



# Eric Zemmour, The New Face of the French Far Right: Media-Sponsored, Neoliberal, and Reactionary

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## Abstract

*French polemist and far-right candidate to the presidency Éric Zemmour personifies a new form of identitarian conservatism, combining a revival of radical notions long taboo in the French political culture—such as race—with more traditional pro-Catholicism language and a neoliberal approach to economics. This article explores Zemmour’s trajectory from journalist to polemist to political activist; his strategy of competing with Marine Le Pen’s Rassemblement National through his ambitious project of “Union of the Rights;” and his ideological offering, which can be summed up as a version of Trump’s MAGA narrative adapted to the French context. It concludes with the systemic reasons for Zemmour’s visibility on the French media and political landscape, as well as explaining why his modest electoral results should not be allowed to obscure his success at creating a new political brand that will remain on the French ideological market.*

Keywords: Zemmour, France, Le Pen, far right, illiberalism

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The French presidential elections of spring 2022 resulted in Emmanuel Macron's re-election with 58 percent of the vote, the lowest result ever achieved by a centrist candidate against a far-right opponent. Marine Le Pen, who earned almost 42 percent of the vote, faced an electoral defeat but a political victory: not only did she get the highest result ever achieved by a far-right candidate, but she was also not seen as a real threat by the 28 percent of potential voters who decided not to turn out, including 40 percent of young people.

But the genuine novelty of the election was the emergence of a new far-right candidate, the journalist and polemist Éric Zemmour. Even if he garnered only 7 percent of the vote (he reached 17 percent of voting intentions in January 2022, making him a potential candidate for the second round<sup>1</sup>), he dominated the media landscape throughout the campaign and was able to shift the overall tone of the debates toward his pet themes: immigration, Islam, identity, and the "Great Replacement."

Zemmour personifies a new form of identitarian conservatism, combining a revival of radical notions long taboo in the French political culture—such as race—with more traditional pro-Catholicism language and a neoliberal approach to economics. Zemmour embodies the vocal revival of conservative ideologies that began in France with Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency (2007-2012); crystallized with La Manif pour Tous, the popular mass protests against gay marriage that revived the rightist landscape in 2013-2014; and continued with a wave of Islamophobia related to the 2015 terrorist attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* and the Bataclan. Since then, these conservative, sometimes reactionary ecosystems have been organizing themselves to secure their voice on the political and media landscape, benefiting from corporate support and corporate control over the main media outlets, as well as a public opinion skeptical of traditional liberal values.

This article explores Zemmour's trajectory from journalist to polemist to political activist; his strategy of competing with Marine Le Pen's *Rassemblement National* through his ambitious project of "Union of the Rights;" and his ideological offering, which can be summed up as a version of Trump's MAGA narrative adapted to the French context. It concludes with the systemic reasons for Zemmour's visibility on the French media and political landscape, as well as explaining why his modest electoral results should not be allowed to obscure his success at creating a new political brand that will remain on the French ideological market.

### **Zemmour as a Journalist: Shifting the Media Landscape to the Right**

Before announcing his candidacy for the 2022 presidential election, Éric Zemmour had a career in the print and audiovisual media. His trajectory embodies the mainstreaming of far-right topics in the right-wing media.

Zemmour began his career at a small print media outlet in 1986, then joined the political department of *Le Figaro* in 1996, staying there until 2009 (before returning in 2013). Between 2010 and 2021, he wrote columns for *Le Figaro Magazine*. Since its creation in 1826, *Le Figaro* has always been a right-wing newspaper. Notably, the newspaper opened its pages to the New Right<sup>2</sup> in the late 1970s and early 1980s, helping to give a mainstream platform to far-right notions, a pattern that has been repeated with Zemmour. In the 25 years that Zemmour has been

<sup>1</sup> "French Poll Puts Far-Right Pundit Zemmour ahead of Le Pen," *Al Jazeera*, October 6, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/6/french-poll-puts-far-right-pundit-zemmour-ahead-of-le-pen>.

<sup>2</sup> See Pierre-André Taguieff, *Sur la Nouvelle Droite* (Paris: Descartes & Cie, 1994).

working for *Le Figaro*, the newspaper has undergone a notable rightward shift, as evidenced by a recent dossier on the “indoctrination” of children by “decolonialism, Islamogauchisme, communitarianism and transgender promotion.”<sup>3</sup>

This shift resulted in the newspaper turning a blind eye to Zemmour’s media slip-ups, convictions for incitement to racial hatred, and accusations of rape.<sup>4</sup> The *Figaro* corporate culture seems to have been comfortable with him defending racial profiling by the French police in 2009,<sup>5</sup> calling Muslim immigration an “invasion” and a “struggle to Islamize the territory” in 2016,<sup>6</sup> denying the Holocaust in 2019,<sup>7</sup> and referring to isolated underage immigrants as “thieves,” “murderers,” and “rapists” in 2020.<sup>8</sup>

Éric Zemmour’s longtime protector at *Le Figaro* is his friend Alexis Brézet, its editorial director since 2012. Brézet started out as a journalist for *Valeurs actuelles*, the most popular far-right weekly magazine in France. *Valeurs actuelles* was founded in 1957 by Raymond Bourguine, a French journalist and politician who supported French Algeria and was a member of the Vichy-nostalgic Association to Defend the Memory of Marshal Pétain (*Association pour défendre la mémoire du Maréchal Pétain, ADMP*).<sup>9</sup> Following Bourguine’s death in 1990, the magazine changed hands several times. But the real change took place in 2012 with the appointment as director of Yves de Kerdrel, who completely transformed the magazine’s editorial line, making it an outspoken showcase of the radical right. Since then, the magazine has stood out on newsstands for its shocking front pages featuring divisive themes. This lack of moderation has led to its being condemned twice by the courts for incitement to racial discrimination and hatred.<sup>10</sup>

What distinguishes *Valeurs Actuelles* from other far-right newspapers is that it is much more integrated and legitimate on the French mediascape than other far-right newspapers like *Rivarol* or *Minute*. The magazine owes this to two strategies. The

3 Le Figaro Magazine (@FigaroMagazine\_), “Ce sont les dérives qui sont dénoncées dans l’article de @jwaintraub et Nadjat Cherigui. Voici le début du papier pour ceux qui s’arrêtent à la Une sans lire le dossier,” Twitter, November 13, 2021, 2:40 p.m., [https://twitter.com/FigaroMagazine\\_/status/1459516471525191683/photo/1](https://twitter.com/FigaroMagazine_/status/1459516471525191683/photo/1).

4 Lénéaig Bredoux, David Perrotin, and Marine Turchi, “Violences sexuelles : plusieurs femmes accusent Eric Zemmour,” *Mediapart*, April 29, 2021, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/290421/violences-sexuelles-plusieurs-femmes-accusent-eric-zemmour>.

5 Julie Saulnier, “Eric Zemmour condamné pour provocation à la discrimination,” *L’Express*, February 18, 2011, [https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/justice/eric-zemmour-condamne-pour-provocation-a-la-discrimination\\_963962.html](https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/justice/eric-zemmour-condamne-pour-provocation-a-la-discrimination_963962.html). In 2009, Eric Zemmour ceased his collaboration with *Le Figaro*. If this breach of contract could be interpreted by some as a dismissal following his racist remarks, in reality it is mainly due to a discrepancy between his high salary and his low number of publications. In this regard, see “Zemmour: 9.700 euros pour un petit papier par semaine,” *Slate.fr*, March 25, 2010, <http://www.slate.fr/story/19171/zemmour-9700-euros-pour-un-petit-papier-par-semaine>.

