

Guest Essay

France Is in a Deep, Deep Hole

Feb. 11, 2025, 1:00 a.m. ET



Credit...Sarah Meyssonnier/Reuters

By David Broder

Mr. Broder, an expert on the European far right, wrote from Paris.

François Bayrou, France’s fourth prime minister in a year, knew he had trouble ahead. In his [inaugural speech](#) in December, he acknowledged “all kinds of difficulties”: a debt mountain, political strife and, alarmingly, “the splintering of society itself.”

So far, he’s at least succeeded in holding a government together. Tasked with reducing a deficit currently over 6 percent of gross domestic product, Mr. Bayrou cleared a major hurdle last week. After much wrangling, he secured the backing of the country’s fractious Parliament for a budget, surviving the [no-confidence vote](#) that followed. The sense of relief in the government camp is palpable.

But Mr. Bayrou is not wrong to talk of dangers. In France, malaise is all around: In [one recent poll](#), 87 percent of respondents agreed that the country is in decline. This story is often told in the language of civilizational threat and culture war, amplified by recent [conflicts](#) in France’s overseas territories. Fanned by a rising Fox News-style conservative media, the trio of insecurity, immigration and Islam fuels a mounting call to defend a besieged French identity. Even the centrist Mr. Bayrou speaks of a feeling of “[submersion](#).”

The malaise is steeped in economic issues, too, from energy-price inflation and low investment to the weakening of [flagship industries](#). But it has a more fundamental cause: citizens’ declining faith in the state. The much-vaunted French social model, a product of the postwar decades that combined state-led investment, welfare protections and labor rights, is foundering. Its slow capsizal has cast France into a deep hole from which there is no easy exit — and given the far right a major opportunity.

This has been a long-term process. While the pandemic brought a surge in admiration for medical professionals, [surveys show](#) that most French people think public services, especially hospitals, are performing poorly. The institutions they say they [trust most](#) are small and medium businesses, the army and the police. With services run down and infrastructure suffering from underinvestment — to say nothing of the political dysfunction in Paris — it’s perhaps easy to see why.

The blame doesn’t just belong to President Emmanuel Macron. For decades, governments of both center left and center right have overseen a managed decline of France’s social model. Privatization and pressure on services to be more cost-effective have led to deserts of school and hospital provision, even as politicians blame

the lazy and feckless for overwhelming the services that do exist. There are loud [calls](#) to abandon the 35-hour workweek — already a fiction for many, especially in the private sector.

Some leaders have justified this process in the language of rebooted meritocracy — that people should, in former President Nicolas Sarkozy’s phrase, “work more to earn more.” Yet if most French people [believe](#) hard work should pay, poor wage growth and longer working lives have put that aspiration out of reach. This frustrated promise of meritocracy catalyzes all sorts of other grievances, from anti-immigration sentiment to protests against fuel-tax rises.

That’s where Marine Le Pen’s far-right National Rally comes in. The party is often stereotyped as a protest vote for “left behind” industrial workers, but its appeal is [much broader](#). While the party still trails the left among the very lowest paid, its electoral support has in recent years stretched deep into the middle class. Given that Ms. Le Pen inherited the leadership from her multimillionaire father, the party might not seem like an ideal champion of meritocracy. Yet this promise, to restore the value of individual endeavor, is its pitch today.

Ms. Le Pen is often cast as a defender of the old French social model, and it’s true that her party opposed [Mr. Macron’s raise](#) of the retirement age. Yet she takes a far more ambiguous position on welfare provision generally, as her preference for a pension system more dependent on individual employees’ contributions shows. Her party [channels](#) the dissatisfaction of many late-career employees forced to work longer, to be sure, but also that of younger voters skeptical about paying into a system that might never reward them. By the same balancing logic, the party tends to oppose budget cuts while also standing against tax rises for consumers and households.

The party’s signature move is to cast ethnic minorities, immigrants and the undeserving poor as a special drain on resources. Ms. Le Pen’s supporters are galvanized by fear of such populations, according to researchers such as [Félicien Faury](#) and [Violaine Girard](#), yet — interestingly — they do not favor broad welfare support, even for whites. Rather, they increasingly identify with values of self-reliance and homeownership. This is less honey-eyed nostalgia for the postwar “golden era” than a 21st-century expression of individual autonomy. It demands a tough call to order, though always for someone else.

For much of France, Ms. Le Pen’s rise is itself cause for pessimism. Her poll ratings for the next presidential election, in 2027, stand at around 35 percent; given France’s fragmented party system, she is on track to receive the highest first-round percentage for any candidate in the past half-century. In last summer’s parliamentary elections, a so-called republican front of left-wing and centrist voters held back her party’s expected victory. Yet warnings of far-right danger are securing diminishing returns.

Perhaps France isn’t headed for disaster. For all its recent anxieties, it remains far from a Greek-style sovereign-debt crisis. If borrowing has risen sharply, the country has [transgressed](#) European Union deficit limits for much of the past quarter-century without risking economic meltdown. [Productivity](#) and [worker incomes](#) remain much better than in neighboring Italy. Social mobility is not especially strong, but wage inequality has [tended to fall](#) in recent decades. Even Ms. Le Pen’s triumph is hardly assured; an embezzlement trial may soon see her [barred](#) from running for office.

Yet France’s malaise is not simply a product of an overheated culture of complaint or political missteps like Mr. Macron’s rash call for snap elections last summer. The National Rally is exploiting a deeper disaffection with the public realm, as residual elements of the postwar social compact jar with a rising mood of privatization. In some areas, trade unions and social movements stoutly defend welfare and labor rights. But it is less clear that left-wing parties, which today command under one-third of the electorate, can rebuild a wider consensus around a more collectivist model.

This isn’t the only project in doubt. Mr. Macron began his presidency promising to rally both left and right behind a modernizing, liberal agenda. Yet his support has shriveled, a result of cutting social protections without securing broader public buy-in and offering tax breaks for the rich without lessening the debt load. His presidency has revolved around what has been termed a “[bourgeois bloc](#),” appealing to a slice of wealthier voters but failing to offer much for the majority. The exhaustion of this strategy, and the political fragmentation it has caused, could prompt snap elections as soon as the summer.

The longtime patriarch of the French far right, [Jean-Marie Le Pen](#), died last month. Yet while the cadaver lies in the ground, to paraphrase [Victor Hugo](#), the ideas are standing on their feet. France is in a rut — and time is running out to stop Mr. Le Pen's heirs from taking advantage.

David Broder ([@broderly](#)) is the author of "Mussolini's Grandchildren: Fascism in Contemporary Italy."