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THE NEW HORIZONS OF THE FRENCH EXTREME RIGHT

Fragmented but Dynamic and Better Socially Embedded

Nicolas Lebourg and Marlene Laruelle

The French far right has historically been characterised by its fragmentation into small groups. This fragmentation is so structural that even the Vichy regime had the peculiar distinction of not being a single-party system and offering up to 88 different far-right political parties and organisations for voters to choose from.¹ This fragmentation tends to create the illusion that, because each far-right group outside the *Front National/Rassemblement National* (FN/RN) is small, even the sum of their parts would be laughable. However, when *La Manif Pour Tous* (LMPT: Demonstration for All) called to continue mass demonstrations against the legalisation of homosexual marriage in 2013, the extreme right (outside the FN) could line up 17,000 people under multiple banners in Paris for the “Day of Anger” demonstration on 26 January 2014, demanding the resignation of President François Hollande. The intelligence services estimated in 2019 that far-right radical groups represented 3,000 people, including 1,000 who were potentially dangerous.²

A first National Front (not related to the contemporary one) was created in 1934 precisely to counter this fragmentation: it was about achieving a unitary “nationalist consensus” between all the far-right organisations. This principle was the one constantly cited by Jean-Marie Le Pen between the foundation of the FN in 1972 and the great split experienced by the party in 1999 when half of its executives and elected officials left with Bruno Mégret and founded the *Mouvement National Républicain* (MNR: National Republican Movement). Since then, the FN gradually deepened its electoral impact under the presidency of Marine Le Pen – who renamed it *Rassemblement National* (RN: National Rally) in 2018, to symbolise its desire to repair the split and show a united front.

However, in 2021, Marine Le Pen saw her leadership contested by the presidential campaign of polemicist Éric Zemmour, confirming once again that fragmentation remains a key feature of the French radical right. In this chapter we explore the extreme-right landscape (we use “extreme right” to define those groups situated to the right of the National Front/Rally), look at those minor parties which remain politically active, those which have been dissolved by the authorities since 2017, and investigate the growing number of cases in which activists opt for violence, terrorism, or the dream of a coup.

On the right of Marine's national rally: Active movements

Overall, the small parties existing on the right of the NF/RN were born from the transformation of the National Front into a family business during the 1990s. To ensure the generational passage between Jean-Marie and his daughter Marine Le Pen, the party purged its ranks of the less docile figures over several years.

Movements standing for electoral representation

In 2009, former FN cadres founded the *Parti de la France* (PDF: Party of France) in order to re-establish the National Front of the 1980s: in its form, with the nationalist consensus, and in its substance, by advocating a liberal economy and by castigating “foreign colonisation and Islamisation.” The PDF’s purpose was to become an old-fashioned version of the National Front in the hopes of one day retaking the support of those disappointed with Marine Le Pen’s “normalisation” process (which began as early as 2002 after her father’s defeat at the presidential elections). The bet on this revival was lost, and the joint candidacies of the PDF together with other micro-groups represented only 0.3% of the votes cast in the legislative elections of 2017.

The main activists of the PDF movement are the national Catholics, who had a real weight in the National Front until they were pushed out during Marine Le Pen’s rise to party leadership. The main representative body of this group is currently Civitas, an institute founded in 1999 and transformed into a party in 2016. Its program calls for Catholicism as a state religion, the prohibition of Freemasonry, and the abolition of the progressive nature of income tax. A few local candidacies gave Civitas around 1% of the votes in the legislative elections of 2017. Neither Civitas nor the PDF were able to stand in the European elections of May 2019, but, together with former RN candidates, several of their members took part in the “*Reconquête!*” (Reconquest) electoral list initiated by the *Dissidence française* (DF: French Dissent).

Founded in 2011, Dissidence française was ostensibly neo-fascist, called for a Eurasian geopolitical union, and willingly quoted Aleksandr Dugin and Julius Evola. In the European elections, the Reconquest list³ won the competition with the other extreme right list denouncing the threat of the “Great Replacement” as coined by the writer Renaud Camus: 4,569 votes against 1,578 for the latter. The anti-“Grand replacement” list was led by SIEL (*Souveraineté, identité et libertés*: Sovereignty, identity, and liberties), a small sovereigntist party founded in 2011 with the initial aim of opening up the National Front to the moderate right. The votes for Dissidence française are firmly concentrated in France’s classic regions of radicalism (North and Rhône valley), but above all show dissemination in rural areas.

Dissidence française wanted to go further by joining forces with Civitas in order to set up electoral lists in small towns without declared candidates for the 2020 municipal elections. After the failure of this tactic, the group transformed itself into the *Mouvement National-Démocrate* (MND: National-Democratic Movement). This strategy has clear electoral aims: by leaving aside the esotericism inspired by Evola and his Traditionalist movement, the MND now concentrates on preserving “the Christian roots of France.” While the DF assumed a nationalist-revolutionary style that liked to play “both right and left,” the MND presents itself firmly to the right of the National Rally, considering Marine Le Pen to be giving voice merely to the “protest of the rentiers.”⁴ Despite the direct reference to the *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, the German neo-Nazi party, in its title, the MND is more an echo of the frontism (the National Front’s ideology) of the early 1990s, mingled with the notion of absolute sovereignty and the desire to re-examine the immigrant naturalisations carried out since 1973.

