

APRIL 2022

THE FRENCH RIGHT, THE EUROPEAN UNION, AND THE 2022 FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION



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This text was written before Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It is a translation of: Nicolas Lebourg, "In Ablehnung vereint? Rechte Parteien in Frankreich und ihr Blick auf die Europäische Union," Paris, 2022, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Paris, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/paris/19076.pdf>

This paper provides a short inventory of the ideological relationship of the French right-wing presidential candidates toward the European Union (EU). Following the "Sarkozyst decade" (2002-2012), French conservatism has struggled to chart a course for its relationship with the EU. The Sarkozy decade remains celebrated by conservative voters yet marked by "the impossible synthesis between neoliberalism and nationalism."¹ In December 2021, a Les Républicains (LR) party primary election resulted in the nomination Valérie Pécresse, in an attempt to combine patriotism with a moderate pro-EU stance. On the far right, the nationalist voting bloc was split in two. For the third time, Marine Le Pen has been nominated as the candidate of Le Rassemblement National (RN: National Rally), which is the successor to the former Front National (FN). Running against her, to her right is Éric Zemmour, a successful television pundit, who had launched his own party, Reconquête! (R!: Reconquest!, or *¡Reconquista!*). Focused on the constant denunciation of the "Great Replacement"² and Islamophobia, its political apparatus is reminiscent of the FN of the 1990s.

Les Républicains

The central figure of the French mainstream right was President Jacques Chirac, who dominated the French conservative landscape from the 1970s to the mid-2000s. His position toward the European Union evolved dramatically over the years, from opposition in the name of sovereignty and the legacy of Charles De Gaulle, to a "Europe of reason," a sign of the right's adaptation to the transformation of French political identity and its Europeanization.

In 1992, Chirac supported the Maastricht Treaty, which created the European Union, and in 2005 the Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe (TCE), though the latter was not ratified. When France took over the semiannual rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union in July 2000, President Chirac made a speech whose central notion was that of "European construction," insisting on the need to endow the European Union with diplomatic and military powers.³ Faced with the hostility of his electoral base towards Turkey's consideration for prospective entry into the EU, in 2005 he obtained a revision of the French Constitution requiring that French approval of the accession of a new state to the EU be subject to a referendum or a three-fifths vote by both chambers of Parliament.⁴

Chirac's successor at the Élysée Palace, Nicolas Sarkozy, initially showed a certain European zeal, in particular during France's European presidency in 2008. Sarkozy advocated for a powerful Europe

capable of taking control in areas where the nation-state struggles: industrial policy, migration control, the climate crisis, and relations with Russia. On the other hand, President Sarkozy also raged against the EU technocratic and ordoliberal tendencies and challenged its system of checks and balances.⁵ Sarkozy's former Prime Minister, and candidate of the right in 2017, François Fillon, was less pro-European. Fillon had voted "no" on the Maastricht Treaty and his presidential platform stuck almost exclusively to an intergovernmental vision of the EU wherein the other countries are no more than "partners," or even competitors. His view of Germany was quite critical: "Germany has become great, but she still lives in her parents' house," writing about its relationship with the United States. Fillon's central point was to reinforce the relationship with Russia: "by wanting to tear Ukraine away from Russian influence at all costs, Europe has committed a historic blunder" undermining "all hopes of integration of Russia into a larger European economic space capable of resisting Asian domination."⁶

Today's candidate, Valérie Pécresse, has recently published a book presenting her political views. She states: "I am first and foremost a patriot before being European, even if I believe in the absolute necessity of a European ambition for France, which includes transfers of sovereignty." She recalls her support for the euro ("[an] indispensable tool of a great economic power") and the TCE ("a magnificent cathedral"). She is much more critical than her predecessor towards Brexiters, whom she paints as liars, and towards illiberal regimes. In addition to her support for sanctions against Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, she also strongly opposed the leadership of her own party when in 2018 the majority of Les Républicains members of the European Parliament (MEPs) refused to vote for sanctions against Hungary. She is more nuanced than Fillon in her stance on Russia, pointing to Moscow's "desire to weaken the European Union" and the "power of the destabilization carried out via the internet by Russian networks." In terms of relations with North Africa, she has called for a "harmonization" of asylum rights, "with a common list of safe countries," and "the development of Africa."⁷ She has approached macroeconomic issues from the perspective of the EU's Stability and Growth Pact: she proposes raising the retirement age back to 65 in order to lower France's debt-to-GDP ratio from its current level of 116.3%, back down to 100% by 2027.

