

# The discourse and aesthetics of populism as securitisation style

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## Abstract

Populists have lately been at the forefront of securitisation processes, yet little attention has been paid to the relationship between populism and securitisation. This paper investigates the role of securitisation in populism, exploring how the populist mode of securitising differs from traditional securitisation processes. It argues that securitisation is inherently embedded in populism which embodies a particular style of securitisation with a distinct set of discursive and aesthetic repertoires. The populist invocation of societal security and their claim to defend the fundamentally precarious identity of ‘the endangered people’ necessitate an unceasing construction of new threats. Aiming to discredit ‘elitist’ securitisation processes, populism invests in a specific construction of the referent object, the securitising actor and their relationship to the audience. The populist securitising style also carries a distinctive aesthetic centred on ‘poor taste’, sentimental ordinariness and unprofessionalism, examining which can widen our understanding of the aesthetics of security.

## Keywords

aesthetics, populism, securitisation, societal security, style

‘We must stop being politically correct and get down to the business of security for our people’ – wrote the President of the United States Donald Trump on his Twitter the day after the ‘London Bridge’ attack by the so-called ‘Islamic State’ on 4 June 2017.<sup>1</sup> With his daily production of such little ‘speech acts’, Trump has been eager to implement several extraordinary security policies, such as invoking national emergency powers to secure funding to build a border wall with Mexico. Trump is just one example of how populists rally audiences around themes of security, as also seen in the Brexit campaign

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and the European 'refugee crisis'. In this paper, I investigate the role that securitisation plays in populism, exploring how the populist mode of securitising differs from traditional securitisation processes. The focus is on populism in its mainstream, right-wing form, since the complexity of 'left populism' deserves separate attention and is beyond the scope of this inquiry.<sup>2</sup>

Scholars have long highlighted the role of perceptions of crisis or insecurity in providing an entry point for populism.<sup>3</sup> According to Laclau, 'some degree of crisis [. . .] is a necessary precondition for populism'.<sup>4</sup> Ontological security research has also shown that populism responds to the everyday anxieties and fears of ordinary individuals and the heightened sense that global forces are beyond their control.<sup>5</sup> Scholars have also explored the role of populism in triggering crises and, in so doing, fostering the right environment for its appeal to succeed.<sup>6</sup> As Brubaker said, populists 'construct, perform, intensify, dramatise and, in these ways, contribute to producing the very crises to which they claim to respond'.<sup>7</sup> Homolar and Scholz also show that populists use emotionally charged, anti-establishment crisis narratives that instil in their audiences a sense of loss.<sup>8</sup>

The impetus for this paper comes from the latter proposition that it is not so much insecurity that generates populism, but populism that produces insecurity. Translated into the language of Security Studies, this implies that populists actively exercise securitisation – that is, the process of discursively framing issues as matters of security. According to the 'Copenhagen School' framework, security is not an objective condition but 'a quality actors inject into issues by securitising them, which means to stage them on the political arena' and 'have them accepted by a sufficient audience to sanction extraordinary defensive moves'.<sup>9</sup> The dynamics of this process vary depending on the context, and securitisers might use a diversity of communicative means beyond speech, such as visual imagery and physical action. The result invests the referent subject with 'an aura of unprecedented threatening complexion', which can justify otherwise unacceptable measures to block it.<sup>10</sup> Still, scholars tend to speak of securitisation merely as a ready-made tool that populists occasionally employ to give urgency to their message, overlooking the pivotal role that securitisation strategies play in the dynamics of populism.<sup>11</sup>

This paper delves deeper into the relationship between the two, proceeding through three sections. The next section shows that securitisation is inherently embedded in populism. They are related through the populist invocation of the concept of societal security, as populists claim to defend the identity community of the people against the elite. Sustaining this claim necessitates a constant re-articulation of a securitising act staging the people as 'endangered'. The forging of security problems and crises provides populists with the opportunities to (re)produce the very identity they claim to protect. Since this identity is built through an antagonistic form of othering, it remains fundamentally precarious and insecure, leading populists to constantly initiate new cycles of securitisation.

My argument is that populism presupposes securitisation but practises it in a way that discursively and aesthetically differs from 'traditional' securitisation. Following Moffitt, populism is defined as a style which takes the form of 'embodied, symbolically mediated performances made to audiences that are used to create and navigate the fields of power that comprise the political'.<sup>12</sup> It is built around two central features: (i) the claim to speak and act in the name of 'the people', whereby populists aesthetically embody their image; and (ii) the construction of an antagonistic divide between two sides – the good, 'pure'

people and the bad, 'corrupt' elite. Here, populism is understood as a matter of degree, as while some actors draw on it occasionally and minimally, others deploy it chronically and intensely. Scholars of populism have generally overlooked the way it navigates the realm of security, constructing security discourses, subjects and practices. To fill this gap, the paper considers populism as a specific style of securitisation, examining its distinct set of discursive and aesthetic repertoires.

Whereas the second section is dedicated to the discursive characteristics of populist securitisation, the final section marshals an understanding of the populist aesthetic of security. Populism erases the distance between the securitiser and the audience through aesthetic devices as the leader performs 'the endangered people'. Comparing populist to several mainstream examples of security aesthetic, the paper demonstrates that populists securitise 'in poor taste', professing to be a form of aggressive defiance against the norms of the security 'establishment'. Discrediting expertise, rationality and good manners, the populist aesthetic expresses a taste for unprofessionalism, sentimental ordinariness and the improper. Studying the aesthetic dimension of populist securitisation can widen our understanding of the aesthetics of security, explaining the attractiveness of the populist, 'kitschy' appeal.