The “Frexiter” niche (supporters of a French version of Brexit) promoted by the *Mouvement National-Démocrate* has been a dead end so far: in the European elections the party of *Les Patriotes* (LP) under the leadership of Florian Philippot, a very mediated figure, formerly close friend of Marine Le Pen, won only 0.65% of the votes. The party’s strategy to present itself as the political outlet for the Yellow Vests (Gilets Jaunes) movement was also a failure. Since then, *Les Patriotes* has spearheaded the opposition to the vaccination pass, embracing a virulent form of health populism. The demonstrations against the vaccination pass that *Les Patriotes* led during the summer of 2021 were able to bring together up to 200,000 people.

Until the autumn of 2021, it was clear that none of these small structures had the means to challenge the hegemony of the National Rally. The electorate who could be ideologically seduced by their offers was not only sparse but knew very well that backing what Le Pen offers was more productive in terms of its potential results. For instance in the southern city of Perpignan – the only large city won by the RN in 2020 with the new mayorship of Louis Aliot, the kingpin of the “de-demonisation” strategy – the SIEL and the Reconquest lists won zero and seven votes, respectively.

Reducing the vote for the extreme right to a “vote of anger” has always been a false lead: the extreme-right voter knows how to vote rationally for their ideas. Consequently, these formations have bet everything on the decline of the National Rally and of Marine Le Pen personally. Radical groups have maintained the concept of nationalist consensus, which was immediately redeployed when Éric Zemmour launched his candidacy in the autumn of 2021. Siphoning off half of Le Pen’s vote potential in the opinion polls after launching his own party, *Reconquête!*, dedicated to the fight against the “Great Replacement,” Zemmour’s platform served as a nationalist consensus unifying different micro-constituencies of the extreme right, such as fundamentalist Catholics, monarchists, and white nationalists. Zemmour’s platform also broke with the two markers of Le Pen’s “de-demonisation”: her rejection of anti-Semitic polemics and of ethnic/racist approaches to identifying the nation. Zemmour has attracted to his ranks all those who were ousted by two generations of Le Pens, such as Jean-Yves Le Gallou, the former right-hand man of Bruno Mégret.

Movements without an electoral strategy

Outside of the camp of small political organisations trying to fight for electoral survival, the extreme right is even more fragmented. Action Française (French Action), a royalist movement founded in 1905 adhering to the doctrine of Charles Maurras, has gone through cycles of heightened activity and of decline. It has faced the same challenges for decades: an over-representation of young people from aristocratic families, sometimes socially downgraded, wherein the affiliation with Action Française is transferred from father to son; an organisational apparatus that acts as a “strainer,” which means that young members leave after a few years of membership; a de facto subdivision between young activists who dream of becoming the new Groupe Union Défense (GUD), an infamously violent neo-fascist youth movement founded in 1968 and relaunched in 2023 (with an impressive protest of several hundred people in Paris’ streets in May 2023); and a much older hierarchy (Casajus, 2019).

After the success of La Manif pour Tous, Action Française gained some momentum, as evidenced by the arrest of a dozen of its members in the “Day of Anger” demonstration, the brawling agitation of its Marseille section in 2016–2017, or the conviction in November 2019 of five of its members for violence in the city of Le Mans. Following Maurras’ adage, “we must be intellectual and violent,” *Action Française* does not limit itself to these sorts of actions alone. In 2018, the movement launched a new magazine, *Le Bien Commun* (“the common

good,” or “commonweal”), which joined the *l’Association pour la presse française libre*, founded by the national Catholic daily *Présent* (with a daily circulation of between 5,000 and 10,000 copies) and joined by the monthly *L’Incorrect* (launched in 2017 with 10,000 copies), close to Marion Maréchal, the niece of Jean-Marie Le Pen in dissent against her aunt Marine.

Another group is *Égalité et Réconciliation* (ER: Equality and Reconciliation), founded in 2007 by the writer Alain Soral when he was a member of the FN directorate, with the administrative and financial support of former members of the GUD. The initial goal was to provide the National Front with an ethnically and culturally diverse base of activists, in order to pursue the strategy of “de-demonisation” (Mestre & Monnot, 2011). Following Soral’s departure from the FN in 2009, *Égalité et Réconciliation*’s goal was to present Marine Le Pen in a negative light, and NF number two Florian Philippot (who had sent a signal of support in return) in a positive light (Jonathan Hayoun and Judith Cohen-Solal 2019,). ER relies primarily on its website for getting its message out, which had reached eight-million monthly views in 2016 but has since lost half of its traffic – through the closure in 2020 of its YouTube channel and its Twitter account has not diminished its audience. *Égalité et Réconciliation* covers a stable but limited space: it has a few thousand contributing writers for 200 active members (Montagner, 2020).

