

Greens in France Must Build a Narrative For the Past, Present, and Future

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The political landscape in France has been profoundly transformed over the past decade, with the once dominant parties challenged by new movements and the constant presence of the far right. With a presidential election coming up in 2022, the French Greens must evaluate how they can be a real contender in this environment, explains French Green MEP David Cormand.

This interview is part of a series that we publish in partnership with Le Grand Continent on green parties in Europe.

Edouard Gaudot and Sébastien Repaire: This is a pivotal year in France, leading up to the presidential election in 2022. How is Europe Écologie Les Verts (EELV) approaching it?

David Cormand: Our ambition is to shake up the situation, though we are aware of how difficult that is. 2017 was a moment of change with the end of Francois Hollande's five-year term and the arrival of Emmanuel Macron. His victory completed social democracy's long process of decomposition in France and radically changed the political landscape. The two political pillars of government, the social-democratic left and the liberal-Gaullist governing right, simply exploded. In their place, a "Bermuda Triangle" of populism emerged: a consolidating far-right populism; a left-wing populism invented by La France Insoumise (LFI); and a liberal populism, embodied by Macron's La République En Marche (LREM). What these three movements share is that they are not really parties but vertical organisations, structured around a personality, that question the importance of intermediary powers in civil society. They represent the most caricatured form of the Fifth Republic since they are entirely focused on presidential power.

We are still in this Bermuda Triangle but the arrival of political ecology as a major force represents something new. Its emergence is the fruit of a long history, as well as the result of long-term thinking since 2017 when we were at the bottom of a hole for many reasons, structural and circumstantial. We refused to let ecology be dissolved into political traditions that were losing momentum and asserted the originality of a vision that went beyond old cleavages without denying them. The political reconstruction began at the European elections of 2019 and the local elections of 2020 and 2021, with the aim of building a political offer for 2022. For the moment, the plan is holding together well.

But nothing is certain. We need to reject both the fetishisation of unity and the centrifugal temptations of an alternative pole. In other words, we avoid dissolving into an agreement without principles or vision, and guard against the excesses of individual ambition that create division without generating real political prospects. The road is narrow.

The ecologists' roadmap is to reshape the political landscape around three alternatives, which schematically represent three-time horizons: the far right's nostalgia for a fantasised past, Macron's straitjacket of presentism and the status quo, and the future, represented by ecology - the only matrix that faces the challenges of the 21st century. Any force that wants to win a majority, however, must bring together these three temporalities to construct a narrative of the past, propose a programme for the present, and offer a vision for the future.

What issues are driving French politics today?

In France, and it is not good news either for ecology or the country, the battleground is identity, as seen in debates about the Republic, secularism, "Frenchness", and integration. It is a battleground imposed by the far right but the LREM majority in power, even if they do not share these ideas, also believes that fighting on this ground is not such a bad idea. Ecologists thus have to fight two battles at the same time: to escape both the identity impasse and the liberal common sense.

The energy issue is crucial, but it is not the only aspect of the ecological transition to be carried out.

On the first point, it is a question of shifting the centre of gravity from identity to more essential questions about control over our very subsistence: ecological recovery, economic transition, new types of jobs, social policy. Conversely, the Rassemblement National (RN, formerly Front Nationale) appeal to nostalgia for a dreamed-of era, basically the *Trente Glorieuses* [the 30-year perceived golden era from 1945 to 1975], Audiard's black-and-white films, schools where we wrote in purple ink with beautiful, rounded lines. Of course, this vision forgets how that period was not so rosy, inequality was high, and its social achievements were backed by a productivist model of environmental degradation and North-South inequalities.

Can and should environmentalists go after voters who have turned to the far right? Or should they be considered definitively lost?

It's an interesting question because the social-democratic left, in the 1980s and 1990s, believed that there was no point in chasing a working-class electorate that had been lost, and turned to the middle class. At the time, the working class were not yet voting Front National, they were happy to abstain. But later, out of anger, they switched to the far right.

Ecology must be the rallying point to defeat the Right.

Ecologists must address everyone. The specificity of political ecology is that it is both unifying – about ensuring that the planet remains hospitable to life in general and human civilisation in particular – and very confrontational in its public policy implications. It

questions powerful established interests, including some resulting from what was considered gains for the working classes. On the other hand, the promise of Marxist-inspired social democracy, the Fordist compromise of emancipation through abundance, is not only not emancipatory but is also untenable due to the physical limits of the planet.