6 “Eric Zemmour condamné en appel pour des propos islamophobes,” *Libération with AFP*, May 3, 2018, [https://www.liberation.fr/france/2018/05/03/eric-zemmour-condamne-en-appel-pour-des-propos-islamophobes\\_1647536/](https://www.liberation.fr/france/2018/05/03/eric-zemmour-condamne-en-appel-pour-des-propos-islamophobes_1647536/).

7 Pierre Plottu and Maxime Macé, “Après la haine raciale, Zemmour condamné pour négationnisme?,” *Libération*, December 10, 2020, [https://www.liberation.fr/france/2020/12/10/apres-la-haine-raciale-zemmour-condamne-pour-negationnisme\\_1808248/](https://www.liberation.fr/france/2020/12/10/apres-la-haine-raciale-zemmour-condamne-pour-negationnisme_1808248/).

8 “Eric Zemmour, condamné à 10 000 euros d’amende pour provocation à la haine raciale, va faire appel,” *Le Monde*, January 17, 2022, [https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2022/01/17/eric-zemmour-condamne-a-10-000-euros-d-amende-pour-provocation-a-la-haine-raciale\\_6109814\\_823448.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2022/01/17/eric-zemmour-condamne-a-10-000-euros-d-amende-pour-provocation-a-la-haine-raciale_6109814_823448.html).

9 AFP, “Valeurs actuelles, vitrine écornée de la droite radicale,” *Le Point*, September 9, 2020, [https://www.lepoint.fr/societe/valeurs-actuelles-vitrine-ecornee-de-la-droite-radicale-09-09-2020-2391086\\_23.php](https://www.lepoint.fr/societe/valeurs-actuelles-vitrine-ecornee-de-la-droite-radicale-09-09-2020-2391086_23.php).

10 *Valeurs Actuelles* was condemned for the following press releases :

- “The Roma, the Overdose” (Roms, l’overdose) of August 22, 2013 (judgment of the Tribunal de Grande Instance of Paris of March 5, 2015, confirmed on appeal on December 9, 2015)

- “The Naturalized: The Hidden Invasion” (Naturalisés : l’invasion qu’on cache) of September 22, 2013 (judgment of February 3, 2015, confirmed on appeal but cancelled by the Court de Cassation on June 7, 2017).

first is its hiring policy: most of its journalists and columnists have been recruited from mainstream newspapers—*Le Figaro*, *Les Echos*, *L'Express*, *Le Point*—and they usually continue to participate in other media, notably as commentators on national TV channels. The second is its practice of having leading political actors give interviews to the weekly, notably President Emmanuel Macron in 2019. This has served to manufacture a certain level of respectability for *Valeurs Actuelles*. Thus, rather than being confined to a marginal role in the specialized far-right press, *Valeurs Actuelles'* journalists accumulate media capital,<sup>11</sup> allowing them to position themselves as key personalities on such subjects as immigration or security.

The same mainstreaming of far-right ideas happened for Zemmour at *Le Figaro*. Under Brézet's leadership, the newspaper has become Zemmour's biggest supporter, offering him full pages to advertise his very popular essays. This support has been so great that some journalists have even resigned, refusing to work for what they see as "Zemmour's newspaper."<sup>12</sup> At *Le Figaro*, Zemmour is also no longer alone on the right wing: the newspaper now employs several young columnists known for their right-wing positioning, among them the Quebecer Mathieu Bock-Côté, author in 2021 of *La Révolution raciale et autres virus idéologiques* (The Racist Revolution and Other Ideological Viruses) and Eugénie Bastié, known for her reactionary vision of women and the family (LGBT+-phobia, sexism, anti-gender studies positioning) as well as her rehabilitation of antisemitism, notably through *Limites*, the magazine she co-founded, which claims the heritage of the monarchist Action Française.<sup>13</sup>

While a prolific author for *Le Figaro*, it is television that has earned Zemmour real popularity. Since 2003, he has been a regular guest on late-night shows,<sup>14</sup> where he has become known for clashing with other guests. He made a name for himself in 2010 after claiming on national television that "most drug traffickers are Blacks and Arabs."<sup>15</sup> That scandalous image has paved the way for his success: later that year, he was offered the opportunity to head up his first radio show,<sup>16</sup> followed a year later by his very own TV show.<sup>17</sup> But if different channels historically employed Zemmour to "generate buzz" and increase their viewership, they did not necessarily follow him down the slippery slope to the far right. Indeed, one after another, they parted ways with the scandal-loving anchor.

Things changed in 2019, when Zemmour became the main anchor of the program *Face à l'info* on CNews. CNews is the first stone in a much larger reactionary media empire being built by the well-known billionaire Vincent Bolloré. Bolloré

11 Abdellali Hajjat, "L'emprise de Valeurs Actuelles," *Carnet de recherche Racismes* (November 2020), <https://racismes.hypotheses.org/222>.

12 Aude Dassonville, "Au 'Figaro,' le cas Eric Zemmour crée un profond malaise," *Le Monde*, December 18, 2021, [https://www.lemonde.fr/actualite-medias/article/2021/12/18/au-figaro-le-cas-eric-zemmour-cree-un-profond-malaise\\_6106575\\_3236.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/actualite-medias/article/2021/12/18/au-figaro-le-cas-eric-zemmour-cree-un-profond-malaise_6106575_3236.html).

13 Action Française is a far-right monarchist movement born out of the Dreyfus affair in 1899, known for its antisemitism. See Laurent Joly, "D'une guerre l'autre. L'Action française et les Juifs, de l'Union sacrée à la Révolution nationale (1914-1944)," *Revue d'histoire moderne & contemporaine* 59-4, no. 4 (2012):97-124, <https://doi.org/10.3917/rhmc.594.0097>.

14 *Ça se dispute* on I-Télé and *On n'est pas couché* on France 2.

15 "Thierry Mariani exprime sa 'consternation' après la condamnation d'Eric Zemmour," *Le Monde with AFP*, February 18, 2011, [https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2011/02/18/eric-zemmour-condamne-pour-provocation-a-la-discrimination-raciale\\_1482264\\_3224.html?fbclid=IwARiz1aRIWtYRUGAz2sYo5KuYd8taQ4gYeOub9zaKehwO\\_N3mlgdmTqq60Cw](https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2011/02/18/eric-zemmour-condamne-pour-provocation-a-la-discrimination-raciale_1482264_3224.html?fbclid=IwARiz1aRIWtYRUGAz2sYo5KuYd8taQ4gYeOub9zaKehwO_N3mlgdmTqq60Cw).

16 A radio show called "*Z pour Zemmour*" (Z for Zemmour), which aired from 2010 to 2019 on the radio network RTL (owned by the digital media group RTL Group)

17 A TV show called "*Zemmour et Naulleau*" (Zemmour and Naulleau), aired since September 2011 on Paris Première (channel of the *Groupe M6* media holding company, majority-owned by the aforementioned RTL Group).

rose to prominence as one of the leading advocates of “Françafrique,” or French interference in the affairs of its former African colonies, which can be described as neo-colonialism. For example, the Bolloré Group has been condemned for having helped elect Faure Gnassingbé, the current president of Togo, to succeed his father—in exchange for which Bolloré obtained the management of a container terminal in Lomé.<sup>18</sup> It is therefore easy to understand why Bolloré is now funding CNews, a television channel engaged in an ideological war against post-colonial theories.<sup>19</sup>