Pécresse's campaign does not hesitate to adopt a more patriotic or nationalist tone than her predecessors. Her team is largely made up of former Fillon campaign staffers, including one of the speechwriters: Joseph Macé-Scaron, who was a member of the French New Right, GRECE (Groupement de Recherche et d'Études pour la Civilisation Européenne, or Research and Study Group for European Civilisation; its acronym spells out the French word for the country Greece: *Grèce*) and the sovereignist left. She has pledged that she "will not hesitate to invoke the 'constitutional identity' of France to oppose any encroachment of European jurisprudence." She detailed her vision of the relationship between nation and Europe on the day France took over the presidency of the EU.⁸ Defending the latter as "the soft underbelly of globalization," her proposals focus first and foremost on migration issues. She approaches the question of a multicultural society from the angle of "secularism." Her desire to redeploy pre-accession aid given to new member states joining the EU has been renewed. She believes that the EU budget should also be rebalanced by ending flat-rate corrections allocated to various member states (Denmark, the Netherlands, Austria, Sweden, and Germany). On economic policy, she supports the harmonization of taxation, a "buy-European" preference in public procurement, and the Green Deal with a carbon tax on imports. She would also ask EU member states to favor the French defense industry as compensation for the fact that France "assumes the largest share of European defense." Finally, an original institutional proposal of hers straddles the fence between the spirit of European coordination and the perception of competitive tension between the nation and the EU: "Each of my senior ministers will have at his side a national-level secretary responsible for defending the interests of his ministry in Brussels."

Her systematic reiteration of the principle of constitutional identity and openly sovereigntist policies indicate that French establishment conservatives consider the central question for its electorate today to be the reappropriation of the markers of sovereignty, particularly in the areas of migration and macroeconomic policy—a sign that the establishment wing of French conservatism now has to position itself in relation to its two far-right competitors.

Le Rassemblement national

Nationalist but not sovereigntist, the FN initially defended the European Currency Unit (ECU), the index that served as a precursor to the introduction of the euro.⁹ During the 1986-1988 legislative session—the only period when the FN had a parliamentary group—the party did not intervene during the debates on the European Monetary System (EMS, which included the application of the ECU and related mechanisms) and abstained during the vote on the Single European Act.¹⁰ Its leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen (father of Marine), even defended a common European defense, both conventional and nuclear.¹¹ Hostility emerged only beginning with the Maastricht Treaty, which was ratified in 1992, together with an anti-American shift marked by opposition to the US-led war against Iraq beginning in 2003. The FN took up a perspective stemming from the more radical groups, which consider globalization and American unipolarity as the establishment of a yoke by new globalist, cosmopolitan elites. As criticism of the EU became commonplace with its democratic deficit, its technocracy, and its submission to global financial capital, the FN was also forced to steadily radicalize its opposition to the EU.¹²

In the doctrinal book that Marine Le Pen published before the 2012 presidential election, she asserted that the EMS was at the origin of the destruction of the French social and industrial model and called for a “return to national currencies.” The question is not only economic but political, as globalization would work hand in hand with post-modernity. The EU would impose an “American ultra-liberal communitarian model” producing a new and nomadic man, conforming to what would be a liberal totalitarianism. Marine Le Pen defines globalism as “an ideology, the main feature of which is to deny the usefulness of nations and to adapt to the ‘postmodern’ world, which aims to shape a new man, a sort of *Homo mondialisus*, living above ground, with no identity other than that of the global consumer ... to bring Man out of History.” Faced with this process, she calls for an equally integrated emphasis on demographic, cultural, economic, and political sovereignty, in order to ensure a protective enclosure.¹³

The desire to break with the eurozone prevented the transfer of votes from well-to-do right-wing voters during the second and final round of the 2015 local elections. Marine Le Pen then conceded a slight shift, saying that she was once again defending the policy of a common currency. During the 2017 presidential election, she explained that 70% of her platform depended on achieving a Frexit (a proposed French imitation of Brexit), on which she pledged to hold a referendum.¹⁴ Such a position became untenable after the agreement concluded between the two rounds of the presidential elections with the sovereigntist Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, who was hostile to the idea of leaving the euro, and which contradicted Le Pen’s narrative during the first round. She then stated to the press that she never said that France would leave the euro and that she was in favor of a common currency. The FN did not inform its members about this ideological shift, and each member had to defend it as best they could. During the televised debate with Emmanuel Macron, Marine Le Pen ended up accepting the EMS as a model by stating that the common currency would be a return to the ECU.