Its ideological platform is built upon a virulently Anti-Semitic denunciation of “Zionism” behind everything, considering that this “Zionism” aims at the transnationalisation of the world. For example, even Éric Zemmour’s revisionist remarks on how Marshall Philippe Pétain allegedly protected French Jews were described by *Égalité et Réconciliation* as a tactical move by the supposed “Jewish community” to reassert its domination over France. Nevertheless, *Égalité et Réconciliation* no longer lives in a state of autarky. Alain Soral spoke at a January 2019 unitary meeting called “Yellow Vests, or the coming revolution!” which brought together 500 people. The other speakers were the editor-in-chief of the anti-Semitic newspaper *Rivarol* (which has seen its weekly circulation of 50,000 during the 1960s decline by 90%); the anti-Semitic writer Hervé Ryssen, himself a former FN militant and current leader of what he claims to be the real *Action Française*; and the leader of the *Les Nationalistes* group, Yvan Benedetti.

Les Nationalistes take a fascist stance, mixed with Catholicism and affirmation of pride in the white race. They took over from the *Œuvre française* (OF: French Mission), banned in 2013, but with only a third of its 150 remaining members. OF had received Jean-Marie Le Pen’s agreement to participate in the FN, but Marine Le Pen expelled its leader Yvan Benedetti after he declared to the press in 2011 that he was “anti-Zionist, anti-Semitic, anti-Jew.” Benedetti has a gift for being able to exercise leadership over his men, giving them political discipline, while at the same time observing how averse they are to a culture of textual doctrines.⁵

All those today interested in the fight against “the Zionist lobby” are difficult to lump together within a more unitary far-right struggle, and tend to perpetually accuse mutually each other of hidden Jewishness. For instance, an extreme-right periodical *La Politique* condemned Hervé Ryssen as a “Zionist” during his incarceration in 2020 for anti-Semitic remarks, while reproducing extracts from *Rivarol* making Marion Maréchal out to be “... a Jewish Zionist.”⁶ Hervé Ryssen and white nationalist YouTuber Daniel Conversano clashed with each other from 2017 as to who would be the least consistent in opposing Jews and Islam, but both chose to support Éric Zemmour despite his Jewishness, on behalf of the fight for the white race.

White nationalism has indeed become the main unifying thread amongst the fragmented French extreme right. Its leader has long been Pierre Vial, who founded the *völkisch* group *Terre et Peuple* (Land and People) in 1994 to organise it both from within and on the fringes of the National Front. Claiming to have been ideologically trained by the former Waffen-SS

member Marc Augier, Pierre Vial had been one of the main cadres of the split with Bruno Mégret. He left the MNR when Mégret reached out to French Jews after the 9/11 attacks. However, he too, like Mégret's followers, chose to support Zemmour's candidacy⁷ – a merely symbolic support, since according to one anonymous source, the *Terre et Peuple* magazine has just 381 subscribers.

However, *völkisch* references as such, with their openly German origins, are no longer deemed appropriate, and a leading face of white nationalism is now the young YouTuber, Daniel Conversano. Conversano was an early collaborator of the black anti-Semite Dieu-donné before becoming a full-blown racist. He pushed his racist logic to the limit by emigrating to Bucharest and inviting his friends to join a supposedly racially unaltered Eastern Europe. Hyperactive on the internet, he managed to give birth to a real group, Les Braves, from his web activism, bringing together half a thousand people with a white communitarian ideal (Marion-Bouille & Pacaud, 2022). To promote his cause, he published *Racial Civil War*, a posthumous work of Guillaume Faye, former member of GRECE (*Groupement de Recherche et d'études pour la Civilisation Européenne*: Research and Studies Group for European Civilisation), who from 2000 onwards became a prophet of racial war, and died in 2019 with his ideas having widely spread to the English-speaking world (Camus, 2022). In late 2021, Conversano's two YouTube channels had about 30,000 subscribers altogether, his Twitter account about 16,000 followers, and his Telegram channel about 10,000 – quite high numbers for the small field of the extreme right.

Failed experiments: Movements banned by the authorities

Several extreme-right movements have been banned by the French authorities. Historically, the legal mechanism for prohibiting political groups in France was established by the law of 10 January 1936. Certain groups may be prohibited on the proposal of the Prime Minister by decree of the President of the Republic in the Council of Ministers. The law originally targeted far-right leagues, and this field has remained the essential object of its application, with 46.5% of the movements banned since 1936 coming under it. Although the rate has been lower under the Fifth Republic (40.7%), it has increased since 2002, reaching 51.4% of cases in this latest period.