## Populism, societal security and securitisation

Despite the absence of consensus on the ultimate definition of populism, most theories of populism agree on its defining characteristic – the construction of a shared identity of the people which populists counterpose to the threatening image of the elite and those aligned with it. Representing the ideational approach to populism, Mudde highlights the centrality of the populist narratives of a heroic struggle, where populists defend the general will of the 'pure' people against the 'corrupt' elite and promote a view of politics as 'an expression of the *volonté générale*'.<sup>13</sup> A pioneer of the discursive approach to populism, Laclau views populism to be a discourse that separates the social into 'the people' and 'the power bloc', purporting to confront the existing hegemony.<sup>14</sup> Weyland similarly stipulates that populism is a political strategy that is based on the anti-elite rhetoric and the 'leader's promise to protect "the people" from a pernicious enemy'.<sup>15</sup>

To security scholars, the claim to act on behalf of and with reference to the security of the people echoes the discourse of societal security. Societal security is about the security of a particular collectivity and the shared identity it sustains. According to Wæver, societal security refers to 'the sustainability [. . .] of traditional patterns of language, culture, association and religious and national identity and custom'.<sup>16</sup> Societal insecurity occurs 'when communities of whatever kind define a development or potentiality as a threat to the survival of their community' or, more precisely, the identity of their community.<sup>17</sup> In populist discourses, societal security is centred not on ethnonational or religious identities but primarily on the identity of the 'common' people as a referent object that is threatened by the 'corrupt' elite. 'The people' are the social unit that serves as a locus of identification for its members. The invocation of 'the people' is not viewed just as a means to achieve other goals and securitise particular issues; rather, the preservation of a particular identity community appears as an end in itself. Here, identity is not a 'thing' that agents possess and want to defend when it is threatened but a process of constant

social (re)construction and reproduction.<sup>18</sup> To maintain identities, agents must intersubjectively act out the internalised representations of the group through particular ways of thinking, acting and feeling that adhere to dominant group norms.

Societal security was initially one of the sectors of state security in the five-dimensional approach elaborated by the Copenhagen School. Since then, research has mostly detached the concept from the sectoral approach and its association with the state level, beginning to examine societal security in its own right.<sup>19</sup> This paper defines societal security in terms of the referent object of security – the identity of a community – without limiting its focus to any particular dimension from which threats emanate. That is, to stress the centrality of societal security in populist discourses does not mean that populism operates solely within the societal sector of security. Societal security implies that populism maintains identity concerns as its central dynamic. But the people can be threatened along all five sectors of security: military, political, economic, societal and environmental. Otherwise put, populists may construct many threats – to sovereignty, borders, economy – but securing the identity of the people is the ultimate regard.

### *The role of securitisation*

Having established that societal security concerns are central to populism, what is the process through which the identity of the people is brought into existence, and how does it become viewed as appearing in danger? By referring to the need to preserve a specific identity group, populists activate a particular mode of security discourse – securitisation. The very emergence of populism presupposes a securitising act which posits the people as an identity community whose way of life is under attack by the elite. An everyday political appeal to the electorate transforms into populism when an actor articulates the threat narrative, and this securitising move receives enough resonance among the target audience, who might potentially authorise some kind of special action to be taken under the leadership of the actor. Before and without this original securitising act, populism is not yet populism. Rather than having a circumstantial relation, securitisation is an integral part of populism. The continued existence of populism demands a constant re-articulation of the original securitising act, amalgamating disparate issues under the guise of the struggle for the security of the people.

The idea of societal security suggests that populists use securitisation not only for putatively defensive purposes (i.e. defending a community against perceived threats) but also for the specific goal of constituting the identity of the people. Populists mobilise their audiences around the need to fend off perceived threats to their identity. Crucially, the very act of defending the group signifies the existence of that group, enacting the subject of the people into being. By engaging in defence of their identity, populist supporters externalise and affirm the existence of the people and their membership in the group to themselves and each other. Therefore, the forging of security problems and crises provides populists with the opportunities to reassert the identity of the people, for ‘only by being not totally secure can an identity be sustained’.<sup>20</sup> In the words of Weldes, crises ‘allow for the articulation and re-articulation of relations of identity/difference as a means of both constituting and securing’ identities.<sup>21</sup>

Drawing on this last point, the importance of securitisation further stems from the nature of identity in populism, which is produced in relation to difference and, in

particular, through an antagonistic form of othering. Populists do not merely differentiate between 'us' and 'them' to consolidate self-identity but, in fact, convert difference into evil and dangerous otherness. From then onwards, the very fact of the existence of different identities becomes seen as a menace to the people. According to Taggart, the demonisation of social groups as a threat object, together with the perpetual 'antipathy towards the elite, provides populists with an enemy, but it is also a crucial component of the attempt to construct identity'.<sup>22</sup> The enemy at once threatens and constitutes the people. Insofar as the identity of the people is fixed through the politics of othering, it is fundamentally precarious and insecure.<sup>23</sup> It is by its very nature always under threat and has to be unceasingly reasserted. By engaging in defence of their identity, the people more strongly internalise it, which elicits further societal security responses, after which the cycle repeats. Thus, to the extent that security threats and identities are mutually constitutive, securitisation is internally embedded in populism.