Following this debate, which was seen as a failure for Le Pen and led to a split between her and the sovereigntist ideologue Florian Philippot, Marine Le Pen abandoned the Frexit theme, and even declared she no longer wanted to suspend France’s membership in the Schengen Agreement, which creates a common external border to be enforced equally by all Schengen member states, thereby

eliminating internal customs and border checks between them. The platform published during the 2019 European Parliament elections nevertheless affirmed the party's refusal to have the EU covering the pre-accession costs of prospective member states, proposed abolishing the European Commission and giving back the ability to propose legislation exclusively to the European Council, and called for national law to take precedence over rulings by the European Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights. The document also advocated a rapprochement with Russia,¹⁵ development assistance to Africa in exchange for the control of migratory flows, and the exit "from the logic" of Schengen. It stated that French companies must be the "priority in public procurement" in order to compensate for the "acceptance of the customs union" to which the party now consents. Finally, if "the euro as it functions today serves the interests of Germany," it would be retained in return for an increase in the proportion of the national debt held by the national central banks.¹⁶

As we can see from this platform, contrary to what the media claims, it cannot be said that the RN has converted to become an apologist for the EU: it has merely accommodated its platform to the new reality of the majority of the French electorate, which rejects the idea of Frexit. Regarding the euro, European Parliamentarians from the RN published a clumsy report stating that France has suffered from the adoption of the euro, and blaming this for excessive French taxation and the poorer quality of French products. However, it acknowledged that France was able to absorb the shock thanks to the "performances of a fine array of globalized groups and the immense contribution of tourism."¹⁷ The EU's responses to the pandemic have met with partial satisfaction by the RN. Its MEPs felt that "the suspension of the rules of the stability pact" and "the authorization given to the states to release national aid" demonstrated that in the face of the crisis there were ultimately no solutions other than "the ideas of the sovereigntist forces."¹⁸

In January 2022, the day France took over the EU presidency, Marine Le Pen argued that, if she were president, she would propose a referendum stating that the French Constitution affirms "the superiority of constitutional law over European law."¹⁹ If it does not specify the modality of such superiority, one can suppose that the RN envisages a generalization of the principle of constitutional identity of France, imported from Italian and German case law. The concept appeared on July 27, 2006 in decision no. 2006-540 DC of the Constitutional Council in response to the inclusion of a principle of the primacy of EU law in the draft Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe (article I-6 of the draft TEC). It thus makes it possible to legally challenge the application of the principle of primacy.²⁰

Reconquête!

Over the past year, Éric Zemmour has gradually built up his image as a political figure in order to become a viable candidate for president. He takes advantage of the weakening of the establishment end of the conservative spectrum, held between Emmanuel Macron and the RN, and is attempting to impose "the unification of the right." By this, Zemmour means what has been called since 1934 a "nationalist compromise" on the part of the French far right, to create a common platform for the various nationalist structures.

Zemmour's European platform must therefore appeal to a wide array of figures such as the former number two of Les Républicains, Guillaume Peltier; or Jérôme Rivière, who led the RN MEPs; but also the Catholic sovereigntist Philippe de Villiers (who received 2.23% of the vote in the 2007 presidential election); and all the far-right radicals who have joined Zemmour, such as Jean-Yves Le Gallou, among one of the most prominent ideologues of French radicalism. A former member of GRECE, and former right-hand man of Bruno Mégret, Le Gallou is the inventor of the principle of "national preference."²¹ Immediately adopted by the FN, it was watered down by Marine Le Pen, who nevertheless wants to include this principle in the French Constitution. Le Gallou supports a white

Europe, speaks against the “cosmopolitan Europe of the ‘Eurocrats’ building a supranational state, itself a step towards a centralized world government.” He advocates for a European confederation governed by the legal principle of subsidiarity, such that decisions are made at the European level only as a last resort.²²

Éric Zemmour has dedicated only a very small plank in his platform to the EU. In it, he highlights themes of strict subsidiarity, the primacy of French law over European law, the reservation of a quota of public procurement orders for French companies, and reserving social benefits for Frenchmen.²³ His bestselling works draw a clear line in favor of radical sovereignty. According to him, the EU only serves the economic interests of Germany and the migratory “invasion.” Zemmour displays a thoroughgoing Germanophobia: “three times in one century, the Germans will have contributed in a decisive way to European suicide: 1914, 1939, 2015.”²⁴

In his campaign tour, Zemmour contrasts being a “Frenchman of the earth and the dead” (a reference to the nationalist ideologue Maurice Barrès) with an EU sold out to American imperialism. Radicalizing the line of François Fillon, he considers that the “Franco-German alliance” is a myth because the EU has “allowed Germany to regain its rank lost in 1945,” and described Angela Merkel as “American Gauleiter.” In contrast, Zemmour praises Russia for its resistance to NATO’s “imperialism.”