Bastion social

In 2017, the radical milieu seemed to find a spearhead with the creation of *Bastion Social* by the GUD of Lyon. The GUD of Lyon had at that time just recently participated in the creation of the European movement Reconquista, launched by the main Ukrainian far-right group, the Azov Division (Nonjon, 2020). They opted to found a movement with a nationalist-revolutionary tendency inspired by the Italian *CasaPound*, and with a strategy of social action and the systematic creation of “community pub”-type local branches. The latter strategy is supposed to insert the group into its urban fabric (not without some oddities: at the end of 2017, at night of the inauguration of such a place in Strasbourg, 20 nationalists beat up a young Algerian).

It was Bastion Social participation in the Yellow Vests riots of 1 December 2018, during which the Arch of Triumph was vandalised, which justified its ban on 24 April 2019. The decree prohibiting it took care to list the small local groups on which *Bastion Social* relied (*Les Petits Reblochons*, *Association Lugdunum*, *Cercle Frédéric Mistral*, *Cercle Honoré d'Estienne d'Orves*, *Solidarité Argenteratum*, *Association Arvernais*). The activists reconverted

into city-level associations—a method already used by radical groups following bans of their movements (Lebourg, 2019).

Also involved in the vandalisation of the Parisian monument was a new group calling itself the *Zouaves* (after the famous French infantrymen stationed composed of Algerians), who were in turn banned in January 2022, after the violence they had committed the previous month against anti-racist activists protesting against Zemmour's first campaign meeting. Since 2018, the name *Zouaves* has been used by Parisian right-wing activists for their common violent actions, beyond their individual group affiliations. Amongst these were the *Identitaires*, a movement whose main organisation, *Génération identitaire*, was banned in March 2021 but which has deeply transformed the radical right end of spectrum in Europe.

Génération identitaire

The adventure of the *Identitaires* began with the dissolution of *Unité Radicale* in 2002. One of its young members shot President Jacques Chirac on Bastille Day – the attacker justified his action by the fact that the president was allegedly an “agent of ZOG” (which stands for “Zionist Occupation Government”) (Albertini & Doucet, 2016). The group's/party's ban allowed its young activists to renovate the methods of action: exit the fascist references, radical anti-Zionism, violent activism, typical looks, and underground propaganda. The impact of jihadist attacks on French territory also liquidated their neo-paganism, hegemonic in the radicalism of the 1980s and 1990s, and provoked adherence to cultural Catholicism.

The *Identitaires* has broken with neo-fascist codes to assume an ethnicist/racist line of thought such as has rarely been seen or heard in the French public square since it became taboo following the Second World War. They have claimed to espouse a more mainstream style, stating that their goal is “to scare the adversary, not our grandmothers.” However, their activists do not easily adopt this approach, and they still can be found engaging in various brawls. One of their members from Toulouse, dismissed from the army after setting fire to a mosque, ended up going to fight in Ukraine's Donbas region on the Russian side, before reappearing in the security service of the Yellow Vests (Lebourg, 2018). The *Identitaires*' relations with Marine Le Pen are especially bad, since they tried for a few years to stand for election and therefore compete directly with the National Front's share of the conservative vote. In 2014, they called on their supporters to vote for the Le Pen party, and got around 50 of them on its lists in the municipal elections. The idea was to continue to carry out the ethnic and anti-Islam themes that the National Front could not deploy publicly, drawing inspiration from the methods of environmental activism: peaceful and symbolically strong actions intended to promote topical issues and ultimately to advance a long-term political agenda.

Génération identitaire (GI) has become the flagship of these actions and the antithesis of the model of the radicalism of past decades: acting in broad daylight, faces uncovered, with women in the group and with actions designed for their potential media impact, claiming to defend those who would be oppressed by Islam. A new generation in this movement is currently taking over the reins: Damien Rieu embodies *Génération identitaire* on Twitter, with 86,000 followers at the start of 2020, and has since then rallied Zemmour. Younger, more masculine, and more popular than the militants of most other French political parties, mainly located in urban centres, the *Identitaires* have developed a strong sense of community. With their system of initiatory militancy, where the militant is gradually integrated into the organisation, the *Identitaires* do have a certain capacity for networking (Jacquet-Vaillant, 2021a). They have become an international brand with the foundation of branches in Germany, Austria, Ireland, Italy, Hungary, the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, and

Slovenia (Jacquet-Vaillant, 2021b). Their “summer university” also has European dimensions and, even if the photograph of the class of 2019 only showed 107 people, it served to forge common transnational cultures and practices.

Their leading figure, Philippe Vardon, has long posed a problem for the National Front. He has been critical of the orientation led by Marine Le Pen, believing that “the strictly sovereignist line that some defend in the FN sometimes seems to give priority to the state over the people and their identity.”⁸ Although widely considered one of the most gifted politicians of the far right, Philippe Vardon caused such mistrust that in 2013 he only had the card of the *Rassemblement Bleu Marine* (Marine’s association intended to open up the FN) for less than 24 hours. In 2018, Vardon joined the National Office of the National Rally and participated in the organisation of the last presidential and European campaigns. He is one of the three *Identitaires* out of the seven aides of European deputy Nicolas Bay, vice-president of the Identity and Democracy faction in the European Parliament (which was also the former name of the *Identitaires’* journal), who joined Zemmour in February 2022. However, the *Identitaires’* leader had to give up his position in 2021: the repeated broadcasting of images showing him at a neo-Nazi concert in his youth had been deemed “unmanageable” by the leadership of the National Rally, as stated by one of the party’s leading figure at the Party convention. Vardon eventually joined Zemmour too, a sign that the National Rally prefers to lose than to keep those who could create internal schism.