The constant need to protect the 'always-precarious' people is an essential source of power for populist actors. Once the enunciated threat becomes recognised as such, populists gain the authority to speak and act on behalf of the people. Hence, populists always try to continue securitisation by extending the purview of danger. They do so by gradually 'switching' crises, substituting one threat for another.<sup>24</sup> This has been the case in Poland, where the issue of migration has intermingled with the issues of abortion, LGBT rights and the threat coming from Russia. Moreover, populists perpetuate the perception of insecurity by connecting the chosen issue to the malign nature of a broader structural framework. Whatever the immediate security issue is, populists must frame it as symptomatic of the fundamental problem of the antagonism between the people and the elite which allegedly causes the former to exist in a permanent state of insecurity. Consequently, a disparate set of issues is eventually transformed into symptoms of one substantial security problem. For example, Orbán has often connected the enemy image of the former government and the opposition to the narratives of Hungarian victimhood and the struggle between the communist past and present.<sup>25</sup>

### *The limitations of securitisation theory*

Although helpful in illuminating securitisation as a mechanism that enables populists to mobilise societal security discourses, securitisation theory is limited in its ability to capture the full extent of how populism participates in the processes of security construction. Challenging the theory's narrow focus on the framing of security threats, Ciută argues for 'a thicker and more consistent understanding' of how security is constructed, including the construction processes of security meanings, actors, referent objects and practices.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, as the next section shows, apart from immediate security threats, populism invests in constructing security actors and building their identities. The examples are the 'ordinary' people, the 'corrupt' political establishment but also the leader who is identified as one of 'us', hence, possessing the genuine knowledge of what security means to the people.

Securitisation also tends to be seen as a unidirectional and linear process that is led and controlled by the securitising actor.<sup>27</sup> However, understanding populism demands acknowledging that the threatening elite, the people and the populist actor speaking for

them are all constructed simultaneously. Theiler calls this a 'triangular relationship', whereby there is a reciprocal link between the establishment of a threat object, group consolidation and the status of securitising actors.<sup>28</sup> Securitisation brings a mutual 'strengthening of all three: the social position of the securitising actor, the communal identity and the threat perception'.<sup>29</sup> Here, it is important to recognise that populists do not have full control over the securitisation they initiate. Theiler warns that 'the cycle of group identification, group salience and group defence can accelerate to the point where it spirals out of the control of all social actors concerned'.<sup>30</sup> Once this kind of dialectic gains momentum, 'it can acquire a dynamic of its own and escape the control of the "securitisers" who initially unleashed it'.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to broadening the scope of security actors, populism also raises questions about the duration of securitisation. Securitisation has typically been treated as a one-off event of designating a security threat within the context of a single issue, resulting in a narrow definition of the context of the act. As McDonald contends, the focus on the moment in which an issue becomes securitised contributes to 'a problematic dichotomy between politics and security' – the dichotomy which populism proves implausible.<sup>32</sup> In populism, the securitisation of the people is a continuous process which fundamentally underpins the populist understanding of other security issues and politics in general.

### **Populism as securitisation style: discourse**

While the concept of securitisation is useful for explaining the workings of populism, the latter also contributes to our understanding of securitisation. Populism validates the assumption that the form, content and success of securitising speech acts vary depending on the context and actors involved.<sup>33</sup> 'Security' is deployed differently by different actors who tailor their securitising moves to particular audiences. In his dramaturgical analysis, Salter classifies securitisation into four 'settings': elite, technocratic, scientific and popular.<sup>34</sup> According to him, each of these settings differs in terms of 'the core rules for authority/knowledge (who can speak), the social context (what can be spoken) and the degree of success (what is heard)'.<sup>35</sup> The setting determines 'the stage on which [the securitising move] is made, the genre in which it is made, the audience to which it is pitched and the reception of the audience'.<sup>36</sup> Securitisation does not simply consist of the ready-made grammatical rules (i.e. declarations of existential threat, calls for exceptional measures). It also necessitates a contextual inquiry into norms and conventions of discourse, actors empowered to speak, their identities and interests, security meanings and factors of success for securitising moves.

The aforementioned settings give rise to different styles of securitisation. Style refers to a collection of ways through which the securitising actor communicates and displays the presence of a threat to the audience using verbal and non-verbal symbolic means. This includes the actor's appearance, language, rituals, images, narratives and tropes. Pels defines style as a 'heterogeneous ensemble of ways of speaking, acting, looking, displaying and handling things, which merge into a symbolic whole that immediately fuses matter and manner, message and package, argument and ritual'.<sup>37</sup> The notion accounts for the importance of linguistic-discursive and aesthetic repertoires in securitisation, underscoring the inseparability of content and presentation. What matters is not

only what issues actors securitise but also *how* they do it. Style is a way of expressing the shared identity between the securitising actor and the audience. But actors' identities do not simply translate into a particular mode of securitising; rather, style becomes constitutive of identities of the actor and the audience in the first place. The process of aesthetically forging the figure of 'the threatened people' is never-ending and always remains subject to occurrences that render an aesthetic self vulnerable.<sup>38</sup>

In the elite style, the securitising move is typically done by governmental elites through official executive speech acts or in closed-door meetings with other political decision-makers, resulting in spectacular decisions within traditional security institutions. A non-spectacular, technocratic style of securitising is employed by technical experts and various 'security professionals', such as the police or security agencies, who appeal to their expertise and the importance of modern technologies in dealing with security crises, promoting a sense of stability or measured progress. The scientific style is associated with experts and academics who mobilise scientific facts and lay claim to objective, autonomous knowledge, professing to be disinterested and apolitical in their judgement. All the three styles exhibit good manners, political correctness and a 'knowing' attitude that elevates what is spoken above the 'lay' understanding of security. Hence, for populists, these styles are products of the same 'elitist' discourses of security. The final, popular style of securitisation is harder to pinpoint due to the sheer number of actors that may securitise within the respective setting – from media agents to religious actors and NGOs. In the populist imaginary, however, most of the securitising processes in the popular setting still fall within the 'elite' category if they are led by actors that fall outside of the populist characterisation of the people.

