also runs a popular Youtube channel wrote on Telegram that they needed to get rid of traitors in the true right and named Eric Zemmour as one of them. “An Algerian immigrant who does not have

a drop of French blood, a strictly observing Jew... a paper French...who does not reject the Talmud which takes non-Jews as idiots... who is constitutionally incapable of understanding the greatness of France... is today still the main enemy of the right, and therefore of France.”¹⁷ This was viewed over 3000 times on Telegram.

THE CASE OF THE GREAT REPLACEMENT

The Great Replacement theory used to be confined to the fringes of the far right yet is now discussed on mainstream television platforms and newspapers in France. Coined by French writer Renaud Camus in 2011, it rebranded an old far-right fear of white Europeans being “replaced” by immigrants. The Great Replacement in France according to Camus, is the immigrant population from North Africa who are replacing the indigenous French people. He sees a global elite as responsible for encouraging this demographic change.¹⁸ It was one of the core beliefs of the Identitarian movement, which was banned in France in 2021 for incitement to discrimination, hatred and violence.¹⁹ At the core of this idea is the belief that non-white and Muslim migrants pose an intrinsic threat to white, non-Muslim Europeans.

It is also based on projections that real demographers have repeatedly argued are not reliable basis for long-term predictions. An increase or decline in the birth rate of one group or another does not necessitate its continued increase or decline in the long term, nor does an influx of non-European migrants into Europe necessitate that this will continue at that rate or grow further still in the future. Moreover, the implications of this unfounded projection highlight their racist and anti-Muslim stance, by assuming that, their fellow non-white, Muslim citizens intrinsically pose a threat to their ethnic and cultural heritage.²⁰

Far-right channels on Telegram often reference “Francistan” when deploring what they perceive as a Muslim invasion. The Telegram group Paris Nationaliste, which includes neo-fascist Yvan Benedetti, provides a good selection of the language found on these channels. One message reads: “Instead of protecting the French people against Muslim terrorism, anti-white racism and mixed-race criminals, the dhimmi Macron will protect the eternal victims, the nice Muslims from the mean white racists. The prophet is happy, Inshallah.”²¹ Dhimmi is a historic term for non-Muslim subjects in a Muslim territory. The term is peppered within

far-right circles online, fitting into the myth of Eurabia: a far-right Islamophobic invented myth about a plot to destroy European nations by Islamising and Arab-ising it.²²

For Identitarians, a “demographic crisis across Europe” is occurring wherein “our peoples are becoming a minority in their own countries” due to “declining birth rates, mass immigration and the sharp increase in Islamic parallel societies”.²³ When a white supremacist murdered 51 people in Christchurch, New Zealand in 2019, his manifesto was titled “The Great Replacement”. It included several ideas that are peddled by the far right in France and that have even crept into the mainstream. This includes the idea that immigrants are invading and colonising white lands, that the white race is under attack and that Muslims are the major threat to Europe and its indigenous people. Mass killers who have slaughtered civilians in Germany, Norway and the United States have also cited the theory as a motivating factor.

In response to the “Great Replacement”, Identitarians propose a set of policies under the banner of “Remigration”. This would in theory reverse the flow of migrants in Europe and includes cutting down the welfare state for migrants and introducing policies of “de-Islamisation”. According to Generation Identity this would mean “banning the burqa, banning minarets [and] banning preaching in different languages” with a view to creating a situation where people would go back to countries where they “really could live their faith”.²⁴ At its core, remigration would involve the forced removal and repatriation of non-white, Muslim immigrants that they believe shouldn’t be resident here, which would likely result in violence. When examining Zemmour’s rhetoric on France, his solutions are near indistinguishable. His answer for what he sees is to “re-conquer” the country. This includes deporting foreigners disrupting public order, banning the headscarf in public spaces, as well as minarets or visible mosques. “It is time to stop all foreign infiltration, it is time to impose on Islam... respect for our identity.”²⁵ Over the election season, Zemmour has openly referred to the Great Replacement theory. He said on LCI, “The French people are being replaced by another civilization. This wounds me, this destroys me. I come before the French people to say, let’s together stop this evolution.”²⁶ The clip was repackaged on several of his social media profiles and amassed 14,000 views on Facebook alone.

