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THE COMMUNIST PARTY IN THE FRENCH POLITICAL PARTY SYSTEM

The consolidation of the French political party system after 1958, that is in the period of the French V Republic, was essentially accomplished in the framework of a two-bloc ideological-programmatic, electoral and governmental configuration premised on the division between the left and the right. In this respect, the most important role was played by institutional factors that were related to France's semi-presidential political system and especially to the duality of the executive power and the political leadership of its President who is elected out of candidates supported by political parties. The French President exercises a big indirect impact on competition between the parties and influences its political effects. The presidential majority that has raised the given President to power, that is the left or the right, and especially his/her own party that then earns the status of a presidential party, is the main instrument of this influence. The sequence of presidential and parliamentary elections to the first chamber, since 2002 directly following one another, together with the shortening of the presidential term from 7 to 5 years and its harmonisation with the National Assembly's term, even more strengthened the impact of presidentialism on the two-block shape of the party system (Godlewski 2010: 339–350).

Normative issues should also be highlighted out of multiple factors conditioning the two-bloc party system. Those are most of all linked to the majoritarian electoral system that regulates politically most important elections for the position of the President of the Republic and those for the National Assembly. However, the same proves also true in the case of municipal elections that during electoral campaigns revitalise the polarization between the left and the right at the local, departmental and regional levels. The results of elections produce direct consequences for political parties' finances – on the one hand because of

the juridisation of their funding from the state budget that is based on quantitative criteria which relate the level of funding to the number of votes and mandates gained, while on the other hand – owing to special contributions that are paid by the political party mandataries.

In the circumstances, since 1980s PCF has received ever more limited resources from the internal funding because of a considerable and rapid decrease in its membership and its evolution from a mass party to an electoral party. Nonetheless, this shift in the party's profile and an increased significance of its electoral function enabled it to gain access to power in the public sphere where a process of manifest cartelization has been intensifying since the 1990s (Andolfatto, Greffet 2008: 321–346). The erosion of social anchorage, especially among workers and peasants, has, however, resulted in PCF's quite chaotic politics „in all directions”, meaning a dispersal of its programmatic postulates, shedding its communist ideological orthodoxy and its structural-organizational reconstruction after the principle of democratic centralism was rejected. Despite those inconsistencies and controversies, PCF has remained one of the few communist parties in Europe exhibiting a political culture typical of the radically leftist political stream, that combines the revolutionary Marxist discourse with pragmatic actions in its electoral and governing functions.

This feature of PCF anchors it in the left as such and, more broadly, in the political party system that is distinguished by a particular diversity of political cultures both in the left and in the right. Those cultures make references to differently interpreted and received values and opinions concerning power, customs, family, individual agency in the public space, freedom and equality. This phenomenon was specially stressed by a political scientist, René Rémond: „the division between the right and the left has very deep roots [...], reflecting some basic differences in the sphere of culture and sensitivity that outlive temporary, occasional choices and are preserved in spite of changes taking place in politics and social transformations” (Rémond 2008: 147).

The belonging of PCF to the left has always been obvious and it still remains an axiom in its self-identification as well as in the opinions of its political competitors and scientific evaluations. By contrast, some doubts appeared as for defining the political status and functions of this communist party in the political party system in the period of PCF stalinization between 1947 and 1956 and the subsequent radicalization of its extra-parliamentary forms of political protest and revolutionary rhetorics portraying it as a „working class party” or, in brief: the Party –

which was thus to be different from the other parties. In its political strategy and propaganda inter-systemic and anti-systemic activities were mixed. That incoherence and dysfunctionality was indicated, among others, by Annie Kriegel's scientific research. Also a political scientist, Georges Lavau (Lavau 1969: 25–37), noted some aspects of this dysfunctionality vis-à-vis the system that lasted until the 1970s. He called the presumed representation and defense of the working class interests by PCF its tribunal function (*fonkcja trybuńska*), which was related – according to the communists – to the commodification of the proletariat, to its economic exploitation and marginalization, both cultural and political.