The Bolloré group owns several print and audiovisual media, and is in the process of “right-wingifying” all of them. In October 2021, Bolloré fired the general manager of the famous weekly newspaper *Paris Match* in order to install in that post Patrick Mahé, a former member of Occident (a neo-Nazi group from the 1960s) and former leader of Jeune Europe (created in the 1960s by Jean Thiriart, a former Nazi collaborator in the Belgian Waffen-SS).<sup>20</sup> The whole Bolloré family seems to have a far-right agenda: in January 2022, Chantal Bolloré, the billionaire’s sister, who sits on the board of directors of the family-controlled Bolloré Group, was revealed as one of the sponsors of Zemmour’s presidential campaign.<sup>21</sup> And if the audience share of CNews increases year by year, and now stands at 2 percent, this is largely thanks to Zemmour’s *Face à l’info*, which enjoys an average of 800,000 viewers, or 4.1 percent of the public, with some peaks of more than one million viewers.<sup>22</sup>

## **Zemmour as a Politician: Fighting for the Leadership of the Right**

### *Competing with Marine Le Pen*

Once announced as a presidential candidate on November 30, 2021, Zemmour’s public support grew rapidly, reaching 15 percent of voting intentions in February 2022. According to polls from January 17, 2022, a majority of French people surveyed (64 percent) consider Zemmour to be *the* representative of the French far right.<sup>23</sup> Zemmour has thus been able to supplant, at least for some time, Marine Le Pen in this realm, over which she had heretofore reigned without a strong opponent.

If both candidates have a predilection for the same set of themes—that is, security, immigration, and nativism—there are major differences in their approaches. Zemmour targets Islam per se, while Marine Le Pen limits herself to denouncing illegal immigration; Zemmour celebrates France’s Catholic heritage, while Marine Le Pen employs a more secular narrative; Zemmour engages in confrontational attacks

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18 Joan Tilouine et Simon Piel, “Afrique, amis, affaires: révélations sur le système Bolloré,” *Le Monde*, April 27, 2018, [https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2018/04/27/revelations-sur-le-systeme-bollore-en-afrique\\_5291522\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2018/04/27/revelations-sur-le-systeme-bollore-en-afrique_5291522_3210.html).

19 Philippe Bernard, “Il est logique de voir CNews, liée aux opérations africaines de Bolloré, militer contre l’étude des séquelles du colonialisme,” *Le Monde*, March 6, 2021, [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/03/06/il-est-logique-de-voir-cnews-liee-aux-operations-africaines-de-bollore-militer-contre-l-etude-des-sequelles-du-colonialisme\\_6072152\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/03/06/il-est-logique-de-voir-cnews-liee-aux-operations-africaines-de-bollore-militer-contre-l-etude-des-sequelles-du-colonialisme_6072152_3232.html).

20 Laurent Mauduit, “Médias: l’extrême danger Bolloré,” *Mediapart*, October 21, 2021, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/211021/medias-l-extreme-danger-bollore>.

21 Sébastien Bourdon, Ariane Lavrilleux, and Marine Turchi, “Révélations sur les grands donateurs de la campagne d’Eric Zemmour,” *Mediapart*, January 20, 2022, [https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/200122/revelations-sur-les-grands-donateurs-de-la-campagne-d-eric-zemmour?at\\_medium=custom7&at\\_campaign=1046](https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/200122/revelations-sur-les-grands-donateurs-de-la-campagne-d-eric-zemmour?at_medium=custom7&at_campaign=1046).

22 “Audiences access: Le grand bilan heure par heure,” Pure Medias, last modified January 3, 2021, <https://www.ozap.com/actu/audiences-access-le-grand-bilan-heure-par-heure/600344>.

23 Ivonne Trippenbach and Franck Johannès, “Présidentielle 2022 : confrontée à Eric Zemmour, Marine Le Pen apparaît moins extrême mais plus fragile qu’en 2017,” *Le Monde*, January 17, 2022, [https://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2022/article/2022/01/17/presidentielle-2022-confrontee-a-eric-zemmour-marine-le-pen-apparaît-moins-extreme-mais-plus-fragile-qu-en-2017\\_6109760\\_6059010.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2022/article/2022/01/17/presidentielle-2022-confrontee-a-eric-zemmour-marine-le-pen-apparaît-moins-extreme-mais-plus-fragile-qu-en-2017_6109760_6059010.html).

on progressive values such as abortion, while Marine Le Pen takes a more nuanced view, to the point of not having participated in the anti-gay marriage protests.

Marine Le Pen's tactics are consistent with her decade-long effort to "de-demonize" the *Rassemblement National (RN)*. Since she took over the reins of the party in 2011, she has been trying to rid the *Front National (FN)* of the shadow of her father, party founder Jean-Marie Le Pen. For years, his sordid past of torturing Algerians<sup>24</sup> and his many media slip-ups related to Holocaust memory, antisemitism, and open racism were like a black cloud over the party. Admittedly, Jean-Marie Le Pen's FN was the first far-right party to reach the second round of the presidential elections (in 2002), but it earned only 17 percent of the vote in that round. Its electorate was unstable,<sup>25</sup> and a vote cast for the party in the first round was often interpreted as a protest vote<sup>26</sup> motivated by a particular issue that was unlikely to be repeated in the second round. This led to the FN being described as a scarecrow: once in the second round, the party was perceived to scare off voters, who would either go back to its opponent or abstain from voting.

Marine Le Pen has been successfully trying to rid the party of this curse.<sup>27</sup> In the 2017 presidential elections, she seemed to be approaching her goal. Like her father, she passed the threshold of the first round, but the wave collapsed in the second round, where she won "only" 33 percent of the vote. Reflecting that this was almost double the score of her father, which seemed to indicate that she was moving in the right direction, she decided to double down on the "de-demonization" strategy: evicting her father from the party he himself founded, eliminating disruptive elements,<sup>28</sup> providing media training for her new elite.<sup>29</sup> Every effort was made to smooth the image of the party in order to make Marine Le Pen look like a valid political option and a credible potential president.

This strategy finally seems to have borne fruit: according to a poll on January 17, 2022, Marine Le Pen is seen as the representative of a "patriotic right attached to traditional values," an inflexion in the vocabulary that moves her outside the taboo "far right."<sup>30</sup> This has been reflected at the ballot box: a vote for the RN is changing

24 Lucie Soullier, "Torture en Algérie : Jean-Marie Le Pen dément une nouvelle fois," *Le Monde*, February 21, 2018, [https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2018/02/21/torture-en-algerie-jean-marie-le-pen-dement-une-nouvelle-fois\\_5260134\\_823448.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2018/02/21/torture-en-algerie-jean-marie-le-pen-dement-une-nouvelle-fois_5260134_823448.html).

25 See Gérard Mauger and Willy Pelletier, *Les Classes populaires et le FN. Explications de vote* (Vulaines-sur-Seine: Le Croquant, 2017).

26 IFOP, "Radioscopie de l'électorat du Rassemblement national à un an de l'élection présidentielle de 2022," *Ifop-Fiducial pour Le Journal du Dimanche et Sud Radio*, March 2021, [https://www.ifop.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/118005-Rapport-RN-23\\_03\\_2021.pdf](https://www.ifop.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/118005-Rapport-RN-23_03_2021.pdf).

This is also called "strategic reverse voting," i.e., voting for a small candidate that one does not want to see elected and that one thinks has no chance to send a message to one's preferred candidate. See Nonna Mayer, "Le vote FN: historique, sociologie et enjeux," *TNS Sofres*, 2007, 1–7, <https://spire.sciencespo.fr/notice/2441/fouohitsgqh8dhk97is3m298g>.

27 See Nonna Mayer, Sylvain Crépon and Alexandre Dézé, *Les faux-semblants du Front national* (Paris: Les presses de Sciences Po, 2015); Cécile Alduy and Stéphane Wahnich, *Marine Le Pen prise aux mots—Décryptage du nouveau discours frontiste* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2015); Mathias Destal and Marine Turchi, *Marine est au courant de tout* (Paris: Flammarion Enquetes, 2017).