Zemmour isn’t the only far-right political personality who has subscribed to this theory. Marion Marechal, niece of Marine Le Pen who is also running in the French elections, said, that “on a certain number of French territories, what we call indigenous French people has been replaced by a recently immigrated population”.²⁷ Non-far-right politicians have also mentioned the theory. Valérie Pécresse, a candidate for France’s main right-wing party Les Républicains, drew criticism after mentioning the conspiracy theory at a large campaign event.²⁸ Members of her party were quick to clarify that there was no Great Replacement in which immigrants were changing the demographics of Europe, trying to once again separate the right-wing party from the far right. However, it is not the first time Pécresse has used the term and the concept has already permeated the mainstream.

Le Pen has been cautious throughout this election season to broaden her support base and has refused to use the term directly in the last few years. She stated in 2014 that she believed the Great Replacement was a conspiracy theory.²⁹ However, she has used coded language to refer to the theory. In 2011 she said that the French government wanted to “replace the French population by immigrants” and has given speeches about this replacement without actually referencing Camus’ theory.³⁰ She’s also encouraged people to read *Le Camp des Saints*, (The Camp of the Saints), a novel in which France is overthrown by a million starving and sex-crazed Indian refugees when the French army is not prepared to fire on them. The novel has become a reference book for far-right personalities such as former Donald Trump advisor Stephen Bannon.³¹

THE CASE OF ROUBAIX, FRENCH IDENTITY AND IMMIGRATION

The camera panned to dolls in the shop with no features drawn, to restaurants with closed boxes for veiled women to eat in, and to libraries containing books about the duties of Muslim spouses.

“Restricted Zone: *The response of the state when faced with the danger of Radical Islam*” ran on 23 January 2022, two months before the French elections. The documentary was aired on the M6 channel, known as Metropole Television – the most profitable private national French TV channel and the third most watched television network in the French-speaking world.³² A significant portion of it focused on the Northern French city of Roubaix and painted a vivid image of how radical Islam had overtaken the place.

The documentary described how the dolls in the shop had “no facial features to respect a radical version of Islam that forbids the representation of humans.”³³ An activist filmed in the programme, Amine Elbahi, accused the local government of funding an education project that he suspected of also giving Quran classes. Laïcité, or French secularism – prevents public funding for non-secular initiatives. AAIR – the after-school support programme – is now under investigation.

The documentary soon became a major talking point for politicians and media personalities. Aurélien Taché, a politician from Emmanuel Macron’s ‘En Marche!’ who now supports the environmentalist candidate Yannick Jadot, has called for mandatory religious education at school after being “shocked” by the documentary.³⁴

The programme has received criticism for caricaturing and stigmatising the city despite the claim from the producers that they specified in the documentary that this was a small proportion of the Muslim community. Arret sur Images, a website that examines the media critically, published an article describing how Muslims interviewed in the documentary felt manipulated by M6.³⁵ They were told by the channel they were participating in

a documentary about “laïcité and living-together” rather than radical Islam. One of the interviewees, student Lilia Bouziane also criticised which scenes were kept in the final product such a social meeting that contained only friends of north African origin rather than the pizza night with a more diverse group.



Ophélie Meunier CC Wikimedia

The activist Elbahi, along with the Roubaix mayor Guillaume Delbar, producer Michaëlle Gagnet, and the presenter Ophélie Meunier, all received anonymous online death threats for their portrayal of Roubaix.³⁶ Meunier, who was put under police protection, said they had tried to present the facts. She told the *Quotidien*, “It is a sensitive subject, often picked up by the far right. But two months before the Presidential elections, it deserves to be discussed. As journalists we must not be stuck between the far right who appropriate the subject and radical islamists who stop us from speaking... Our job is to talk as factually as possible about a subject, without ideology.”³⁷

Within the far right however, the documentary was proof they had been right all along.