In political science analyses, the tribunal function is sometimes ascribed to those parties of the extreme left or extreme right that follow radical political strategies. As a result, because of their own will or because of political ostracism that is exhibited against them mainly by the mainstream groupings in the political party system or because of both of those reasons simultaneously, they become irrelevant in their electoral functions (i.e. their ability to make effective alliances) and their governing functions. This has been the case for example of the French nationalist, xenophobic party of radical protest – *Front national* (FN) and the trockist *Ligue communiste et révolutionnaire* (LCR) in the 1990s and during the present decade. Since the 1970s, PCF's pro-system orientation has not been questioned, especially in its electoral and governing functions.

Within the multi-stream left, PCF is usually distinguished in academic typologies and survey research as the communists, the communist party and sometimes as the communist left. Still, it is the Socialist Party (*Partie socialiste*, PS) that remains the strongest grouping that plays the role of a major attractor on the left as far as the electoral and governing functions. In the academic typologies, it is labelled as the socialist left, and only rarely as the social-democratic left in spite of the fact that it does constitute a part of international social democracy. In the elections for the National Assembly in 1978, for the first time during the period of the French V Republic, the socialist party came before the communist party. Since then its predominance has grown, reaching in the current decade the proportion close to 1 : 5 at PCF's disadvantage. The position of PS in the left has been strong enough to compare it to a similar role played in the right by the conservative *Union pour un mouvement populaire* (UMP). According to estimations and forecasts made on this basis by some political scientists, the two-block

system seems to evolve towards a multi-party system that includes two big (dominating) parties. Already PS and UMP perform their governing functions largely on their own albeit supported by a few „vassal parties” from the left and from the right, respectively. Those appear to have a limited choice between political autonomy coupled with systemic marginalization and recognition of the leadership of one of the big parties. The price for the latter choice involves limited relevance in governing and cartelization that ensures, nonetheless, their political survival (Dupoirier, Frongier 2009: 512).

This dilemma is easily seen in the political strategy of PCF. On the one hand, it decidedly favours electoral collaboration of the whole left, including PS, but on the other hand, it tries to diminish the indicated asymmetry of electoral and political influences. PS has continued to strive to exceed the threshold of 30 percent of the electorate’s support in parliamentary and presidential elections during the first round for several years since that would mean achieving the status of a big party and its consolidation at the level that denotes its reinforced potential in the capacity of a governing party.

The heterogenous groupings of the extreme left constitute the third component making up the French left, being also labelled the radical left and over the recent years - anti-liberal left. The extreme left continues to be internally diversified and divided, often conflicted, but also, in some agreed upon cases, able to act in unison or by means of activities undertaken in parallel by the different groupings, parties, social movements, milieus, civic initiatives, trade unions. It preserves the socially meaningful potential for a radical protest, civic opposition and extra-parliamentary activities of the parties of the left. The radical left includes, inter alia, the neo-trotskyist movement, Greens, alterglobalists, communitarians and others. The radical left is frequently joined by separatist fractions and activists conflicted with their mother party authorities both in the left and in the centre.

The initial distrust of PCF as regards the groupings of the radical left in the 1970s and 1980s resulted mainly from competition of that „left of the left” that was stimulated by its developmental dynamics in the period of an intense erosion of the electorate and membership of the Communist Party and the weakening of its linkages with social organizations and the trade union movement, especially with *Confédération générale du travail* (CGT) in the 1990s. In the second half of the 1990s and during the current decade, we have witnessed intensifying attempts to strengthen the new pole of the radical left that is com-

peting with PS and including PCF. They involved primarily efforts by LCR, Greens, alterglobalists, libertarian and feminist milieus, pacifist movements and PCF.

In the meantime, within the Communist Party further internal structural-organisational changes intensified that allowed it to a considerable degree to liken itself to other parties of the radical left through much loosened rigours of membership and a wide opening of its territorial structures on to their social environment. This included an involvement of PCF in defense of rights of discriminated social groups, such as illegal immigrants, the homeless, sexual minorities. An emphasis was put on various aspects of individual freedoms and fundamental rights, such as the right to housing, dignity, economic and political equality of the sexes and others – they have become a common platform allowing for the communists' rapprochement with the anti-liberal left (Reynaud 2007). Also, PCF moved closer to the radical left because of its strong support for pacifist movements and anti-war protests as well as its growing euro-scepticism. It is worth mentioning that in the referendum held in September of 1992 as many as 92 percent of PCF supporters voted against the Treaty of Maastricht, which constituted almost half of those voting „no”. Also, in the May referendum in 2005, PCF supporters consistently voted in accordance with the party's appeal urging them to reject the European Union's Constitutional Treaty (it was rejected by the majority, that is 54,7 percent of votes cast). The other parties of the radical left, and also to a considerable extent PS, took a similar stance. However, later the euro-realist attitude has become stronger in PCF (and in PS), which could facilitate their political co-operation.

