

# The Metapolitical Strategy – Towards an Alliance between the Republican and Radical Right in France?

*Kjerstin Aukrust*

## Introduction

Since René Rémond's seminal 1982 study *Les Droites en France*, the different political factions of the French right have been theorized and divided into separate traditions. When it comes to what one today could refer to as the republican right – mainly represented by the once Gaullist party Les Républicains (LR) – and the radical right – mainly represented by the populist party Rassemblement National (RN) – they have been separated by a clear divide for decades. Indeed, since the 1980s, the French right (together with the left) has formed a *front républicain* or *cordon sanitaire* in order to keep the party formerly known as Front National (FN) out of power. Although this still seems to be LR's official political line, history has shown that there have been several attempts at local alliances, and an ideological rapprochement between the enemies on the right of the political spectrum has clearly taken place over the years. Indeed, they find common ground on several core issues, such as immigration, Islam, and the fight against terrorism. However, a *national* alliance between the two parties has yet to take place. In this article, we discuss the reasons for this, and explore different political strategies that could lead to a future alliance between the republican and radical right in France.

According to Kurt Weyland, political strategy “focuses on the methods and instruments of winning and exercising power”.<sup>1</sup> Naturally, there are different office-seeking strategies, none of which has proven successful for the radical right in France when it comes to winning government power. So far, the “de-demonization strategy”, the *dédiabolisation* of the party, has been Marine Le Pen's main political strategy. The goal is to detoxify the party's reputation and to transform it into a mainstream party, in order to obtain electoral gain.<sup>2</sup> Another possible strategy could be the metapolitical one, the “Gramscian strategy”,<sup>3</sup> which argues that the political struggle should also be fought on the cultural battlefield: It is “a strategy of slowly colonizing society with its rhetoric and ideas”, something that must be accomplished before elections can be won.<sup>4</sup> Here, we will focus on the metapolitical strategy, and particularly on how the *ex-députée* of the FN Marion Maréchal,

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1 Weyland, “Clarifying a Contested Concept,” p. 12.

2 Godin, “The Porosity between the Mainstream Right and Extreme Right in France,” p. 55.

3 Bar-On, “Transnationalism and the French Nouvelle Droite,” p. 215.

4 McCulloch, “The Nouvelle Droite in the 1980s and 1990s,” p. 160.

formerly known as Maréchal-Le Pen, is using this strategy in her new career as an educational entrepreneur.

### Alliances of the past

Let us first look at some of the historical attempts at alliances between the radical and republican right in France. As several scholars have shown, the FN has participated in a number of different electoral alliances with mainstream parties throughout the years, particularly in the period between 1983 and 1998.<sup>5</sup> The party's ability to form such alliances has been at the core of the political debate in France since its first electoral breakthrough. This breakthrough took place in 1983, when former Minister of the Interior of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, Michel Poniatowski, approved the merger of the RPR-UDF list (the two main parties on the right at the time) with the FN during a partial municipal election in Dreux.<sup>6</sup> In 1986, an alliance was made with the republican right in three regions.<sup>7</sup> In the PACA-region (Provence-Alpes-Côtes d'Azur), the right managed to beat the left, thanks to an agreement with the FN, and the republican and the far right ruled together in broad daylight as a result. These examples of alliances were often applauded on a local level. The republican right justified their choice of alliance by arguing that the *left* was the main enemy, not the far right.<sup>8</sup>

Shortly after Jacques Chirac's defeat in the 1988 presidential election against socialist François Mitterrand, an announcement made by the political bureau of the RPR (the Gaullist party Rassemblement pour la République) became a game changer: Any national or local alliance with the FN was formally prohibited.<sup>9</sup> This important strategic choice had major electoral repercussions for the right, particularly in the legislative elections of 1997, following President Chirac's dissolution of the National Assembly. As Dominique Reynié points out, the left could not have won the majority of the seats without the contribution of the FN in the so-called *triangulaires*, which are second electoral rounds with three candidates.<sup>10</sup> When such *triangulaires* occur, the *front républicain* is often enacted. This term refers to an alliance between the traditional parties of the right and left, often by withdrawal of their candidates in the second round, in order to block the FN.<sup>11</sup> However, when the FN is part of the *triangulaire*, it is in their interest to remain, at the detriment of the right.

5 De Lange, "From pariah to power broker," p. 28.

6 Dély, *Histoire secrète du Front national*, p. 59.

7 Delwit, « Le Front national et les élections, » p. 129.

8 Blöss, Rouan, and Ascaride, « Le vote Front National dans les Bouches-Du-Rhône, » p. 309.

9 Sirinelli (Ed.), *Dictionnaire historique de la vie politique française au XXe siècle*, p. 501.

10 Reynié, « Le tournant ethno-socialiste du Front national, » p. 465.

11 Ivaldi, « Les formations d'extrême-droite, » p. 20.

Despite the national guidelines, the FN would continue to cause trouble for the RPR on a local level, and in several regions, alliances continued to be formed.<sup>12</sup> However, these alliances did not gain FN as much as they did the right, and the question of whether or not alliances were the way to go therefore became subject to much discussion within the party. Founding father and leader Jean-Marie Le Pen's standpoint was clear: His strategy was one of isolation. In fact, the multiple provocations that he became known for can be seen as part of that strategy: Whereas each racist or anti-Semitic insult made the possibility of an alliance all the more difficult, it also allowed Le Pen to maintain the control of his own party.<sup>13</sup> Some requests to form alliances with mainstream parties were made, most notably by the party's "number two" Bruno Mégret, who was in disagreement with Le Pen's strategy of going head to head in a *choc frontal* with the right.<sup>14</sup> This rivalry and battle over isolationism versus alliances with the mainstream right was not to be resolved.<sup>15</sup> As a consequence, Mégret created his own party in 1999: The goal was to make electoral alliances and to, subsequently, gain power.<sup>16</sup> This effort did not succeed.

