

**An Alternative to the System or an Alternative within the System ?  
An Analysis of the Relationship of Extreme Right Parties with the  
Political Systems of Western Democracies.**

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On the whole, classical approaches of extreme right parties have analyzed the question of the relationship between these parties and European democratic political systems in three different ways : firstly, by considering extreme right movements as a danger for democracy (Taguieff and Tribalat, 1998) ; secondly, by evaluating the impact of extremist formations on political systems (Schain, 2001) ; finally, by interpreting the phenomenon's emergence in Europe as the consequence of several factors, among which the transformation (Kitschelt, Mc Gann, 1995) or the crisis of West European party systems (Ivaldi, 1999a). In this paper, I would like to suggest another way of exploring this question, i.e. another way of thinking the relationship between extremism and democracy, and more specifically its consequences on extreme right parties. Some of these parties can now be considered as full members of the political arena. It is particularly true in Belgium, Austria, Italy, and France. However, it does not entail that the relationship between these parties and European democratic systems is less problematic. Putting forward an ideology whose original groundings are in contradiction with essential democratic principles, extreme right parties have nonetheless tried to access the realm of political power through proper constitutional means. How have these parties managed, and how do they still manage, through changing political contexts and different strategies, to deal with this contradiction – institutional logic *vs* doctrinal orthodoxy ? My hypothesis is that the manner in which these parties have managed this contradiction partly explains their present evolution. This hypothesis will be explored through the comparative analysis of four organizations – the Front National, the Vlaams Blok, the Alleanza Nazionale-MSI and the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs.

As a preliminary stage of this research, I will discuss the taxonomic and analytical foundations of this study. Drawing from the main teachings of systemic and environmentalist approaches of political parties, I will try, in a second part, to outline a theoretical schema of the relationship between these organizations and political systems. Thirdly, I will put this schema to the test through empirical verification. To do so, I will try to demonstrate that the two elements of the alternative have been clashing, for all the studied movements, at specific moments in their histories. Then I will explore the different manners in which these parties have recently managed to deal with this relationship so as to evaluate the consequences on their evolutions.

## **Taxonomic and Problematic Groundings**

The comparative approach of the extreme right in Europe raises several taxonomic and methodological problems. Firstly, as in any comparative study, this type of approach involves at

least three difficulties – the specificity of each context, the incommensurability of concepts, as well as the choice of comparative criteria<sup>1</sup>. Defining the extreme right in an European perspective may appear a challenge given that, in each of the studied countries, the extreme right is extremely complex, changing and heterogeneous (Sirinelli, 1998 : 5-6). For Klaus von Beyme (1988) or Xavier Casals, it is *a priori* impossible to distinguish a common ground to refer to “the political reality of the world of the far right” beyond “conceptual distinctions (between radical right, ultra-right and neo-fascism)” and beyond “the hazy and fluid boundaries between the groups” (Casals, 1998 : 22). Because of this impossibility, it does not seem acceptable to use this notion on the sole basis of its “utility”, i.e. the fact that it represents “what many authors, researchers and journalists call the extreme right” (Verhoeven, 1974 : 3). On a sheer methodological point of view, the solution put forward by Cas Mudde – “study the object itself first and try to define it later” is not satisfactory either in the context of an analysis whose object is not of a strictly taxonomic nature (Mudde, 1996a : 244).

However, it is essential to try and define notions, as well as to build a classification. To do so, there is only one alternative – either choose among the various existing definitions, since there is no consensus around a common minimal one (Mudde, 1996a : 228), or elaborate a new one. I have chosen the first solution and Piero Ignazi’s definition (1992), although with a critical outlook. The Italian political scientist bases his definition on three criteria : spatial (position in the political spectrum), historic-ideological (declared party ideology and reference to fascism), and/or attitudinal-systemic (attitude towards the political system). This approach can (and has been) be criticized for its essentialist dimension. It is therefore necessary to underline the fact that these three criteria only function in a logic of complementarity. The position occupied by an organization within a given party system does not suffice to define its political identity. In other words, occupying the extreme right position, although a common feature among the studied movements (Mayer, 1999 : 279-280), does not, strictly speaking, involve belonging to the extreme-right (Chebel d’Appollonia, 1986 : 32). It is therefore necessary to combine a spatial criterion with an ideologico-historical one.

To this second criterion, Piero Ignazi adds another element, which is the exclusive reference to fascism, considered not only as the inescapable reference of 1970s ultra-right formations<sup>2</sup> (a point with which I agree) but also as one of the only true extreme right ideologies. This second point is obviously far more debatable if one considers both the conflict over the meaning of the term

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<sup>1</sup> For a state of the art, see: “Où en est la politique comparée?”, *Revue Internationale de Politique Comparée*, n°1, avril 1994.

<sup>2</sup> During this period, the MSI embodied this ideology and represented a sort of “model” for other extreme right formations : according to the French theorician of the revolutionary-nationalism, François Durat, the MSI is the “parti-frère” (*brother-party*) of these formations (Duprat, 1972a : 207).

“extreme-right” and the diverging interpretations of fascism. Moreover, choosing fascism or neo-fascism as ideological comparative criteria, although it can help evaluating the extent of the fascist impregnation on the political practice and ideology of extreme right parties (Milza, 1987 : 297-439), only provides a partial vision of the FN, Vlaams Blok or FPÖ ideologies. Therefore, it is necessary to both keep Piero Ignazi’s second criterion and exclude the reference to fascism, stressing the manifest or declared dimension of ideology instead. This perspective leads to a comparative analysis of the ideology of each of the studied formations, an analysis which I chose to base on the distinction established by Piero Ignazi (1994a) between “traditional extreme right” and “postindustrial extreme right”.

The concept of “traditional extreme right” refers to an extreme right rooted in the tradition of historical fascism. The German NPD, the British BNP, the Dutch Centre Party (CP’86) and the Italian MSI *inter alia* belong to this category. It is true that the transformation of the Italian neo-fascist movement into an ideologically renewed organization questions its present belonging to this category. I will come back to this issue later. What we must bear in mind, for the moment, is that the belonging of the MSI to this category remains relevant because of “the coexistence, within the movement, of a clearly *post-fascist* culture (that of the vast majority of high-ranking officials) with a *nostalgic* culture (of an element of the grassroots, which still reveres Mussolini and Evola)” (Camus, 1998 : 6). Besides, until this transformation in the middle of the 1990s, the manifest ideology of the MSI remained rooted in historical fascism<sup>3</sup>. The fascist ideology consists of various currents (Sternhell, 1987). To reduce this complexity Renzo de Felice (1975) distinguished between two trends - the “fascism-regime” (conservative, clerical, capitalist, corporatist) and the “fascism-movement” (revolutionary, anti-bourgeois, socialist leaning, futuristic). This division can be observed within the MSI, between a “socialist-leaning left”, stamped with the values of the Italian Social Republic, and a “corporatist right”, more moderate and more open to compromise (Ignazi, 1994b : 1015-1016). Despite this opposition, none of these two trends until the mid-1990s has ever clearly questioned the tie with fascism, a particularly present political heritage which goes with strongly authoritarian, nationalist, anti-system and anti-democratic positions that the transformation of the party has not totally erased (Baldini and Vignati, 1996).

The second type distinguished by Piero Ignazi refers to a “post-industrial” extreme right, a produce of what he calls “the silent counter-revolution” (Ignazi, 1992). It consists of the anti-democratic and anti-system organizations of the “third generation” – the French Front National, the Vlaams Blok and Jörg Haider’s Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs. These movements are indeed

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<sup>3</sup> The creation of the MSI corresponds to the wish of “making the idea of fascism alive” (Ignazi, 1994b : 1014-1015).

anti-democratic and anti-system<sup>4</sup> in their ideological groundings and their political platforms. Not only do they put forward a populist, racist and xenophobic message centered around the preferentialist defense of the national/ethnic identity, the rejection of the Other (the immigrant) and strong antagonism to the political elite (called “the political mafia” by the VB, the “Profiteers” by the FPÖ and the “Establishment” by the FN) (Mudde, 1996b). They are also hostile to pluralism, egalitarianism and parliamentary government<sup>5</sup>. In addition, it is necessary to underline that the FN, the VB and the FPÖ belong to cultural traditions and political currents on the rejection of which the mid-20th democratic regimes have based their principles. In Flanders, the Vlaams-National Verbond (VNV), a collaborationist party and a Flemish version of the German national-socialism, is explicitly considered as one of the main ideological sources of the VB’s platform<sup>6</sup>. In Austria, there is also a rather strong ideological continuity between extreme right extremism, national-socialism and pangermanism. The presence of ex nazis among the first leaders of the FPÖ (Anton Reinthaller, Friedrich Peter), as well as Jörg Haider’s declarations on the “normal work policy of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Reich” show the strength of these ties. The case of the French FN appears more complex. Forming a sort of “synthesis of syntheses” (Taguieff, 1984), the party of the “nationalist compromise” (Camus, 1997 : 125-170) feeds on a large variety of extreme right historical currents, coming from a dual tradition – counter-revolutionary on the one hand, national-populist on the other.