28 Franck Johannès and Abel Mestre, "Marine Le Pen fait le ménage au Rassemblement national avant les régionaux," *Le Monde*, August 4, 2020, [https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2020/08/04/marine-le-pen-fait-le-menage-au-rassemblement-national-avant-les-regionales\\_6048075\\_823448.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2020/08/04/marine-le-pen-fait-le-menage-au-rassemblement-national-avant-les-regionales_6048075_823448.html).

29 "Un ex-présentateur de BFMTV coach du RN Jordan Bardella," *Libération*, November 7, 2019, [https://www.liberation.fr/en-bref/2019/11/07/un-ex-presentateur-de-bfmtv-coach-du-rn-jordan-bardella\\_1762156/](https://www.liberation.fr/en-bref/2019/11/07/un-ex-presentateur-de-bfmtv-coach-du-rn-jordan-bardella_1762156/).

30 "Marine Le Pen : les Français estiment que son image s'est 'adoucie,'" *Le Point*, January 17, 2022, [https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/marine-le-pen-les-francais-estiment-que-son-image-s-est-adoucie-17-01-2022-2460773\\_20.php](https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/marine-le-pen-les-francais-estiment-que-son-image-s-est-adoucie-17-01-2022-2460773_20.php).

from a protest vote to a vote of ideological support, especially among young people.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the RN is said to be the leading party among those young people who vote. Overall, the proportion of votes for the RN among young people is the same as among the rest of the population: around 20 percent, the share earned by Marine Le Pen in the 2017 presidential elections. But since only one in two young people actually turn out to vote, Marine Le Pen is indeed their first choice.

Unlike Zemmour—who announced that he would, if elected, create a “Ministry of Remigration”—Marine Le Pen understands that it is useless to harp on the theme of immigration, which only interests an electorate that already plans to vote for her. She spoke little of her favorite subjects during the campaign, betting instead on the promise of an increase in the purchasing power of the French people, an appeal that reached a broader audience. This is indeed one of the major ambivalences of the RN: it seeks to bring together all right-wing voters, but its economic program is focused on the working classes, which are more present on the left than on the right.<sup>32</sup>

Zemmour chases the same far-right electorate as Marine Le Pen, but he also attracts free market-oriented groups to a much greater degree, making him more credible to mainstream right-wing voters. He also has another important asset: the support of Philippe de Villiers, a far-right politician known for founding the *Puy du Fou*, a theme park that immerses its visitors in the France of the past, the time of kings and princes and knights, a Christian France resisting foreign invasion.<sup>33</sup> This cultural message uncovered its real significance when one remembers that de Villiers is an adept of the theory of the “Great Replacement.”<sup>34</sup> He is also one of the main propagators of conspiracy theories in France, especially with his latest book, published in 2021, *The Day After (Le jour d’après)*, in which he argues that the elites have used the COVID-19 pandemic to enslave the world’s population and impose their progressive ideology. A presidential candidate himself in 1995 and 2007, De Villiers officially backed Zemmour’s candidacy this time around, bringing to the table an electorate that, even if small (4.7 percent of voters in 1995 and 2.3 percent in 2007), represents a non-negligible gain: a Catholic audience nostalgic for “Old France” and the royalist *Ancien Régime*.

### *The “Union of the Rights” Strategy*

Contrary to Marine Le Pen’s strategy of appealing to the working class and therefore hunting on the turf of Jean Luc Mélenchon’s La France Insoumise (LFI), Zemmour stands as a candidate of the “Union of the Rights”<sup>35</sup> (*Union des droites*): he hopes to bring together in a single party the mainstream right, represented in France by *Les Républicains (LR)*, and the radical right, including encroaching on the ground of Marine Le Pen. By signing up Guillaume Peltier—former second-in-command of

31 Franck Johannès, “Comment le Rassemblement national est devenu le premier parti de la génération des 25-34 ans,” *Le Monde*, April 5, 2021, [https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2021/04/05/le-rassemblement-national-premier-parti-des-25-34-ans\\_6075574\\_823448.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2021/04/05/le-rassemblement-national-premier-parti-des-25-34-ans_6075574_823448.html).

32 Barthélémy Philippe, “Eric Zemmour et Marine Le Pen... leurs différences flagrantes sur l’économie,” *Capital*, November 16, 2021, <https://www.capital.fr/economie-politique/eric-zemmour-et-marine-le-pen-leurs-differences-differences-sur-leconomie-1420130>.

33 Guillaume Mazeau, “Le Puy du Fou : sous le divertissement, un ‘combat culturel,’” *The Conversation*, March 29, 2019, <https://theconversation.com/le-puy-du-fou-sous-le-divertissement-un-combat-culturel-113888>.

34 The concept of *Grand Remplacement* (Great Replacement) refers to the supposed disappearance of France’s “Christian heritage,” which will allegedly be replaced by an Arab-Muslim culture and customs.

35 Masha P. Davis, “When the Far Right Courts the Right: Understanding Marion Maréchal’s Project of a ‘Union of the Rights’ in France,” *IERES Occasional Papers* 7 (September 2020).

LR—and former RN members Damien Rieu, Jérôme Rivière and Gilbert Collard, Zemmour has begun to sketch the outlines of the gathering he advocates.

LR brings together people from very different backgrounds. These can be roughly divided into four not-mutually-exclusive archetypes: the free-marketeers, who favor the expansion of globalization and France's participation in transatlantic organizations; the Gaullists (a reference to the politics of Charles de Gaulle, French president from 1959 to 1969), who are fervent defenders of France's sovereignty and independence; the centrists, who propose measures for the redistribution of wealth; and the conservatives, who advocate a model of society based on the traditional family and the assimilation of immigrants.

Among the latter thrives an ultra-conservative, identitarian line that is close to the far right. A representative of this radical fringe at LR, who tried to get himself elected as head of the party during the primary, is Éric Ciotti, a "Great Replacement" enthusiast.<sup>36</sup> The 39 percent of voters who voted for him in the LR primary in 2021 are the same people who voted for presidential candidate François Fillon in 2017. On the French political landscape, Fillon was positioned at the intersection of the free-marketeers and conservatives, with a particular emphasis on France's national identity and Catholic roots, a viewpoint accompanied by a stigmatization of Muslims and Islam. In 2021, Ciotti positioned himself in exactly the same way, hoping to repeat Fillon's victory in the 2017 primaries. But to the great displeasure of the identitarian group, the 2021 LR primaries saw the election of the least radical candidate, Valérie Pécresse.

The position of new idol of the Fillonist orphans was therefore up for grabs, and Zemmour was quick to come to the rescue. To introduce himself to this new electorate, he participated in the *Journée du Conservatisme* (Conservatism Day) organized on September 26, 2021, by the *Mouvement Conservateur*, formerly *Sens Commun*, a movement born out of the crystallizing moment of La Manif pour Tous.<sup>37</sup> In 2012, France proposed that same-sex couples should be allowed to marry. The proposal caused a stir on the right, and many organizations, led by La Manif pour Tous, formed to organize protests against it. The conservative fringe of LR, wanting to take advantage of this momentum to assert its power within their party, participated in the creation of Sens Commun, which was intended to become the link between La Manif pour Tous and the LR party. After the law was passed, Sens Commun did not disarm. The group continued its ideological battle within LR, broadening its focus to a pro-life and anti-LGBT+ rights agenda.