### **An alliance of ideas?**

Although alliances between the republican right and the radical right have proven to be both difficult and controversial in the past, there is still a convergence of ideas between the two that has deep historical roots.<sup>17</sup> The ideological kinship has often manifested itself in the co-optation of both political rhetoric, views and policies by the mainstream right from the extreme right.<sup>18</sup> This co-optation has been particularly visible when it comes to anti-immigration views, which were partly adopted as early as the 1980s.<sup>19</sup> This ideological rapprochement seems to have gotten only stronger over the past two decades, particularly since 2007. This was the year the right wing candidate from the Gaullist party, UMP (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire), Nicolas Sarkozy, won the presidential election, notably by seducing a large number of FN-voters.<sup>20</sup> According to Gilles Ivaldi and Jocelyn Evans, this was a pivotal moment in French political history: After many years of hesitation and contested local alliances, 2007 marked the success of the republican

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12 Delwit, « Les étapes du Front national (1972–2011) », pp. 27–8.

13 Bernard, « Le Pen, un provocateur en politique (1984–2002) ».

14 Dély, *Histoire secrète du Front national*, p. 67.

15 Stockemer, *The Front National in France*, p. 22.

16 Reynié, « Le tournant ethno-socialiste du Front national », p. 466.

17 Godin, "The Porosity between the Mainstream Right and Extreme Right in France," p. 54.

18 van Spanje, "Contagious Parties".

19 Schain, "The National Front in France and the Construction of Political Legitimacy".

20 Mayer, « Comment Nicolas Sarkozy a rétréci l'électorat Le Pen ».

right in the field of ideas, values and political action.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Sarkozy, through what Aurélien Mondon refers to as a “reactionary rupture”, managed to become the national spokesperson of the FN’s recurrent themes and ideas, while at the same time assuring that the FN did not profit from it.<sup>22</sup>

After his victory in 2007, Sarkozy introduced a new policy that weakened the *front républicain*: the “ni, ni” (neither, nor) – neither the FN, nor the PS. The new motto was “pas d’ennemis à droite” – no enemies to the right.<sup>23</sup> Logically, if the enemy wasn’t to the right, it was to the left, and in order to beat them, Sarkozy’s strategy was to make the French right great again, so to speak – or rather *décomplexée*, as he put it: In his view, it had to regain its former confidence, particularly on an ideological level. This strategy was not unanimous, and there was internal disagreement on the matter, which caused tension within the party. Whereas those who tended towards the center-right wanted to make a clear stand against the FN, the right wing of the UMP, who in 2010 formed the movement “La Droite populaire”, were ideologically close to the FN on matters such as immigration, security and national identity and did not support a reaffirmation of the *front républicain*.<sup>24</sup> Incidentally, “La Droite populaire”, which became representative of the a radicalisation process and a *droitisation* of the party, a “lurch to the right”, was co-led by the MP and later minister under Sarkozy Thierry Mariani, who in early 2019 left his old party in order to join the RN’s list for the EP-election.<sup>25</sup>

With this new movement within the party, the *cordon sanitaire* that was put in place by Jacques Chirac was broken. Since Sarkozy, the weakening of the *front républicain* has continued, and after the election of Emmanuel Macron in 2017, it seems weaker than ever. A survey conducted in 2020 among 10 000 LR-activists reveals that while the party leadership and overall LR elected officials reject any rapprochement with Marine Le Pen’s party, a significant number of grassroots members are in favor of more right-wing alliances, rather than the centrist ones that the top tends to prefer.<sup>26</sup> As Emmanuel Godin has shown, this difference in attitude between the top level and the base is not unprecedented.<sup>27</sup> The question remains if Marine Le Pen is capable of capitalizing on this support in order to achieve future alliances.

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21 Ivaldi and Evans, « L’extrême-droite à la dérive ».

22 Mondon, “Nicolas Sarkozy’s legitimization of the Front National,” p. 28.

23 Winock, *La Droite hier et aujourd’hui*, p. 180.

24 Bréchon, « La droite à l’épreuve du Front national, » p. 170.

25 Haegel, *Les droites en fusion*, p. 277. Since 2019, the movement is no longer part of LR, but is still active as an independent political association: <https://droitepopulaire.fr/accueil/>.

26 Herbemont, « EXCLUSIF – Présidentielle : ce que veulent les militants LR pour 2022 ».

27 Godin, “The Porosity between the Mainstream Right and Extreme Right in France,” p. 54.

## Marine Le Pen's efforts to ally

Since Marine Le Pen took over as party leader in 2011, the FN's position regarding alliances has changed. Indeed, Jean-Marie Le Pen's isolationism and refusal to form alliances is not a strategy that is shared by his daughter – quite the contrary. Unlike her father, her ultimate objective is to govern, and in order to reach this goal, several efforts have been made to attract political allies. Symbolically, the name change made in 2018 from *front* to *rassemblement* is the most important and visible one: While the first term implies resistance *against* something, the latter signifies a union, a gathering of common forces. With the new party name, Le Pen thus sends a very different message to the political sphere: A hand reached out to potential partners, rather than a back turned against them. The new name can also be interpreted as part of the de-demonization of the party. While it has been successful in improving its extremist reputation, this strategy has not been able to lift the party into power positions.<sup>28</sup> According to scholars, this is due mostly to the fact that the FN/RN, which is “a typical example of an ostracized party”,<sup>29</sup> has been unable “to foster cooperation with the moderate right in order to achieve competitiveness under France's majoritarian two-round electoral system”.<sup>30</sup>

Although the moderate (or republican) right has been out of reach for the RN so far, other alliances have been made, the most significant being the agreement made with Nicolas Dupont-Aignan before the second round of the presidential election in May 2017. The latter is a right-wing politician, a former RPR/UMP-member, who since 2008 has led the souverainist party *Debout La France* (“Stand Up, France”). The endorsement was a significant step for Le Pen's party: Indeed, it was the first time the FN had made a formal alliance with another political party on a national level, where the goal was to form a joint government. As we know, this goal was never brought to fruition, and the partnership between Le Pen and her former ally has long since come to an end. However, this is due to Dupont-Aignan more than Le Pen: In the fall of 2020, she invited him to rally behind her for the first round of the presidential election in 2022. He declined the invitation, arguing that she was “a bad candidate”, “incapable of winning”.<sup>31</sup> His dream was rather to unite the patriotic, sovereignist and far right in a big primary election in 2021. These primaries could include, according to him, names such as party leaders Florian Philippot (*Les Patriotes*) and François Asselineau (*Union Populaire Républicaine*), LR-members from the conservative wing of the party, and public figures such as the notorious political journalist Eric Zemmour, or the general Pierre de Villiers.<sup>32</sup> However, it

28 Ivaldi, “A new course for the French radical-right?”

29 van Spanje and Weber, “Does Ostracism Affect Party Support?,” p. 748.