Combining *position within the political realm* and *ideology* in order to define extreme right movements since 1945 does not suffice. It is also necessary to take into account the relationship they have with the “political system” (third criteria). The political system can be defined as the sum of political interactions in a given society (Easton, 1953). The systemic approach, as well as the environmentalist approach of political organizations (Panebianco, 1982), emphasize the necessity of including this system into a larger environment, an institutional, cultural, social, and economic one (Charlot and Charlot, 1985 : 471) with which the political system, together with all the elements that compose it, interact. However, the systemic approach, or at least that of David Easton, neglects the internal life of the political system (the “black box”) that the structuro-functional approach deconstructs into sub-systems – the party sub-system, defined as the “sum of the parties interacting in a given political system” (Charlot and Charlot, 1985 : 510), and the

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<sup>4</sup> According to Giovanni Sartori, an anti-system party is characterized by an activity which “undermines the legitimacy of the regime” and “abides by a belief system that does not share the values of the political order within which it operates. According to a strict definition, then, anti-system parties represent an extraneous ideology” (Sartori, 1976 : 133).

<sup>5</sup> The three formations want to reinforce “Direct democracy” by a more intensive use of referendums, which would be applied in the context of a “Third Republic” in Austria and of a “Sixth Republic” in France. (Moreau, 1998 : 79 ; Taguieff, 1996 : 221-226).

<sup>6</sup> The ties with this heritage are, among other things, confirmed by the presence of different personalities (Karel Dillen and Roeland Raes) who have played an important role within the party (De Witte, Scheepers, 1998 : 97).

electoral sub-system, both being important parts of the political system. Finally, it is important to bear in mind that in each political system there exist generally accepted normative rules which, without prescribing any type of action in particular, “define rather widely the scope of possible actions” (Bailey, 1971 : 18).

Therefore studying the question of the relationship between extreme right formations and the “political system” implies studying the question of the interaction between anti-democratic, anti-system political organizations, and a global environment (institutional, cultural, social, economic, political system, party system, electoral system, rules of the game), in this case that of representative democracy. This question would have easily been solved if these formations had not chosen to conquer political power through legal and institutional means, to participate in the electoral competition and, doing so, to respect the rules of the democratic game. How have extreme right parties managed to deal with the apparent contradiction between their ideological groundings and those of representative democracy ?

### **Between adaptation, differentiation and distinction<sup>7</sup> : a theoretical approach of the question of the relationship with the political system**

To answer this question, it is necessary, firstly, to briefly summarize the main teachings of the systemic and environmentalist approaches of political parties. The first teaching is that the nature and the actions of a party are not understandable if one does not take into account the interaction at work between a party and its global environment as previously defined. The second teaching is that parties are both dependent and independent from this environment. The dependency factor forces them to “adapt themselves” to the environment. As emphasized by Jean and Monica Charlot, it is a “matter of life and death” (Charlot and Charlot, 1985 : 431). Thus parties are “dependent variables” of the systems in which they operate. Nevertheless, they also “always manage to maintain [...] sufficient autonomy so as to be independent variables as well” (Charlot and Charlot, 1985 : 471). Parties are free to decide not to adapt to the environment ; however, this choice partly excludes them from it. The conditions of adaptation stem from the specific configuration of the environment. In this case, they consist of the essential principles of representative democracy, establishing the rules of the political game – abiding by the constitution and democratic values, and accepting the rules of pluralist competition over power

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<sup>7</sup> The English term “distinction” was chosen for lack of a better translation to express the French stronger notion of “démarcation”, which stresses the idea of a strategic choice based on *rejection*. For purposes of consistency, I will keep this term throughout the text although it is not, as such, very satisfactory.

whose result is decided through electoral means. Whether these parties abide by these principles and these values depends on the ideological distance separating these principles and values from those on which the identity of a given party is built. In the particular instance of extreme right formations, this distance is important enough for the relationship with democratic political systems to be problematic. Abiding by democratic principles and values, or adapting to the environment, equals to reducing this distance. Therefore this reduction, which is the consequence of the constraining interaction between extreme right parties and their environment, has implications on their ideologies. We can formulate, theoretically, that this interaction faces extreme right parties with one alternative : either adapt themselves to the system, hence running the risk of losing a part of their original identities<sup>8</sup> and of the support of their most orthodox members, or “distinguish” themselves from the system thereby running the risk of being excluded from it, or of being marginalized. Theoretically, therefore, full and complete acceptance of the principles and values of representative democracy by extreme right parties amounts to disowning their original identities.

It is necessary, at this point, to clarify notions and specify how this theoretical schema works. Firstly, I think that the strategic alternative between *adaptation* and *distinction* is an alternative between terms that are contradictory for extreme right parties. However, I do not think that for any party, there is any contradiction, or “paradox” (Villalba, 1997)<sup>9</sup> between *adaptation* and *differentiation*. Political systems in representative democracies create a competitive game defined by rules and principles to which the parties who want to participate in the game have to adapt themselves. In this respect, one can assume that, in order to differentiate themselves from others and occupy a specific place in the political spectrum, these formations are also forced to use strategic differentiation (Parodi, 1991 : 50 ; Ysmal, 1985 : 609). Hence, adapting themselves to the system and differentiating themselves within the system are “two essential rules of the political game” (Birenbaum, 1992 : 18). Therefore, adaptation and differentiation do not seem to be contradictory principles and there is “no irreducible dilemma between these two political imperatives” (Birenbaum, 1992 : 19). It is true, however, that the necessity, for a party wishing to participate in the electoral game, to conciliate these two imperatives (adaptation and differentiation) creates an intra-party tension centring around the relationship to ideology. Strategies of differentiation stem from the competitive nature of the party system. The changing pattern of occupied positions within the system implies that, in some circumstances, some parties are led to stress their differentiation strategy and put forward the most uncommon elements in

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<sup>8</sup> As underlined by Bruno Villalba, “ideology is an essential component of party’s identity” [...]; “the ideological discourse organizes the actor’s field and grants him a specificity” [...]; “the ideology contributes to the formation of a corpus of beliefs, translated into a system of representation which is specific to each formation”(Villalba, 1997 : 69).

their ideologies and in their platforms. In other circumstances, particularly while allying themselves with other parties or while trying to broaden their electoral base, these singular aspects in their ideologies are going to be marginalized (Michels, 1962 : 333-363 ; Bourdieu, 1981 : 13). However, the tension at work in the relationship of these parties (or of any other party) to their ideologies does not only vary according to the position occupied within the system. It also and mostly depends on the nature of the relationship with this system. For extreme right parties, who show “opposition of principle” (Kirchheimer, 1966 : 237) to democratic systems, differentiating themselves can imply putting forward, in some circumstances and on some topics of the political debate, an ideology and a platform which contradict the principles on which the system is based. In this case, extreme right parties not only stress their difference *within* the system but also *with* the system : they distinguish themselves from it. The ideological tension is all the more acute, more acute than for any other party not strictly defined as an anti-system and anti-democratic one. Therefore it is important, in the case of extreme right parties, to establish a distinction between adaptation (to the system), differentiation (within the system) and distinction (from the system). It is also important to stress the existence of an ideological threshold beyond which extreme right parties, when differentiating themselves, adopt not only strategic positions of differentiation but also of distinction. It theoretically confirms the existence a strategic contradiction between embodying “an alternative within the system” (adaptation and differentiation) or and an “alternative to the system” (distinction).