Instead, populism embodies a distinct style through which actors securitise issues in a way that enables the identity of the people to live on. The argument put forward in this paper is that populism can be understood as a specific style of securitisation which is distinguished by an appeal to the people who are claimed to be in need of protection by the populist leader and against the elite. Here, the notion of style implies looking beyond how populists frame 'the endangered people' and accounting for the way in which this idea is aesthetically delivered and enacted in the imagination of the audience. Below, I present the key discursive characteristics of populist securitisation, comparing it to the traditional, Copenhagen School model of securitisation and showing how populism fills some of its gaps. The section thereafter zooms into the aesthetic side of populist securitisation, demonstrating how it differs from other forms of security aesthetic.

### *Anti-elite*

Securitisation theory has traditionally focused on the speech of actors deemed institutionally legitimate to speak security and their designations of threat. According to Wæver, 'security is articulated only from a specific place, in an institutional voice, by elites'.<sup>39</sup> The securitisation process has been thought to be shaped by and further strengthen the institutional power of state elites and the preponderance of expert knowledge. Populism, in contrast, confronts the elitist nature of securitisation, expounding anti-elite security rhetoric. International organisations, policy-makers, state bureaucrats, the army and police, intelligence and defence agencies are linked with the groups that are portrayed as



threatening to the people – ethnic minorities, immigrants, asylum seekers, the long-term unemployed and LGBT groups. In the Netherlands, for instance, Thierry Baudet from the Forum for Democracy party has accused the establishment of putting the country's sovereignty at risk by encouraging migration: 'Malevolent, aggressive elements are being smuggled into our social body in unprecedented numbers [. . .]. Police reports about violent incidents at refugee centres are not made public. The attorney general's office looks the other way when it runs into sharia courts'.<sup>40</sup> The media are likewise framed as part of the establishment, with populists such as Trump, Bolsonaro and Modi accusing the mainstream media outlets of systematically broadcasting false news stories.

Populism is also profoundly distrustful of traditional security institutions, portraying intelligence and defence agencies as a threat to the true security needs of the people. For example, Trump reconfigured the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency as united in a 'deep state' conspiracy.<sup>41</sup> The attacks and purges against the military, law enforcement and intelligence communities have also been a feature of the Law and Justice government in Poland and the Freedom Party in Austria. Anti-institutionalism also manifests in the current right-wing populist backlash against the multilateral regimes of security and the international legal norms. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the International Criminal Court, the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU) have been targeted by the National Rally in France, the Alternative for Germany and the UK Independence Party for weakening national interests. Having withdrawn the Trump from the Paris Climate Agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, Trump has moved to pull the US out of the World Health Organisation, with Bolsonaro threatening to follow suit.

### *Political outsider as a securitising actor*

In traditional securitisation, actors become empowered to articulate security by way of their institutional position as state representatives. A facilitating role in the securitisation process is also played by security experts, bureaucrats and scientists whose authority is based on their expert knowledge and qualifications. Consequently, it has been assumed that populists are successful securitisers because they already possess sufficient institutional authority to do so.<sup>42</sup> However, in the conditions where 'the answer to the question of "who can securitise" remains "predominantly the state actors"', the authority of populist securitisers depends precisely on the opposite.<sup>43</sup>

Criticising the establishment, populists derive the authority to securitise from their status as political outsiders, which allegedly enables them to understand and incarnate the popular will. For example, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi – the son of a tea-seller – has differentiated himself from the hereditary and 'corrupt' political establishment: 'On one hand, there are these intellectuals who talk about Harvard, and on the other, there is this son of a poor mother, who is trying to change the economy of the country through hard work'.<sup>44</sup> While being one of 'ours', the image of the populist securitiser simultaneously needs to exhibit strong personalistic leadership. The centrality of the leader's extraordinary persona in the securitisation process is necessary to transcend the inherent weakness of the audience as an amorphous mass that lacks the capacity to



speak security for itself.<sup>45</sup> Wodak notes the double-positioning of the leader as both a representative and saviour of the people.<sup>46</sup> The leader embodies a quasi-missionary figure of salvation, displaying the mental and physical aptitude to fight for the people. Trump, Bolsonaro, Chávez, Modi, Orbán, and Wilders have all portrayed themselves as ‘creative agents endowed with extraordinary personal attributes who appear during political crises and other emergency situations to provide solutions’.<sup>47</sup>

### *Agential audience*

Suffering from an elitist bias, securitisation theory has paid scant attention to the role of securitisation audience. The audience has been conceptualised as ‘agents without agency’, as spoken at and acted towards rather than a meaningful participant in the securitisation process.<sup>48</sup> In populist securitisation, however, an agential audience is paramount. The populist audience can be divided into primary – those identifying as ‘the people’ – and secondary – a much larger category that is essential for disseminating populist securitising narratives which may include the media, politicians, the electorate and transnational actors.<sup>49</sup> With the secondary audience, it does not matter whether it actually ‘buys’ populist securitising moves, as its function merely is to provide populists with reception and dissemination. But it is the primary audience that has the capacity to accept or reject populist securitising moves.

While the audience and the referent object appear as separate units in securitisation theory, populists elevate their (primary) audience to the status of the ultimate referent object of security. In addressing the ‘struggling’ people, the populist rhetoric resembles the emancipatory promise of Critical Security Studies (CSS) to reclaim security ‘for “the voiceless, the unrepresented and the powerless”’ who are at best part of the audience providing moral support for a securitising move, and at worst passive recipients of elite discourses.<sup>50</sup> By securitising the people, populists construct a collective subject capable of acting upon its own ideas of security. As White elucidates, populism grants its audience the promise of agency, enacting ‘a politics of action and volition – or recognising problems where they exist and tackling them as one sees fit’.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, the people are actively involved in the securitising act through grassroots popular organisations and political movements. Populist securitisation is a ‘two-way phenomenon’, whereby the leader constantly arbitrates between the audience’s multiple re-interpretations of his/her discourse which generate new security meanings and threats.<sup>52</sup> Consequently, the populist securitiser’s power to impose a securitising ‘discourse with a univocal meaning on what is effectively a highly diverse public’ is ultimately constrained by the audience’s reactions to the securitising move.<sup>53</sup>

### *The homogenous people as a referent object*

Another feature of populist securitisation is the construction of a homogenous identity of the referent object of security. Far from the totality of all members of society, the people are just a sub-set of the whole population which, nevertheless, aspires to be the only legitimate totality. As Laclau said, it is ‘a part which identifies itself with the whole’.<sup>54</sup> This exposes another shortcoming in securitisation theory which has not adequately

theorised how the identity of the referent object is formed.<sup>55</sup> However, treating the referent object as a pre-discursive subject risks reifying the populist idea of 'the people'.