30 Ivaldi and Evans, *The 2017 French Presidential Elections*, p. 30.

31 Cuny-Le Callet, « Pour Dupont-Aignan, «il n'y a aucune raison de subir ce duel Macron-Le Pen» en 2022 ».

32 Dupont-Aignan, « Vœux à la presse ».

seems that one person was missing from Dupont-Aignan's list of eligible people – Marion Maréchal. Let us now take a closer look at this political figure.

### Born into politics

Marion Maréchal was born into the Le Pen dynasty in 1989 as Marion Jeanne Caroline Le Pen. Her mother is Yann Le Pen, the second daughter of Jean-Marie Le Pen, and Marine Le Pen's sister. Marion took the surname Maréchal at an early age; it comes from her stepfather, Samuel Maréchal, also a long time FN-activist.<sup>33</sup> She quickly became literally the French far right's poster girl, as she was featured at two years old in the arms of her grandfather on an official poster for the regional elections in PACA in 1992.<sup>34</sup> Fast forward to the municipal elections in 2008, when she made her humble political debut in seventh position on the lists in Saint-Cloud. The choice of this particular electoral district was a natural one, as she grew up in the Le Pen mansion of Montretout, which is located in this western suburb of Paris.

Two years later, the FN put the young blonde in a more pivotal position in the regional elections in Ile-de-France. She had by then also added the "hyphen Le Pen" to her name, which she had not done two years prior, as a way to communicate more explicitly her connection to the Le Pen clan, which was considered an asset amongst FN-voters. This proved to be a success in 2012, and at only 22, she was elected the youngest *député* in the history of the French Republic. She became one of only two members of the National assembly from the FN, the other one being the former lawyer Gilbert Collard. The two were unable to form a group with other MPs, who traditionally have refused to collaborate with the FN, in line with the strategy of the *cordon sanitaire*, and they were therefore labelled *non-inscrits* (not enrolled). Maréchal-Le Pen's partisan attachment and polemic side quickly came to show, as she stood up to defend matters dear to her party's heart, such as the *préférence nationale*, the sovereignty of France threatened by the EU, or even the defence of the memory of French Algeria.<sup>35</sup> But the issues which would make her gain the most notoriety were the ones related to same-sex marriage and adoption, abortion, and questions of bioethics. Maréchal's outspokenness and standpoint on these issues quickly made her a rising star of the conservative right.

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33 Maréchal's biological father is the journalist and diplomat Roger Auque, who confirmed the paternity in his posthumous autobiography *Au service secret de la République*.

34 Ritot, « La petite Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, 3 ans, faisait déjà de la politique avec papy! ».

35 Pottier, « La saga des députés Le Pen, une histoire du Front national ».

## Family values

Despite the fact that the new FN-leader considered the young *députée* an asset to the party, it became clear early on that the aunt and niece had diverging ideological and political stands. Unlike her aunt and her FN “rival”, former vice-president of the party and chief strategist Florian Philippot, Maréchal-Le Pen was an active supporter of the grassroots right-wing protest movement “La Manif Pour Tous” (LMPT). Created in 2012 against former President François Hollande’s legislation on same-sex marriage (called “Le Mariage Pour Tous”), its supporters were strongly opposed not only to the extension of marriage rights to same-sex couples, but also to adoption and parenting rights for same-sex married couples. Although it did not prevent the laws from being passed, the movement was an impressive political success. Indeed, LMPT had a remarkable ability to mobilize a huge crowd for a large number of demonstrations, events and rallies, and made history by becoming the most successful right-wing phenomenon in decades.<sup>36</sup> In fact, its importance and success was such that the movement was by some interpreted as a “conservative May 68”.<sup>37</sup> From the point of view of its supporters, the hope was that it could, potentially, generate a conservative cultural revolution, thus creating profound changes in French society, much like May 68 did – but in reverse. This is a parallel that should be nuanced, but the movement had in any case undisputable popular support: For example, 36% of LR-sympathisers claimed to feel “very close” or “rather close” to the values that LMPT defended.<sup>38</sup>

Maréchal-Le Pen quickly became closely linked to the movement, participated multiple times in their rallies, and gave speeches at different events, where the FN-*députée* called her co-demonstrators the “pride of the nation”.<sup>39</sup> This was not only the case in 2013, which was the first round of mobilization by the LMPT, but also in 2016, when the movement made a comeback in the streets after two years of silence, this time opposing gender theory, PMA (*Procréation médicalement assistée* – Assisted reproductive technology (ART)) and GPA (*Gestation pour autrui* – surrogacy). At the demonstration on October 16, 2016, Maréchal-Le Pen was even given center stage at the iconic Place du Trocadéro, where she once again praised the courage of the activists, calling them “watchmen and guardians of the French conscience”, and stressed the importance of the “civilizational issues” that were at play. For her, the current debate was related to the very survival of French civilization, the essence of France. In a typical rhetorical manoeuvre, she drew a line between ART, surrogacy and the danger of France becoming an Islamic republic, quoted the controversial Eric Zemmour to the cheers of the crowd, and accused the socialist government of being anti-national and anti-French, because of its attack

36 Gaffney, *France in the Hollande Presidency*.

37 Brustier, *Le Mai 68 conservateur*.

38 Fourquet, *À la droite de Dieu*, p. 112.

39 France Mariage, « Marion Maréchal Le Pen appelle à l'insoumission. »

on the family, the core of the Republic.<sup>40</sup> Maréchal-Le Pen also presented herself as the unofficial spokesperson or the parliamentary *pasionaria* of the movement, attacking the government for its “repression” of the demonstrators and their “anti-fascist propaganda”.