FAR RIGHT NARRATIVES: ZEMMOUR AND LE PEN


Zemmour, the far-right candidate who exploded on the political scene in 2021, was quick to seize the documentary as evidence that his rhetoric on Muslims in France was necessary. The television pundit turned Presidential candidate is running on an anti-Immigration platform and has received a disproportionate amount of media attention³⁸. His controversial statements which include wanting to ban “non-French” names such as Muhammad³⁹ and arguing that employers should be able to turn down Arab or black people as applicants⁴⁰ are easily repackaged online, generating buzz on social media channels.

He tweeted, “Roubaix is Afghanistan two hours away from Paris” which was quickly re-shared on Telegram.⁴¹ Telegram is an instant messaging service that is known for its ability to secure messages and encrypt them during transit. It is also an easy way to coordinate with a large numbers of users, and it has become increasingly popular among the far right and conspiracy theorists. The tweet gained over 10,000 likes on Twitter and 20,000 views on Telegram.

 Eric Zemmour



L'Afghanistan à deux heures de Paris.
#ZoneInterdite

<https://twitter.com/ZemmourEric/status/1485376636614844424>  20.7K edited 23:23
Zemmour on Telegram

Zemmour then wrote an article in the oldest national newspaper in France, *Le Figaro*, about the documentary. He described how the road filmed, with several Arab bakeries and libraries, halal butcher shops and a hammam, showed that “if you don’t believe in the existence of the Great Replacement, it is because you’ve decided to not see it.”⁴²

The documentary also serves his narrative that the white indigenous race in France is in danger. “Roubaix is an Arab-Muslim lifestyle imposed in a country with a thousand year old Christian tradition. It’s called colonisation.”

The Great Replacement theory in France was first spread on the Internet by far-right websites such as Breizh-info and Fdesouche. The Identitarian movement also created the online “Observatory of the Great Replacement” with Camus’ approval.⁴³ When the Roubaix story broke, the most shared articles on French far-right Telegram groups were links to these websites. Fdesouche, (standing for Indigenous French People) published a video of Canadian sociologist, Mathieu Bock-Côté who described a “veiled city marked by the cultural codes of radical Islam ... leading to a form of expulsion of the French culture”. Breizh-info published an article where Jean-Yves Le Galou, a French politician who believes racial war is inevitable⁴⁴, examines “Sharia in Roubaix”.⁴⁵ These shared links often also result in a torrent of online comments about the Muslim invasion.

Thaïs d’Esfucon, a far-right activist who was a spokesperson for the Identitarian movement in France before the organisation was dissolved, shared her thoughts about Roubaix on Telegram to nearly 25,000 users. She describes Roubaix and how it shows the insidious danger of Islam is not only terrorism, but also political Islam. She writes that some have become used to it, “We tell ourselves, ‘Oh it’s not a big deal! It hurts no one!’ and we shift the Overton Window again and again, we make compromises. But there are no possible concessions; they want everything. We give them the hand they take the arm. We must affirm urgently who we are and who we are not, and act in accordance.”⁴⁶ D’Esfucon is a firm supporter of Zemmour and has a popular Youtube channel with videos such as, “White Privilege exists... so what?” garnering tens and hundreds of thousands of views.⁴⁷

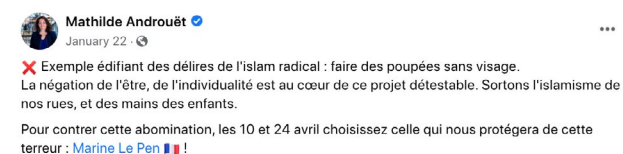
The Great Replacement ties up two controversial issues together: Immigration and Islam. The Roubaix documentary also brings up these two issues as well the question of French identity. This partly explains why the far right picked the topic up to such a degree online and has used it to call for voting either Zemmour or Le Pen into office. Stephane Ravier, member of the RN said on Telegram, “Protecting a journalist threatened by Islamists is well and good, but expelling said Islamists and ensuring they never step into France again is much better.” The post was viewed nearly 7000 times and is an example of how the documentary was weaponised to demand policy change.⁴⁸