### **An “alternative within the system” and an “alternative to the system” – an irreducible dilemma ?**

It is now time to test the validity of this schema from an empirical point of view. Now that they have become full-time actors in the political game, how have extreme right parties managed to deal with this paradoxical relationship with the system ? To answer this question, it is important to grant full attention to the contextual evolution of the global environment which, from the mid-1980s onward, has been rather favourable to the emergence and implantation of extreme right organisations in representative democracies. Even though the interpretations of the phenomenon’s apparition vary from one explanatory model to another (Ignazi, 1994a ; Kitschelt and Mc Gann, 1995 ; Betz and Immerfal, 1998 ; Weinberg and Merkl, 1997), most commentators agree on its partly exogenous and plurifactorial origin (crisis of political representation, evolution of party systems, economic crisis, unemployment, growth of a feeling of insecurity, political

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<sup>9</sup> On this point, I do not agree with Bruno Villalba (1997).

construction of the immigration question, electoral systems, etc.). Political organisations are far from controlling the full process granting them access into and survival within a given political system. Their recognition, which is their key to access the decision-making process (Charlot and Charlot, 1985 : 465), comes from a host of complex institutional, cultural, economic, social and political mechanisms that they can only partially control (Lagroye, 1985 : 461-463). Still, these organizations use strategies and discourses, in the competitive game over power, that are clear testimonies of the type of political behaviors that they have adopted towards the system and the other political actors. I will use the – inevitably summary and fragmentary – analysis of these strategies and discourses as a base for empirical verification, while taking the environmental global context into consideration as a constraint on the elaboration and the implementation of these strategies and discourses.

I will start with the case of the MSI, and separate different phases in its history. The most recent trends of the relationship of extreme right parties to the political system will be examined in the last part. First and foremost, I wish to specify the conditions in which extreme right formations are theoretically faced with this alternative and identify its consequences in the political practice.

Founded in 1946 by ex dignitaries of the Italian Social Republic, the MSI positioned itself from the start at the fringe of the Italian democratic political system. In the words of Piero Ignazi (1989), it was the “excluded pole” of the political system. As the movement owed its *raison d’être* to its bond with fascism, accepting a proper “anti-fascist” system was a painful operation as it lied heavy on its manifest ideology (Ignazi, 1994b : 1016-1017). In a first phase, the party clearly refused to compromise with the system. They overtly used strategic distinction and violently criticized the institutional regime. Their platform was then unambiguous : “to keep on calling on the spirit of fascism and the spirit of the Italian Social Republic” (Almirante and Palemenghi-Crispi, 1957 : 12-13, quoted by Simon, 1992 : 73). Their activities focused around activism and anti-communism.

Although originally rejected, the political system still functioned as their inescapable center of attraction. As early as 1947, the MSI endeavored to implement both a strategy of adaptation and of electoral participation : three town councilors were elected in Rome and, the year after, six deputies and a senator. As underlined by Roberto Chiarini, “the very fact of entering Parliament and local councils forced the MSI to moderate its ideology” (1995 : 98), i.e. to reduce the distance between their own values and those of representative democracy. This strategic participation raised the sensitive question of the relationship with the political system. As such, it became the issue of a strong conflict between the two wings of the party - the intransigents hostile to any

type of compromise, and the moderates in favor of an anti-communist alliance with the Christian Democrats and the monarchists. The first congress of the party, held in Naples in June 1948, did not bring any solution to the problem of the strategic choice that had to be made between *alternative to the system* and *alternative within the system*. The chosen slogan strikingly underlined this original ambiguity in the MSI's relationship to the system and to fascism : “no repudiation, no restoration”<sup>10</sup>.

The ambiguity was nonetheless progressively erased from the early 1950s onward when the members of the conservative wing of the movement acceded to the leadership of the party. At the same time, the threat of the Scelba law, aiming at outlawing the MSI as a fascist party, forced its leaders to abandon their revolutionary intentions in favor of a more moderate platform. Under the influence of this double impulsion, the neo-fascist movement, run from 1951 to 1954 by Augusto de Marsanich then by Arturo Michelini, planned to become a “credible” political force, the spearhead of a national opposition and the hub of a future government of national union” (Milza, 1991 : 481). However, this strategy, which enabled to MSI to conclude first a “ pact of action” (Ignazi, 1997 : 138)<sup>11</sup> then a “pact of alliance” with the Monarchist Party, gave rise to heavy tension within the movement. Remaining faithful to the tradition of the Social Republic, Giorgio Almirante, principal private secretary at the Ministry of popular culture (Minculpop) under the Social Republic and an irreconcilable opponent to the regime, resigned from the national leadership of the party in April 1956. Pino Rauti, likewise, parted from the almirantian group of the party to form the evolian movement Ordine Nuovo.

During the 1950s, Marsanich's and Michelini's MSI successively supported the moderate governments of Pela, (1953), Zoli (1957), and Segni (1959). The strategic reconversion of the movement had immediate positive electoral consequences : 29 *missini* deputies were elected in 1953. 1960, however, brought about a new turning point, when Tambroni's Christian Democrat government obtained a vote of confidence thanks to the support of the neo-fascist party. This event, which seemed to make the strategic insertion of the MSI complete, triggered a strong reaction from the Italian population, and violent confrontation between leftist militants and the police took place during the congress of the MSI held in Genoa (the capital of the Resistance).

Twelve people died in street battles and hundreds were injured. The government was forced to resign and the MSI was marginalized. The party then entered a phase of decline, during which the conservative leadership, trying to maintain the objective of insertion, was increasingly contested. When Michelini died in 1969, the MSI was once again faced with the same alternative, stuck into

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<sup>10</sup> “Non rinnegare e non restaurare”. A motto which has traditionally been attributed to Augusto de Marsanich (Servello, 1995 : 87 ; Ignazi, 1989 : p. 49).

<sup>11</sup> Thanks to this pact, the MSI obtained 11,4% of valid votes in the communal by-elections in the South (Ignazi, 1997 : 138).

this “contradiction between theoretico-verbal maximalism and the daily practice of a somewhat receptive attitude towards the moderate of the Christian Democracy” (Ignazi, 1989 : 133). Paradoxically, the election of Giorgio Almirante as secretary-general did not lead to radicalization of the movement’s strategy. Made strong by several electoral victories (13,8% at the 1971 administrative by-elections), Almirante asserted his intention to pursue the strategy of insertion by reconciling the extremes within a vast “autonomous” union. The party was then redefined as the party of “the alternative to the system *and* of the alternative within the system”<sup>12</sup>. The outcome of this strategy of conciliation was the creation of the Destra nazionale (MSI-DN), which united some members of the Monarchist Party, some ex Christian Democrats and ex liberals, with a view to the legislative elections.

This union set a strategic precedent which was one of the main sources of inspiration of the revolutionary-nationalist French leaders when founding the party of the “Droite nationale, sociale et populaire” (*The national, social and people’s Right*, i.e. the Front national)<sup>13</sup> the same year. This precedent helps illustrate and specify the various implications of this strategy of adaptation. The constitution of the MSI as an “autonomous” political force, freed from its ties with the Christian Democracy but integrated into the system, was accompanied by a strategic attempt to broaden their electoral base (in the context of the 1972 elections, the MSI tried to seduce the middle classes) as well as their political staff (Monarchists, liberals, Christian Democrats whose presence helped granting legitimacy to the party). However, this process contributed to effacing a part of the original ideological groundings which, in turn, required changing the party’s label. Henceforward in their speeches “any subversive or revolutionary attempt were rejected”<sup>14</sup> while “democracy” and “liberty” were redefined as “priority values that cannot be renounced”<sup>15</sup>. At the same time, the MSI launches an vast cultural operation (creation of reviews, founding of an Institute of Corporative Studies), the aim of which being to accompany the project of the Italian National right with some “theoretical dignity”.

However, the party could not totally renounce their ideological groundings or afford to do without their electorate or their most orthodox militants. MSI leaders, through the voice of their secretary-general, were nevertheless conscious that it was no longer possible to “present fascism in a grotesque[...], old-fashioned, anachronistic and stupidly nostalgic manner”<sup>16</sup>. The party therefore developed a latent ideology, expressed through the use of a “double” discourse perfectly illustrated by the slogan found on a poster of the 1970 regional elections campaign –

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<sup>12</sup> Giorgio Almirante, “L’unità del MSI, garanzia per la nazione”, *Il Secolo d’Italia*, September 23<sup>th</sup>, 1969.

<sup>13</sup> François Duprat (1972b : 114-115) attended the 9<sup>th</sup> Congress of the MSI, when they adopted the slogan “Destra nazionale”.

<sup>14</sup> Giorgio Almirante, “I nostri anni settanta”, *Il Secolo d’Italia*, January 3<sup>th</sup>, 1970.

<sup>15</sup> Giorgio Almirante, “Conferenza Stampa”, *Il Secolo d’Italia*, April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1972.

<sup>16</sup> Giorgio Almirante, *Il Secolo d’Italia*, April 7<sup>th</sup>, 1970, quoted by Luciano CHELES (1986 : 29).