In 2016, during the LR primary, Sens Commun supported the conservative candidate François Fillon. Five years later, in 2021, the movement refused to support Valérie Pécresse, whom it deemed less able to ensure the "preservation of the Judeo-Christian civilization."<sup>38</sup> It then disassociated itself from LR, renamed itself *Le Mouvement Conservateur*, and chose a new champion, Éric Zemmour. The rest of the radical fringe within LR went along with it: a month later, on January 13, 2022, 1,417 elected

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36 Mahaut Landaz, "Grand Remplacement, 'priorité nationale' ... Eric Ciotti, à l'extrême de la droite," *Nouvel Obs*, November 9, 2021, <https://www.nouvelobs.com/politique/20211109.OBS50811/grand-remplacement-priorite-nationale-eric-ciotti-a-l-extreme-de-la-droite.html>.

37 See Yann Raison du Cleuziou, *Une contre-révolution catholique. Aux origines de La Manif pour tous* (Paris: Seuil, 2019); Sara Garbagnoli and Massimo Prearo, *La croisade "anti-genre." Du Vatican aux manif pour tous* (Paris: Textuel, 2017); Léa Morabito and Manon Réguer-Petit, "Les traces de La Manif pour tous," in *La déconnexion électorale* (Paris: Fondation Jean-Jaurès, 2017), 95–106.

38 "Le Mouvement Conservateur soutient la candidature d'Eric Zemmour," *Mouvement Conservateur*, last modified December 4, 2021, <https://www.mouvementconservateur.fr/9458-2/>.



officials, executives, members and sympathizers of the LR party signed on to an article in the newspaper *L'Opinion* entitled "Why We Support Eric Zemmour."<sup>39</sup>

Behind the new champion of the "Union of the Rights," there is a very solid pre-existing network. The first pillar of this network is the spin doctor behind the 2007 election of Nicolas Sarkozy: Patrick Buisson.<sup>40</sup> It was he who invented the "Union of the Rights" strategy, at a time when the mainstream right and the far right did not mix. To enable Sarkozy to capture the far-right electorate, Buisson created a compelling narrative by hijacking the populist "appeal to the people against the elites" traditionally used by the left and turning it into an identitarian concept. Indeed, the "elites" against whom he urges people to rally are not the financial capitalist elites, but rather the "cultural establishment," defined notably by cosmopolitan values and multiculturalism. Buisson's narrative advocated a nationalist cultural model for France that was centered around the Christian, traditional (and implicitly racial) roots of French identity.

Through this clever shell game, Buisson managed to bring together two opposite tendencies: he prized the defense of the "French identity" dear to the far right, while at the same time continuing to defend the free-market matrix necessary to keep the liberal-conservative label. Today, he applies essentially the same strategy to Zemmour's campaign: maintaining his ultraconservative narrative while superimposing a discourse in favor of the free-market economy.

But the *éminence grise* behind this network is Marion Maréchal, granddaughter of Jean-Marie Le Pen and niece of Marine. A former *Rassemblement National* MEP, she retired from politics in 2017 at the age of 27 to focus on what she calls "metapolitics": seeking to rise above transient presidential struggles to have a long-term impact on political culture. To that end, she created in 2018 a far-right political training institute, the Institute of Social, Economic and Political Sciences (*Institut des sciences sociales, économiques et politiques, ISSEP*). The scientific board of ISSEP reflects the institution's anchoring in the far right: among its notable members are former editor-in-chief of Breitbart News London and Nigel Farage adviser Raheem Kassam; and Pascal Gauchon, former secretary general of the *Parti des Forces Nouvelles* (PFN), a neofascist party that splintered off from the *Front National* in the 1980s.<sup>41</sup> Among the classes offered, one can find a smokescreen of "legit" options—like management and business strategy—but also more problematic ones, like "History of Religions and Civilizations" (taught with a very anti-secular mindset) or commando training.<sup>42</sup>

During Zemmour's campaign, Marion Maréchal was lurking in the background, meeting in secret with his campaign manager, Sarah Knafo. The two share close friends, including Jacques de Guillebon, director of the far-right magazine *L'Incorrect* and director of studies at Maréchal's ISSEP. Knafo and Maréchal co-

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39 "Pourquoi nous soutenons Eric Zemmour." La tribune de 1 417 élus, cadres, adhérents et sympathisants LR," *L'Opinion*, January 13, 2022, <https://www.lopinion.fr/politique/pourquoi-nous-soutenons-eric-zemmour-la-tribune-de-1-417-elus-cadres-adherents-et-sympathisants-lr>.

40 After his upbringing in a royalist family, he made a name for himself in far-right circles, notably through his managerial positions on two major far-right newspapers: *Minute*, very close to the National Front, where he was on staff from 1981 and was director in 1986-1987; and *Valeurs Actuelles*, which he joined in 1987 and of which he was managing editor from 1992 to 1998.

41 "Les missions du Conseil scientifique," ISSEP, last accessed March 24, 2022, <https://www.issep.fr/le-conseil-scientifique/les-membres/>.

42 "Magistère Bac+5 Science politique et management de projet," ISSEP, last accessed March 24, 2022, <https://www.issep.fr/les-magisteres/magistere-2eme-annee/>.

organized in September 2019 *La Convention de la Droite*—a French replica of Trump’s Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC). Éric Zemmour was the guest of honor and gave a very violent speech against Islam and Muslims in which he compared immigration to the Nazi occupation.<sup>43</sup> In the summer of 2021, Zemmour, Knafo, and Maréchal met to discuss the possibility of his running for president, and the number of meetings between Maréchal and Knafo has since multiplied.<sup>44</sup>

Zemmour was hoping to win Maréchal’s official support, as the latter represents quite a nice prize for him. First, of course, because Marion Maréchal is the niece of his rival Marine Le Pen. Second, because Maréchal has a well-stocked Rolodex that she could put at his disposal. Notably, it was she who organized Zemmour’s appearance at the Budapest Family Summit on September 26, 2021, co-organized by such powerful conservative Christian lobbies as the World Congress of Families and the ultraconservative advocacy group CitizenGo<sup>45</sup> and supported by the government of Viktor Orbán.<sup>46</sup>

Zemmour’s wish came true on March 6, 2022,<sup>47</sup> when Marion Maréchal joined him on stage to announce her official endorsement of his campaign (Jean-Marie Le Pen did the same). This seems to spell the end of Marion Maréchal’s “metapolitical retreat” and show her desire to return to politics. Having left her post as RN MP in 2017 and led the ISSEP with limited success, she found herself gradually isolated, watching her close friends rallying to Zemmour’s party one by one, including Thibaut Monnier, co-founder of ISSEP.<sup>48</sup>

Marine Le Pen was quick to comment on the endorsement, deploring the fact that her niece and former RN deputy has been “transformed into a sort of lifeline for a campaign that is collapsing on itself.” Indeed, in the context of the war in Ukraine, Zemmour was heavily criticized for his pro-Russian stance, less nuanced than Marine’s, and was embarrassed after the revelation of his 2015 meeting with Vladimir Yakunin, a Russian oligarch close to Vladimir Putin.<sup>49</sup> If Marion Maréchal’s support brought about a surge in Zemmour’s popularity, it did not help the pro-Russian tropism of his party. Marion Maréchal also shares this fascination with Putin: in February 2014, immediately following the annexation of Crimea, she praised Putin and called him a “good patriot.”<sup>50</sup> She was then invited to a May 2014 meeting of European right-wing parties organized in Vienna by Konstantin Malofeev, a Russian oligarch close to Putin who is the co-founder of the Saint Basil the Great Charitable

43 Lucie Delaporte and Marine Turchi, “L’équipe de campagne d’Éric Zemmour : le listing secret,” *Mediapart*, October 20, 2021, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/201021/l-equipe-de-campagne-d-eric-zemmour-le-listing-secret>.

