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The Extreme-right in France: the situation in November 2009

How does the Extreme-Right show in France?

Elections to the Regional Councils will be held in March 2010. In the previous such elections which were held in 2004, the FN polled 14,7% and that was the last time the party approached the 15% mark, before the historical setback it suffered in 2007, when Jean-Marie Le Pen polled a poor 10,44% in the presidential election won by Nicolas Sarkozy, who had vowed to crush the FN. Now, according to opinion polls, the major Conservative party, the UMP, would win 27/30% of the vote, the Socialist Party, 21%; the Greens 15%; the Parti de Gauche (more or less the equivalent of Die Linke) and the Centrist MODEM, 6% each and the FN, 8/9%¹. If this becomes reality next year, it means an unexpected revival of the FN, which is expected to receive more than 10% of the vote in 10 of the 22 regions of mainland France.

As in much of Western Europe, there are Extreme-Right political parties other than Front National, but they are either almost inactive, as is the MNR (formerly led by Bruno Mégret) or totally insignificant (that is, they poll less than 1%).

The situation in the polls:

The peak of the party's electoral success was in 2002, when Le Pen came second to the incumbent president Jacques Chirac, in the first ballot of the presidential election, polling

¹ Latest poll by IFOP, November 24, 2009

16,86%, that is 4,8 million votes. However in the second ballot, Le Pen was defeated, receiving 17,79% against 82,2% for Chirac². What looked like a thunderstrike then, must therefore be understood in the light of two factors. First in the first ballot, Le Pen came second because of the high number of candidates (16), especially because the Left was divided and second, he was not able to gather new votes on the second ballot, because all the political parties other than the Extreme-Left, asked their voters to support Chirac, despite their total opposition to his policies. This sums up the major problem of FN: its constant inability to become more than a nuisance and a protest vote, a situation which made it unable to break the „cordon sanitaire“ the other parties imposed on him and which explains his failure to gain credibility as a party of government, both on the local and the national level. Throughout the 1983-2009 period, more than 80% of the voters said in opinion polls that they did not trust the party and did not wish to see it in Government.

The election results of FN in 1992/2007 were as follows:

Regional 1992	13,8%
Local (cantonales) 1992	12,31%
National 1993	12,7%
EU 1994	10,5%
Local (cantonales) 1994	9,67%
Presidential 1995	15,3%
National 1997	15%
Regional 1998	15,4%
Local (cantonales) 1998	13,9%
EU 1999	5,69%
Local (cantonales) 2001	7,12%
Presidential 2002 (second ballot)	16,9%

² On the second ballot, Le Pen received 5,525 million votes, that is : his votes on the first ballot, plus the 666,000 cast for Bruno Mégret, plus 55,000 votes.

National 2002	11,34%
EU 2004	9,8%
Regional 2004	14,7%
Local (cantonales) 2004	12,1%
Presidential 2007	10,44%
National 2007	4,29%
European 2009	6,47%

The downward trend in the FN vote that began in 2007 can be attributed to Sarkozy's populist campaign and the fact that he almost "stole" the issues of immigration, the multicultural society and law and order from an ageing and less charismatic Le Pen, the age difference (52 y.o vs 79), playing against the FN. Approximately 70% of those who had voted for Le Pen in 2002, voted for Sarkozy in 2007 on the second ballot. This is particularly true of the middle-class and those in the professions, but the FN retained a significant part of its base among the working-class and the jobless, particularly in areas that are hit by the industrial crisis, like North and Eastern France. In other words, the FN will may be pass the 10% threshold in the next election, but it is very unlikely that it can come back to national prominence unless a significant part of Sarkozy's voters switch again to the Extreme-Right, a trend that is not foreseen now. Another important point is that the hegemony of the Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP) over the Conservative Right, allows it to refuse any kind of alliance with FN.

