SPECIAL REPORT

Double fracture

How France’s regions reflect the country’s diversity

From vibrant cities to toxic banlieues and rural deserts

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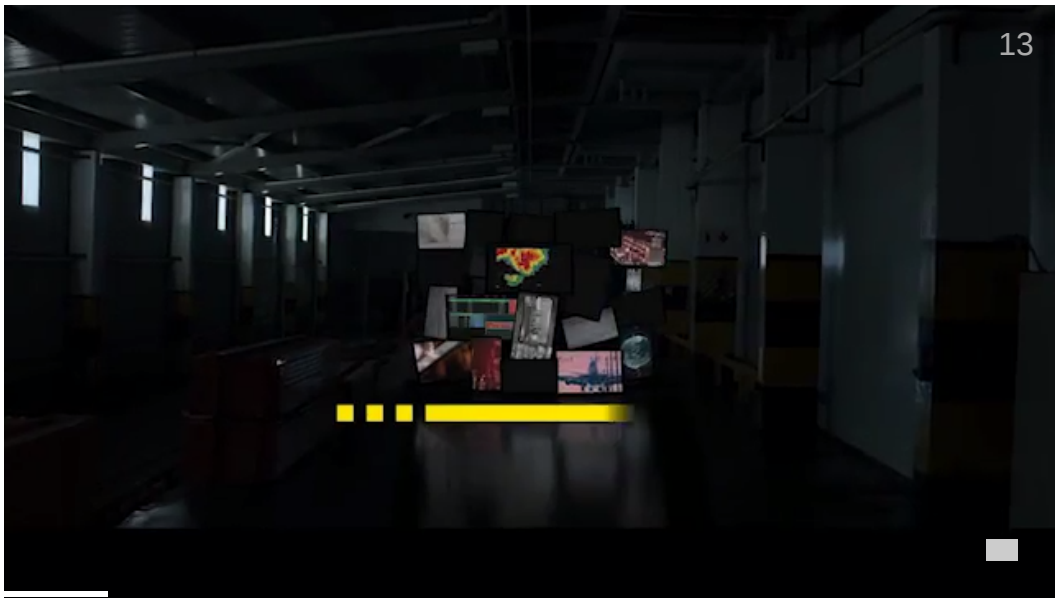
“IT’S SIMPLE UNTIL you make it complicated”, reads a poster pinned to the wall of the hangout room. Purple and green cushions on the sofa are printed with other injunctions, such as “Less meeting, more doing”. There are deckchairs, coffee machines, a figure of Yoda from “Star Wars” and other must-have accessories of the startup office. The main concession to local culture, says Jérôme Vuillemot, a tech entrepreneur in Lyon, is a table-football game, a staple of the French café. In 2013 he co-founded Vidcoin, which uses zero-latency technology to allow advertising

videos on mobile screens to launch instantly. Today the Lyon firm employs 20 people and has 75m users a month worldwide. Its biggest market is America.

Lyon is a thriving, cosmopolitan regional city that feels at ease with change. Between 2008 and 2015, a period when unemployment rose across the country, the net number of jobs there increased by 5%. It enjoys fast trains and slow food, and got a bike-sharing scheme long before Paris or London. Perched at the confluence of the Rhône and the Saône is a futuristic new plate-glass museum. Along the quay an experimental driverless bus conveys passengers to and fro. A startup incubator is being fitted in an old boiler factory.

ADVERTISING



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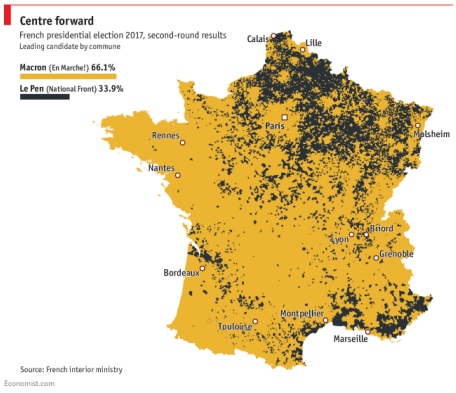