44 Marylou Magal, “Marion Maréchal, la tentation Zemmour,” *L’Express*, September 23, 2021, [https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/politique/marion-marechal-la-tentation-zemmour\\_2159046.html](https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/politique/marion-marechal-la-tentation-zemmour_2159046.html).

45 See Ellen Rivera, “Unraveling the Anti-Choice Supergroup Agenda Europe in Spain: A Case Study of CitizenGo and HazteOir,” *IERES Occasional Papers* 4 (October 2019).

46 Kata Balint, “Hungary’s Pivotal Role in the Global Network against Sexual & Reproductive Rights,” Institute for Strategic Dialogue, last modified December 17, 2021, [https://www.isdglobal.org/digital\\_dispatches/keeping-it-in-the-family-hungarys-pivotal-role-in-the-global-network-against-sexual-and-reproductive-rights/](https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/keeping-it-in-the-family-hungarys-pivotal-role-in-the-global-network-against-sexual-and-reproductive-rights/).

47 “Présidentielle: Marion Maréchal officialise son soutien à Éric Zemmour,” *France Inter*, March 6, 2022, <https://www.franceinter.fr/politique/presidentielle-marion-marechal-officialise-son-soutien-a-eric-zemmour>.

48 Ivanne Trippenbach, “Derrière les hésitations de Marion Maréchal, la guerre des extrêmes droits,” *Le Monde*, January 29, 2022, [https://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2022/article/2022/01/29/derriere-les-hesitations-de-marion-marechal-la-guerre-des-extremes-droits\\_6111486\\_6059010.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2022/article/2022/01/29/derriere-les-hesitations-de-marion-marechal-la-guerre-des-extremes-droits_6111486_6059010.html).

49 Robin D’Angelo and Antoine Malo, “Quand les Russes choyaient Éric Zemmour,” *Le Journal du Dimanche*, March 5, 2022, <https://www.lejdd.fr/Politique/info-jdd-quand-les-russes-choyaient-eric-zemmour-4097637>.

50 Ivan Valerio, “Marion Maréchal-Le Pen: ‘Poutine est un patriote et ça fonctionne plutôt bien,’” *Europe 1*, February 4, 2014, <https://lelab.europe1.fr/marion-marechal-le-pen-poutine-est-un-patriote-et-ca-fonctionne-plotot-bien-12775>.

Foundation, which defends traditional family values against the “homosexual lobby” of the West.<sup>51</sup>

### **Zemmour as an Ideologist: MAGA, French-Style**

While Marine Le Pen has been working hard to erase or at least soften many themes of the French far right that her father promoted (antisemitism, pro-colonialism, rehabilitation of the Vichy regime, sexism...), Zemmour has been reactivating them, recreating a space for what was the Front National narrative during Jean-Marie Le Pen’s leadership. Zemmour has also been offering a “Make France Great Again” narrative that borrows extensively from Trumpist themes, but with a heavy insistence on French history, something that is not present in Marine Le Pen’s discursive strategy.

#### *Ethnodifferentialism: Race War and Civilizations*

Zemmour does not hesitate to activate all the classic themes of identitarian conservatism: order and authority, the restoration of so-called traditional values, and the defense of the nation (understood in a very ethnicized way). Indeed, Zemmour speaks openly about race, a notion that has been marginalized in French politics since the end of the Second World War and the shadow of which hampered the far right for decades. He has revived racial ideas in their contemporary variant, namely the conspiracy theory of the “Great Replacement,” which he puts forward in the most straightforward way. Zemmour believes that racial/ethnic nations have existed throughout history and are living entities to be protected from mixing with others and defended from enemies. He thus belongs to the ethno-differentialist trend that has been rising since the New Right, in particular Alain de Benoist, crafted the notion in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>52</sup> While Zemmour is almost the only French public figure to use the term “race,” he combines it with more accepted notions such as “civilizations” and of course “war of civilizations” that resonate better with the culturalist *zeitgeist*.<sup>53</sup> Policywise, he advocates for theories of “national preference,” i.e., that social policies in employment, healthcare, pensions, and education prioritize “ethnic French” and benefit only secondarily migrants who have “assimilated” to French culture. Those deemed “non-assimilated” (obviously, the definition of assimilation is Zemmour’s own subjective one) would be deported back to their country of origin.<sup>54</sup>

#### *Reactionary Ideology: Gender and Religion*

In Zemmour’s view, the French nation has two key enemies: Islam, which he sees as a dangerous religion that is by its very nature incompatible with French culture, and the egalitarian left that has dominated the French cultural landscape since the

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51 AFP, “Réunion prorusse à Vienne de partis d’extrême droite européens,” *Libération*, June 4, 2014, [https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2014/06/04/reunion-prorusse-a-vienne-de-partis-d-extreme-droite-europeens\\_1033208/](https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2014/06/04/reunion-prorusse-a-vienne-de-partis-d-extreme-droite-europeens_1033208/).

52 Taguieff, *Sur la Nouvelle Droite*.

53 Henry Hale and Marlene Laruelle, “A New Wave of Research on Civilizational Politics,” *Nationalities Papers* 49, no. 4 (2021): 597-608, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2020.83>.

54 Benoît Bréville, “Préférence nationale, un remède de charlatan,” *Le monde diplomatique* (November 2018): 1-18, <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2021/11/BREVILLE/64034>.

May 1968 revolution.<sup>55</sup> He thus produces a classic model of horizontal and vertical enemies that cooperate with the aim of destroying the nation.<sup>56</sup>

Zemmour virulently denounces social and cultural modernity, particularly its most obvious features: gender equality and multiculturalism. His first book, *Le premier sexe* (*The First Sex*, 2006) is an answer to Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*: it denounces the feminization of society, which is allegedly demolishing such masculine values as courage, heroism, sacrifice, and hard work. Zemmour has been accumulating ultraradical misogynist comments, presenting men as natural predators and stating that rape trials are just "judiciary surveillance of desire."<sup>57</sup> This feature sharply dissociates him from Marine Le Pen, who does not play that card, for obvious reasons: as the most popular female politician in France, she will gladly put aside the defense of traditional values if it can help her to gain access to a female electorate. She is also decidedly more nuanced than Zemmour on LGBT+ issues in order not to alienate any potential voters.

Notably, while she has declared that she is personally against gay marriage, she opposes a legal ban and proudly supports the (very few) gay members of the RN's executive committee, including Florient Philippot before he left the party in 2017 and the RN mayor of Hénin-Beaumont, Steeve Briois. But if Marine Le Pen positions herself as a seemingly gay-friendly feminist, it is in service of her favorite argument: the fear aroused by Islam and its supposed intolerance of gays and women. Meanwhile, Zemmour condemns homosexuality as an anomalous choice contrary to good morals; castigates transsexuality as a mere trend and gender studies as a danger to the youth; and denounces the existence of a "homosexual lobby"<sup>58</sup> protected by capitalist elites.

In his bestselling trilogy *Mélancolie française* (*French Melancholia*, 2010), *Le Suicide français* (*The French Suicide*, 2014), and *Destin français* (*French Destiny*, 2018), Zemmour traces the history of what he sees as the deconstruction of France's identity and sovereignty in all domains. He focuses obsessively on the 1960s, his "decade horribilis," and on the May 1968 revolution, criticizing what he calls the new mandatory ideological trio "derision, deconstruction, destruction."<sup>59</sup> Since then, French political and intellectual elites are accused of having embraced the values of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism and having allowed these to destroy the nation.