Ecology articulates a promise of emancipation, first and foremost to the working class because they are the first victims of the inequalities generated by the plunder of natural resources and pollution. But before talking about emancipation, we need to talk about protection and repair: repairing the damage the working class has suffered and offering protection against new dangers.

How does ecology shape the political landscape in France today?

If we pull on the thread of what generates conflict in French society today, we end up with ecological issues: environmental health issues, economic issues, and social issues. It's a good sign and also leads to the paradox whereby our opponents both seek to take over ecological issues while also stigmatising ecologists. To put it simply, the liberals are interested in ecology to give green growth as an answer. The far right proposes a relocation of identity, cutting France off from the realities of the planet. The social democrats tout social ecology, a regeneration of Keynesian social democracy incorporating ecology. Meanwhile, LFI integrates the ecological question into populism through "them against us" rhetoric.

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And what about Europe?

To be honest, not much. It is a source of frustration. Europe comes up in the French debate when there are major crises, for example, the pandemic, the recovery plan, or vaccines. In France, the reflex is to see the European Union as a foreign body, which is in sharp contrast to the expectation at the European level that France should be more concerned about Europe.

However, looking at ecological issues through a European and transnational prism, including through North-South relations, is rooted in the history of the French Greens. The first ecological candidate in a presidential election in France was René Dumont in 1974, one of the first alterglobalists. That France and Europe have a specific responsibility in the world's development, particularly in countries of the Global South, has always been a guiding principle.

In the conclusion of his book *Où atterrir?* (translated literally as "Where to Land?"), Bruno Latour responds "in Europe", because, for better or worse, Europe has a prescriptive voice in the world through its historical role and regulatory power. Political ecology must bring this aspect to the French public debate, so that France assumes its proper role - not in a Napoleonic or imperialist way but rather to remind Europe to use its weight to defend an internationalist vision in the truly universal sense of human rights.

EELV is a member of the European Greens, but to what extent do you actively collaborate with your sister parties? Do elections in neighbouring countries, especially Germany, have an impact on French politics and the Greens?

Of course, and not only on the ecologists. LREM is petrified by the good polls of the Grünen in Germany and responds by caricaturing the French Greens as “degrowthers” and “ideologues” while praising the German Greens as “serious and modern”, supposedly like them. Meanwhile, to our left, LFI sees the success of the German Greens as proof that ecologists are liberals. In short, the German Greens are becoming the mirror of our opponents’ fantasies.

These polemics are signs that our opponents take political ecology seriously. This is a source of strength and credibility. Let’s imagine that in the spring of 2022, Germany and France are led by ecologists. It would totally change the face of the EU at a time when orthodoxies are being questioned on debt, investment, and the Green Deal. The same is true even beyond, now that Biden is making moves around taxing multinationals and funding green investment. It’s the first time that political ecology can claim to be changing the face of the world on decisive issues.

We have set up working groups, notably with the German Greens, on common policy priorities for the German federal elections and the French presidential elections. The objective is to break the common idea, which has been internalised even among the Greens, that the German Greens and the French Greens are fundamentally different. In fact, their programmes share many similarities. The institutional culture is different but the fundamentals are shared. The common ecological doctrine in Europe is to promote, in a transnational way, the idea of leaving behind the productivist logic that shaped Western modernity. This break is fundamental.

Beyond the Franco-German aspect, the victories of French ecologists can contribute to changing the view of ecology in southern Europe. In Spain, for example, the collapse of Podemos is opening up more space than ever for the emergence of an ecological alternative. There will be no shortcuts, but we can embody a hope of overcoming the old political system that seems to be regaining ground there.

How does EELV see the European debate today and the role of Europe in the world, especially in the face of growing strategic uncertainty, border conflicts, and this apparent cold war emerging between Washington and Beijing?

This is perhaps not what is most perceptible externally, but I think that the ecologists are those who have the most clear-sighted vision. For the old left, the China-USA rivalry is a matter of “the enemies of my enemies are my friends”, to caricature it. Conversely, others are Atlanticists and hold the opposite bias. Ecologists are less tainted by the stigma of preconceived ideas.

In a multipolar world bristling with power struggles, the question of Europe’s autonomy is central. We have a vision of economics that allows us real autonomy. Carbon offsetting at the borders, energy security, and a more endogenous economy less indexed to liberal globalisation also mean recovering the ability to act in relation to external forces.

Furthermore, ecologists have an alter-globalisation tradition, anti-imperialist in the broadest sense. It favours the emancipation of all parts of the world, regardless of the advantages this may bring for European power. In the new geopolitical chaos, the fundamentals of political ecology are quite suitable for building a coherent and effective Western, or at least European, doctrine.