Another key *Identitarian* figure is Damien Rieu, who started out as an aide to Marion Maréchal, and then became the assistant to the European deputy Philippe Olivier, the brother-in-law of Marine Le Pen before, too, rallying Zemmour. The latter borrowed from the *Identitaires* the notion of “localism,” the only strong new theme of the National Rally since 2017 – to the point that led to the creation a new satellite, the *Parti local*, in 2021. The *Identitaires* thus oscillated between being a cadre school for the National Rally and a transnational movement of agitprop playing the role of a radical right avant-garde.⁹ This dynamism has pushed them to make major plays for media attention: setting out in a boat on the Mediterranean to cut off the route of migrants, then engaging in border control operations in the Alps and then in the Pyrenees against migrants crossing the borders. This vigilante substitution for law enforcement agencies resulted in the movement’s dissolution in March 2021 – which again led to a flowering of local affiliate associations, but also to various members being drawn to the Zemmour campaign, like Damien Rieu himself.

L’Alvarium

Another political structure that emerged at the local level, before being banned, was the *Alvarium*, founded in 2017 in Angers by the son of Pascal Gannat, former chief advisor to Jean-Marie Le Pen. The *Alvarium* participated in neo-fascist actions, also holding the Italian *CasaPound* up as a model. A community vegetable garden, for example, was launched in 2020. They also organised a squat reserved for French citizens, not migrants, that was evicted the police in the autumn of 2020, but the movement was able to keep some proximity with the conservative bourgeoisie. The magazine *Valeurs actuelles* (with a weekly circulation of 93,000, and close ties to the Zemmour campaign) has indeed supported the *Alvarium* as a social movement with rightist values.

Academia Christiana, a training institute for young Catholics (including one of Marine Le Pen’s daughters), organised its summer school with the *Alvarium* in a school of the Holy Cross Congregation. Engaged in humanitarian support for Armenia, the leader of the *Alvarium* is a former National Front candidate, son of a former chief of staff of Jean-Marie Le

Pen. In September 2020, he ran the local elections, only garnering 1.41% of the vote when the National Rally candidate won 9.78% (Décugis et al., 2020). The participation of *Alvarium* activists in various acts of violence led to the banning of the movement in November 2021. In January 2022, one of its former members was still serving his 12-month prison sentence, eight of which were for violence committed towards demonstrators protesting against the unemployment insurance reform.

The neo-Nazis

On the list of extreme-right movements banned by the French state, one can also find some neo-Nazi organisations. This is the case, for instance, of Blood & Honour Hexagone (BHH), banned in 2019 following the discovery of this neo-Nazi group's participation in arms trafficking. Like all Blood and Honour chapters, their activities were primarily those of classic skinhead subcultures, such as concerts like the one in 2015 which brought together between 300 and 350 people, including some from Germany, Belgium, Switzerland, and Spain. These gatherings were the occasion for neo-Nazi provocations, such as Algerian and Israeli flag burnings, and the display of swastikas. BHH also organised mixed martial arts tournaments and fights. Its website offered radical merchandising, such as a line of clothing "made by white people, for white people." Limited to the Marseille region, the subdivision of the organisation into three circles did not hide the modest number of its members. BHH thus had 12 dues-paying "members," four "prospective members" (aspirants to member status in the observation phase and needing to prove themselves in combat), and seven "hexagoners" (supporters).¹⁰ President Macron himself announced the banning of BHH at the dinner of the Representative Council of Jewish Institutions of France (*Conseil représentatif des institutions juives de France*: Crif), at the same time as those of Bastion Social and Combat 18. The latter actually never existed: C18 was not present in France apart from a few instances of insulting graffiti.

The French authorities also banned other radical groups between 2019 and 2021: the Anti-Zionist Party, a splinter group that led a list in the Ile-de-France region during the 2009 European elections (1.3%) with Alain Soral and Dieudonné and was forbidden at the same time as some radical pro-Iranian Islamist associations; the Turkish Loups Gris (Grey Wolves), on the grounds of their violence against the Armenian community, but also with the suspicions of the co-opting of the Turkish diaspora in France by the Erdoğan regime; and the *Ligue de défense noire africaine* (Black African Defence League) for anti-white racism. The French authorities have then worked on dissolving both extreme far-right groups and more Islamist or "Islamofascist" associations, essentially those of national level, while allowing the smaller ones of regional size to remain (Molard, 2021).