Stéphane Ravier CC Twitter

Aurélia Beigneux, an MEP for the RN who holds a particularly vitriolic Facebook account, posted, “Soon this will be France, if we let Roubaix, Tourcoing, and the suburbs of Paris be replicated. An ignoble situation, abject but real in the fanatic minds of Islam.”⁴⁹ This was in reference to a video about honour killings in Pakistan. Roubaix has become shorthand for extreme or Islamic practices in countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan for the far right in France.

Another MEP for RN, Mathilde Androuët describes the dolls in the Roubaix documentary on Facebook: “The negation of being and of individuality is at the heart of this detestable project. Let’s keep Islamism off our streets and children’s hands. To oppose this abomination, choose the person who will protect us from this terror, Marine Le Pen on the 10 and 24 April.”⁵⁰



Mathilde Androuët on Facebook: Vote Marine to protect us from this terror!

Jordan Bardella, acting President of the RN after Marine Le Pen left to launch her Presidential campaign, wrote on Telegram, “The blindness of the state made the city [of Roubaix] an Islamist region. This future must not and cannot be France’s. In April, Marine.”⁵¹ He also posted, “Go take a walk in Saint-Denis, Trappes or Roubaix: You will notice everywhere a change in population. We were the first to alert France to this migratory danger; we are the only ones who can stop it.”⁵²

Despite her supporters and political aides adopting the Great Replacement theory, Marine Le Pen commented on the Roubaix documentary without using the phrase. A clip that has been shared on social media shows her saying,

What we see is the advancement of Islamism, which I’ve been denouncing for the last twenty years, when we see shops with dolls that have no faces, if we let this go, tomorrow what is sure is that there will be a hundred cities like Roubaix, then ten thousand cities like Roubaix until we don’t have the capacity to react. There is an objective urgency. We must eradicate Islamism.⁵³

The video was watched 22,000 times on Youtube alone. Her more cautious tone and current less extreme position has cost her votes from within her party however. A former supporter Elisabeth Louvel, who has joined Zemmour’s party said, “With Le Pen, you could not speak of the Great Replacement.”⁵⁴ Her position could be attributed to how Le Pen has been trying to attract more mainstream voters and has tried to shake the party’s reputation for racism and antisemitism. This included kicking her own father Jean-Marie Le Pen – who co-founded the party in 1972 and led it for four decades – from the party for antisemitism in 2015 and changing the name from National Front to National Rally.

THE CASE OF MILA, FREE SPEECH AND ONLINE HARASSMENT

The infamous “Mila affair” which sparked a debate over blasphemy and free speech in France began on Instagram. The then-16 year old Mila told *Le Quotidien* she was on the platform and that, “A guy was hitting on me heavily during the live, telling me ‘you’re beautiful, you’re hot, what age are you?’” She told those watching that she was a lesbian and that “blacks and Arabs” were not her type. She was then subjected to a barrage of insults, both homophobic and racist, to which she replied, “The Quran is a religion of hatred, there is only hatred in it. Islam is shit, your religion is shit,” before describing in lewd terms what she would do to “your god”.⁵⁵

The teen’s viral video prompted heavy online abuse and death threats, but also support, causing a national debate on free speech and blasphemy. The hashtag #JeSuisMila trended on social media, along with its opposite #JeNeSuisPasMila. President Emmanuel Macron spoke out in support of the teenager, arguing that in France “we have the right to blaspheme.”⁵⁶ Former Socialist Presidential candidate Ségolène Royal, defended Mila’s freedom to criticise religion while saying she should have shown «more respect, manners