One of his most famous polemics has been around the names given to newborns in France. Zemmour wrongly affirmed that Muslim names now comprised a majority of those being given and called for banning Muslim names, as well as some American-inspired names like Kevin, to force people to give "traditionally French" names to their children, because "naming a child Mohamed is colonizing France."<sup>60</sup> In his main political meeting as a presidential candidate in Villepinte in December 2021,

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55 Gilles Ivaldi, "Éric Zemmour: Un 'Backlash Culturel' à La Française?," HAL (CEVIPOF; Sciences-Po Paris, February 3, 2022), 1, <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-03553884/>.

56 Rogers Brubaker, "Why populism?" *Theory and society* 46, no 5 (2017): 357-385, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-017-9301-7>.

57 Éric Zemmour, *Le premier sexe* (Paris: Editions Denoël, 2006), 53.

58 Éric Zemmour, *Le suicide français* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2014), 73.

59 *Ibid.*, 14.

60 Marie-Pierre Haddad, "Polémique sur les prénoms : qu'est-ce que la loi de 1803, défendue par Zemmour?" *RTL*, September 14, 2021, <https://www.rtl.fr/actu/politique/polemique-sur-les-prenoms-qu-est-ce-que-la-loi-de-1803-defendue-par-zemmour-7900072054>.

Zemmour summarized his vision as being the only one “against globalism, against living together, against mass immigration, gender theory, and Islamogauchisme.”<sup>61</sup>

If the nation is facing an existential threat, it has the right to respond with violence to survive. This claim is regularly advanced by Zemmour, often implicitly, sometimes explicitly, as when he asked at the Convention of the Right in 2019: “Will young French people accept to live as a minority on the land of their ancestors? If so, they deserve their colonization; otherwise, they will have to fight for their liberation.” Lexicometric analysis of his discourses and books by the Stanford scholar Cécile Alduy has shown that “war” is Zemmour’s third most-used concept.<sup>62</sup> The idea that war will be the unavoidable result of the current clash of civilization and of the supposed colonization of Europe by Muslim migrants connects Zemmour to the accelerationism movement. Common among white supremacists, accelerationism presupposes that race war is desirable to achieve white power. Zemmour does not state it this transparently, but legitimizes violence as the only technique that can be employed to ensure the survival of the French nation.

#### *Antisemitism and Judaism: The Paradox of Zemmour*

Another feature of Zemmour’s ideological packaging is his Judaism. He comes from an Algerian Berber Jewish family, attended Jewish schools, and regularly practices Judaism. Yet he presents this feature as a purely private one, supporting Catholicism as the historical religion of the nation and the ultimate embodiment of Frenchness. His Judaism helps to neutralize the claim that the far right is antisemitic and provides cover for his direct Islamophobia. It is a way for him to express his vision of an assimilationist policy: Jews were the first to be given equal rights (first by the French Revolution and then by Napoleon) and have completely integrated into Frenchness—which Muslims, in his view, would not.<sup>63</sup>

Memory of his childhood gives Zemmour a rhetorical tool to argue for the lost “happy days” when Algeria was French and colonizers and colonized lived happily together. While Zemmour has remained discreet on his positioning on the Israel-Palestine conflict, he seems supportive of Israel and the idea of moving the capital to Jerusalem. His judeo-christianism makes him in tune with the American Christian Right, for whom Israel’s destiny is an integral part of the Christian world. Yet Zemmour has simultaneously been advocating historical revisionism, arguing that the Holocaust was not a major event of the Second World War, its memory should not be protected by state laws, and the collaborationist Vichy regime of Marshal Pétain successfully protected French Jews from Nazi Germany.<sup>64</sup> Zemmour thus represents a rare case of antisemitic Jewishness, inspired by the leading figure of French antisemitism of the late nineteenth century, Edouard Drumont (1844-1917).<sup>65</sup> His paradoxical statements fit well with the New Right’s trend of decoupling antisemitism at home from pro-Israeli positions.<sup>66</sup>

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61 “Éric Zemmour : Discours de Villepinte,” YouTube video, 1:37:08, posted by “Éric Zemmour,” December 6, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBBtuSOEQCo>.

62 Cécile Alduy, *La Langue du Zemmour* (Paris: Seuil, 2022).

63 Mitchell Abidor and Miguel Lago, “The Politically Expedient Jewishness of Éric Zemmour,” *Jewish Currents*, December 6, 2021, <https://jewishcurrents.org/the-politically-expedient-jewishness-of-eric-zemmour>.

64 Zemmour, *Le suicide français*, 89-90.

65 Gérard Noiriel, *Le venin dans la plume: Édouard Drumont, Éric Zemmour et la parte sombre de la République* (Paris: La Découverte, 2019).

66 Jelena Subotic, “Antisemitism in the Global Populist International,” *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/136914812110066970>.

*Rewriting France's Roman National*

Since his teenage years, Zemmour has been a connoisseur of French history and literature, to which he devotes a lot of his spare time.<sup>67</sup> He sprinkles references to French history and French literature throughout his speeches to give himself the appearance of being well-read. These carefully chosen references allow him to tell an attractive story of French history in a nineteenth-century romantic style, full of historical misinterpretations and presentisms. Zemmour positions himself as the heir of Charles Maurras (1868-1952), the central figure of the French “blood and soil” tradition, who inscribes French identity into reactionary Catholicism and the monarchist tradition (Maurras was the founder of the *Action française*). This legacy is visible in Zemmour’s support among French monarchist circles, both on the Legitimist side, where he has received a declaration of support<sup>68</sup> from the heir of the House of Bourbon, Prince Charles-Emmanuel of Bourbon-Parma, a descendant of King Louis XIV; and on the Orleanist side, where he is backed by Antoine Berth, the spokesperson for *Action Française*, who was a member of Zemmour’s electoral campaign team, and several other members.<sup>69</sup>

Zemmour reads history as the history of national heroes, imbued with the energy of the nation, but adds elements of autobiography: his own life experience is paralleled by France’s national moments of heroism. His video announcing his candidacy for the presidency was a real *mise en scène* in a vintage style inspired by de Gaulle’s June 18, 1940, London speech calling for resistance to Nazi Germany—an implicit parallel that would present Zemmour as the savior of France in the face of a new (Muslim) invasion. In the video, Zemmour reads a long text full of cultural references, explaining to viewers why they “no longer feel at home in their own country.” He then offers an arch-view of French history:

You remember the country found in films and books. The country of Joan of Arc and Louis XIV. The country of Bonaparte and General de Gaulle. The country of knights and ladies. The country of Victor Hugo and Chateaubriand. The country of Pascal and Descartes. The country of the fables of La Fontaine, the characters of Molière, and the verses of Racine. The country of Notre Dame de Paris and of village church towers. The country of Gavroche and Cosette. The country of barricades and Versailles. The country of Pasteur and Lavoisier. The country of Voltaire and Rousseau, of Clemenceau and the soldiers of '14, of de Gaulle and Jean Moulin. The country of Gabin and Delon; of Brigitte Bardot and Belmondo, of Johnny and Aznavour, of Brassens and Barbara; of the films of Sautet and Verneuil.<sup>70</sup>

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67 Étienne Girard, *Le Radicalisé. Enquête sur Éric Zemmour* (Paris: Seuil, 2021).

68 “[Vidéo] Charles-Emmanuel et Amaury de Bourbon-Parme, descendants de Louis XIV, apportent leur soutien à Eric Zemmour,” *Valeurs Actuelles*, February 17, 2022, <https://www.valeursactuelles.com/societe/video-les-bourbon-parme-descendants-de-louis-xiv-apportent-leur-soutien-a-eric-zemmour/>.