“Nostalgia dell’avvenire” (*Nostalgia for the future*), a conceptual expression of what Piero Ignazi called “the almirantian compromise” whose aim was to overcome the problem of the alternative by striking a balance between the past (fascism) and the future (the integration of the MSI). The results of the 1972 election first confirmed Giorgio Almirante’s strategy (8,7% of votes). However, unable to complete this ideological revision because of strong criticism among the more militant, intransigent fringes of the party, Almirante was faced with the failure of the National Right’s project during the 1976 elections (6,1% of votes).

Jeopardized by a context of gruesome terrorism, abandoned by the advocates of ideological renovation, the MSI *de facto* relaunched their policy of alternative to the Christian Democrat regime. Unfailingly faithful to fascism, the Italian movement was increasingly isolated within the political system, marking their distance with the other political actors and radically expressing their extragenicity from the principles of the democratic system<sup>17</sup>. More than thirty years after the creation of the MSI, the issue of their relationship with the political system kept on centering around contradictory ideas, as the Italian movement failed to overcome the problem of the alternative between fascism and democracy until the mid-1990s.

Let us now study the case of the Front National, and insist first on the context of its creation. The conditions in which the leaders of the revolutionary-nationalist group *Ordre nouveau* (ON) prepared for the 1973 parliamentary election evoke the MSI’s situation on the eve of the 1972 electoral consultation. Having succeeded in federating the scattered forces of the “*Opposition nationale*”, and after encouraging results in the Paris 1971 municipal elections, ON decided “to widen the penetration of the movement by opening it to new groups of potential supporters” and “to increase the impact of the movement [...] by working towards the creation of a vast Front National”, which had to be achieved for the 1973 parliamentary elections. “This phase will enable the established nationalist party to play its own political game in the competition over power. It is only at that moment that all the fighting methods will be fully available to instigate the nationalist, popular revolution” (*Pour un Ordre nouveau*, June, 1972 : 163-165). Hence, the creation of the Front National in October 1972 proceeded from punctual strategic adaptation to the political system, which implied giving up all forms of activism on the one hand (which, in turn, led to the disappearance of *Ordre nouveau* within the Front), and adjusting to the access conditions of the electoral competition on the other hand (with the adoption of moderate, legalist speech and image). The appointment of Jean-Marie Le Pen (who embodied, at that time, a more legalist figure in the French extreme right) to the head of the new party of the “*Droite nationale*” was

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<sup>17</sup> The result of which being poor electoral scores : 5,3% in the 1979 legislative elections, 6,8% in 1983, 5,9% in 1987.

supposed to meet this second requirement, as well as the elaboration of a program which was based on a compromise between revolutionary-nationalism and conservatism. However, the weakness of electoral results (1,3%) showed the failure of this strategy and led a split between the the nationalist wing of the movement, which called for intensified activism and a return to a radical conception of the doctrine and the national Lepenist tendency who took power over the FN and approached the 1974 presidential election in particularly difficult conditions. "Because it had not been able to make the choice of parliamentarism" (Camus, 1996 : 21), *Ordre nouveau* was dissolved following a meeting organized in Paris around the theme "Halte à l'immigration sauvage" ("*Stop wild immigration*"). The FN began a long "crossing of the desert" (in their own words), a period during which the Lepenist organization first expressed full ideological opposition to the democratic system and to the parliamentary government<sup>18</sup>, before changing their strategy under the influence of the Union solidariste (ran by Jean-Pierre Stirbois and Michel Collinot). This strategy was characterized, from the 1978 parliamentary elections onward, by an intensification of the militant action at municipal level and, for the first time in the Front national's history, by capitalizing on the immigration theme (Camus, 1996 : 33-34).

Therefore at the beginning of the 1980s, the Front National was only a very small organization in French political scene. In 1981, Jean-Marie Le Pen cannot gather the 500 signatures required to stand in for the presidential election, a failure that he blamed on a boycott organized by the "Gang of the Four". At the parliamentary election, the same year, the FN obtained 0,18%. Among their candidates, some members of the neo-nazi wing of the party could still be found. An isolated and weakly implanted organization, the Front National seemed doomed to remain a marginal party, incapable of presenting themselves either as an alternative to the system or an alternative within the system.

The Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs is the third formation studied here. It was created in 1956 out of the fusion between two movements – the Party of Freedom, founded by an ex-Nazi, Anton Reinthaller the previous year, and the VdU (Verband der Unabhängigen, *Association of the Independents*), a movement that was more liberal than nationalist, launched in 1949 after being authorized by the Allies (Seiler and Meltz, 1998 : 63). The FPÖ was the last representative of an anti-Semitic, nationalist-pangermanist, anticlerical tradition born under the Empire. From 1956 (when it first participated in the elections) to 1986 (when Jörg Haider arrived at the head of the liberal movement), the political history of the FPÖ did not really attract the attention of

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<sup>18</sup> Under the influence of the revolutionary-nationalist wing of François Duprat, the FN, throughout the 1970s, started resembling xenophobic parties such as the Swiss National Action or the Powellists in Great-Britain (Camus,

observers. It must be said that during this period, the FPÖ never scored more than 6% of votes and was caught into a stranglehold between the two great formations of the Austrian political system - the SPÖ (Sozialistische Partei Österreichs) and the ÖVP (Österreichische Volkspartei), gathered within a governmental coalition from 1945 to 1966. As underlined by Patrick Moreau (1998 : 67), there was extremely strong politico-cultural identification between the electorate and the SPÖ-ÖVP couple during this period (89% of voters in 1956 and 91% of voters in 1966 voted for these two formations). Besides, the clear ties between the FPÖ and nazism (from 1956 to 1978, the party was run by two leaders who were ancient dignitaries of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Reich and the Nazi Party) condemned the party to even greater isolation. Nevertheless, signs of change began to appear within the Austrian political system, notably through the emergence of the decline of the identification with two great Austrian political formations. This evolution can in part be explained by the constitution, in 1966, of the first one-coloured government (ÖVP) of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Austrian Republic. Excluded from the coalition, the SPÖ tries to get closer to the FPÖ who, in parallel and under the influence of Friedrich Peter, switched directions in favour of the liberal pole of the ideology (the FPÖ went as far as joining the Liberal International).

This pragmatic turning point shows the clear intention of the FPÖ's president to implant his party within the democratic system (Resource center of the Austrian Resistance - DÖW, 1998 : 59 ; Camus, 2000 : 105)<sup>19</sup>. However, the implementation of this strategy had consequences on the internal balance of the various leanings of the party. In 1966 Norbert Burger left the FPÖ to form the Nationaldemokratische Partei (NDP), a neo-nazi formation banned in 1988. Likewise, the collaboration between the FPÖ and the SPÖ within Sinowatz(chancellor)/ Steger<sup>20</sup> (vice chancellor)'s government of "small coalition" from May 1983 to June 1986 prompted the hostility of the movement's nationalist wing (*GrossDeutsch*), represented by the young president of the Federation of Carinthia, Jörg Haider. As underlined by Max Riedelspeger (1998 : 29), the "years of coalition with the Socialists had cost the party the protest vote as well as its own identity". Haider's arrival at the head of the party in September 1986, denounced throughout the press as the obvious proof of the extreme right-wing character of the party (Riedelspeger, 1998 : 29), can be partly explained by the reaction of the FPÖ's radical wing. This switch to the right immediately provoked the breakup of the governmental coalition as well as, for some time, the failure of the FPÖ's strategy of adaptation.

The incapacity to overcome the alternative between electioneering and extremism, as well as the phenomenon of exclusion from a wing by another, has thus been identified in the case of the

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1996 : 24).

<sup>19</sup> Patrick Moreau (1998 : 69) underlines the fact that in 1976, the FPÖ was perceived by the voters to be more on the left than the ÖVP on the political spectrum. In 1996, the FPÖ was perceived to be at the extreme right of the spectrum.

FPÖ as well. Nevertheless, from 1986 onward, the growing evolution of the liberal party and its potential power seem to show some particularities in regard to our question (*cf. above*).

