

## ZEMMOUR SYMBOLISES RISE OF EXTREME RIGHT-WING MEDIA

**Francis Ghilès**, Senior Associate Researcher, CIDOB



*The gadfly political commentator Éric Zemmour has come from nowhere last summer to become one of the most popular candidates in next April's presidential election. He attracts more media attention than the far-right leader Marine Le Pen and the conservative Valérie Pécresse. The fragmentation of left-wing forces has helped, as France continues to drift to the right. But a whole media operation is backing Zemmour's candidacy.*

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Éric Zemmour's rise owes a lot to the increasing clout of CNews, a TV channel backed by the arch-reactionary billionaire Vincent Bolloré. Critics liken CNews to Rupert Murdoch's Fox News in the US, which championed former president Donald Trump and right-wing causes.

CNews is owned by media group Vivendi, which Bolloré has bought from the Lagardère Group. It has trebled its audience share in four years to reach second place among the country's four 24-hour news channels, which include LCI, Franceinfo and BFM-TV which leads the pack. Its business model is built on a low-cost news operation with raucous debates on topics from violent crime to the glorious epoch of Napoleon. CNews is not as influential as Fox in the US nor is Zemmour as popular as Trump, but rival politicians and many ordinary Frenchmen are lamenting how the TV channel is setting the terms of the national debate and deepening rifts in an already divided society.

CNews is rising in a period many growing economic disparities and fear of the *Other* following radical Islamic terrorist acts have fuelled doubts about what it means to be French and the country's relative decline in world affairs which it shares with its Western allies. The country's media are often staid whiles decades-old regulations have failed to keep up with the high-speed news cycle and the pervasive influence of social media. That said, the regulator the Conseil supérieur de l'audiovisuel (CSA) requires channels to showcase a range of opinions and impartially doles out time to politicians especially during campaigns. Such broadcast rules do not exist in the US. Other conservative mouthpieces such as the TV channel TF1 and the daily Le Figaro which belong to the Bouygues Group do not share the views of Zemmour as Martin Bouygues interests are not aligned

with those of Vincent Bolloré. Through his control of Vivendi, Bolloré has been handed Europe1 radio, Le Journal du Dimanche (JDD) newspaper, and celebrity magazine Paris Match which increased his capacity to shape French public opinion. Earlier this autumn, Bolloré was quick to sack the editor of Paris Match and the JDD, Hervé Gattegno, and replace him with two men, Patrick Mahé and Jerome Bellay who share a long history of association with extreme right wing violent groups such as Occident. This prompted former president Francois Hollande to comment that “Trump had moved from tv reality shows to the White House, but he was the Republican Party candidate whereas Zemmour is the candidate of a tv media group”.

The unlikely alliance between a deeply conservative Breton catholic, who has built his fortune up to now in former French West African colonies and a Jew whose family hails from Algeria is unusual to say the least. It is deeply upsetting to many mainstream French people, including many conservatives, who feel insulted when Zemmour argues that Marshal Petain, who led France during the German occupation (1940-1945) “protected” French Jews and slowed their deportation to concentration camps in Germany. Zemmour hates the Fifth Republic established in 1959 by De Gaulle, who saved the honour of France by standing up to Petain. He loathes the European Union, modern feminism and gay rights. His views are aligned with those of the right-wing writer Charles Maurras and like him they want to revisit an ideal “pure” patriarchal France which never existed. His credo is the fight against Islam. Immigrants in his view are swamping France and Europe. He buys into the ‘great replacement theory’ which suggests that western societies will find their white populations overwhelmed by mass Muslim immigration.

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The US historian Robert Paxton, whose book “La France de Vichy” (1973) revealed how deep the collaboration between the French and German states was during the Second World War does not mince his words about Zemmour. The fear of Jews so common in right wing circles in France in the 1930s has been replaced by fear of Muslims. Both are irrational but that a Jew should ally with a reactionary catholic to promote such views is one of the paradoxes of French politics today. Zemmour likes to pass himself off as an intellectual, a historian his real skill lies in manipulating and falsifying history. French Jews find his outbursts abhorrent.

Others are surprised by the extent to which traditional elites accommodate a man who never ceases to insult De Gaulle who is a towering figure of French modern history. Zemmour was recently asked to address the Club de l’Union Interalliée, the holy of holies of the French establishment. Many of the left as Jacques Julliard defend his “right” to lift taboos. Across the political spectrum many argue that all views should be aired so when Zemmour states that before being colonised by France in the 1830s, Algeria was a country of “misery and infested with malaria”, nobody stops to

ask whether such insults and fake history damage diplomatic relations with a major North African country. The former minister of Nicolas Sarkozy, Rama Yade, whose family hails from Senegal recently reminded us of a book published in 1927, "La Trahison des Clercs". Its author, the philosopher Julien Benda warned of the danger of so many intellectuals moving to the right and falling to the sirens of nationalism.

Vincent Bolloré does not appear to harbour any political ambitions for himself but seems to be using Éric Zemmour to prepare the ground for Marion Marechal Le Pen, the niece of the Front National leader Marine Le Pen, to run for president in 2027. The chances of Zemmour winning against the outgoing president Emmanuel Macron appear to be a long shot but his words pour endless venom into the public debate. "This country you cherish is in the process of disappearing... / ...immigration is not the source of all our problems, but it worsens them all". A sad comment of the country which gave the world the Declaration of the Rights of Man in 1789. If one compares the campaign for the presidential elections in France with the recent general elections in Germany, the latter appears to be a more mature democracy than the country denouncing "Islamism-leftism".