How the Extreme-Right is organized

Political Parties

The Extreme-Right is divided into a myriad of rival groups which are trying to contest the leadership of this party family once Le Pen steps down from the presidency of FN, in 2010 or

in 2011. What is now at stake is the ideological identity and the tactics of the FN in the presidential election of 2012 and after, and they are quite different, according to whether Marine Le Pen or Bruno Gollnisch take over the party. New alliances will then take place, either with a „modernist“ outlook with Marine Le Pen or with a „traditionalist“ outlook with Gollnisch. However, the fundamentals will not change and they remain: populism; xenophobia with a social agenda of „priority to the French“; opposition to the European Union and the Euro; opposition to „the Big State“, but with a demand for a higher level of social services for the French natives only. What may change is the style of leadership: Marine Le Pen is much less prone than her father, or Gollnisch, to utter statements that are blatantly racist or even, which promote anti-semitism or Holocaust denial.

Apart from the FN, the Extreme-Right consists of the Mouvement National Républicain; the Parti de la France and the Bloc Identitaire. The MNR was founded in 1999 by Bruno Megret, the former number two man in FN, as the result of a split. It polled only 0,39% in 2007 and is almost defunct now. The Parti de la France is led by Carl Lang, a former FN top executive. It is a splinter party which was launched in January 2009, mostly as a group trying to position itself in the prospect of Le Pen's retirement. The PDF is a mix of former FN arch-conservatives, Catholic fundamentalists and neo-fascists. The Bloc Identitaire was launched as a party in October 2009 and is headed by Fabrice Robert. It comes from the national-revolutionary sub-party family and evolved into a populist movement rallying around Lega Nord-like slogans of European nationalism; opposition to Islam; distantiating from the traditional Extreme-Right and a focus on cultural/ethnic identity values. The PDF and BI will contest the regional elections, while the MNR may do so in an alliance with PDF.

Distinct features of the French Extreme-Right are: a weak skinhead movement, which is however gaining ground in Northern France and is mostly represented by the Hammerskins; a weak neo-Nazi movement, except in the above mentioned region; the fact that the organizational model of the Autonome Nationalisten is virtually unknown, despite the short existence of a Paris-based cell; the intellectual influence of both the Monarchist and the

Catholic fundamentalist groups; the fact that the New Right, and especially Alain de Benoist, its major thinker, have expressed their opposition to the FN³.

Social movements

The Extreme-Right has almost no influence on the social movement: in the mid-90s, the attempts of FN to launch trade unions and professional associations ended quickly in dismal failure. The youth wing of the party (Front National de la Jeunesse), which served as a training-school for future party executives and has always been a hotbed of radical ideologies, never had more than 1800 members. The FN has no influence in the academy and in the media, it has no think-tank, although the Fondation Polemia and the Club de l'Horloge respectively disseminate the ideas of the Identity movement and the national-conservative Right. The number of extremist publications sold at newstands, as well as that of bookshops other than mail-order or online, is diminishing but remains higher than in most European countries (6 publications; a dozen bookshops). The Extreme-Right is a kind of counter-society with its codes and traditions, but the overwhelming majority of the voters do not have any connection to it. The average FN voter feels very alienated from the elites and the social movement, he/she tends to stop voting when he/she is not able to cast his/her vote for FN (as it was the case in the 2008 city council elections, when the party was unable to stand in all the major cities). Besides, all surveys show that the average FN voter has no religious affiliation.

Attitudes in society

The activity of the Extreme-right is to be seen in the context of the growing number of racist/antisemitic acts, when compared to the 1990s. A downward trend in racist actions began in 2006, but it has stopped in 2008/ 2009, because of the record-breaking number of

³ Despite the fact that he remains a regular contributor to *Junge Freiheit*, de Benoist is not a national-conservative and tries to distance himself from the political Right. The *Konservative Revolution* is, however, the major influence on his thought.

antisemitic incidents at the time of the demonstrations against Operation Cast Lead. Quite paradoxically, this does not mean that the French society becomes more intolerant. The annual survey of the Commission Nationale Consultative des Droits de l'Homme (CNCDH) for 2007, shows that 48% of those surveyed say they „are not racist at all“, an increase of 4% over 2006. Although 49% think that „there are too many immigrants in France“, 68% say that „immigrants bring cultural openness“ in France and 78% think that „immigrants are here at home, since they are a need for the economy“. Nevertheless, some ethnic minorities are still the victims of specific prejudices: the Roma are said by 74% to be „an insular group“ and 48% show prejudice against the Muslims. The Jews are considered by 34% as a group isolated from the rest of society and have to face a rise in violence perpetrated by a minority of the people from an immigrant, North-African background. When asked about their major problems in everyday life, 50/52% of the French mention unemployment and the fear of becoming poor (terrorism: 21%; religious fundamentalism 15%; immigration, only 9%). The influence of the Extreme-Right can be seen in the negative image of the Muslim faith: almost 40% have a negative opinion of Islam and 77% stand against wearing the hijab outside of one's home. In all cases, prejudice against the minorities are strongly correlated to voting for the Extreme-right, but also to being a male, under-educated working-class citizen with a lower than average income.