Importantly, overlooking the importance of collective identity formation, securitisation theory has also been unable to account for the racialised and gendered underpinnings of the referent object. The question is 'who is morally worthy to count as the people?'<sup>56</sup> To answer it, one must disentangle the racialised and gendered grids of intelligibility that underlie the embedded and embodied identity of the people. In Gray and Franck's study of the representation of refugees in British media narratives, 'the people' were defined against the representations of racialised, masculinised enemy image of non-white populations, which, for example, portrayed Muslim men either as terrorists or rapists.<sup>57</sup> The idea of 'the endangered people' equally relies on the representations of racialised and feminised vulnerability, in which white women appear as 'pure' yet vulnerable bodies that are spoken for by populist leaders. A relevant example is the portrayal of 'white German women' as objects endangered by 'male Muslim migrants' against the backdrop of the 2015/16 Cologne New Year's Eve events.<sup>58</sup> Even when populists seem to foreground class to race and gender, the racialised inequalities that underpin 'the people' reduce the meaning of class to the white working class.<sup>59</sup> In the context of Brexit, Shilliam observes that the English white working class was 'introduced as a forgotten indigenous constituency, independent of colonial pasts and unfairly displaced by multi-coloured newcomers'.<sup>60</sup> Whiteness served as the fundamental criterion for distinguishing between those who are entitled to security and the unsalvageable.

### *Identification between the actor and the audience*

The 'Copenhagen School' securitisation theory has suffered from a limited understanding of the relationship between the actor and the audience. The two merely seem to foregather around the act of negotiating the presence of a threat, with their identities being fully formed in advance and existing in separation from each other.<sup>61</sup> In contrast, populist securitisation entails a relationship of identification or the formation of a sense of shared identity between the actor and the audience. Compared to so-called 'elitist' securitisation styles – elite, technocratic and scientific – which maintain distance between the 'knowledgeable' actor and the popular audience, populist securitisation emphasises closeness to the people. It is marked by a special kind of rapport and an imaginary intimate actor-audience bond, which allows the actor to understand the people as oneself.

As the securitising actor cannot be identical to the audience, the gap between them is filled creatively through aesthetic devices. Identification is an ongoing creative process whereby the populist securitiser 'performs' the people and their experience of insecurity.<sup>62</sup> Since the people are not a given, singular or transparent entity, their identity does not exist before it is aesthetically enacted in the process of securitisation. What populists perform are the ascribed, idealised characteristics of an imaginary 'portrait' of the people.<sup>63</sup> A shared sense of aesthetics creates an impression of a direct connection between the actor and the audience as if there are no barriers between them. The aesthetic is a communal experience, and the populist leader and their followers draw intrinsic satisfaction from enacting collective identity in the process of defending it.<sup>64</sup> As the audience establishes psychological and emotional connections with the painted image and acts to

maintain its self-integrity, the identity of 'the endangered people' becomes consolidated.<sup>65</sup> The next section examines the aesthetic of populist securitisation, showing how it differs from the 'elitist' aesthetic of security.

## **Populism as securitisation style: aesthetics**

Viewing populist securitisation as a style takes its analysis beyond the strictly linguistic-discursive level, emphasising its aesthetic dimension and the interconnectedness of content and presentation. The discussion of populist securitisation requires examining how populists aesthetically project 'the endangered people'. Although there is an aesthetic dimension to every securitisation style, populist securitisation introduces an unconventional aesthetic that is specifically aimed to resonate with the popular audience. The notion of aesthetics denotes a set of contextually dependent principles governing the ideas of taste and beauty as expressed through actors' outward appearance, language and behaviour. The focus is on how actors broadcast and enact their content and the self-fashioning practices actors utilise to control their image. Vocabulary, prosody, fashion, manners, body language, metaphors and background setting are structured in ways that would maximise the persuasiveness of securitising performances.<sup>66</sup> The populist leader does not merely replicate the popular style of expression but becomes actually seen as embodying 'the people'. This final section characterises the aesthetic that animates populist securitisation, comparing it to the mainstream aesthetic representations of security.

### ***'Elitist' aesthetic***

In her feminist critique of nuclear strategic thinking, Cohn conveys the discourse characteristic of 'defence intellectuals' which, as she remarks, has 'become virtually the only legitimate form of response to the question of how to achieve security'.<sup>67</sup> Writing in the context of the Cold War, she captures how security has since become defined by the use of a specialised, 'technostrategic' language.<sup>68</sup> At play is the aesthetic of hyper-rationality and cold-bloodedness that denigrates sensory and emotional experience. It is evident in the countless dispassionate and intricately reasoned discussions that are devoid of 'any sense of horror, urgency or moral outrage'.<sup>69</sup> Cohn discerns a 'vigilant purging of all nonrational elements' and 'every possible trace of soft sentimentality'.<sup>70</sup> The legitimacy of security speakers rests on a claim to objectivity born of technical expertise and the isolation from social, emotional or moral factors that might threaten their objectivity. Fitting in aesthetically grants certain actors 'the power of entering the secret kingdom' of national security; whereas the failure to do so excludes others who are seen as unprofessional, unintelligent or simply irrelevant.<sup>71</sup>