### Catholic support

The forces behind LMPT wanted to institutionalise the movement so as to ensure its longevity, which resulted in the creation of Sens commun, a political movement and organisation, one might even say party, representing the values of the sporadic rallies in a more sustainable and continuous way. The new socially conservative movement for family values arose inside the LR party structure, and became one of the strongest and most influential allies of presidential candidate François Fillon in 2017.<sup>41</sup> Although the movement is often criticized by some members of LR, it is strongly supported by others – notably by former LR-leader, Laurent Wauquiez.<sup>42</sup> When it comes to Maréchal-Le Pen’s relationship with Sens Commun, it has been much debated within the movement. Its former president Christophe Billan did not regret involving her in LMPT, and even stated that he would have no problem sharing a political platform with her.<sup>43</sup> This point of view might have some supporters within the organisation, but because of Sens Commun’s close links to LR, it was still very controversial. As a result, Billan resigned as leader of Sens Commun, later admitting that he was strongly pressured by the leaders of LR to hand in his resignation.<sup>44</sup>

If Billan’s *main tendue* to Maréchal-Le Pen was controversial, it was a logical stand-point: Throughout her mandate, Maréchal-Le Pen, a declared practicing Catholic, remained close to traditionalist Catholic milieus and attempted, with some luck, to position herself as the flagbearer of the hard-core wing of French Catholicism.<sup>45</sup> Marine Le Pen has no such ambition, nor should she: In the first round of the presidential election in 2017, only 15% of Catholic voters opted for her.<sup>46</sup> As previously mentioned, Maréchal-Le Pen’s active role during the LMPT was not one she shared with her aunt, who has adopted gay-friendly positions and has a far less conservative profile than her niece.<sup>47</sup> This is not the only difference of opinion the two members of the Le Pen dynasty have had in their political life. Ideologically,

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40 La Manif Pour Tous, « Marion Maréchal-Le Pen. »

41 Fourquet, *À la droite de Dieu*, p. 112.

42 Galiero, « À Lyon, Laurent Wauquiez caresse Sens commun dans le sens du poil ».

43 Guillebon, « Christophe Billan : « Aller au-delà des appareils » ».

44 Mourgue, « Christophe Billan : « Je démissionne de la présidence de Sens commun » ».

45 Fourquet, *À la droite de Dieu*, p. 88 and 107.

46 Ibid., p. 151.

47 Mayer, “From Jean-Marie to Marine Le Pen,” p. 163.



the niece is often said to be closer to her grandfather than his own daughter is, thus placing herself more to the extreme-right than her aunt.<sup>48</sup> In fact, Marine Le Pen has chosen to position her party on a ‘neither left, nor right’ axis, leaving several of her father’s political positions behind. For example, the FN/RN has in recent years significantly shifted its economic platform, moving from a predominantly right-wing to a left-wing location.<sup>49</sup> This economic left turn could further complicate a possible alliance with other right-wing parties in France.

### “Retiring” from politics – and coming back

Despite a successful political career and strong popular support in key milieus, Marine Le Pen’s niece decided to retire, at least temporarily, from politics shortly after her aunt lost the presidential election against Macron in May 2017. This implied that she did not seek re-election in the legislative elections in June, and she also stepped down as the party’s leader in the PACA-region, as well as renouncing her role in the party’s political bureau. In a letter addressed to the voters of her constituency, and published in the regional newspaper *Le Dauphiné Libéré*, she explained the reasons for her withdrawal. On a personal level, the recently divorced single mother wanted to spend more time with her three-year-old daughter Olympe. The political reasons she put forward were linked to her well-known background: At 27, she felt that it was time to take a break from the political world that had been hers “since forever”.<sup>50</sup>

Furthermore, the freshly retired MP expressed the need for politicians to be “connected to reality”, and not relying solely on a relay of elective mandates. Her own connection to reality was to be found in the world of business, which she claimed to “love”, to defend, and to aspire to being a part of. However, her transition from the world of politics to the world of business did not imply a definite break with her political past: “I will not give up the political fight altogether [...]. The love for my country is too strong, and I will never be able to stay indifferent to the sufferings of my compatriots.”<sup>51</sup>

After many months of silence, the former FN-politician made what seemed to be a political comeback – in the USA: She was invited to address American Republicans at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Washington. Here, she shared the stage with political A-list celebrities such as US President Donald Trump, US Vice President Mike Pence, and former UKIP leader Nigel Farage. Although her short speech was very political, containing praises of nation-

48 Hausalter, *Marion Maréchal: Le fantasme de la droite*.

49 Ivaldi, “Towards the median economic crisis voter?”.

50 *Le Dauphiné Libéré*, ««Pourquoi j’arrête» : Marion Maréchal-Le Pen s’explique ».

51 Ibid. (author’s translation).

alism, sovereignty, and family on one hand, and critique of the EU, immigration, and surrogacy on the other, her entourage refused to admit to the press that it was, indeed, a political comeback.<sup>52</sup> However, it seems difficult not to interpret her guest appearance as an important and symbolic political gesture: By accepting the invitation from the CPAC, she also confirmed her attachment to the conservative branch of the right – or rather, the *neoconservative*.

Neoconservatism is a political ideology notably characterized by the opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage, and the priority given to “family values”, associated only with traditional families. Furthermore, neoconservatives are often allied with the Christian Right, with whom they share an opposition to liberal culture “and its inclination to promote individuality, diversity, and critical thought while undermining community, cohesiveness, shared values, and nationalism”.<sup>53</sup> These are all elements that seem to fit perfectly with Maréchal’s ideological standpoint, as shown above. As Francis Fukuyama among others has noted, the roots of neoconservatism are American.<sup>54</sup> According to Juliette Grange, neoconservatism à la *française* holds many of the original features, while having a somewhat different meaning due to French institutional history. However, its *modus operandi* is, in many respects, similar: As Grange puts it, the French neoconservatism aims, like its American inspiration, for an intellectual takeover with the objective of a cultural and social revolution.<sup>55</sup> In her exhaustive investigation of the different neoconservative actors and milieus in France, Grange identifies Marion Maréchal as one of the few neoconservative members of the Front national, a party that in her view does *not* fit the neoconservative mould.<sup>56</sup>

Another key feature of neoconservatism is the belief in “a vanguard elite that can shape the values of society and the will of the people”. “Neocons” denounce the liberal elites and wish to see them replaced by conservative elites: “The latter would respect religion, promote family values, [...] while undermining the liberal and hedonistic culture [...] epitomized by the social unrest of the 1960s”.<sup>57</sup> The forming of such an elite is at the heart of Maréchal’s new enterprise, which she presented to the world at the CPAC:

This young French generation is not encouraged to connect and love this cultural legacy. They are brainwashed with guilt and shame of their country. [...] Our fight cannot only take place in elections: We need to convey our ideas through the media, the culture and the education, to stop the domination of the liberals and socialists.