Target groups and their approach:

In terms of sociology, between 2002 and 2007, the voters for Le Pen or FN have the following background:

	Presidential 88	Presidential 95	Presidential 02	Presidential 07
Total	15	15	17	11
Sex				
Male	18	19	20	12
Female	11	12	14	9

Age				
18-24	14	18	13	10
25-34	15	20	17	10
35-49	15	16	18	11
50-64	14	14	20	12
65 and over	16	10	15	9
Occupation				
Farmer	10	10	22	10
Managers	19	19	22	10
Middle-level executive	14	4	13	7
Low level employee	14	18	22	12
Worker	17	21	23	16
Jobless	17	28	20	11
Sector				
Private	16	16	20	12
Public	14	14	14	11
Education				
Primary school	15	17	24	13
Secondary school	17	20	21	13
Abitur	13	12	15	8
Abitur+2	10	13	11	3
University degree	9	4	7	4
Catholic Religion ⁴				
High	13	8	12	5
Low	13	13	18	10

⁴ The above data refers to the degree of religious belief and obedience to the Catholic Church's teachings: High; Low; No religious attendance or observance; declares as "no religion". There are no data for other religions.

Never	16	19	20	12
Without	10	14	15	12

This matrix can be interpreted as follows. First of all, the FN is predominantly a male party: the “gender gap” does not narrow with time, although Marine Le Pen now represents the FN in the media and is its main spokesperson. The party mostly attracts a middle-aged and retired constituency, and its impact on the youth is limited by its negative image as a party led by an old man. The average voter has a low income; a low educational level and a low social status. He/she is not observant in matters of religion. The overwhelming majority of FN voters has a Catholic background, although there are some Protestant strongholds in the Alsace region as well. The number of those who vote for FN within the Jewish and the Muslim population remains below 5%, despite Le Pen’s efforts to attract the second-generation immigrants’ vote in the suburbs during his 2007 campaign.

As for the leading themes of FN propaganda, they selected accordingly by the party. Immigration and the mobilization against the “decline” of national pride comes first, but is now strongly challenged by Sarkozy’s rhetoric in the current national debate over national identity. The valuation of hard- work, social benefits for the native French only, entrepreneurial skills and meritocracy comes second, as befits a party with a working-class/professions constituency. Law and order (including the re-enactment of the death penalty) comes third. An opinion poll released very recently, shows that among working-class voters however, the priorities of 2007 are changing: those citizens now say that their vote will be cast according to the agenda of the parties on economic and social issues, with unemployment and spending power coming first. Clearly, the issue of immigration/identity is not a priority.

What are its prospects?

The Front National is now declining. The reasons are Le Pen’s bad showing in the 2007 presidential election and the subsequent cuts in public funding of the party, which was forced

to sell its oversized headquarters, fire a portion of its permanent staff and run low-key campaigns. The image of the party is damaged by the internal strife about Le Pen's coming succession as chairman. However, the major question is not to know who will succeed him (most probably his daughter), but whether the party will survive the crisis. The first scenario is that Marine Le Pen becomes chairperson, and she will try to change the image of the party in a way that is said to be "moderate" by many. In this case, she might lose the most diehard ideologues and militants, and will have to attract new voters from the mainstream Right, especially among the youth and women. The second scenario is that Bruno Gollnisch or another conservative will take the chair and in this case, the party might either split or stay as a minor party, around 3/5% of the vote. If Marine Le Pen takes over, one has to understand that she does not intend to follow a Fini-like strategy and that, although she may look softer than her father, Marine Le Pen does not intend to change the fundamentals of the FN ideology on such issues as immigration; opposition to Islam, multiculturalism and law and order, although she does differ from her father on Jewish and Israel-related issues: because of her age (born 1968), she, unlike her father, is not mentally shaped by the history of the Second World War and it is even quite certain that she is not anti-Semitic.