The Vlaams Blok, the last formation studied in this paper, was created by Karel Dillen in 1978 following exacerbated conflict between various wings – ultranationalist (Dillen), moderate and progressive – of the Volksunie, the national-Flemish party founded in 1954. In 1977, the VU participated in a national government regrouping the Belgian Socialist party (PSB-BSP), the Christian Social party (PSC), the Christelijke Volkspartij (CVP) and the Democratic Front of the French speakers (FDF, an opponent of the VU). The participation of the Volksunie in this coalition and their support to the Egmont Pact triggered the creation of the Vlaams Blok. Hostile to this pacification agreement, Senator Lode Claes left the VU in 1977 and founded the Vlaamse Volkspartij (VVP), while Karel Dillen created the Vlaamse-national Partij (VNP) the same year. Regrouping extreme right nationalists, the VNP was directly in line with the Vlaams Nationaal Verbond (VNV). The two formations ran for the December 1978 elections under the common label Vlaams Blok. Only Karel Dillen was elected, in the district of Antwerp, one of the bastions of flamingantism and of the Flemish extreme right. Claes failed and, soon after, left the VB which then entirely adopted the ultranationalist Flemish program of the VNP. Supported by veterans of the Flemish Movement's radical wing (Mudde, 2000 : 87), the VB also relied on the support of a network of radical militant organizations (the fascistic militia Vlaamse Militanten Orde, the intellectual and ideological training centre Were Di run by Karel Dillen from 1962 to 1976) which were particularly receptive to the nationalist, racist and xenophobic speech of the Flemish movement and the main topics of its programme, namely the independence of Flanders (as a cleansed ethnic community), "Right to specificity", "security", the "reemigration" of "delinquent immigrants" (Gowaert, 1992 : 10-11) – although a marginal theme during the first years of the VB (Swyngedouw, 1998 : 307), as well as that of the long-term unemployed and of "illegal immigrants". As underlined by Pascal Delwit, Jean-Michel De Waele and Andrea Rea (1998 : 74), "the party's documents [at the beginning of the 1980s] reveals the right-wing, sometimes fascistic choices made by the party". Nevertheless, this radical policy of distinction from the system brought about the marginalization of the Flemish ultra-nationalist party which obtained consistent electoral results in Antwerp in 1982 (5,1%) but failed to pass the threshold of 3% of votes in Flanders until the end of the 1980s. The theoretical hypotheses that I have

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<sup>20</sup> The president of the Freedom Party from 1980 to 1986.

formulated seem to be confirmed in the case of Vlaams Blok also, at least till the beginning of the 1990s when the VB enjoyed a new boom which put an end to its “crossing of the desert”<sup>21</sup>.

After this brief examination of the relationship of extreme right parties with the political system, and according to the chronological approach I used, it appears that the alternative with which extreme right parties were faced was made of conflicting choices. Strategically adapting to the system systematically led to giving up or erasing a part of their original ideological groundings, a phenomenon which gave rise to conflicts with the most radical wings of these movements. On the other hand, the implementation of strategic distinction from the system seemed to irrevocably doom these formations. Because of their incapacity to overcome this strategic dilemma, it has been said that “the institutional strategy of the extreme right” was destined to remain “necessarily partial and unfinished” (Sadoun and Donegani, 1992 : 767). Does the recent evolutions of the MSI, the National Front, the FPÖ, and the Vlaams Blok refute this conclusion?

### **Overtaking, scission, distinction and balance : the current modalities of the relationship between extreme right parties with the political system**

After underlining the analogical modalities (in some periods in their histories) of the relationship between extreme right parties and the political system, it is necessary to stress the differences in their recent evolutions. It seems impossible *a priori* to find one or even two models within which the four studied parties could fit, an impossibility which shows how varied the gamut of contemporary extreme rights are. Four types of evolution emerge of the analysis. I will examine firstly the MSI (overtaking), then the FN (scission), the FPÖ (distinction) and finally the Vlaams Blok (balance).

During the 1980s, the question of the relationship of the Italian neofascist party with the political system still partly explained its political marginality. The MSI was indeed incapable of overcoming the alternative between loyalty to fascism and adaptation to the system. At the end of the 1980s, it entered in a phase of electoral decline which accelerated when its historic leaders died (Giorgio Almirante, Pino Romualdi). As the “Dauphin” of Giorgio Almirante, Gianfranco Fini became the leader of the party without suggesting any new strategy. At the 1990 congress, he

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<sup>21</sup>Sources : <http://www.vlaams-blok.be/watzijnwe/brochure/engelsfrans/brochurefrans.htm>. This notion has been originally used by the French Front national.

sought refuge in the apology of fascism and rejected the “principles of 1789”<sup>22</sup>. This return to the original identity was strengthened by the election of Pino Rauti as secretary-general in 1990, who conducted an even more pronounced strategy of distinction leading to poor results at the 1990 municipal and regional elections (3,9%) (Tarchi, 1995 : 67). The 1991 Sicily elections were no better ; Rauti resigned and, the following year, the MSI commemorated the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the “March on Rome”. At the dawn of the 1990s, everything seemed to indicate that the neofascist movement was doomed to remaining a marginal force in the Italian political system. However, its recent evolution, based on full integration into the system and, consequently, on the acceptance of the founding principles of representative democracy, refutes this hypothesis. How did the MSI succeed in overcoming the historic dilemma with which it had been faced during fifty years ?

To answer this question, firstly, it is necessary to pay considerable attention to a series of exogenous factors. The MSI would have probably never managed to get out of its “ghetto” without the context of de-radicalization of political conflict (namely the end of the terrorism and of political violence) and without the renewal of the historiography on fascism<sup>23</sup>, which contributed to progressively rehabilitating the MSI within the Italian political space. Paradoxically, as it has been previously underlined, this favorable context in the mid-1980s did not modify at all the strategy of distinction of the MSI which remained faithful to fascist ideals. The catastrophic results of the 1990 and 1991 elections led to Fini’s re-election as secretary-general, who relaunched the traditional policy of opposition to the regime in a more moderate way. This reorientation would have undoubtedly been insufficient to allow the movement to go out of its isolation if the political context of the 1990s had not been particularly favorable to the neofascist movement. Because it was “excluded” from the system, the party remained untouched by “Mani Pulite” Operation (*clean hands*) and the “Tangentopoli” (*bribes*) trials which led the traditional party system to collapse. It is in this context that Gianfranco Fini ran for the Rome 1993 municipal elections<sup>24</sup> and that the history of the party began to dramatically change. In the battle against Francesco Rutelli, Fini indeed got the support of Silvio Berlusconi, the leader of Forza Italia – a support which was a huge first step towards real explicit legitimization of the MSI and to a “redefinition of [its] place in the political panorama” (Ignazi, 1994b : 1032). This redefinition becomes reality when the MSI regrouped with Forza Italia and the Lega Nord under the name “List of Agreement of the Good Government” on the eve of the 1994 legislative

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<sup>22</sup> *Relazione d’apertura del Segretario Nazionale on. Gianfranco Fini*, polycopied, press agency of the MSI-DN, Rimini, January 11<sup>th</sup>, 1990, p. 17, quoted by Piero Ignazi (1997 : 141).

<sup>23</sup>A renewal in which the researches of Renzo De Felice (1975) played an important role. On this point : Pierre Milza (1991).

<sup>24</sup> In the municipal elections, 13 mayors *missini* were elected. Gianfranco Fini was not elected but obtained 46,9% of valid votes.

elections. A previously “excluded pole”, the MSI became one of the main actors of the “Pole of liberties”. It is on this occasion that the neo-fascist movement adopted the label Alleanza nazionale-MSI, thereby stressing their will of change and renewal within the party. Elections are a triumphant success : 13,5% (+8 points in two years), 107 deputies and 5 ministers. Now a member of the Berlusconi government, the MSI went a lot further than simply changing names or labels : they also are stopped referring to corporatism, and accepted the market economy as well as the fundamental principles of democracy. Finally, they clearly distanced themselves from historical fascism<sup>25</sup>.

The “postfascist” (Ignazi, 1994c) reversal of Alleanza nazionale attracted the attention of observers who all tried to measure its extent. To do so, one cannot only rely on the expressed intentions of the party’s leaders. One must examine how it was perceived by the electorate, as well as by activists and the political staff of the party. As underlined by Gianfranco Baldini and Rinaldo Vignati after Angelo Panebianco, “the militants’ attachment to an original definition of the doctrine makes it impossible for the dominant coalition to arbitrarily change ideological referents” (Baldini and Vignati, 1996 : 82). One is therefore lead to wonder how the party’s rank and file accepted this new political, ideological and strategic orientation. Unfortunately, such a study on militants does not exist as far as I know. However, Gianfranco Baldini and Rinaldo Vignati (1996), drawing on a research led by Colette Ysmal and Piero Ignazi (1992) on the delegates of the Front National and of the MSI, studied the party’s intermediate executives during the 1995 Fiuggi congress (a congress during which the transformation of the MSI became official). The results of this work pointed at a much less radical profile (showed by a weakening in positions on the scale of cultural liberalism, the abandonment of anti-system positions, a much more opened attitude towards other political formations), but still identified very strong ties with fascist culture (showed by a favorable appreciation of the regime and the importance granted to Gentile, Mussolini and Evola).