Cohn correctly captures the sense of gravitas or high seriousness which typically characterises the act of speaking security. Security is traditionally associated with the 'high' aesthetic – good manners, dry scientific language, emotional neutrality, technical rationality, specialist training, discipline and the presentation of oneself in an official fashion. These aesthetic elements are characteristic of elected officials, administrative experts and policy analysts who utilise a dry, arcane language to maintain the image of themselves as voices of reason. Good aesthetic 'taste' in security terms often implies the

performance of knowledge, competence and credentials. A pertinent example is the COVID-19 press conferences, during which political leaders report on the latest situation with a solemn face, always trying to adhere to the script, referring to the scientific advice and reciting the approved slogans. For average members of the public, security speakers may seem rigid, boring or even heartless, reinforcing the view of the state as distanced, unresponsive and disconnected. For Cohn, the sanitised professional discourse removes defence professionals from the realities of which they speak. 'The elaborate use of abstraction and euphemism' has little to do with the way security is experienced by people on the ground.<sup>72</sup> It is at this point that populism intervenes to expose the chasm between the rationalist discourse and lived experiences of security.

There have been attempts to render security more aesthetically friendly to the mass audience. For example, Vuori shows how the Cold War securitisation of nuclear weaponry in a scientific setting combined the aesthetics of science and prophecy. The resulting 'aesthetic of doom' was manifested in the image of the Doomsday Clock which symbolised the imminence of nuclear annihilation and was displayed on the cover of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*.<sup>73</sup> The performance of resetting the Clock allowed the scientific community to present itself both as a voice of rationality and a soothsayer, blending science and fiction. According to Vuori, whereas 'scientists' textual arguments [tried] to awaken the reason of their audience, the symbol of the Clock [tried] to reach its bare sensibilities'.<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, the scientific aesthetic ultimately predominated. The very idea of the ticking clock was a symbol of the 'final countdown' which is 'a major aesthetic aspect of military and scientific operations'.<sup>75</sup> The prophetic aesthetic served to promote the status of scientists as 'purveyors of truth', given their access to facts, further elevating them above ordinary members of the public.

In the post-9/11 context, US popular culture saw the rise of another aesthetic of security specifically meant for the consumption by the mass audience. Hollywood's filmic engagement with terrorism dramatises elements of real-life terrorism through the familiar combat genre, constructing certain groups and regions as 'terrorist' in nature.<sup>76</sup> Action thrillers and blockbuster films are marked by spectacular action sequences, fast-paced storylines, fearsome demons (overwhelmingly Arabs and Muslims), the hypermasculine warrior, sound effects, sci-fi pictures, exotic settings and the cult of guns and violence. The object of attack usually appears to be an iconic object or city, such as the White House or New York, or the Commander in Chief as such, whose survival represents the survival of American power and Western values. These films also regularly feature images of government or intelligence and security agency sites, such as the US Capitol, the Pentagon or the CIA headquarters, as symbols of authority. A similar militaristic aesthetic permeates warfare video games, in which players command military units to destroy attackers in simulated 'real-world' conflict scenarios. Inspired by the Iraq war, war-themed games transport gamers into immersive virtual battlefields and create a realistic design of the equipment and uniforms.<sup>77</sup>

Despite likewise appealing to the popular audience, the populist aesthetic differs from the representations of security in post-9/11 popular culture in several significant ways. Granted, 'computer-generated images of over-determined historical events robbed of their particular significance' generate 'easy stimuli and sensation' and are intelligible and commercially attractive to audiences worldwide.<sup>78</sup> However, the populist aesthetic

establishes a connection with the audience on a deeper level by exploiting its desire for authenticity and employing culturally bounded, locally developed repertoires. Instead of fictional ‘superhero’ characters, there is an ‘ordinary’ figure of the leader. Instead of inaccessible and threatening symbols of institutional power, populists articulate security from banal spaces like community centres or farms. Instead of celebrating the arts of combat in defence of state security, populists fight for the identity of the people on a socio-cultural battlefield. The entertainment industry popularises discourses of American military prowess and global leadership – hence, the involvement of the US Department of Defence in the filming process.<sup>79</sup> In comparison, populism employs an anti-elite aesthetic that challenges the *status quo*. With this goal in mind, populism carries a distinctive aesthetic of security which, as I argue below, is appreciated specifically for its ordinariness.

### *Populist aesthetic*

Simple-minded, inexpert, shallow, improper, antagonistic, emotional and irrational – these are all the terms that are associated with the populist aesthetic of security. Populism is transgressive of the ‘high’ aesthetic of security, of the ‘proper’ behaviour of security speakers and of what can be publicly said – a so-called ‘celebratory desecration of the “high”’.<sup>80</sup> The populist aesthetic depends on its ‘high’ counterpart for its dialectical existence yet constantly devalues it by denigrating everything challenging and complicated. Populists securitise ‘in poor taste’, having the proclivity to provoke scandals, agitation and indignation. Their securitising performances are politically incorrect, insulting and crude, with the securitiser demonstrating impudent and imprudent manners. Inappropriateness and vulgarity are justified as a way of rendering visible the previously invisible suffering of the mob, the ‘humble’ people.