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52 Soullier, « Aux Etats-Unis, Marion Maréchal-Le Pen veut « make France great again » ».

53 Drury, “Neoconservatism”.

54 See for example Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads*.

55 Grange, *Les Néoconservateurs*, p. 31.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

57 Drury, «Neoconservatism».

That is why I have recently launched a school of management and political science. What is the goal? To train the leaders of tomorrow, those who will have the courage, the discernment and the skills to defend the interests of their people. [...] Brexit in the UK, Manif pour tous in France and, of course, the election of President Donald Trump prove a fact: When the people are given the opportunity to take their country back, they will seize it.<sup>58</sup>

The school of management and political science that she is talking about here is of course ISSEP – let us now take a closer look at it.

### **Starting – and legitimizing – ISSEP**

On May 22 2018, the name of the former MP's new project was finally revealed: ISSEP (Institut de Sciences Sociales, Économiques et Politiques), as well as its website (<https://www.issep.fr/>), which had been created a few months prior. The school is set in Lyon, more precisely in the dynamic “quartier des Confluences”. The choice of Lyon was by no means a coincidence: It was important to leave the self-centered political and economic metropolis of Paris, as a symbolic gesture.<sup>59</sup> There was also a more practical reason for this choice: Initially, the idea to start a school in Lyon was not her own, but that of Thibaut Monnier, departmental secretary of FN in Isère, near Lyon. One of the members of Monnier's entourage working on creating this school, was another Lyon local, Sylvain Roussillon, who later became pedagogical director of ISSEP. Roussillon is described as a “militant royalist”, and has a past within the Action française.<sup>60</sup> Both he and Monnier are thus typical of the type of people that are affiliated with ISSEP in that they have a strong connection to either the FN/RN, or other currents of the right and the extreme right in France – in particular Catholic, royalist or conservative.

A year after the rising star of the Le Pen family made the transition from politics to civil society, another, rather symbolic transformation took place: In May 2018, she changed the surname she was now known under, Maréchal-Le Pen, described as her “political name”,<sup>61</sup> back to her “civilian name”, Maréchal.<sup>62</sup> If the surname “Le Pen” is considered an asset among core voter groups of the FN, this is by no means true when it came to the general public. In fact, even within allied movements such as LMPT and Sens commun, her family name was pinpointed as the most important obstacle to a formal collaboration – not her ideas.<sup>63</sup> Removing the stigma of the

58 American Conservative Union, “CPAC 2018 – Marion Maréchal-Le Pen”.

59 Boche, « Issep : l'“alternative éducative” selon Marion Maréchal ».

60 Sillières, « L'Issep, nouveau théâtre des marionnistes ».

61 AFP, « Marion Maréchal explique pourquoi elle abandonne le nom Le Pen ».

62 Vergnaud, « Avant Marion Maréchal, Jean-Marie et Marine Le Pen avaient déjà changé d'identité ».

63 Guillebon, « Christophe Billan ».

surname “Le Pen” was one of the many ways that the former MP tried to build a new legitimacy as a free agent, outside of any partisan or institutional commitment.

Another way of building legitimacy, was by recruiting an entourage with a certain reputation and profile. Founded and led by Maréchal herself, whose formal title is *directrice générale*, the school’s honorary president is Patrick Libbrecht, former director of French food companies and emblematic figure of the Audace collective, very close to the FN. The scientific board is co-chaired by Patrick Louis, former Secretary General of the Mouvement pour la France (headed by Philippe de Villiers until its dissolution in 2018), and Jacques de Guillebon, a right-wing Catholic and royalist journalist with a long list of conservative and Christian newspapers and magazines on his CV, most recently the ultra-conservative *L’Incorrect*, for which he is the editor-in-chief. It was launched in September 2017 and its goal is to “reconcile right and extreme right” in France – in other words, build an alliance between the republican and radical right.<sup>64</sup>

The other members of the school’s scientific committee, which is in charge of selecting professors and putting together the educational project, also fit this profile. On ISSEP’s website<sup>65</sup> all the twelve members (all men, by the way), are presented almost exclusively through their academic and professional credentials, which are quite impressive. For instance, Pascal Gauchon is a former director of Prépasup, a private institute specializing in preparatory classes for prestigious *grandes écoles*, Alain Marion is professor emeritus at Lyon 3, Jean-Marie Faugère is a former general of the armies, and Guillaume Drago has been awarded with the high-ranking Chevalier de la Légion d’honneur. Many of them have also their own fields of “expertise”, which correspond perfectly with political issues dear to Maréchal’s heart. For example, Thibaud Collin has published several books against gay marriage, the American historian Paul Gottfried is a specialist in conservative movements, while Raheem Kassam, former editor-in-chief of *Breitbart News London* and former senior advisor to Nigel Farage, is a strong advocate for Brexit.

However, when it comes to political affiliation, much is left in the dark in these bios: Typically, Louis’ connection to Mouvement pour la France is not mentioned. Neither is Gauchon’s much more problematic political past: A member of Ordre Nouveau in his youth, he founded the neo-fascist party Parti des forces nouvelles in 1974, which he led until 1979. He has also been the editor-in-chief of *Défense de l’Occident*, founded in 1952 by Maurice Bardèche, and considered the most important newspaper of the French far right after the war.<sup>66</sup> The example of Yves-Marie Adeline’s bio is also interesting in this respect: In addition to being presented as a very productive writer and composer, it is mentioned that he is the founder of

64 <https://lincorrect.org/>

65 <https://www.issep.fr/le-conseil-scientifique/les-membres/>

66 Camus and Monzat, *Les Droites nationales et radicales en France*.

the movement Alliance Royale (a royalist party that still exists today). However, this undeniable fact is immediately followed by an important precision: Adeline has since 2008 retired and taken his distance from the movement, whose political agenda is the return of monarchy in France.<sup>67</sup> It neglects, nonetheless, to mention that Adeline is still *président d'honneur* of the party. On the other hand, Roger Chudeau's collaboration with former Prime minister and presidential candidate for LR François Fillon is openly presented. This suggests that a big part of ISSEP's strategy is to hide the more problematic side of the board's political history and ideology, and promote the more mainstream side of this history in order to legitimize their project.