The FN's poor showing in the polls, combined with the announced retirement of Le Pen, will undoubtedly re-draw the map of the French Extreme-Right, and in 2009, there were many moves that already prove this. First of all, several grouplets (PDF; BI; Nouvelle Droite Populaire) are trying to fill the tiny space that exists between the arch-conservative Right (the Mouvement pour la France, led by Philippe de Villiers) and the Extreme-Right, with the hope of attracting FN militants who are weary of their party's inability to become mainstream.

On the other hand, there are groups and individuals who wish that when Le Pen steps down, radicals from inside and from outside the party rally around an anti-establishment; racist, anti-capitalist and anti-globalization "Third Way". Terre et Peuple, led by Pierre Vial, is one of those and can be labelled a French equivalent of the völkisch movement, much in the way of the German Thule Seminar. The group Egalité et Réconciliation, led by Alain Soral, is another one but opposite to Vial, it has a positive view of Islam, seen as a religion which provides immigrants with a set of conservative moral values, thus allowing them to resist the race-mixing induced by the multi-cultural society. The former Réseau Radical, whose leader

is Christian Bouchet, holds similar views, and is an interesting example of how a radical anti-Zionist, pro-Iran, national-revolutionary group has chosen to work from inside the FN and support Marine Le Pen, in order to influence her policies. This tiny minority of Extreme-Right movements promotes an ideology that can be traced back to such figures as Jean Thiriart, Franco Freda and Francis Parker Yockey. Finally, the fear of many in the law-enforcement agencies is that, if the FN splits or continues to lose ground, a violent Extreme-Right might emerge, on a pattern similar to that of the *Autonome Nationalisten*, which does not exist yet.

The international networks

The FN was the driving force behind the wave of similar parties that blossomed in Western Europe and eventually followed in the steps of the former Italian MSI as the leader of the West European Extreme-Right. As it rose from the lunatic fringe to being an important party, the FN soon took over as the shining star of the European Extreme-Right. This partly explains why, following its first electoral success, Le Pen began contemplating the idea of building up a trans-national network, both in the European Parliament and outside of it. The last such grouping was the *Groupe Identité, Tradition, Souveraineté*, which existed in the Euro-Parliament in January-November 2007, but like other such previous groups, this one failed because of internal in-fighting. Those attempts at building a group in Strasbourg, as well as a trans-national network of parties under the name “Euro-Nat”, have generally been misinterpreted. In the 1970s, when the MSI sponsored the *Eurodroite* network, it had very little to gain from this and the move was primarily motivated by a genuine commitment to “spreading the faith” in countries where the Extreme-Right was weak, or keeping it alive where it was threatened, such as in Greece and Spain, following the fall of the dictatorships. On the opposite, FN-led groups were only launched in order to compensate the party’s total lack of credibility on the “home front”, by trying to appear as a party with many high-ranking or mainstream connections abroad. The international contacts of FN were managed without any attention being given to their ideological soundness or their practical relevance, and the party even seems to have known very little about some of its foreign partners: in 1996, the FN staff member in charge of handling the contacts for the Youth wing of Euro-Nat was not able

to give a proper definition of ideological filiation of the Portuguese movement that was part of the network⁵. In fact, the FN has not been very serious about building a trans-national network on an ideological basis. First of all because it knows too well that this is an impossible task, then because the real reason behind those contacts was for Le Pen to boost his ego by meeting fellow politicians who, especially in Austria, Romania, Slovakia and Russia, were part of the ruling coalition or who, in Flanders, had the pretense of becoming the leading political force. The only thing that was serious about the group in the European Parliament is that it gave the party, important financial and administrative means, provided by the assembly, which were used to hire staff members and publish propaganda material, or stage events, which in fact were useful to the party on the national level.

At this time, another attempt is made to build a transnational network that is both active within and outside of the European Parliament. It includes the FN; BNP; Jobbik; Sverigedemokraterna; Front National Belge; the Ukrainian Svoboda party and the MS-Fiamma tricolore. The name is Alliance européenne des mouvements nationaux”.