Zemmour rejects the “Constitutional Council, Council of State, Court of Cassation, European Court of Justice, and European Court of Human Rights—which consider themselves supreme courts in the American style, corseting the freedom of action of governments in the name of human rights.” He asserts that “The rule of law and the European Union are not an end, but a means.” Yet Zemmour has strong poll numbers among senior citizens and the part of the wealthy class who refused to vote for Marine Le Pen because of her “leftist” economic program. Zemmour positions himself in favor of an overhaul of the EU rather than exit. However, his entire political position is opposed to European treaties: “It is time to take our country out of the European Convention on Human Rights, to show that it will no longer leave its national destiny in the hands of the deleterious ideology of the rights of man. We must abolish the Pleven Act of 1972²⁵ and all the laws which, following it, created the suffocating corset of non-discrimination. Only a cultural revolution can allow us to win the war of civilization that is taking place on our soil. A sort of *Kulturkampf*.”²⁶

Conclusion

For the first time in several decades, two consensuses are appearing between the different candidates of the right. The first is an acceptance of France’s membership in the EU and the eurozone: the idea of Frexit has almost no electoral support and would be a losing argument. The pro-Frexit candidate list led by Florian Philippot in the European elections garnered only 0.65% of the votes. The second is the desire to subordinate European law to national law, yet with nuances. However, the classic establishment conservative candidate, Pécresse, certainly would not go anywhere near as far with this idea in France as Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has in Hungary. In contrast, the two far-right French candidates have met with the Hungarian prime minister and pointed to him as a role model. Even if Le Pen and Zemmour agree to reduce the EU to a “Europe of nations,” neither of them seek to push the European theme in their presidential campaigns, knowing how electorally delicate this topic has become today.

As the political scientist Émilien Houard-Vial points out, for the French mainstream right, “Sustainable support for the Brussels institutions now appears to be conditional on their reform and in particular on additional guarantees of protection vis-à-vis globalization. In other words, it must be a Europe that extends and strengthens France’s capacity for action rather than curbs it.”²⁷ If the far right has retreated from its proposals for national preference and a break with Europe, the rise of

ethnic chauvinist/racist representations and of an authoritarian political model have compensated for this dynamic. Faced with the difficulty of positioning herself between Emmanuel Macron and the far right, Pécresse directs LR to show support for the EU, through the recognition of a French voice on sovereign issues. If a desire to reinstate the primacy of national law points in different directions, the fragmentation of the right in France hinders its crystallization into a political program capable of challenging the European status quo embodied by incumbent President Emmanuel Macron.

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¹ Gilles Richard, *Histoire des droites en France: de 1815 à nos jours* (Paris: Perrin, 2017), 472-503.

² This syntagm hammered out today by Éric Zemmour was coined about ten years ago by the writer Renaud Camus. It covers the idea that the white populations of European stock would be replaced by those originating from the Middle East and Africa, in a demographic movement supported by “globalist” elites. The theme had already existed for a long time, but with a more anti-Semitic than Islamophobic aim. See Nicolas Lebourg, *Les nazis: Ont-ils survécu?: Enquête sur les Internationales fascistes et les croisés de la race blanche* (Paris: Seuil, 2019).

³ French President Jacques Chirac, speech, “Sur la construction européenne, le rôle politique de l’Union Européenne, la réduction des tensions internationales, le maintien de la paix en Europe et dans le monde, la réconciliation entre les peuples des Balkans, le désarmement, la défense européenne de réaction rapide et l’ensemble des moyens dont dispose l’Europe pour agir sur la scène internationale” (Paris, May 30, 2000). Élysée Palace archives. Available at: <https://www.elysee.fr/front/pdf/elysee-module-9497-fr.pdf>

⁴ Available at: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/article/lc/LEGIARTI000018077285>

⁵ Renaud Dehousse, “Nicolas Sarkozy the European,” ed. Jacques de Maillard, *Les politiques publiques sous Sarkozy* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2012), 153-166.

⁶ François Fillon, *Faire* [Getting things done] (Paris: Albin Michel, 2015).

⁷ Valérie Pécresse, *Et c’est cela qui changea tout* [And that’s what changed everything], with Marion Van Renterghem (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2019).