### A metapolitical project

On February 21 2018, several months before ISSEP was launched, the conservative magazine *Valeurs actuelles* published an exclusive op-ed, a so-called *tribune*, by Marion Maréchal-Le Pen (who still went by that name), in which she stated that the ideological family to which she belonged should “invest more in the field of metapolitics”:

Since the beginning of the Fifth Republic, all the vectors of thought have been held by the left. It infuses its near hegemonic cultural dominance through the press, education and culture. Now is the time for us to apply the lessons of Antonio Gramsci.<sup>68</sup>

The explicit reference to the Italian communist philosopher Antonio Gramsci is an interesting one, coming from a political figure on the opposite side of the political spectrum. Gramsci popularized metapolitics – without ever naming the concept himself – claiming that ideological hegemony is a necessary step towards an electoral victory. The term “metapolitics” itself was coined by German liberal thinkers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and designated originally “a metaphysical study into the principles of politics, its fundamental grounds, and its ultimate ends.”<sup>69</sup> This is also the meaning the notion had when it was introduced in France by Joseph de Maistre, an anti-liberal and royalist philosopher from the Counter-Enlightenment.

The term is however mostly associated with the conservative and ethno-nationalist think tank GRECE (*Groupement de Recherche et d'Études pour la Civilisation Européenne*, or the Group for the Research and Study of European Civilization), which was founded in 1968 by the French intellectual, philosopher and writer Alain

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67 « il est le fondateur en 2001 du mouvement l'Alliance Royale dont il s'est éloigné en 2008 » (author's italics).

68 Maréchal-Le Pen, « Marion Maréchal-Le Pen signe son retour métapolitique » (author's translation).

69 Bosteels, “Metapolitics”.

de Benoist, among others. The GRECE represented one of the most important brick stones of the French (and, arguably, the European) *Nouvelle Droite* (ND, New Right). The ND can be defined as a “cultural school of thought”<sup>70</sup> and a “metapolitical movement”<sup>71</sup>, who made the Gramscian idea of cultural war and the struggle for hegemony the heart of their ideology, giving primacy “to the struggle for cultural power over and above any concrete policy making, or politics as usual”.<sup>72</sup>

The ND’s importance on the French right is significant. As Godin points out, it “militates for a rapprochement of all right-wing tendencies against the left and as such has been a crucial point of convergence between the extreme and mainstream right.”<sup>73</sup> Indeed, its’ influence within both main parties has been visible on many levels. When it comes to the ND and the FN, they share the same standpoint on many political issues, such as their resistance against liberalism, immigration, and multiculturalism.<sup>74</sup> Several key ND figures joined the FN in the 1980s, and former “number two” in the party, Bruno Mégret, had been a member of the Club de l’Horloge, with strong ties to the GRECE: He was what one might call “a good right-wing gramscian”.<sup>75</sup> The focus on “culture” was at the center of the political strategy by the FN in the early 1990s, with what Ivaldi refers to as “a rather dubious appeal to Gramsci and a much clearer reference to the primacy of culture and values in the ideology of the new right.”<sup>76</sup>

## Together against the legacy of May 68

Regarding the republican right, it is former president Nicolas Sarkozy who is the best example of ND’s influence, when he “snatched” the credo of the neo-Gramscian ideological struggle during the presidential campaign in 2007.<sup>77</sup> According to Jérôme Sgard, the strategy of hegemony became the major feature of Sarkozy’s campaign.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, in an interview with *Le Figaro*, he claimed that he had adopted Gramsci’s analysis that power is won by ideas, and prided himself on being the first *homme de droite* to take on this battle.<sup>79</sup> During a big campaign meeting at Bercy, he recognised that “the heirs of May 68 had imposed their views”, i.e., successfully

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70 Duranton-Crabol, *Visages de la nouvelle droite*.

71 Bar-On, “Transnationalism and the French Nouvelle Droite,” p. 200.

72 Bosteels, “Metapolitics”.

73 Godin, “The Porosity between the Mainstream Right and Extreme Right in France” p. 54.

74 Bar-On, “Transnationalism and the French Nouvelle Droite,” p. 213.

75 Dély, *Histoire secrète du Front national*, p. 66.

76 Ivaldi, “The *Front national vis-à-vis* power in France, » p. 181.

77 Ivaldi and Evans, « L’extrême-droite à la dérive ».

78 Sgard, « Nicolas Sarkozy, lecteur de Gramsci, » p. 15.

79 « Sarkozy : « Le vrai sujet, ce sont les valeurs » ».

won the battle of ideas, before announcing that “the heritage of May 68 must be liquidated”, implying that the cultural war was on again and that this time, the right had to win.<sup>80</sup>

The idea that one should try to reverse the legacy of May 68 is a train of thought that is widespread on the French right – particularly in Marion Maréchal’s entourage. To her and her ideological allies, May 68 is to blame for a leftist dominance, particularly in the very field she has invested herself in recently, namely that of education. The values that Maréchal and her school promote are according to herself the antipodes of the “values” of May 68: authority, responsibility, excellence, tradition, and *enracinement* (rooting in national identity and history). Her school aims to be “an alternative offer” to the *grandes écoles* (Sciences Po, École normale supérieure, École polytechnique, École des hautes études commerciales, École nationale d’administration etc.), which in her opinion are conformist in the spirit of May 68, and form their students in *moules à gaufre macronistes* – waffle molds in the shape of president Macron.<sup>81</sup> In order to seize the “intellectual authority from the Left”<sup>82</sup> that these schools represent, ISSEP offers other thinkers on the syllabus than the standard ones, such as Joseph de Maistre, Charles Maurras, Robert Brasillach, and Ayn Rand – thinkers that are arguably less “politically correct”.