Terrorist and coup attempts: The ultra-right realm

The French intelligence services are concerned not only about radical movements that have been banned but also about the ongoing violent radicalisation of what they call the ultra right.¹¹ The term has no ideological value: it is simply used to designate that segment of the extreme right that may be prone to violence. Statistically, the number of acts attributed to the ultra-right exploded since 1982. Originally anti-Semitic, the violence has become mainly anti-North African. Prefiguring accelerationism (the white-supremacist idea that one needs to accelerate political tensions and sow chaos in order to provoke racial wars and white "racial awakening"), neo-Nazi militants perpetrated attacks and assassinations under false Jewish or North African flags between 1987 and 1995, in the hope of provoking waves of inter-ethnic

violence. Ultra-right violent attacks reached a low point during the 1990s – activists were then engaged in the National Front. Their rise today is significant: the number of cases grew in 2013 in the context of La Manif pour Tous, and then rose again following the jihadist attacks of January and November 2015 (Lebourg & Sommier, 2021).

Since then, terrorist attempts and coup d'état fantasies have followed one another. However, the radical leaders of the 1960s and 1970s had never ceased to explain to their members that the dream of a putsch was a thing of the past and that terrorism was futile.¹² Yet the 2015 attacks (the January one against *Charlie Hebdo* and the November one against the Bataclan, the Stade de France, and some bars), the Yellow Vests movement in 2018–2019, and pandemic populism in 2020–2021 have been three shocks accelerating the renewal of the ultra right. From 2017 to 2021, the French Counter-terrorist Prosecutor's Office was given 11 cases, resulting in 48 arrests. In almost all cases, we find a combination of survivalist groups and online radicalisation (Telegram groups, usage of Protonmail), leading to offline violence.

Organisation de l'armée secrète

Two dismantled groups were born directly from the aftershocks of the 2015 jihadist attacks. The first, *Organisation de l'armée secrète* (OAS: Organisation of the secret army), took on the name of the terrorist group that fought against the independence of French Algeria in the 1960s. This neo-OAS was founded by young former militants of the *Œuvre Française* from Marseille. They first created a movement inspired by the Greek Golden Dawn and, after the 2015 turning point, joined the Conversano movement with the aim of building a communitarian village reserved for whites, hesitating to emigrate to supposedly “free-of-migrants” Hungary or Poland. When the OAS group was banned, its militants from the Paris region joined Dissidence française. On the first anniversary of the attacks, the members from Marseille and Perpignan set up a terrorist group inspired by such “role models” as Anders Breivik (whose 2011 attacks in Norway left 77 dead and 151 injured) and Alexandre Bissonnette (whose attack on a mosque in Montréal in 2017 left six dead and eight injured). Their plots were those of a ragtag group (such as an attack on a bar frequented by the left), but most of them were aimed at murdering people from the Middle East in order to cause more of them to flee. In October 2021, the OAS leader was sentenced to nine years in prison.

Action des forces opérationnelles

With much more sophisticated plots, another group, *Action des Forces Opérationnelles* (AFO: Action of the Operations Forces) has a more complex history. It was born of an activist split, provoked by *Volontaires pour la France* (Volunteers for France), another movement born in the aftermath of the attacks of January 2015, but whose theorist Yvan Blot was a former member of GRECE and of the National Front, where he denounced the “genocide of the white race.” Then he became a member of the MNR and contributed to the pro-Russian think tank Géopragma.

Although referring to Gaullism and the Resistance, while modelling their structure on that of the anti-Gaullist OAS, *Action des Forces Opérationnelles* was close to white-nationalist movements, with the desire to build white communities and to organise terrorism directed against Muslims—including the poisoning of halal meat. It denounced the “Great Replacement” both in its mainstream, Islamophobic, version, and in its old-fashioned variety of a supposed Jewish globalist plot. AFO's president was a retired general, animating the association of reserve officers of the department of Perpignan. Eager to take action, AFO members were wealthy people and former police officers. Those who were interested in a more classical form

of political engagement joined either the Republican Party (*Les Républicains*: LR) of former President Nicolas Sarkozy, or the National Front.

The Yellow Vests offered a fertile soil for ultra-right radicalisation. Right-wing radicals joined the popular protests in November 2018 but were gradually supplanted by the ultra left (estimated at around 3,000 activists) in December. Yet they were still represented amongst those Yellow Vests arrested in January 2019,¹³ which led police departments to coin the designation of “yellow ultras.” Estimated at around 300 people, these yellow ultras were sometimes sympathisers of the National Front, but became radicalised after coming into contact with the ultra left. Some of the influential Facebook pages that contributed to the Yellow Vests movements were coming from groups close to AFO (Décugis et al., 2020). As early as March 2018, they were contemplating terrorist acts against Muslims, Freemasons, and the assassination of the president. Here again, it was impatience that led activists to rush in, and consequently to their arrests.