⁸ Valérie Pécresse, “Je me battraï pour la force de l’Europe comme pour la force de la France,” *Le Monde*, December 9, 2021.” Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/12/09/valerie-pecresse-je-me-battrai-pour-la-force-de-l-europe-comme-pour-la-force-de-la-france_6105268_3232.html

⁹ Front National, *La lettre de Jean-Marie Le Pen*, February 15, 1985.

¹⁰ Abstention was chosen in the name of “the future of France which will surely be achieved through Europe.” *Journal officiel de la République française, Débats parlementaires*, November 20, 1986, p. 6663. In the book he published during the RN congress in 2021, when he was a candidate for party chairman, Louis Aliot considers this abstention “incompréhensible” and due to the “ ‘racialist’ conception of Europe” the part of the party coming from the New Right, which is being rallied today to the candidacy of Éric Zemmour. See Louis Aliot, *Impossible n’est pas français: 2022, les voies du succès*, (Versailles: Quid Novi, 2021), 84.

¹¹ Front National, *Europe & Patries*, March 1988.

¹² Emmanuelle Reungoat, “Le Front National et l’union européenne. La radicalisation comme continuité” [The National Front and the European Union. Radicalization as Continuity], in *Les Faux-semblants du Front national*, ed. Sylvain Crépon, Alexandre Dézé, and Nonna Mayer (Paris: Presses Sciences Po, 2015), 225-246.

¹³ Marine Le Pen, *Pour que vive la France* (Paris: Jacques Grancher, 2012).

¹⁴ Marine Le Pen, “144 Engagements Présidentiels: Election Présidentielle,” 2017, available at: <https://rassemblementnational.fr/pdf/144-engagements.pdf> In 2022, Marine Le Pen announced that she was renouncing any ban on dual nationality.

¹⁵ On the Russian polarization of the French far right, see Nicolas Lebourg, *The French Far Right in Russia's Orbit* (New York: Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs and Foundation Open Society Institute, 2018), available at: https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/articles_papers_reports/the-french-far-right-in-russias-orbit/res/id=Attachments/index=1/Lebourg-EN%20revised%203.pdf.

¹⁶ Rassemblement National, “Projet-élections européennes 2019: Pour une Europe des nations et des peuples.” Available at: <https://rassemblementnational.fr/telecharger/publications/programme-euro2019.pdf>

¹⁷ Cahiers de la délégation Rassemblement National du Groupe Identité et Démocratie, mandature 2019-2024, “Zone euro: Convergences, divergences, et réalités,” 2019. Available at: <https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/idgroup/pages/551/attachments/original/1635180441/2020-11-livret-zone-euro-web-light.pdf?1635180441>

¹⁸ Rassemblement national, “Livre noir: La gestion de la crise du coronavirus par l’Union Européenne.” Available at: <https://www.id-france.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/livre-noir-covid-def-web.pdf>

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- ¹⁹ France Inter, radio broadcast interview with Marine Le Pen, January 19, 2022. Clip available at: <https://twitter.com/i/status/1483708040750714882>
- ²⁰ Édouard Dubout, “ ‘Les règles ou principe inhérents à l’identité constitutionnelle de la France’: Une supra-constitutionnalité?,” *Revue française de droit constitutionnel*, vol. 83, No. 3, 2010, p. 451-482. The program is available at: <https://valeriepecesse.fr/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/16P-VP2022-ok.pdf>.
- ²¹ Jean-Yves Le Gallou, *La préférence nationale: réponse à l’immigration* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1985).
- ²² Front National, *Identity*, May–June 1989.
- ²³ Éric Zemmour 2022 presidential campaign website, “L’Europe: Le programme d’Éric Zemmour.” Available at: <https://programme.zemmour2022.fr/europe>
- ²⁴ Éric Zemmour, *Un quinquennat pour rien* (Paris, Albin Michel, 2016).
- ²⁵ The Pleven Act penalizes incitement to racial discrimination, hatred, or violence, as well as racist insults and defamation.
- ²⁶ Éric Zemmour, *La France n’a pas dit son dernier mot* (Rubempré: Paris, 2021).
- ²⁷ Émilien Houard-Vial, “Valérie Pécresse: Sur l’Europe, un équilibre périlleux,” *Libération*, January 10, 2022. Available at: https://www.liberation.fr/politique/elections/valerie-pecesse-sur-leurope-un-equilibre-perilleux-20220110_2INDEJZLVBF75BTXIOLUDPTRVU/?redirected=1