In an interview with *Valeurs actuelles*, Maréchal states that she thinks that the liberal elites are scared of her newfound project:

I think they are afraid that we could get a foot in the door, because if we manage to establish a school of high quality, that is demanding, [...] it is obvious that it would be the proof that the intellectual domination of the left in higher education is over.<sup>83</sup>

She considers that education, media, and the entire cultural field are dominated by “the intellectual system of the left”. This point of view is one she shares with the ND: As leading ND-scholar Pierre-André Taguieff has stated, the Gramscian idea of cultural war and the struggle for hegemony implied that the GRECE aspired to penetrate both the media and the universities in order to initiate a right-wing “counterculture”.<sup>84</sup> Maréchal’s ambition to “form the leaders of the French right of tomorrow”<sup>85</sup> also echoes the ND and GRECE, which in the 1970’s aimed at “the formation of a sort of “intellectual elite” that could disrupt the “semi-monopoly” that the Left and the Far Left had enjoyed in the cultural realm”.<sup>86</sup> According to Benoist

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80 « Le discours sur mai 68 de Nicolas Sarkozy ».

81 « Débranchons mai 68 avec Marion Maréchal, Charlotte d’Ornellas et Jacques de Guillebon ».

82 McCulloch, “The Nouvelle Droite in the 1980s and 1990s,” p. 159.

83 « Pensée unique, son école, son projet métapolitique » (author’s translation).

84 Taguieff, *Sur la nouvelle droite*.

85 <https://cap.issep.fr>

86 Capra Casadio, “The New Right and Metapolitics in France and Italy,” p. 54.

and his like-minded followers, this cultural hegemony was gained following the events of May 68, after which the liberal-left “supposedly controlled the schools, universities, media and the thinking of the key state elites”.<sup>87</sup>

As we have seen, the influence of the ND is palpable in the discourse on Marion Maréchal’s new school, both in her own statements and analyses done by her supporters and critics. Indeed, she seems to share Benoist’s main goal: “to regain cultural power from the liberal-left by seizing the ‘laboratories of thought’ [...] in a right-wing Gramscian spirit”.<sup>88</sup> Another such laboratory of thought is Maréchal’s Center for Analysis and Prospective (CAP), a think-tank attached to the school, the purpose of which is to “feed public discourse” and to “draw a direction for France for 2030”.<sup>89</sup> This explicit time indication tells us that Maréchal is in no rush: The goal is to change the hearts and minds of the French public and influence public opinion in the long term, not from a day-to-day political basis, in line with the metapolitical logic.

### Ready for an alliance?

Since the presidential election in 2017, President Macron has had the ambition to restructure the political landscape in France by making the traditional left/right-axis obsolete, creating “a restructured competitive space”.<sup>90</sup> As a consequence, the traditional parties on both the left and the right have gone through a major crisis during Macron’s time in office, and several commentators even claim that Macron has made the classical right in France explode.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, a survey done prior to the regional elections in 2021 revealed a major divide within the party: 58% of LR-voters were in favor of an alliance with Macron’s party LREM, whereas 48% preferred an alliance with RN.<sup>92</sup> Another survey from October 2019 shows that 61% of French people claiming to be right wing want a *union des droites*, i.e., the type of alliance that we are talking about here. The union is requested by both sides: Among LR-sympathisers, the number is 57%, while two-thirds (66%) of RN-supporters hope for joined forces. If RN-supporters have long desired this union, it was still unthinkable for most supporters of the mainstream right just a few years prior. However, Marine Le Pen’s party has had many electoral successes since she took over, while LR has had several setbacks during the same period. This has deeply affected the status of the party and the loyalty of its voters: Towards the end of Macron’s *quinquennat*, only 9% of French people felt close to LR. The

87 Bar-On, “Transnationalism and the French Nouvelle Droite,” p. 204.

88 Ibid.

89 <https://cap.issep.fr>

90 Ivaldi and Evans, *The 2017 French Presidential Elections*, p. 16 and 149.

91 See for example Devecchio, *Recomposition. Le nouveau monde populiste*.

92 « Régionales 2021 : quelles alliances au second tour ? ».



growing aspiration for a *union des droites* can be linked to this: Many supporters of the traditional right want their elected officials to start winning local and national elections again, and they perceive a broader alliance as a means to this end.<sup>93</sup>

Although this line of thinking is not one that is openly shared by many elected LR-officials (yet), there is, however, a growing fraction in the party that represents the type of stands that the Droite populaire once did. It is notably incarnated by the head of the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region and former leader of the party, Laurent Wauquiez, one of the few political leaders who refused to endorse Macron immediately after the first round of the presidential election in 2017. Other representatives of the conservative wing of the party are Senator Bruno Retailleau, the MPs Eric Ciotti, Julien Aubert, Guillaume Larrivé and Guillaume Peltier, as well as MEPs Nadine Morano and François-Xavier Bellamy. Their political positions are more than often convergent with RN, a fact that was illustrated in an interview with  *Valeurs actuelles* in 2021, where Ciotti said that the main difference between RN and LR was the latter's ability to govern – implying that nothing else really separated them.<sup>94</sup> The same year, Peltier claimed having the same beliefs as Robert Ménard, who was elected mayor of Béziers in 2014, with the support of the FN.<sup>95</sup>

### In search of a leader

The above-mentioned Ménard is one of many on the radical right who shares the goal of creating an alliance that could ultimately win them the Elysée palace. However, during the *Convention de la droite* in September 2019, a “Right-wing Convention” whose objective was to build an alternative to progressivism, multiculturalism and free trade, he pointed out that the right that he represented lacked what seems to be the most important ingredient within the French political system: “the face and the name of the one who would be able to carry our ideas”.<sup>96</sup> He is not the only one who suggests such a diagnosis – the whole *droite hors les murs*, i.e., the right *outside* LR and RN, is in quest of its new star.<sup>97</sup> Considering that Marine Le Pen has established herself as the (almost) undisputed leader of the radical right and has an unrivalled international notoriety, this claim might seem surprising. But as we have seen, despite her voters' wishes and her own ambition to create alliances, she

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93 « Les droites en France, aujourd'hui ».