As many as 84% of Lyon's voters backed Mr Macron for president. The city's affinity with him is not coincidental. In many ways it is a laboratory for his politics. Gérard Collomb, its mayor from 2001 until he became interior minister in May, was one of Mr Macron's earliest supporters. He ran the city by building a majority across the political divide, showing that this was possible well before LRM was launched. "We've done this for a long time and it feels quite normal here," says David Kimelfeld, who replaced Mr Collomb as mayor of Greater Lyon. Mr Collomb, a Socialist, is also unapologetic about backing

business. The city retains a heavy industrial base, but has built new strengths in robotics, life sciences and clean tech. "Lyon used to feel like a provincial town," says Mr Bonnell, founder of a local robotics firm and one of Mr Macron's new deputies. "Now it could become France's Shanghai."

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Lyon's breezy confidence is echoed in a string of other French regional cities, including Lille, Grenoble, Montpellier, Toulouse, Rennes, Nantes and Bordeaux, the last of which is now only two hours from Paris by TGV. These metropolitan centres, criss-crossed by shiny trams and well supplied with smoothie bars and co-working spaces, are the new urban face of a country whose geography was famously summed up as "Paris and the French Desert", the title of a book by Jean-François Gravier published in 1947. In the second-round presidential vote Mr Macron scored a massive 90% in Paris, 88% in Rennes and 86% in Bordeaux. Such places are at ease with his business-friendly globalism. Another side of France is not.

On the front line

Travel 10km (six miles) east of Lyon, to Décines-Charpieu, home to the brand-new Groupama stadium for the Olympique Lyonnais football club, and Mr Macron's second-round majority begins to taper off. Continue for another 10km, beyond the city's airport to the town of Colombier-Saugnieu, and it disappears. Here, Ms Le Pen secured 57% of the vote. Carry on up over the Crémieu plateau, which looks out towards the Alps, and down to the village of Briord, with its single main road, café-bar-tabac and car mechanic, and you reach deep Le Pen country. She came top in

first-round voting in the surrounding department of l'Ain. In the run-off, 61% of Briord's voters backed her for president.

Ms Le Pen's territory is the France of anxiety and neglect. For decades, her party's support base has relied on two strongholds: the Mediterranean fringe (its traditional base), and the industrial rustbelt of the north and east, both areas with historically high levels of immigration and unemployment. Ms Le Pen's vote correlates closely with measures of social distress, notably joblessness and lack of qualifications. In the presidential first round 37% of working-class voters backed Ms Le Pen, 24% Mr Mélenchon and just 16% Mr Macron.

The most startling change since 2011, when Ms Le Pen took over the party her father founded in 1972, has been the FN's push into small rural communities, notes Hervé Le Bras, a geographer. In 1995 the FN secured its highest scores in inner suburbs 20-30km from the centre of big cities. Now that spot has shifted to 40-50km away, where pavements give way to farmland. An analysis by Mr Le Bras and Jérôme Fourquet, a pollster, shows that the FN vote is closely associated with the absence of services such as a pharmacy, bakery, post office or café. This "France of the forgotten" was zealously courted by Ms Le Pen, who played a classic populist hand, appealing to ordinary people's sense that the elite was neglecting them, and promising to evict the establishment "in the name of the people", her campaign slogan. She held more rallies in villages than she did in big cities.

Mr Macron may have defeated Ms Le Pen, but the reasons for the FN's surge have not disappeared. Some 10.6m French voters backed her in the second round, nearly twice as many as supported her father in 2002. Mr Macron's liberal internationalism does not speak to such places, and public policy offers few remedies. The best of them focus on *désenclavement*, or breaking the sense of isolation, by improving public services such as bus links, family doctors and high-speed broadband coverage in such areas. But these are flimsy counter-forces to populism.

Across the tracks

Like all big French cities, Lyon is suffering from a second fracture. Beyond the city's ring road lies Vaulx-en-Velin, an angular *banlieue* originally built to house people recruited from north Africa, Spain and Portugal for the textile industry and public

works. Vaulx-en-Velin became nationally known for riots there in 1990. Since then, huge sums have been pumped into renovating the place. Brutalist tower blocks were demolished, young trees were planted and park benches put in. Huge, brightly coloured plant pots were installed in front of one concrete parade of shops, where men gather at shaded tables outside a kebab restaurant. Unemployment in Vaulx-en-Velin, at 20%, is still twice the national average. Nearly two in five adults have no school-leaving certificate. In the first round of the presidential election, the far-left Mr Mélenchon came top there. The abstention rate was nearly twice the national average.

