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'The strength of a united left-wing camp'

Thomas Manz in Paris on why France's 'green wave' represents a triumph of left-wing unity — and not just the Greens

Read this interview in German.

In last Sunday's local elections in France, the left-wing camp achieved important victories – among others in major French cities such as Paris, Lyon, Strasbourg, Lille and even Marseille, a city that has been governed by the conservatives for 25 years. The French and international media are talking about a "green wave". But doesn't the election rather show the strength of a united left?

It is without question justified to speak of a "green wave". But "green wave" must not be misunderstood as the sole triumph of the French Greens. Julien Bayou, the Secretary-General of the Green party EELV, put it correctly: "First and foremost it's about ecology, not the Greens".

The result of the local elections is certainly, first and foremost, the triumph of those political forces that are seeking an ecological and solidarity-based renewal of the French economic and social model. This agenda of socio-environmental renewal is being driven by a broad alliance on the left, based above all on a renewed Socialist Party and the Greens, which have become an independent and serious political alternative.

The "social-ecological bloc" of a renewed left can therefore not be reduced to one political force as the winner of these local elections. And its spectacular individual successes have happened where – as in Marseille for example – the old party-political profiling in the left-wing camp were subordinated to the common goal of an ecological and solidarity-based reorientation of local politics.

"Green Wave" therefore means that the concern for a socio-ecological transformation has become broadly anchored in society. This has

naturally also led to an impressive strengthening of the Greens as a political force. Whereas the Greens previously governed only one city with over 100,000 inhabitants, Grenoble, they will now have mayors in cities such as Marseille, Lyon, Strasbourg and Bordeaux. But it's precisely these dazzling victories that the Greens have not achieved on their own, but in alliance with other parties in the "social-ecological bloc". It's therefore correct to say that the election results, while surely speaking to the strength of the Greens, reflect above all the strength of a united left-wing camp.

The Socialists traditionally assume the hegemonic position on the left. Why were they open to build alliances in the local elections?

The Socialists had explicitly renounced their traditional hegemonic position in the left-wing camp and were prepared to line up behind Green candidates or other left-wing forces. Socialist Party Chairman Olivier Faure immediately reminded us that the French left always loses when it's divided, but that it can win when it builds alliances.

If one can speak of the triumph of a "green wave", then this certainly includes a renewed Socialist Party. After the humiliating results in the presidential and European elections, the Socialist Party has achieved a result that breathes new life into it and underpins its status as a major political force. Not only did it defend Paris, but it also achieved victory in a whole series of other important cities.

It's certainly no coincidence, however, that the party has been able to assert itself most impressively in those cities where candidates entered the race with a clear social-ecological profile – like Anne Hidalgo in Paris, but also Johanna Rolland in Nantes or Nathalie Appéré in Rennes. But even where Socialist bastions such as Lille or Dijon were threatened by strong Green challengers, party veterans such as Martine Aubry and François Rebsamen were able to hold on to their office.

What could this mean for the 2022 presidential elections – is it realistic that the left-wing camp could unite behind one candidate?

Considering the presidential elections, the first step is to consolidate the social-ecological bloc that was successful in these local elections. In this respect, we can hope that the sense of achievement in the left camp will promote the willingness to keep efforts to achieve hegemony in check. As such, it depends not least on whether Mélenchon's *La France Insoumise* can be integrated into the social-ecological bloc. But it should be clear to all left-wing forces that another edition of the Macron-Le Pen duel in the coming presidential elections can only be avoided with a unity candidate.

President Emmanuel Macron had to accept a heavy defeat in the local elections. Only his Prime Minister Édouard Philippe was re-elected in the northern French port city of Le Havre. What does this say about Macron's chances of winning the 2022 presidential elections?

If the "social-ecological bloc" stands out as the clear winner of the elections, Macrons *En Marche* is the clear loser. *En Marche* has not only failed to establish itself as a new political force in the country, but has also suffered a series of bitter defeats in symbolically important cities: for example in Paris, where former Health Minister Agnes Buzyn only came in third place and was not even elected as a city councillor. That's also true for Lyon, which is considered a Macronist stronghold, and in Bordeaux, where *En Marche* supported the candidates of the conservative Republicans in the second round of voting.

The reasons for this "political turnaround", as the Greens' Jannick Jadot summarised the election results, lie in a very deep disappointment about the lack of ecological and social aspects in Emmanuel Macron's politics. While this disappointment had previously been expressed in social protests and the mobilisation of climate activists, it has recently cost *En Marche* the absolute majority in the National Assembly. The Covid-19 pandemic has also increased dissatisfaction with government policy. Moreover, the experience of the pandemic, which caused weeks of economic and social stagnation, has led many French people to question our consumer-oriented lifestyle. "Ecological" issues have certainly received a considerable boost between the first and second rounds of voting.

Macron will also struggle with the expected government reshuffle. Many considered it likely that he would replace Prime Minister Édouard Philippe. Now, he will find it difficult to part with Philippe and make a significant turn to the left. Even with the loss of his own majority in the National Assembly, he is more than ever dependent on allies in the moderate right. Moreover, in the Covid-19 crisis he has made a strong effort to establish a national-patriotic discourse, emphasising national independence and sovereignty. It remains to be seen whether this will be detrimental in creating a contrasting profile with regards to Le Pen.

How did Marine Le Pen's *Rassemblement National* perform, which made headlines with Louis Aliot's victory in Perpignan? And what are Le Pen's prospects for the presidential elections?

Just before Sunday's ballot, a poll was published once again confirming that there would be another clash between Macron and Le Pen in the second round of the 2022 presidential elections; but this

time with a smaller lead for Macron than in 2017.

The *Rassemblement National* itself has so far only been able to benefit from Macron's weakness to a limited extent. The fact that, in Perpignan, they have once again been able to win a city with over 100,000 inhabitants cannot hide an otherwise unsatisfactory election result. In any case, we can certainly not speak of a territorial expansion of the right-wing populists' base. But as long as there is no serious candidacy on the left for the presidential elections, Marine Le Pen will stay in the race.

This interview was conducted by Daniel Kopp.



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