Mila CC Twitter

and knowledge» and cautioned against making her «a paragon of freedom of expression.»⁵⁷

As a result of the ensuing harassment, Mila had to change schools and her family was put under police protection. The Mila affair came just over five years after extremists gunned down a group of French cartoonists from the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine, for having poked fun and drawn the Prophet Mohammed in their magazine. In July 2021, eleven people were found guilty of sending abusive messages to Mila.⁵⁸ Mila later apologised for insulting people who practise their religion “in peace”, which disappointed some in the far right, but said she had no “regrets about what I said, it was really my thought.”⁵⁹

The affair was a much-promoted story within the online far right, with Mila becoming a rallying cry against the encroachment of Islam. Influential far-right figures made Mila their hero, and accused left-learning personalities and organisations of not defending Mila immediately and of cowardice because Islam was involved. The far-right online were also initially responsible for helping make the story a viral one.

Identitarian Solveig Mineo was the first person to interview Mila and launched the #JeSuisMila hashtag and a support page on Facebook as well as a petition of support. Solveig is the founder of the *Bellica* website which she describes as the “first feminist website that openly discusses the negative consequences of immigration and Islam.” She also describes how in France, the principal cause of sexual harassment is due to ethnic replacement.⁶⁰

Mineo’s article was immediately picked up by Damien Rieu who links the story about online hate to foreign Islamist governments on Twitter: “Must we all blaspheme for the ayatollahs to understand that in France, religions are beliefs on which we are free to say whatever we want without risking death? Pakistan and Saudi Arabia will be happy to welcome the unhappy. #Mila”. Rieu was co-founder of the banned Identitarian movement

in France, joined Le Pen's party before finally supporting Zemmour. He also launched a Twitter poll with the binary choice of either being with 'Mila and freedom' or 'Islamists and their allies'. This reflects the general lack of nuance in the Mila affair. Public debate was mainly driven by the far right prism of either being #JeSuisMila and giving unequivocal support, or #JeNeSuisPasMila and being on the side of Islamists. The story quickly spread on far right channels, with anti-Muslim posts and the recurring idea of a clash of civilisations. Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" theory states that after the fall of the Soviet Union, Islam would emerge as the threat to Western civilization.⁶¹ The French far right immediately grasped Mila's story, which could have centred on online harassment, as further evidence of their worldview and their belief that Islam is incompatible with France and laïcité.



Damien Rieu CC Twitter

On a more mainstream platform, Le Pen was quick to pick up on the story and said on Europe 1, "Islamic fundamentalist is ravaging our country". She added, "... hundreds of neighbourhoods are in the hands of Islamists today."⁶²

Zemmour on the other hand accused feminists of staying silent and that for new wave feminists, the patriarchy was only the "white occidental male of Christian culture" while the "exotic Arab-Muslim patriarchy" were the "the eternal proletariat victims".⁶³ Zemmour was adding to the far-right narrative about immigrants, especially brown Muslim ones, being responsible for sexual deviancy, harassment and grooming.

Mila trended once again on Twitter in January 2022 when she wrote online, "I don't like Zemmour, and to encourage him goes against my values... But I am so terrorised within my own country that I tell myself we don't have a choice but to go through this radicalisation even though I dislike it. To stay alive." This was soon picked up by far-right newspaper *Valeurs Actuelle* who published an article with the headline, "2022 Presidential elections: For Mila, "there is no choice" but to vote Zemmour."⁶⁴

The article quickly spread and Mila was once again at the centre of the media storm. She quickly clarified she has no intention of voting for Zemmour because she did not like his "fascism" and was for laïcité rather than the Christianity-inspired France that Zemmour represented. The Presidential candidate also weighed in the debate with a tweet that was shared nearly three thousand times, "Mila, those who want to intimidate you for this message have one point in common: they've accepted the Islamisation of France, all the while hypocritically crying over your fate. Our disagreements are nothing in the face of our common determination to live in a free France in peace."⁶⁵

In February 2022, Mila posted a video about being harassed on the street constantly and implied it was a certain type of people that did so. She also posted a clip of a foreign-looking man who spit at her and insulted her and she explained he then grabbed her phone and sexually assaulted her before onlookers intervened.⁶⁶ While Mila focused on the sexual harassment faced by women in France, the far right social media sphere used her experiences to further their online narratives about the immigrants and Muslims in France who sexually harass white women. This fit into the far right idea that brown immigrants who come to Europe harass, groom and attack white indigenous women.