Such intractable problems, powerfully captured over the years by French films from Mathieu Kassovitz's angry "La Haine" (1995) to Céline Sciamma's tender "Bande de Filles" (2014), require an urgent policy response. Mr Macron's labour reform may help if more firms create stable entry-level jobs, particularly for the young. Smaller primary classes in such areas will improve schools in the long run. Mr Macron's planned overhaul of the inefficient training system could also help (France offers only half as many apprenticeships as Germany). Some also see enterprise as a way out. "Digital can be a tool to overcome discrimination," says Mounir Mahjoubi, a former entrepreneur and now digital minister, explaining that the trouble he had getting a job helped persuade him to launch his own startup.

There are other reasons for worrying about the toxic mix found in France's *banlieues*. "They represent a collective failure," says Amine El-Khatmi, a deputy mayor in Avignon, "because we are losing a generation." He notes a growing discourse of victimisation in certain quarters among French-born children of immigrants who are rejecting France. This is the sort of message, argues Gilles Kepel, a scholar of Islam, that is used by jihadists to recruit on French soil. Home to some 5m Muslims, France has supplied more such fighters to Syria and Iraq than any other European country, and has been more battered by terrorist attacks since 2015.

Such matters are politically delicate in France, partly because they challenge its strict version of secularism known as *laïcité*. Entrenched by law in 1905 after a prolonged anticlerical struggle, this creed keeps religion in all its forms out of public affairs. Some mayors used it to ban the "burkini", a body-covering swimsuit, before being overruled in the courts. Yet some campaigners for women's rights also

argue that *laïcité* is not being enforced in ways that protect their freedom. "The growing number of veiled women reflects the investment of Islamists," Nadia Ould-Kaci, of Women of Aubervilliers against the Veil, told the Senate recently. She says that in some neighbourhoods women are not welcome in certain cafés, and eating out during Ramadan has become "very dangerous". Behind such conservative pressure, researchers see the hand of well-organised Salafist movements. David Thomson, the author of the most comprehensive study of French jihadists who returned home after going abroad to fight, says that many of his subjects were drawn first to the Salafist doctrine of rupture with French society.

This is a daunting problem. The Catholic University of Lyon offers a government-backed diploma in religious freedom and secularism in French, designed especially for imams from abroad, but not enough people sign up. Over mint tea at the Othmane mosque, near Vaulx-en-Velin, Azzedine Gaci, its imam and a local pioneer of inter-religious dialogue who also teaches part of this course, says that mosques find it difficult to reach teenagers at an age when they are asking searching questions about being Muslim in France.

The government's attempts have fared little better. France's experiments with deradicalisation have been disappointing, notably in its prisons. Pre-emptive intelligence is considered a far better tool. French security services frequently foil home-grown terrorist plots. Mr Macron has set up a new counter-terrorism co-ordinating committee, reporting directly to him. But France, like other European countries, is up against big numbers, small and shifting cells, and low-tech operations such as knife attacks and the use of vehicles to mow down pedestrians. They are all but impossible to prevent. The French intelligence services' terrorism watch list contains 12,000 people.

In the long run Mr Macron's labour and education reforms could help to combat exclusion in the *banlieues*, but that will take time. Faster-acting schemes might include a promise to introduce a month's compulsory military service to encourage a sense of national belonging. Mr Macron's central short-term proposal is a new counter-terrorism bill to bring an end to France's state of emergency in November, two years after it was first declared.

Lyon’s double fracture is a reminder that, for all the optimism Mr Macron’s victory has rekindled in metropolitan folk, the threat of populism, and the dark fascination with political Islam, both remain potent. Each will continue, in its own way, to lure some of those who have been angered, disillusioned or repelled by liberal Western society. And both raise intractable policy challenges. As Mr Thomson says of radicalisation: “The reality is that nobody knows how to solve the problem.”

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