94 Hoster, « Éric Ciotti : “Si nous ne défendons pas notre identité, nous allons disparaître” ».

95 Haddad, « Les Républicains : Peltier déclare avoir «les mêmes convictions» que Ménard ».

96 Coupeau and Denis, « “À la Convention de la droite, on n'a pas été à la hauteur du rendez-vous” ».

97 Torres, « Zemmour, Marion Maréchal, Villiers, Bellamy, Retailleau, Messiha : comment la droite s'active dans la quête de sa nouvelle star ».

has yet to be successful in her attempts. Could it be that she is not the right person to mastermind such a project?

It is certain that her standing has taken a toll since her weak performance in the much talked about televised debate against Macron on May 3, 2017. According to many commentators and viewers, she was unable to present convincing and clear arguments for key issues and did not seem presidential or credible enough: She appeared as the eternal protestor rather than a potential leader of the country.<sup>98</sup> Marion Maréchal's image, on the other hand, has not known a similar drop, despite her political exit: In fact, she has often surpassed her aunt in popularity polls, and she is very well liked on both sides of the traditional *cordon sanitaire*.<sup>99</sup> This allows her to have a more pivotal position than Le Pen, and her current role as a free agent seems to have made her more approachable, even for previous political competitors. For instance, she has had meetings with several officials and lawmakers of LR, where the goal was to build bridges with conservatives who feel that the only way to survive in the new political landscape is by joining forces.<sup>100</sup>

This type of meetings illustrate Maréchal's ultimate political vision: a big coalition between her former party and the popular right wing of LR, previously embodied by the *Droite populaire*.<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, Maréchal is also preaching for an alliance *hors les murs*. In an interview with the TV-station LCI in June 2019, she stated that the RN is "essential to political life, but it is not enough". She also advocates for *other* voices, expressed through *other* movements in order to favor "a great patriotic compromise which results in a government coalition, to counter the great progressive project". Her ambition, as she puts it, is to figure out how to go *beyond* the RN and to create alliances that will "allow us to save France". This is an ambition that she has articulated several times.<sup>102</sup> Her aspiration to go *beyond* the traditional parties could very well be the answer: As Anne Sa'adah claims, "the demise of the political party as a key institution of democratic political life" is one of the traits of the times we live in, offering a proliferous setting for "opportunistic alliances – in such a way as to supplant the traditional conservative parties."<sup>103</sup>

## Conclusion

As we have seen in this article, there is an ideological kinship between parts of the republican and the radical right in France. However, it does not seem realistic

98 Ivaldi and Evans, *The 2017 French Presidential Elections*, pp. 115–19.

99 Hausalter, *Marion Maréchal*.

100 AFP, « Marion Maréchal a dîné avec une quinzaine d'élus LR ».

101 « Marion Maréchal veut «une grande coalition» entre le RN et «la droite populaire».

102 Sapin, « Après la débâcle de LR, Marion Maréchal en appelle à une union des droites »; BFMTV, « Marion Maréchal face à Jean-Jacques Bourdin ».

103 Sa'adah, "After the Party. Trump, Le Pen, and the New Normal," pp. 43–4.

to assume that LR and RN will be able to form an alliance on a national level. Although there is currently a tendency in France towards a break with the historical ostracism of the radical right, the lack of allies has so far made it impossible for RN to gain any real power, other than in some local *bastions*. The electoral advantage of the family name that has been intimately associated with the party since the beginning could turn into a political disadvantage: Is it even possible to make an alliance with someone named “Le Pen”?<sup>104</sup>

Enter Marion Maréchal. Since her withdrawal from political life in 2017, she has made choices that could make her the catalyst for a future, hitherto unseen alliance between the republican and radical right, *outside* traditional party structures. First, she has removed the “hyphen Le Pen” from her name, and with that freed herself from some of the stigma that was previously attached to her. Second, she has re-invented herself as a strong entrepreneurial leader, creating a network of potential allies. Third, she has managed to remain in the limelight and continues to be one of the most talked about and popular political figures in France. This is crucial in a time where the “personalization of politics” only seems to be getting stronger,<sup>105</sup> and where many of the traditional French parties, such as LR, lack strong and charismatic leaders. Fourth, she has made a transfer from the political to the metapolitical sphere, a strategic choice that could prove to be decisive.

As we have seen in this article, Marine Le Pen’s chosen strategy of de-demonization has proven unsuited to build alliances. Furthermore, there are internal tensions within the RN “between the social conservatives and radical populists in the party over whether or not rapprochement with LR is strategically desirable.”<sup>106</sup> Maréchal, whom we have classified as a neoconservative à la *française*, is a strong advocate for such a rapprochement. Although some critics have judged her school, ISSEP, to be a “fiasco”<sup>107</sup>, mainly because of the lack of diversity in its students’ profile, it could be the first stepping-stone in the quest for new alliances and, ultimately, the conquest of power. Whereas de-demonization can be seen primarily as a short-term vote-maximising strategy,<sup>108</sup> the metapolitical time frame is long: As Tamir Bar-On reminds us, Alain de Benoist, the godfather of the ND, from whom Maréchal has inherited her metapolitical approach, believed that “[i]t is only a matter of time [before] ND ideas will be the dominant and ruling ideas [...]. It only needs a shift in political circumstances.”<sup>109</sup>

104 Delwit, « Les étapes du Front national (1972–2011), » p. 36.

105 McAllister, “The Personalization of Politics”.

106 Ivaldi and Evans, *The 2017 French Presidential Elections*, p. 225.

107 Delaporte, « Ecole de Marion Maréchal : anatomie d’un fiasco ».

108 Ivaldi, “A new course for the French radical-right?”.

109 Bar-On, “Transnationalism and the French Nouvelle Droite,” p. 216.

If the election of Macron taught us anything, it is that such shifts do occur in French politics. In an article with the captivating title “Understanding Marion Maréchal”, Nathan Pinkoski identifies “the emergence of a new political tradition [where the] once-conflicting strands of the French right are discovering intellectual and political unity”.<sup>110</sup> Could Maréchal be the leading figure of that unity? What is certain, is that for the time being, the French republican right is still very much conflicted and divided into two factions. The first one has been labeled “Macron-compatible”<sup>111</sup>, whereas the other one is not. The question remains if the second faction can be “Maréchal-compatible”.

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