The creation of an alliance of anti-liberal left based on programmatic and electoral grounds in mid-2000s turned out to be an ephemeral political project. Especially the initiative to embark on a programmatic debate and reach a political consensus resulting in a joint candidate of the whole left in the presidential election of 2007 failed completely (Zappi 2007). This has been a permanent problem of the left since the 1970s. During the current decade, the main difficulty that has blocked attempts at its overcoming has continued to be a contradiction between two goals: reaching unity by the left, which usually produces overrepresentation of its electoral support, and attracting support from new voters, especially the ones connected with the political centre. As much as some streams within PS opted for its opening up to the centre, PCF and the radical left opposed this strongly, treating the centre as part of the right. Similar opinions could also be found in scientific analyses,

for example those of the already quoted political scientist R. Rémond (Rémond 2008: 207). In the presidential elections, PCF and other parties and groupings of the left each offered their own candidate during the first round but before the second round appealed to their voters to lend support to the remaining candidate of the left, usually a PS politician. The 2002 election was different, in which exceptionally (since the 1970s) in the second round two candidates of the right competed against each other: gaullist Jacques Chirac and the FN leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen. The majority of the left urged their supporters then to vote negatively – to support Chirac not to let Le Pen succeed.

Table 1. The results of the Left in presidential elections (first round) and of PS candidates (second round) in 1988–2007 (%)

Year of election	PS Candidate	PCF Candidate	Other Candidates of the Left	Left in total	PS Candidate in II round
1988	34,1	6,8	7,9	48,8	54,2
1995	23,2	8,7	8,6	40,6	47,3
2002	16,2	3,4	25,3	44,9	–
2007	25,4	1,95	8,6	36,0	46,45

Source: based on official election results. See also: Amson 2002: 147–148.

The discipline of the voters of the left in the second round of presidential elections usually guaranteed the left better results. The PCF electorate has been the most disciplined: for instance in 2007 in 90 percent it lent its support to the socialist candidate Ségolène Royal. However, the dispersion and divisions within the left have weekend its ability to attract new voters. In 2002, it was difficult for Lionel Jospin of PS to reach the second round. PCF registered considerable electoral losses in presidential elections but its participation in the mobilization of the left electorate’s support for the joint candidate continues to be politically meaningful.

Table 2. Results of the Left in elections for General Assembly in 1997–2007 (%)

Year of election	PS	PCF	Greens	Other Left	Left in total
1997	23,8	9,9	6,8	6,8	47,3
2002	24,1	4,8	4,5	7,8	41,2
2007	25,0	4,4	3,25	6,7	39,35

Source: based on official statistics. See also: Bachelot 2008: 409.

In the parliamentary elections held between 1997 and 2007, the left did not manage any more to reach an all-national electoral agreement based on a common programmatic basis as was the case in 1973. In the elections in 1997, owing to a joint declaration of intent by PS and PCF, it succeeded in nearing to the conditions of 1978 as far as mutual support for candidates better positioned to succeed after the first round was concerned. Also, PS signed bilateral agreements in several tens of constituencies securing for itself already in the first round the support from candidates of small leftist groupings, mainly the radical left and Greens, and to a lesser degree from *Mouvement démocratique et citoyen* (MDC). This enabled PS and the left to win the election and guaranteed an opportunity to create government. Such agreements were also concluded between PS and PCF, but on a small scale, before elections in 2002, which secured the success for the communists in twelve cases. Their collaboration during the current decade, without signed political agreements, occurred in the second round as a norm, basing on so called republican discipline of the voters supporting the groupings and parties of the left who in turn supported jointly better positioned candidates.