Returning to the opposition after the fall of Berlusconi’s government, and in spite of disappointing results at the 1999 European elections (10,3% for the AN - Segni<sup>26</sup> list), the movement of Gianfranco Fini did not nevertheless become marginal again. The recognition of the fundamental principles of democracy, the official rejection of the 1938 racial laws, of anti-Semitism and racism (reasserted again at the 1998 Verona congress), as well as the program of the movement in line with those of moderate European right-wing parties (which showed their

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<sup>25</sup> Anti-fascism is redefined by Gianfranco Fini as “a moment which is historically essential to the return of democratic values in Italy” (declaration to *Il Secolo d’Italia*, May 24<sup>th</sup>, 1994).

<sup>26</sup> This result is explained by the competition with the Lega Nord, by the presence of the Emma Bonino list, as well as by the relative failure of the AN’s opening strategy and of their alliance with centrist Mario Segni.

rejection of the state-control, nationalist and centralist tradition of the neo-fascist project), point at their full, complete integration into the Italian political system.

The recent evolution of the ex neo-fascist movement confirms the validity of the theoretical hypotheses previously expressed. It was only by giving up its original identity, and helped by a particularly favorable context, that the AN succeeded in overcoming the constituent dilemma in the history of the MSI. This renunciation provoked Pino Rauti's departure and the subsequent creation of the Movimento Sociale Fiamma-Tricolore (MSFT). However, the evolution of the MSI constituted a real precedent in the contemporary political history of extreme right parties.

It is difficult, within the problematic framework of this study, not to interpret the scission of the Front National in December 1998/January 1999 as the proof of their incapacity to overcome this same political alternative between “tradition vs. modernity, historic legitimacy vs. program aggiornamento” (Osmond, 1999 : 118). To fully confirm this interpretation, it is necessary to study the strategic evolution of the Front National from the beginning of the 1980s onward.

While it was still a very small organization when the Left came to power in 1981, the Front National obtained their first “historic” results two years later at two municipal by-elections in Dreux (16,7%) and Aulnay-sous-Bois (9,3%). At the 1984 European elections, the FN vote increased dramatically (11,2%), a progression confirmed at local level by the results of the 1985 cantonal elections (8,8%) (Perrineau, 1996 : 43-47). The emergence of the FN on the French political scene was the object of numerous analyses (Mayer and Perrineau, 1996 : 395-409). Some of them may not have enough insisted on the fact that this emergence *also* corresponded to a very clearcut change in the image, the style as well as the speech of the party. This change can be seen in the FN's graphic propaganda. In 1984, a new kind of posters appeared whose intentions were clearly to present the FN and Le Pen as credible, respectable party and politician. These posters were a real turning point in the graphical conception of FN posters and in the iconographic style of the FN, which has been characterized by vigorous, radical images and words during the 1970s (Dézé, 1995). At the same time, the production of posters targeting militants is not interrupted. The appearance of this double discourse – a radical one targeting hardpit militants, and a softer for the whole electorate – shows the constraints that emerged from the party's more active participation in political competition (Birenbaum, 1985) as well as the necessity, for the FN, to adapt themselves to the system without giving up their political identity. The problematic management of this double discourse was partly resolved by the use of strategic euphemisms, among which the notion of “national preference” (the equivalent of the “French First!” slogan). In this respect, it is necessary to underline that the use of this notion in the frontist speech (from

1985 onward) did not only show the need, for the FN, to adapt the foundations of a racist, xenophobic ideology to the standards of the political expression of the time. By playing on the implicit, this notion also contained the radical aspirations of the militants and turned an exclusive conception of racism into an acceptable preferential one (Taguieff, 1986 ; 1988).

The political history of the FN from that moment onwards can perfectly be read in the light of the alternation between and/or the concomitance of strategic phases of adaptation (shown by the creation of the label “Rassemblement national” for the 1986 parliamentary election so as to attract some members of the moderate right seduced by the potential political growth of the extreme right party ; particularly active parliamentary participation between 1986 and 1988 (Maisonneuve : 1991) ; the “presidentialisation” of Le Pen’s image ; the creation by Bruno Mégret of a set of “new instruments” – a general delegation, a scientific council (Dézé : 2000), an Institute of National Formation for intermediate executives, a propaganda workshop, etc. - in order to implement the strategy of “conquête du pouvoir” (“power conquest”<sup>27</sup>) ; punctual, local coalitions with the moderate right; the emergence of new themes in FN platforms, such as ecology, agriculture or social questions, etc.) ; of differentiation (recurring attacks on the political class and the “Gang of the Four”; competitive quest for legitimacy by strategically attacking in turns the right and the left (Taguieff, 1990 : 93) ; and of distinction (expressed through phrases about gas chambers qualified as “detail points ” of the Second World war in 1987 ; in 1988 by the play on word “Durafour – crématoire” (*Duraoven crematorium*) ; in 1996, through comments on the “inequality between races” ; and, from the beginning of the 1990s onward, through radicalization of the treatment of the immigration theme, as well as on insecurity and unemployment ; the celebration of the twentieth anniversary of François Duprat's death, etc.)<sup>28</sup>.

As in the case of the MSI, these opposition strategies match up an opposition between wings : on the one hand, the general delegation of the movement run by Bruno Mégret, a supporter of an electioneering strategy based on alliance with fringe members of the moderate right (a project supported by Jean-Yves Le Gallou, Yvan Blot and Pierre Vial *inter alia*) ; on the other hand the Lepenist wing, gathered around the secretary-general Bruno Gollnisch and regrouping, among others, Jean-Claude Martinez, Dominique Chaboche, Samuel Maréchal, Marie-France Stirbois, Roger Holeindre). This aggravated conflict between these two wings explains the FN’s scission (Ivaldi, 1999b), an event that needs to be briefly discussed here.

Further to the 1989 municipal elections (for which the FN managed to make around thirty alliances with the moderate right), the leaders of the RPR and the UDF agreed on a policy of ostracism towards the FN which, added to the competition at work in the political space of

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<sup>27</sup> It is one of the slogans of the FN Nice Congress in March 1990.

<sup>28</sup> For an analysis of these strategies : Guy Birenbaum (1985 ; 1987 ; 1992) ; Colette Ysmal (1999 : 17-32).

nationalism, condemned the Lepenist movement “ to marginality by considerably reducing their possibilities of tactical choices” (Ivaldi, 1998 : 11 ; Perrineau, 1993). The FN has then no other option than “amplify their difference and their capacity to embody an alternative by means of great change” (*Le Monde*, February 13 1996, quoted in Ivaldi, 1998 : 11). It is then by applying a strategy of differentiated adaptation (“ni droite, ni gauche”, *neither right, nor left*<sup>29</sup>) that the party aspired to establish themselves within the political system. However, the penetration of their own theses both in public opinion and in the political space (Pasqua laws on immigration, Sauvaigo report on clandestine immigration, Debré bill) forced them to reassert their monopoly on the political representation and treatment of the immigration, insecurity, and unemployment themes. Forced to accentuate their distinction, the FN abandoned the discursive register of differential neo-racism to make a vivid comeback to “the field of ideological racism” (Ivaldi, 1998 : 13) – a phenomenon expressed through the elaboration of the 50 propositions of the FN on immigration or through the Jean-Marie Le Pen’s comments on “the inequality between races” (*inter alia*). This strategy proved successful as the party collected 15,3% of votes at the 1995 presidential election. Let us note that this phase also corresponded to the rise in power, within the movement, of the advocates of ideological orthodoxy, while fights between the two different wings intensified with Jean-Marie Le Pen’s arbitration in the background, warning “ those [implicitly referring to the general delegation] that dream about an union of the rights” (*Le Monde*, February 22<sup>th</sup> , 1997).

As far as this fight is concerned, 1997 was a real turning point. The Megretist conquest of the municipality of Vitrolles enabled the delegate general to strengthen his position within the leaders of the party. Besides, the defeat of the moderate right at the 1997 parliamentary elections, as well as the isolation of the FN in Parliament (only one deputy, Jean-Marie Le Chevallier) lent credit to the electioneering project of the delegate general. An explicit policy, led by the FN delegate, of opening to disappointed right wing electors was a sign of this new strategic reversal. This reversal was finally confirmed during the national convention of the party in January 1998. It worried the orthodox who decided, as local elections were getting close, to regroup within a “pre-government” of the FN of which Megretists were almost totally absent.