So ecology started thinking about strategic autonomy well before it shaped the European conversation?

Autonomy is what distinguishes us from the far right. It's not that we cut ourselves off from the rest of the world. Exchanges and interactions of people, culture, and knowledge with the rest of the world will continue. I come back to Latour: a tempered globalisation and geopolitics involve a form of landing. It means having an economy that rebuilds its links with the reality of the planet and a move away from the logic of offshoring, globalisation, and the conquest of external markets.

Pierre Charbonnier has recently argued that the green movement in Europe needs to “open the breach” and seize the opportunities to be found in the appropriation of ecological issues into the axis of US-China competition. What do you think of the analysis?

His analysis re-integrates the ecological question into geopolitics and highlights at least two dangers: the first is lip-service environmentalism, the second is “green modernity”. Lip-service environmentalism is what we see at international summits. World leaders are used to making loud and affected statements about a world in peril. Yet the goals they announce are distant and often inadequate. This is no longer possible. We must now demand strong and immediate action. There is no time for anything else.

The second danger is the untenable promise of “green capitalism” that China and the United States are betting on. They hope that it is possible to pursue further power through the climate issue. The objective seems to be to take over planetary leadership than to open the way for greater cooperation within humanity to regain a form of harmony with the living world. The other states remain competitors to be subdued, and the living world a negligible quantity that only has value because its collapse may eventually affect us. It is the risk of a “green deal” that does not break free from the classic logic of production and consumption and seeks only to replace fossils with something else.

The energy issue is crucial, but it is not the only aspect of the ecological transition to be carried out. We need to devise a new approach to prosperity, where the quest for growth is no longer the absolute north-star, and where a new environmental and social compromise is forged. Paradoxically, at a time when the issue of the climate emergency resonates powerfully in the collective global imagination, the imperative of preserving nature is still hardly taken into account. It is as if it were a matter of saving the climate without really rethinking the foundations of the system that has brought us to the brink of the abyss.

The stakes of the transformation to be carried out are considerable. One major difficulty is that this new awareness must give rise to renewed multilateralism if we are to acquire the global regulation tools we need, and yet ecological issues today constitute a new frontline in local and international tensions.

Europe's great ecological and civilisational challenge is to invent a solid economic and social model, jobs-intensive, and sober in resources. It must invent, dare I say, a new modernity. Europe's "new frontier" must be to set limits on the myth of infinite expansion. Apart from the fact that it is in our interest to do so, we have the wherewithal to do it and the force to inspire the world with a universalist humanism that is finally free of any imperialist temptation. Europe must think about the world, about itself in the world, and with the world.

What priorities is EELV setting for itself in the short term?

The last statutory congress in November 2019 set the roadmap to 2022 on a line of asserting political ecology as the alternative to the Right (including Macron's liberal right, the conservative right, and the far right). Ecology must be the rallying point to defeat the Right. This is the strategic and tactical roadmap that we have developed at the municipal level, and it remains valid for the presidential and legislative elections. It is a question of continuing to wage the cultural battle that we have been fighting for a long time. We can see how, even though the global pandemic has confirmed the accuracy of our fears and positions, there is a great risk that the old productivist logic returns in full force. This is what is at stake in the debates on the recovery plans. We are told about reindustrialisation but without any qualifications. We sing the praises of recovery without questioning the purpose and methods of production as if the ecological debt were deferrable.

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The gateway to winning in 2022 is not just about the name on the ballot paper. It starts with a political offer that proves that ecology is going to transform society, and that it cannot be reduced to the label of leftism. Particularly because, while the term "left" remains valid for millions of people, it is also synonymous with disappointments and betrayals that have led to an enduring break with a large part of the electorate. The question of unity, which is essential, must not lead us to sweep renewal under the carpet and ecology should not become the lowest common denominator of an alliance of convenience. On the contrary, we must provide the backbone of the majority. We will need to set out a narrative supported by a strong, precise, and detailed programme, which shows what we want to do and how. What do we do in the first 100 days if we win, the first year, the first three years? What are our priorities? How do we intend to overcome the divisions in society? As we don't have proportional representation in France, we need to break this system where the party that wins the presidential election necessarily wins the parliamentary majority and becomes hegemonic.

Let us ask ourselves what political majority is to be built and what programme is to be applied. The political question is much more about the path of the alternative to Macron and Le Pen. The candidate will follow from the political dynamics. Not the other way round.



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