The findings of the Eurobarometer survey carried out in 15 European states in early 2004 were reconfirmed in France: a prolonged lapse of time following politically most important elections (presidential, parliamentary) has a destructive impact on the popularity of the victorious political groupings. It breeds disappointment and distrust towards the governing parties and fosters outflows of the electorate towards the groupings of the opposition. For example, in local elections of 2003 and regional elections of 2004 (following the parliamentary and presidential ones that were victorious for the right and UMP in 2002), the left had big successes, especially PS. Also PCF made up for the earlier losses (Berton 2004: 654–655). Similarly, the municipal elections in 2009 proved victorious for the left as well as the regional ones in 2010 after it had suffered defeats in the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2007.

Although regroupings within the radical left in the mid-1990s did not result in the emergence of a new pole of the anti-liberal left, they did produce two effective electoral coalitions in the political party system. One of them was *Front de gauche* (FG) including PCF and secessionists from PS forming a new *Parti de gauche* (PG) as well as secessionists from the trockist stream acting in *Gauche unitaire* (GU). As of 2009, in the election to the European Parliament FG got 6,3 percent of

votes, while in the regional elections in 2010 – 6,1 percent, which turned out to be a significant success for PCF. What was even more surprising for the observers of the political party system was the electoral results of the coalition *Europe – Écologie* (EE), uniting the Greens and MDC. EE received in those elections 16,2 percent and 12,5 percent of votes respectively, becoming a PS competitor in attracting not only votes from the left but also from the centre.

The long-lasting (since 1970s) process of shrinking of the PCF's electorate has undoubtedly diminished its coalition relevance at the level of governing the state. However, some factors continued to preserve its relevance at the basic level. First, the electoral co-operation remains a permanent element of political strategies of the leftist groupings and parties including PCF. This delimits in turn the boundaries of potential governing coalitions in case the majority is won in the National Assembly, as for instance in 1997, when the governing majority was created inclusive of PS and its coalition partners: PCF, the Greens, MDC and radical leftists (Kuczyńska 2008: 225–242). This is also bred by strong ideologization of the left – clarity and compatibility of its political cultures restrict possibilities of transcending barriers of bipolarization typical of the French political party system in the direction towards the centre.

Secondly, PCF is in principle, next to PS, the only party of „long duration” in the left that has preserved, almost for the whole period of the V Republic, its parliamentary status in the form of a parliamentary group present at the National Assembly (NA), that is in this chamber where the parliamentary majority is formed. Thanks to this, the Communist Party has had a direct influence on the organization and proceedings of legislative work. In 1993– 2010, there were four such groups within NA, with the exception of the XI term of the chamber in 1997–2002 when there were five such parliamentary groups. It is also worth noting that over the last two decades PCF has managed to preserve its status of a parliamentary group owing to electoral and political support from PS (Godlewski 2009: 49–51).

Thirdly, the process of PCF's cartelization was conducive to the consolidation of its identity as a „party of power”, especially because its parliamentary representation acted autonomously of the statutory authorities of the party in the capacity of a decision-making centre that was able to exert some influence on decisions of the national party authorities, as well as owing to the stabilization and professionalization of decision-making centres at the level of central authorities of the party,

which was demonstrated by a big share of activists that had had governing, parliamentary or local/regional experiences. Nonetheless, the participation of PCF in Lionel Jospin's cabinet in 1997–2002 proved equivocal. PCF oscillated between collegial governing that implied its loyalty in the implementation of the government's policies and criticism addressed at the government that was linked with its temptation to take part in extra-parliamentary protest actions. This ambiguity (or political dualism) was related to internal divides within PCF at that time, where the minority stream opposed the party's participation in the government. The lack of an agreed upon programmatic basis for the governing coalition might have also contributed to that political ambiguity. Instead of a programmatic agreement, a less binding „governmental accord” had been in use as a basis for co-governing in partnership with the Socialist Party.

Fourthly, the PCF's potential as a „party of power” was considerably strengthened by the influences that it enjoys during local and regional elections as well as by its participation – independently or locally in alliance with other groupings of the left – in the authorities of self-government. The left gained for example an advantage over the right in the elections to the self-governmental authorities in the majority of medium and big cities in January of 2008, decidedly winning the regional elections in 2010 and having the upper hand in 24 out of 26 regions.

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