Opération Azur

In 2019, a new network emerged that would take the name of “*Opération Azur*” (OA). Its leader, Rémy Daillet-Wiedemann, claimed to have joined the Croatian ranks during the war in the former Yugoslavia, but his first official political engagement was in François Bayrou’s centrist party the Modem. He then launched a website to support homeschooling, on which an ER activist and the president of Civitas also collaborated. In the autumn of 2020, Daillet-Wiedemann began to multiply his video messages on all sorts of classic conspiratorial themes. He warned that he was preparing a *coup d’état*, and opened a website “*For a coup d’état*” in the hopes of enlisting activists via an online form. In short, his image was that of someone insane.

Nevertheless, in April 2021, *Opération Azur*’s activists were arrested in connection with the kidnapping of an eight-year-old girl whom they thought they would save from her supposed exploitation by paedophilic Satanist elites – a theme inspired by the QAnon culture. Then, the following October, the media reported that Daillet-Wiedemann had been indicted for leading a terrorist organisation involving dozens of people, including police and military members, and plotting attacks against Masonic lodges, 5G antennas, vaccination stations, etc. The plot was intended to culminate in a *coup d’état* during which the militants would make a point of taking the Élysée Palace and the headquarters of a television channel. While part of the terror plot was based on members of the neo-Nazi group *Honneur et Nation* (HN: Honour and Nation), the supervision of the paramilitary branch was provided by a former army lieutenant colonel decorated with the Legion of Honour (Macé & Plottu, 2021).

The documentation distributed by Rémy Daillet-Wiedemann to activists by email described the *Opération Azur*’s worldview. According to it, “the God of the Jews is Satan. Their messiah is the Antichrist.” Judaism would have been taken up by the Khazars (the 2008 work by the Israeli historian Shlomo Sand on the supposed Khazar ancestry of the Ashkenazi Jews received an enthusiastic welcome amongst French anti-Semites); hence the repression of this supposed paedophile Satanism by Russia (the documents quote the French neo-Eurasianist site Saker, which portrays Russia very positively). Some traits of classic Nazism and anti-Semitism were to be found: the Jews would be “Turkic-Mongols” breaking in from Asia to subjugate Europe and take control of the white masses through Masonic lodges, etc. The movement thus combined all the major conspiracy theories: how *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, MK Ultra, QAnon, mind control, white genocide, the Great Replacement, the September 11 and November 13 terrorist attacks, as well as coronavirus and COVID-19 vaccines would all be Jewish actions.

Although the members of *Opération Azur* were more classically anti-Semitic than Islamophobic, one may find amongst them a dimension typical of the radicalised “counter-jihad”

activists, especially those who radicalised after the 2015 attacks. One of their members was a survivalist used to pose for photography with guns, wearing insignia such as the wolf rune or the symbol of Hydra in front of flags flanked by the swastika or the Black Sun, but another one was a professor of chemistry who got interested for the first time in the explosive substance TATP after one of his students was killed at the Bataclan.¹⁴ Half of the dozen members of *Action des Forces Opérationnelles* became radicalised after the November 13 attacks, and several said in police custody that they believed that war with Islam had been opened at the Bataclan. They gradually came to believe in the need for a “white jihad” under the influence of accelerationist theories.

Accelerationism

Accelerationism appeared in France not due to the rise of neo-Nazi groups, but rather of far-right YouTubers: in 2018, two of them with hundreds of thousands of subscribers in total launched the creation of local teams, which gradually formed the small group *Vengeance patriote* (Patriot Vengeance). *Vengeance patriote* uses the face masks typical of AtomWaffen Division (AWD) and distributes the French translation of its bible, *Siege*, presenting it as “the reference work of Ironmarch and AtomWaffen Division (...) the most popular work of the radical right for its terrorist and clandestine approach to the struggle against power.”¹⁵ If the group has not drifted towards terrorist action, the Counter-terrorist Prosecutor office decided in December 2021 to indict the moderator of the website for advocating terrorism.

In October 2021, two young neo-Nazi men and a young woman were arrested for both distributing AWD literature and promoting jihadist themes – a paradoxical combination that may emerge at the most radical parts of the extreme-right landscape (Newhouse, 2021). They were suspected of having wanted to prepare dual mass killings to be perpetrated on 20 April 2022, four days before the first round of the presidential election and the anniversary day of Hitler’s birth. In November 2021, a man was indicted for act of terrorism, and possession of a weapon of war and explosive substances. He was hosting a “To Hell” Telegram group discussing the *Siege* literature. He not only invited its members to vote for the extreme right against the Arabs or for the radical left against the Jews, but also pushed each of his readers to “become a lone wolf,” quoted white supremacist David Lane, and published poems and notes recounting the hunts for the man and mass killings of his dreams.¹⁶ He also distributed the *Accelerationism: A Collective Handbook* (*Accélérationnisme: un manuel collectif*), the French version of the British Terrorgram, comprising 136 remarkably illustrated pages and arguably the most radical document published in France since *Disintegration of the System* half a century ago. In the same month, 13 members of “*Recolonisation France*,” a small group set up on Telegram whose members were mainly from Marseilles, were arrested with 130 firearms, bulletproof vests, silencers, and other equipment in their possession.