The results of the March 1998 elections (15,1%), as well as local alliances made with the right on the basis of a “minimum common program” (*Le Monde*, March 18, 1998) confirmed the Megretist strategy. In spite of profound contextual difference between the two countries, the hypothesis of an “Italian-style” evolution emerged, helped by the emergence, at the right of the political scene,

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<sup>29</sup> This strategy has been inspired by Samuel Maréchal (1996), the leader of the Front National de la Jeunesse.

of a political space favoring a bringing together of a fringe of the classic right and the FN<sup>30</sup>. The creation of “The Right”, the party of Charles Millon meant to be an assembling of “all temperaments and of all wings of the right, from nationals to Europeans, from Girondins to Jacobins, from traditionalists to reformists” (*Liberation*, April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1998), first seemed to satisfy Megret’s expectations. In an interview given to the newspaper *Le Monde* (April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1998), he asserted that “there is space for a rightwing party, different from the FN, but ready to make alliances with him. This coalition can quite quickly come to power”.

The recent evolution of the FN, as well as the results of Megret’s Mouvement National at the 1999 European election (3,3% of votes), have made this perspective unlikely for the moment. Aggravated internal tensions between the two wings of the movement, mirrored by the confrontation between Jean-Marie Le Pen and Bruno Mégret, led the FN to a split which undoubtedly came from the “clash between two ambitions”, as well as the “merciless confrontation of two strategies [...]. On one side : Le Pen and his own people, obsessed by the conservation of the ideological ‘purity’ of the movement and rejecting the slightest compromise with the parties of ‘the establishment’ ; on the other side : Mégret and his clan, concerned with ‘the conquest of responsibilities’, and convinced that they will need to make alliances in order to succeed” (*Liberation*, December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1998). However, since they could not afford doing without the support of at least a part of the Frontist electorate (a fact which explained, for example, the presence of Jean-Marie Le Pen’s daughter on the list of the MN), the Mouvement National, in the months before the European election, failed to implement fully this strategy of integration. This failure led them to come back to an orthodox definition of the doctrine. Over the same period, Jean-Marie Le Pen’s Front National, anxious to convey a respectable image (a sign of which, for instance, being the presence of the grandson of Charles De Gaulle on the European list of the FN or the reconstruction of the Scientific Council in spite of the departure of neo-rightists), did not explicitly try to distinguish themselves (5,7% of votes at European elections). Nevertheless, the split of the FN into two different organizations rather confirms the validity of the theoretical “schema” previously described. Therefore, at present, the institutional strategy of the French extreme right appears to be still doomed to remain “necessarily partial and unfinished”, as it was again shown by the results of both parties in the first round of the March 2001 municipal elections (2,1% for the FN, and 1,7% for the MNR)<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> According to Bruno Mégret, “it is clear that one cannot come to power on one’s own and that there is no possibility to make alliances with RPR Gaullists and UDF Giscardists as they presently are”. Nonetheless, “one of possible ways to come to power is an alliance with renovated RPR and UDF, as it happened in Italy” (declarations to the Italian Newspaper *Il Borghese*, quoted by *Libération*, April 13<sup>th</sup>, 1998. At the same time, the editorialist of *Il Secolo d’Italia*, the official newspaper of the AN-MSI, recognized, after the 1998 regional elections, that “post-Le Penism [had] begun [...] Within the FN, the most noisy, vulgar, demagogic and unacceptable positions are doomed to be put aside” (quoted by *Libération*, December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1998).

<sup>31</sup> Sources : [http://www.interieur.gouv.fr/elections/plus\\_3500.pdf](http://www.interieur.gouv.fr/elections/plus_3500.pdf)

Now, what is the situation of the FPÖ ? If we rely on theoretical logics, the November 1986 elections should have brought the party, in the hands of nationalists, back to marginality. Contrary to this reasoning, Haider's party achieved their first electoral success (9,7% of votes, 18 seats). From these elections onward, the growing evolution of the FPÖ has presented some specificities in regard to our question. Indeed, this evolution tends to refute the idea according to which unambiguous implementation of a strategy of distinction loyal to doctrinal orthodoxy is synonym of failure. Actually, one of the reasons for the growing electoral success of the FPÖ – who won 26,9% of votes at the 1999 National Council elections and arrived in power in February 2000 together with the ÖVP – is their rigorous, almost untouched implementation of a strategy of “opposition at all costs” (Moreau, 1998 : 65). How has the FPÖ managed to escape the theoretical logics of the alternative and maintain such a strategy ?

First of all, it stemmed from the absence of conflict between the party's different wings (conflicts which were so crucial in the evolutions of the FN and the MSI), an absence which can be explained by repeated purges at all levels of the party which began when Haider became its leader. As Patrick Moreau underlined, “criticism made by some rare opponents against the logics of ‘opposition at all costs’ of the FPÖ are forestalled by the apparently unlimited extension of electoral potential. These opponents either resigned or were evicted and were replaced by a sectarian elite (essentially young academics), worshippers of Haider as a political animal, but also by numerous careerists, tempted by available posts in parliaments and municipalities” (Moreau, 1998 : 65). The resignation of the liberal wing of the party in 1993 left the FPÖ for good in the hands of the nationalist wing led by the current governor of Carinthie.

Concretely, this opposition strategy consisted of radical oral interventions, notably borrowing explicit references to nazism – for instance the statements of the FPÖ's president about the “normal policy of employment led under the III<sup>th</sup> Reich”, his presence during a meeting of former Waffen SS in Krumpendorf in 1996, his attacks against the verdict of the Nuremberg trials, as well as his comments on nazi concentration camps called “penal camps”. They also capitalized upon xenophobia and preferentialist racism. In 1992, the FPÖ set up a twelve points petition entitled “Austria first”, asking for the introduction of a constitutional amendment on immigration, demanding that the possession of a work permit and an insurance certificate for foreigners be made compulsory, and that the proportion of pupils whose mother tongue is not German be strictly limited to 30%<sup>32</sup>. While relentlessly pursuing this “strategy of opposition”, the FPÖ tried to widen the base of their electorate. To do so, from 1992 onward, the party has opted

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<sup>32</sup> Sources : <http://www.col.fr/cera/texte/Autriche/html>.

for more respectable positions. The party have supported the reinforcement of the anti-nazi legislation, have toned down their national-German chauvinism, and condemned the profanations of cemeteries by neo-nazi groups. The most notable change occurred when the party suddenly and very pragmatically gave up their anti-Catholics positions. Elaborated by Andreas Mölzer (the theorist of the new Austrian right), this strategy, which turned the FPÖ into a Christian, pro-Catholic party, is best explained by their desire to seduce the ÖVP electorate, a desire which appears to have borne fruits at the last elections in October 1999.

In spite of this pragmatic reversal, the FPÖ has maintained a strategy of both opposition and distinction, a strategy that was thought to [remain] “the best stabilizer of the coalition (ÖVP-SPÖ) [then] in power” (Moreau, 1998 : 82). Recent events have obviously shown the opposite. This can be explained by several factors – first of all, by the emergence of a particularly favourable context for the FPÖ (erosion of traditional social classes, fear of unemployment, crisis of political representation, corruption, Eastern immigration). Then, the capacity of Jörg Haider, whose charisma and political intelligence cannot be questioned, to exploit some themes and to give them a particular echo (“ecological menace”, expansion of “international mafia”, decline of national language, “mass” and “uncontrolled” arrival of foreigners) in order to seduce an increasing number of voters. The electoral breakthrough of the FPÖ can also be explained by the fact that the question of the Austrian involvement in the nazi regime is only partly settled and that a “casual attitude towards history has continued to prevail within the Austrian society” (Pasteur, 2000: 3 ; Knight, 2000). Finally, it is obvious that the incapacity of the SPÖ and of the ÖVP to find common ground in order to form a new governmental coalition considerably facilitated the entry of the FPÖ into government. More specifically, if the Haider’s party was able to come to power while maintaining their strategic orientations and without being faced with the problem of the alternative, it is because of the particular configuration of the Austrian political system, which, for fifteen years, had been dominated by two major formations occupying, thanks to the *Proporz* system, all political, administrative and economic posts. This domination eventually froze the system and led to the rejection by the Austrians of these two formations. Because of this specific context, and because of their almost permanent strategy of opposition to the system, the FPÖ gradually established itself as the only formation offering a real alternative as well as a political outlet for the protest claims of the Austrian electorate. Therefore it is really by rigorously implementing strategic distinction that the FPÖ managed to join the political game and integrate the system. However, recently involved in a case of stealing confidential files belonging to the police, the FPÖ has had to face chain resignations from their governing Ministers (Social Affairs,

Justice, Transport). As political analyst Emmerich Talos rightly remarked, “the extreme right has been successful in the opposition and is now unsuccessful as a governing party”<sup>33</sup>.