69 Lucie Delaporte, “Dans les comités locaux, des factieux derrière Zemmour,” *Mediapart*, October 21, 2021, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/211021/dans-les-comites-locaux-des-factieux-derriere-zemmour?onglet=full>.

70 The video is no longer available on YouTube due to copyright violation. See “Présidentielle 2022 : la vidéo de campagne d’Éric Zemmour bloquée par la plateforme YouTube,” *ladepeche.fr*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.ladepeche.fr/2022/03/10/presidentielle-2022-la-video-de-campagne-deric-zemmour-bloquee-par-la-plateforme-youtube-10160520.php>.

Zemmour stated that there is a “real history of France” that is hidden to the public and no longer taught in school because the multiculturalist elites and the professional community of historians are working against genuine history. This “real history” re-mythologizes the *roman national*, from king Clovis’ Christian baptism in 506 and the Poitiers battle of 1356 that halted the expansion of Islam in France to, of course, Joan d’Arc and her militant patriotism. But Zemmour also comments frequently on twentieth-century history, especially on the collaboration era, trying to rehabilitate Marshal Petain; affirming that the Vichy regime protected French Jews; and supporting Maurice Papon, one of the key figures of French collaboration, who was tried in 1996. He also refers regularly to the still-raging memory wars over the Maghreb and especially Algeria, painting colonization as a civilizing mission that helped the colonized nations and complaining about the latter’s lack of gratitude for everything France did for them.<sup>71</sup>

### *Neoliberal Illiberalism*

Economically, Zemmour partially fits the definition of an “authoritarian neoliberalism”<sup>72</sup> or “neoliberal illiberalism,”<sup>73</sup> promoting exclusionary social protection or welfare chauvinism through the concept of “national preference.” Indeed, Zemmour defends neoliberalism in the sense of austerity measures and reducing government regulation, celebrates the business elites, and calls for halting redistributive measures. His only criticism of neoliberalism relates to globalization, which he sees as destructive of the nation; he therefore proposes a deglobalization project that would reindustrialize France.

Here too, Zemmour copies and pastes the Trump brand of neoliberal deglobalization/protectionism, yet with less success, as French public opinion is much more favorable to state redistributive mechanisms than its American counterpart. But his neoliberalism allows him to accuse his competitor Marine Le Pen of being too leftist—read: generous—when it comes to her economic political program<sup>74</sup> and to secure support among the free-marketeers, such as big French corporations and the traditional French bourgeoisie. And indeed, we know—thanks to the investigative journalists of *Mediapart*—that the main donors to Zemmour’s electoral campaign were senior figures in major investment funds, hedge funds, real estate companies, financial advising firms, and industrial groups.<sup>75</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Zemmour did not succeed at capturing support from French voters. His radicality, especially in relation to women, abortion, the LGBT+ community, and the Vichy regime cost him at the ballot box. When they vote, French citizens prefer to go with well-known figures who are trusted as pragmatic and efficient and not purely

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71 Aglan Alya et al., *Zemmour contre l'histoire*, Tracts no. 34 (Paris: Gallimard, 2022).

72 Noemi Lendvai-Bainton and Dorota Szelewa, “Governing New Authoritarianism: Populism, Nationalism and Radical Welfare Reforms in Hungary and Poland,” *Social Policy & Administration* (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12642>.

73 Erik Swyngedouw, “Illiberalism and the Democratic Paradox: The Infernal Dialectic of Neoliberal Emancipation,” *European Journal of Social Theory* (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310211027079>.

74 Barthélémy Philippe, “Eric Zemmour Et Marine Le Pen... Leurs Différences Flagrantes Sur L'économie,” *Capital.fr*, November 16, 2021, <https://www.capital.fr/economie-politique/eric-zemmour-et-marine-le-pen-leurs-flagrantes-differences-sur-leconomie-1420130>.

75 Sébastien Bourdon, Ariane Lavrilleux, and Marine Turchi, “Révélation sur les grands donateurs de la campagne d'Eric Zemmour,” *Mediapart*, January 20, 2022, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/200122/revelations-sur-les-grands-donateurs-de-la-campagne-d-eric-zemmour>.

ideological (a brand that Marine Le Pen has gradually built). Yet Zemmour's electoral failure should be contrasted with his political success at becoming a key figure on the French public landscape. He continues to access major media outlets, including the most respectable ones, overwhelming them with provocative soundbites that meet the need of the whole media ecosystem, especially the 24/7 television channels, for clickbait content that can attract an audience. He also benefits from the support of the Bolloré media empire, and more globally from the corporate world, which needs new voices to defend neoliberal economic politics, even if under a Trump-style antiglobalization narrative.

Zemmour embodies a global, transnational trend of decomplexified language that aims to break the norms of dialogue by insulting and polarizing, and which builds its moral ground on the notion of fighting political correctness—what Ruth Wodak, Jonathan Culpeper, and Elena Semino have called the “shameless normalization of impoliteness” à la Trump or Berlusconi.<sup>76</sup> When asked about the xenophobic nature of Zemmour's discourse, CNews responded that they “bring pluralism to life, without being afraid of polemics.”<sup>77</sup> The myth of the crisis of free speech has been the far right's favorite battle horse lately. The purpose of the myth is not to secure freedom of speech—that is, the right to express one's opinions without censorship or restraint—but rather to allow people to speak with impunity and to destigmatize racism and prejudice. Or, as Nesrine Malik puts it, “not freedom of expression, but rather freedom from the consequences of that expression.”<sup>78</sup>

Zemmour benefits from other systemic changes, such the collapse of the French center-right, now absorbed by Macron's La République en Marche and unable to maintain its own political identity: Les Républicains' candidate, Valérie Pécresse, failed to reach even the threshold of 5 percent of voters, a first for the party and a financial disaster. Zemmour may also represent a change in the far-right realm, namely a new battle emerging between supporters of the “normalization” strategy embodied by Marine Le Pen and those following Marion Maréchal in assuming their far-right identity and ideological genealogy. It is indeed likely that Zemmour will gradually have to share his segment of the ideological market with Marion, whose ambitions to develop her own brand closer to that of her grandfather Jean-Marie than to that of her aunt Marine are well-known.<sup>79</sup>

Whatever Zemmour's future will be, his newly acquired stunning visibility on the French public landscape confirms the revival of the figure of the *intellectual engagé*, historically on the left of the political spectrum but now conquered by the (far) right. This shift confirms that illiberal thinkers and doers have been able to position themselves at the forefront of the current cultural wars and no longer allow the progressivist side to dominate. In that sense, Zemmour represents the French version of a transnational trend that has been rising for more than a decade. The decreased profile and partial delegitimization of these illiberal figures due to

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76 Ruth Wodak, Jonathan Culpeper and Elena Semino, “Shameless Normalisation of Impoliteness: Berlusconi's and Trump's Press Conferences,” *Discourse & Society* (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926520977217>.

77 Sandrine Cassini et Mouna El Mokhtari, “CNews, la télé du clash permanent,” *Le Monde*, October 26, 2019, [https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2019/10/26/cnews-la-tele-du-clash-permanent\\_6016977\\_3234.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2019/10/26/cnews-la-tele-du-clash-permanent_6016977_3234.html).

78 Nesrine Malik, “The Myth of the Free Speech Crisis,” *The Guardian*, September 3, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/03/the-myth-of-the-free-speech-crisis>.

79 Lucie Delaporte, “Marion Maréchal derrière Éric Zemmour: une candidature peut en cacher une autre,” *Mediapart*, March 5, 2022, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/050322/marion-marechal-derriere-eric-zemmour-une-candidature-peut-en-cacher-une-autre>.



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Russia's war against Ukraine is only a short interlude, not a long-term decline, as the structural elements of their success have yet to be addressed.