Conclusion

Fragmentation is noticeable in all extreme-rights contexts and the French case in no exception. The extreme right has always been a rhizome of interconnected small groups, with activists embedded in several structures simultaneously, but encrypted messaging systems have accentuated its nebular character. Digital socialisation obviously plays a central role in the new radicalisation processes described here. One of the members of *Opération Azur* was, for instance, subscribed to no fewer than 32 Telegram channels, including some from the Nationalists, *Action des Forces Opérationnelles*, *Recolonisation France*, *Génération Identitaire*, *Alvarium*, etc.

The 20th-century dream of small groups hoping to become political parties, with doctrinal programs, training camps, and formally enrolled members, is over: fluidity of institutional belonging has become the new norm. Yet, this does not mean that the links between the fragmented extreme right and the main far-right political structures have been severed: while the Telegram channel *Team Patriote* saw its 150 members denigrating Marine Le Pen and the National Front, and promoting a “race war” as the only solution, they all declared their solidarity for Éric Zemmour’s candidacy (Laurent, 2020).

Zemmour’s strength has been to re-launch the idea of a nationalist consensus that can rally from the ultras ready to engage in terrorist actions and dreaming of a coup to the notables of the conservative bourgeoisie shaped by their Catholicism and nostalgia for a mythified old-fashioned France. Zemmour’s success then raises a key question for both scholarship and policy: is national populism able to neutralise radicalism? It remains to be seen whether the former can channel the latter into more peaceful activism, or if it may contribute to radicalism by normalising radical theories and discourses. A second central question is whether the current fragmentation of French political life on the right end of the ideological spectrum (mirroring what is happening on the left) will be overcome by Marine Le Pen’s strategy, or if the centrifugal dynamics will gain momentum once again.

The French far right finds itself at a turning point. With 41,45 per cent of election at the second round of the May 2022 presidential election, and in gathering 89 deputies at the parliamentary elections of June 2022, Marine Le Pen has proved the validity of her strategy of de-demonisation of the National Rally. She was able to embody a populist *aggionamento* shared by many European countries, where the far right posits itself as the last solution to defend European way of life against alleged Islamisation and globalisation. But while the anti-Muslim xenophobia is spreading, it also contributes to radicalise the far-right fringe, up to the terrorist temptation. Radicalisation now concerns now not only peripheral movements with open references to historical fascism, but also new groups, better integrated into the social fabric, that denounce the domination of the “elite” against the “real people.” These new radicals have different, more mainstream, sociological profiles and could recognise themselves into Zemmour’s political offer. The RN success of 2022 thus confirms that at stake today is not only the normalisation of the far right but a radicalisation of the mainstream.

Notes

- 1 Inspection Générale des Services des Renseignements Généraux, “Partis et groupements politiques”, 14 June 1941 p. 98, Archives Nationales/F/7/15588.
- 2 Parliamentary inquiry commission., *La nouvelle menace d'ultra-droite: Mieux l'appréhender pour mieux la combattre. Comptes-rendus des auditions*, June 2019, p. 72 (Nicolas Lebourg’s archives: NLA).
- 3 “Reconquest” is also the name of the party founded by Éric Zemmour in 2021. This is not a reference to the DF list but the influence on these two circles of the thought of Guillaume Faye who put fashion twenty years ago, by analogy with the history of Spain, the principle of the “Reconquista” against “the Islamization of Europe”. See François and Nonjon, 2022.
- 4 See <https://www.natdem.fr/le-mouvement> (accessed 3 January 2022).
- 5 Interview of Yvan Benedetti with Nicolas Lebourg, 23 March 2019.
- 6 *La Politique: Lettre d'information des Cercles Nationalistes Français*, n°222, October 2020 (NLA).
- 7 *Le Chêne*, n°101, October 2021 (NLA; this is the internal bulletin of the MNR).
- 8 Interview of Philippe Vardon with Nicolas Lebourg, 11 November 2013.
- 9 *La Revue identitaire*, n°6, 2019 (bulletin of GI).
- 10 Superior Court of Marseille, « Réquisitoire définitif à l'encontre des prévenus de l'affaire BBH, » 30 July 2018 (NLA).

- 11 For the three cases studied below, we use French services investigation documents. For the OAS: investigation documents from the Anti-Terrorist Sub-Directorate of the Judicial Police; for the AFO and the Operation Azur: investigation documents from the General Directorate of Internal Security (NLA). For a full study see Lebourg, 2021.
- 12 Dominique Venner, *Pour une critique positive*, supplément au n° 98 du 28 August 1962 de *Politique éclair Hebdomadaire de l'élite française*; François Duprat, *Année Zéro*, 1976.
- 13 Commission of Inquiry, *op. quote*.
- 14 Investigation documents from the General Directorate of Homeland Security (NLA).
- 15 We do not add footnotes with URL for movements accused of terrorism by the French Counter-terrorist Prosecutor Office.
- 16 Telegram loop messages and manual: NLA.

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