The poor taste manifests itself, first and foremost, in the way populists securitise the referent object, which takes the form of ‘an antagonistic appropriation for political, mobilisation purposes of an “unpresentable Other”’.<sup>81</sup> As Ostiguy argues, this so-called ‘Other’ is not the racialised enemy but the repressed ‘silent majority’, the politically subaltern, ‘a historical byproduct of an allegedly “civilising process”’.<sup>82</sup> The Other can be identified by its tendency to ‘provoke[. . .] shame or embarrassment for “decent”, “politically correct”, “proper” or “well-educated” people’.<sup>83</sup> Panizza clarifies that the portrait of the people is constructed by ‘adopting, turning upside down and putting into public discourse’ aesthetic elements that appear as markers of inferiority in the eyes of the elite – politicians, technocrats and scientists whose stylistic repertoires dominate the security arena.<sup>84</sup> Populists frame the referent object as an ‘ugly duckling’ and proudly flaunt it in a vulgar and ugly way to make themselves – and by extension, the endangered Other – visible in the security sphere.<sup>85</sup> For example, in response to the 2016 remark by Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton that half of Trump supporters belonged in the ‘basket of deplorables’, the Trump campaign turned ‘deplorable’ into a badge of honour for its supporters.<sup>86</sup> The meme ‘Les Deplorables’ quickly began circulating on social media, parodying a revolutionary scene from the *Les Misérables* musical with Trump standing in the centre. The song from the scene, ‘Do You Hear the People Sing?’, was played on several occasions as Trump walked up to the stage to deliver his speeches, with the meme

appearing on the background. The reference to the song cast Trump supporters as the 'poor' and 'downtrodden' people, conveying a sense of rage against the 'oppressors'.

The leader works as a symbolic device that incarnates the mindset of the 'common man' through speech, image, gesture, tone and demeanour. The self-presentation of populist securitisers can take different guises – from a colloquial and coarse way of talking to an informal style of dressing. 'I call for the awakening of our people's ancient soul, capable of opposing a bloodthirsty barbarism' – Marine Le Pen's reaction to the 2017 Champs Elysees shooting in Paris demonstrates the exaggerated, 'colourful' securitising rhetoric.<sup>87</sup> Self-presentation also involves particular props – for example, coming with a pitchfork and a cow to the Parliament to showcase the ability to protect the people's authentic way of life, as in the case of Oleh Lyashko, the leader of the Radical Party in Ukraine. The leader must be both like 'me' – the gendered and racialised figure of the people – and a fighting hero but one that is accessible and relatable to the audience. Referring to Trump's repetitive, ungrammatical and 'politically incorrect' way of speaking, a woman at his rally explained how he differs from politicians and experts: 'He's down to our level. He speaks it like it is'.<sup>88</sup> These lines from Trump's presidential announcement speech also illustrate the inseparably intertwined operations of gender and race that produce the threatening and violent image of Mexican migrants: 'When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. [. . .] They're sending people that have lots of problems. [. . .] They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists'.<sup>89</sup> The audience recognises itself in the image of a vulgar leader, whose position of power raises the people to the same level as the elite.

Instead of calmness and rational argumentation, populists turn securitisation into an affective spectacle aimed at invoking an array of emotions – from fear and anger to a sense of belonging and love with the leader. This is illustrated by Trump's rallies, where the populist demagogue and the crowd come together to aesthetically stage moments of unison through interactive securitisation, and where the audience can any time take over the making of speech acts. The end-products of this securitising spectacle are an aesthetically forged figure of the people together with an aesthetically represented binarism of the people versus the establishment (the Democrats) and the threatening outgroup (racial minorities). Another good example of the populist spectacles of security is the US military 'reunion' videos, in which a returning soldier surprises a family member.<sup>90</sup> Without involving the populist leader, it is the child that usually appears as a central actor in these performances, which take place in familiar community sites like churches or schools. As Steele elucidates, the reunion encounters serve 'as a stand-in for the celebratory and larger-scale parades following the "successful" conclusion of past conflicts and wars'.<sup>91</sup> They are significant in symbolising the hard-won victory of 'everyday' citizens, as opposed to the politicians who have failed those soldiers and the nation.

Self-presentation and affective spectacles apart, the populist aesthetic needs to be connected to the background culture of the audience. Populist securitisers must 'draw on and mobilise a common cultural structure, via appeals to the common knowledge of epistemic communities, to the *endoxa* by using presuppositions, insinuations and other pragmatic devices'.<sup>92</sup> Mobilising common symbols from popular culture, religion and history allows populist securitisers to secure credibility and sympathy. A good example is an endorsement by Poland's Law and Justice government of large-scale public ceremonial events led by



right-wing and religious groups. One of such events was the 'Rosary to the Borders' mass prayer, during which close to a million of Catholics gathered along the full length of the Polish border to pray for the salvation of Poland and other European nations against the framed threat of Islam.<sup>93</sup> Such symbolic rituals create a polarisation between, in this case, the Poles-Catholics, on the one hand, and imagined external enemies together with the secular, cosmopolitan elites, on the other. Therefore, populist securitisation is 'not superficially or faddishly about style', but rather about 'connect[ing] deeply with a society's history, existing group differences, identities and resentments' in a culturally and locally bounded manner.<sup>94</sup> This often implies resurrecting the national narratives of the idealised past and hyper-masculine notions of the nation in the socio-psychological process of identity construction.

### *Sentimental ordinariness and deliberate obtuseness*

Having analysed the manifestations of poor taste in the performance of populist securitising, we can see that populism carries a distinct aesthetic of security. Following Jordan, the populist aesthetic can be described as a kind of 'kitsch', referring to excessively garish or sentimental art objects that pander to popular taste – or simply 'really bad taste'.<sup>95</sup> Populists draw on formulaic, banal and simplified motifs, emotions and themes which run across the different securitising acts, reducing everything to the narrative of the 'virtuous' people damaged by the elite.<sup>96</sup> The populist aesthetic is seen as pretentious, vulgar and designed to flatter the masses through promulgating false and fraudulent visions of security that interfere with rational considerations. Championing 'common sense' is a populist way to help the audience 'by reducing the complexity of issues and lowering the cost of access to information on those issues'.<sup>97</sup> In preferring simple moral truths to facts, populism 'endorses a repetition of the familiar and a grounding in an affirmation of the everyday'.<sup>98</sup> Populist securitising performances are easily digestible, visually arresting and thrilling in their tendency to say the unsayable. Requiring no additional thought on the audience's part, their attractiveness resides in their easiness, in providing the audience with a short cut to complex problems.