FRANCE, IMMIGRATION AND LAÏCITÉ

The idea of *laïcité*, or *secularism*, is deeply rooted in French history, going back to the revolutionaries that stormed the Bastille in 1789 to overthrow the monarchy and break the power of the Catholic Church. By the Third Republic (1870-1940), anticlericalism unified the state and by the 1900s, education reforms, the cancellation of public prayers, the secularising of hospitals and the removal of exemptions for the clergy in the army had all become law. The 1905 law separating Church and State enshrines governmental neutrality and prevents it from endorsing any religion. It is only more recently that *laïcité* was defined as the character of public space and cited as justification for excluding signs deemed dangerous to the exchange of ideas.

What sets French secularism apart from Anglo-Saxon models is that, over the years, it has pushed religion out of the public spheres and more recently the public practice of Islam has become increasingly difficult with the veil being one of the most visible on-going fights. The headscarf is, for many in French society, evidence of the separation of communities or communalism, as well as proof of the increasing visibility of Islam i.e. an attempt to create political Islam or Islamism, and finally, a sign of the oppression of women. The Roubaix documentary therefore confirmed all three of those fears.

The first headscarf affair occurred in 1989, when three Muslim students were sent home from a public state-funded school just outside Paris for refusing to remove their headscarf. It occurred the same year as Khomeini's fatwa against Salman Rushdie. The narrative of blasphemy and photos of women in black chadors was set in the public discourse⁶⁷ and the story was national and hotly debated by politicians, philosophers and the French public itself.⁶⁸ The Haut Conseil à l'Intégration – a High Council of Integration – was set up the following year and issued a statement calling on schools to integrate

religious and ethnic minorities to prevent a multicultural society and ensure the development of French citizens. By then, the public discourse was virulently against the headscarf, which was even compared to Nazi or Stalinist uniforms.⁶⁹ In July 2003, President Jacques Chirac created the Stasi commission on *laïcité*, under Bernard Stasi, which recommended banning the headscarf. Stasi later said, "Islam only exists in underdeveloped countries, in countries where the rights of man are not respected, often in countries where Islam is the only religion, a dominant religion, and the least that can be said is that it does not respect others."⁷⁰ The 2004 law banning religious symbols in schools is the most famous instance of excluding religion from the public sphere but it is far from being the only legislation that, Muslims feel, targets them. Veiled women have been refused entry to university classes, banks and doctor's surgeries.

The 2015 and 2016 terrorist attacks in France have also led to increasing stigmatisation of the Muslim population who feel constantly called upon to denounce acts of violence spoken in their name. In the case of Roubaix, Jérôme Rivière, a member of the European Parliament and vice Chairman of Zemmour's party Reconquête, criticised Muslim representatives for not giving unequivocal support to victims such as the Roubaix documentary presenter, Ophelie Meunier.⁷¹

The term "Islamophobia" has caused controversy in France, with some debating whether it should even be used to describe anti-Muslim hatred and discriminatory acts. Those who dislike the term say the concept was created by Iranian clerics to stifle freedom of expression and shouldn't be used in a secular country. Academics source it to a term used to designate the specific treatment applied to Muslim minorities in the colonial empire.⁷²

Muslims have been present in France for centuries and cannot be reduced to one






homogenous body. However, a majority of the French Muslim population today emigrated after France’s colonisation of North and sub-Saharan Africa and became part of the working class. The twin legacies of imperial history and economic exploitation still echo in France today.