At a first glance, the Vlaams Blok’s recent evolution confirms the validity of the “schema” of the alternative. It is only at the end of a “Rejuvenation Operation” (Mudde, 2000 : 88 ; Delwit, De Waele and Rea, 1998 : 74) initiated by Filip Dewinter, that the VB succeeded in getting out of political marginality to which it seemed more or less condemned at the beginning of the 1980s. As Marc Spruyt underlines (1997 : 206), “the program of the party is refreshed : political marketing is introduced ; the vocabulary of the old right is replaced by modern rightwing language ; young intellectuals are bringing a new style and above all things respectability is sought”. Filip Dewinter, in his own way, confirmed this new trend : “Without changing anything to our program, we have tried hard to modify the image of the party, the style of our campaigns, our posters and our speeches. It was necessary to prove wrong the people who lwrongly accuse us of being racists, fascists and neo-nazis. Just look at our meetings : women and children have replaced militants with boxing gloves !” (*Le Monde*, October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2000).

This new political “modernity”, together with an effort of party structuration and distancing themselves from the various movements supporting the party, led the VB to experience electoral takeoff. In the 1987 parliamentary elections, the party doubled the numbers of their seats (3%). At the 1988 municipal elections, it won 10 seats in the city of Antwerp (17,7%). As Marc Swyngedouw observed (2000 : 135), these elections marked the beginning of a “second phase” characterised by the extension of the VB’s “field of action”, not only in Antwerp’s disadvantaged districts but also in the city’s most affluent districts, usually more inclined to vote for the liberal party (VPP). Doubtless, this extension can be attributed (at least partially) to the modernised image of the party. But it is necessary to keep in mind that the 1987-1988 period corresponds to the moment when Filip Dewinter, among others, put the immigration theme forward (the rate of immigrants and the results of the VB being closely related, even though this is not always true). As in the case of the FN, the political “modernity” of the VB is coupled with authoritarian positions but also with “culturally racist” ones (*Eigen volk eerst ! Our own people first !*), centering around the defence of “the principle of fundamental and natural inequality between communities” which implies “ethnic hierarchy” (Swyngedouw, 1998 : 191). However, this emphasis caused tensions between the “Lepenist” wing (Dewinter), accused of giving up the Flemish issue, and the Flemish nationalist wing, a few members of which decided to leave the party (Mudde, 2000 : 89).

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<sup>33</sup> Declaration to the AFP, November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2000. Sources : <http://fr.news.yahoo.com/001106/1/q2fn.html>

These tensions did not slow down the progress of the Vlaams Blok in Antwerp or in the Dutch electoral college. At the 1989 European election, the VB won 6,6% of votes. But the real “breakthrough”<sup>34</sup> was achieved at the 1991 parliamentary elections, when the VB won over 10% of votes. The results of the 1994 municipal elections finally sealed the political implantation of the party (28% in Antwerp, 10,3% in Flanders). The Vlaams Blok’s evolution during this period evokes that of the Front National. Indeed, it is principally on preferential racism and on the rejection of immigrants that the VB built their electoral success, much more than on the stigmatisation of the political class or on Flemish independence (De Witte and Scheepers, 1998 : 106-107). The radical propositions on immigration advocated by the VB (“the 70 point program”, 1992) were widely inspired by the “50 point program” of the FN. Besides, studies led on both sides of the French-Belgian border showed that only a minority of FN and VB voters really entirely adhered to the respective programs of the two parties and were explicitly committed to extreme right positions (De Witte, Billiet and Scheepers, 1994, quoted by De Witte and Scheepers, 1998 : 106 ; Mayer, 1999). These results can notably be explained by the fact that the FN, like the VB, strategically denied belonging to the extreme right, while granting greater importance to the populist, ethnocentric, and protest dimension of their program (Swyngedouw, 1998 : 202). Cas Mudde (2000 : 112) underlined that, “under the influence of the ‘Dewinter group’, the party’s literature presented a more populist image. Since 1990, the VB no longer present itself as the voice of a specific group, but as the *vox populi*, caught aptly in the slogans ‘We say what you think’ and ‘The VB : that is you’”. The same idea of protecting “small people” against “the powerful” is also central in FN propaganda, which uses the same slogans (“Le Pen, the People”, “The Front National, it is you”) and still recommends, as the VB does, using referendum as an instrument of direct democracy.

The evolutions of the FN and the VB are also similar in regard to the political isolation both parties experienced – from 1990 to 1998 for the FN because of the “Republican Front” - or still experience - from 1992 onward for the VB, because of the “sanitary cordon” by which parties promised not to make political alliances with the Flemish extreme right party (Maddens and Fiers, 1998 : 257-59). It is known that in both cases, this ostracism against extreme right formations did not in the least slow down the electoral growth of the two parties (the VB won 12,2% of votes in Flanders at the 1995 parliamentary elections, 9,2% at the 1999 European election, and 33% in Antwerp at the October 2000 municipal elections). However, it played an important role in the scission of the Front National. For the Vlaams Blok, which no longer is a circumventable political force in the Belgian political system, accessing power is a problematic issue. From 1996 onward, the VB appears to have become more respectable and, even though

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<sup>34</sup> Sources : <http://www.vlaams-blok.be/watzijnwe/brochure/engelsfrans/brochurefrans.htm>

the “sanitary cordon” has been maintained, to have been increasingly considered “a normal political partner”. Evidence of this are Gerolf Annemans’s contribution to the activities of the Dutroux Inquiry parliamentary Commission created in 1996, the rallying of the VB to the parliamentary consensus on the first final report of the Commission, as well as the VB’s participation in the Flemish Parliament debates over new political culture (Maddens and Fiers, 1998 : 261). Nevertheless, the fact remains that while transforming into a respectable party, the VB have also dreaded to be perceived as too “convenable”, which could have weakened their - electorally very advantageous – image of an anti-system party (Maddens and Fiers, 1998 : 261-262). Torn between the possibility of coming to power, and that of maintaining their identity, an identity marked by strong anti-immigrant resentment, the VB, contrary to the FN, seems to have reached a sort of balance, thanks to the existence of the triumvirate currently leading the party, among others causes. Franck Vanhecke, the successor of Karel Dillen, became president of the party in 1996. He represents a sort of neutral point between Filip Dewinter, the representative of the hard anti-immigrants and anti-system members of the VB, and Gerolf Annemans, the representative of the nationalist wing in favour of making the party more respectable. This triple stabilising orientation has allowed the Vlaams Blok to conduct differentiated strategies and to target different electoral clienteles - on the one hand, traditionalist Catholics, by laying the emphasis on the fight against abortion and against “the permissive society and sexual dissoluteness” (a strategic pole run by Alexandra Colen) ; on the other hand, the labour movement, by putting forward a social program associating classic socialist claims (increasing pensions and fighting against unemployment) with Flemish ultra-nationalist and ethnocentric positions (De Witte and Scheepers, 1998 : 112). At the moment, this balance appears to be ensured, although the emphasis laid on some topics is not unanimously approved within the party and although tension is emerging. Hans De Witte and Peer Scheepers (1998 : 113) wrote that when Alexandra Colen expressed her intention to introduce a private bill aiming at banning advertisements featuring naked women, Filip Dewinter called her “a churchy puritan”. In reply to which Colen accused Dewinter of being a “fascist dictator”. This incident, while underlining the existence of some internal tensions, ended with a compromise between the two parts.

## **Conclusion**

The ambition of this study was not to elaborate a predictive, normative model of the evolution of extreme right formations but to try to better understand the specificity of the relationship that these formations have with the political system. In this perspective, I tried to demonstrate that

this relationship is based on a triple strategic dimension - adaptation to the system, distinction from the system, differentiation within the system - and that, from a theoretical as well as an empirical point of view, the issue of this relationship implied making conflicting choices for the studied parties. Only the Front National, although it seemed to be the leading movement in the extreme right political scene of the 1990s, has failed to overcome the alternative. While the post-fascist transformation of the MSI into the Alleanza nazionale created a precedent in the political scene of the European extreme right, the FPÖ was able to reap the rewards of their almost continuous strategy of distinction, thereby proving that such a strategy, provided that it takes place in a particular context (political system blocked by the political domination of two major formations, partial settlement of the question of the relationship to the Nazi past...), is not necessarily synonym with political marginality. Finally, the instance of the VB demonstrates that the solution of strategic compromise and internal balance can be successfully experimented within a specific institutional framework. It would be particularly interesting, in order to clarify even more the modalities of this specificity, to make a comparative analysis of the relationship of other formations with the system. In this respect, we could learn a great deal from a comparison with communist parties. The fact nonetheless remains that, in the precise case of extreme right formations, the conflict on which the question of the relationship with the system rests is not only ideological. It is also moral. Doubtless, this constitutes a full specificity of extreme right parties.

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