Having a highly emotionally charged dimension, populism steers the audience towards identifying with the performed image and the actor through largely unreflective emotional responses. Populism uses sentimentality to create a sense of immediacy between the security enunciator and the audience. Populist sentimentality sweetens security with melancholy and nostalgia, inducing the audience to immediately react 'with a teary eye and a lump in the throat'.<sup>99</sup> For example, for Leave voters, the Brexit referendum was invested with nostalgic fantasies of regaining control and returning to a national homeland while fuelling mass fears about migration, as visualised in the provocative 'Breaking Point' poster unveiled by Nigel Farage.<sup>100</sup> Sentimentality is elicited by morally dignifying the people as 'innocent' and 'naïve' victims who are constantly attacked by 'the soulless mighty'.<sup>101</sup> The innocence ascribed to the referent object is central to the reception of the populist aesthetic because it enables the ease with which the audience aligns itself with 'the endangered people'. The very innocence of the people unable to defend themselves becomes perceived as a source of beauty, admiration and awe. This incites the audience to indulge in the pleasure of emotional arousal around performing the identity of the 'harmonious', yet 'long-suffering' people.



Populists' attitude towards security would be generally considered hopelessly wrong not simply because it fails to expand the audience's understanding of security, but because it cultivates deliberate obtuseness in its negation of rationality and expertise. For instance, Bolsonaro has been resistant to the advice from public health experts, dismissing COVID-19 as just a 'little flu' and demonstratively removing his mask during a press conference despite testing positive.<sup>102</sup> He repeatedly stated that the people had been 'tricked by these governors and by the large part of the media when it comes to coronavirus'.<sup>103</sup> Bolsonaro also fired the country's health minister, whose successor soon resigned following disagreements over the government's handling of the pandemic.<sup>104</sup> Nonetheless, populism surpasses bad taste through a curious reversal: its bluntness, emotionality and dishonesty become transvalued into naïveté, frankness and the 'all-too-human quality of folly'.<sup>105</sup> Populism proudly expresses a taste for unprofessionalism, anti-intellectualism and an overarching 'redemption of everyday human vice'.<sup>106</sup> Its predilection for 'alternative facts' is framed as a 'beautiful lie' which derives from the belief that truth is subjective, residing with the 'authentic' people, and not with the 'fake science'.<sup>107</sup>

In conventional security aesthetic terms, populist securitisation has no merit. Indeed, the populist style incarnates the way an 'ordinary' person with petty interests, pre-existing prejudices and no expert knowledge perceives security and acts when confronted with feelings of insecurity. Nonetheless, populism redeems its perceived shortcomings by applying them to the maximisation of its charm. An unrefined or 'low' aesthetic is seen as acceptable and even morally desirable due to its 'authenticity'. Its distance from the 'proper' aesthetic is what leads populist securitising performances to be consumed on a mass scale. Insofar as the audience finds the deviation from the norm to be a source of curiosity and attraction, populism's presumed aesthetic deficiencies will remain key to its virulence.

## Conclusion

This paper has sought to demonstrate the place of securitisation in populism and the discursive and aesthetic repertoires populists use to appeal to the mass audience. Populism and securitisation are connected through the populist invocation of societal security, as populists seek to constitute 'the people' through the act of securitising them. The precarious nature of the identity of the people incessantly triggers the construction of new security threats; and, in turn, securitisation enables that identity to stay alive. Moreover, I have conceptualised populism as a specific style of securitisation which is characterised by an anti-elitist conceit, an 'outsider' leader figure, the involvement of an agential audience, the homogenous identity of the referent object and immediate relation between the securitiser and the audience. I have also argued that the populist performance of securitising has a distinctive aesthetic dimension which is centred on 'poor taste', sentimental ordinairiness and deliberate obtuseness as a form of defiance against the norms of the security 'establishment'.

The purpose of employing a particular style is not only to appeal to the taste of particular audiences but, more fundamentally, to allure the audience with the promise of embeddedness in shared identity. The populist aesthetic conveys a sense of repetitiveness, comfort and familiarity with the represented image of the people, endowing it with

beauty. The very idea of the ‘innocent’ people being constantly menaced by the evil elite becomes infused with the sublime. The audience indulges in the construction of danger because with it comes a more fundamental feeling of security of the Self: ‘the more we suffer, the better we understand who we are, and where we belong’. The insecuritising spiral of populism implies that the sense of societal security it produces becomes a means to awaken the further need for securing the referent object against its imagined enemies. Once the audience internalises the identity of ‘the endangered people’, the ‘suffering’ Self will live on, initiating new cycles of securitisation.

The analysis elucidates the importance of studying different styles of securitisation for our understanding of how securitisation plays out differently depending on the context and actors performing it. Populism reveals the power of the aesthetic experience in securitisation and the significance of an emotional bond between the actor and the audience. As a result, we can better comprehend how the security realm can become infiltrated by the seemingly ‘misfit’ or ‘outsider’ characters and discourses, whose appeal is centred on substantive ties of feeling rather than the performance of expertise and rationality. While this paper has focused on right-wing populism, the studies of populism and security alike can benefit from a consideration of the role of securitisation in ‘left populism’. Given the transgressive capacity of populist securitisation to challenge dominant security framings, future research could investigate whether left-populist securitisation works differently or holds any emancipatory potential.

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## Notes

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