Citizens of Muslim origin face disproportionately high levels of unemployment. Various studies have shown people with Muslim-sounding names are less likely to be called to a job interview. There is also discrimination in employment against people from certain working-class neighbourhoods that house a large proportion of the Muslim community. People say this discrimination extends to housing and education. Researching systematic discrimination in France is complicated by a lack of available official data. The country’s population census does not take note of race, religion or ethnicity, so collating information is very difficult.

A study funded by the Open Society Institute showed that Black and North African youths were also much more likely to be stopped by police in France’s equivalent to stop-and-search. As the researchers could not access reliable data, they analysed the types of youth stopped around Paris underground stations by police.⁷³

BINARY NARRATIVES

Whatever Mila’s political positions, there is no doubt she became a symbol for the far right and a method of furthering their anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim ideology. Her experiences fed into an important debate in its own right about online hate and harassment, youth and social media, homophobia and sexism, and the normalisation of far-right discourse. But instead, the main political debate, inflamed and enhanced by discussions on social media platforms, became about the battleground of blasphemy, and Islamism. This was partly helped by the far right routinely pushing stories that have Islam or Muslims as antagonists online and attacking left-leaning personalities for not defending the black-and-white narratives they created. Zemmour for example used Roubaix to attack the far-left candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon and the clip was widely shared online, “Creolization is Islamisation. We saw on TV that there are 6-year-old girls in Roubaix who wear Islamic headscarves. Public restaurants where women eat separately from men in separate seating sections. Roubaix is the future of #Melenchon’s #France!”⁷⁴ This was viewed 36,000 times on Facebook.

 **Eric Zemmour** 
January 27 ·   

La créolisation c'est l'islamisation. M6 a montré cette semaine à Roubaix des jeunes filles voilées à 6 ans, des jeunes femmes déjeunant enfermées dans un box. L'avenir de la France avec M. Mélenchon, c'est Roubaix !

#ZemmourVsMelenchon #FaceABaba



Zemmour on Facebook: The future of France with Melenchon is Roubaix!

The nuance in stories like the Roubaix documentary and the Mila affair are also purposefully ignored by the far right online to create the black and white narratives the far

right prefers. With Roubaix, ‘radical Islam has taken over a city in France’ and ‘death threats against anyone who speaks out’ were the only two narratives pushed out. With Mila, it was ‘Islam is not compatible with free speech’ and ‘Muslim men are sexual harassers’. Edited clips with political takes shared on each social media platforms contributed to these binary discussions.

The Mila and the Roubaix stories both created media discourse on the compatibility of Islam and France. This simplistic either/or narrative is a long-standing one for the French far right who have insisted Muslims cannot be true French citizens. In both cases, the role of social media in spreading far right messaging and promoting these issues within the national conversation cannot be ignored. There are for example several cases of online harassment in France, including of journalist Julie Hainaut who received hate from a group of neo-Nazis for publishing critically about pro-colonialists.⁷⁵ However, these did not attract anywhere near the media and political attention that the Mila affair did. Meanwhile, days before elections, Zemmour posted a video on his Youtube channels about how a French woman was stabbed to death by an illegal Algerian immigrant.⁷⁶ Zemmour has 459,000 subscribers on Youtube and the video was viewed 83,000 times within a single day. The videos, posts and interview clips shared by Le Pen, Zemmour and their supporters generate discussion and aid in broadcasting their world views on immigration and Islam and the grave threat they pose to the country. It also generates support for the two far-right candidates who can “save” France from this enemy.

The French election season has also helped propagate the Great Replacement theory as the two far-right candidates discussed it openly or in veiled terms in mainstream debates. The two candidates have been setting the agenda for much of the election season, which led to their views being widely shared and discussed online. Despite Emmanuel Macron being expected to win the 2022 French elections, the far right narratives that has increasingly seeped within French discourse is unlikely to disappear and the evidence of the discourse will continue to accrue views and generate debate online.

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