



Jean-Yves Camus

# The Profiteers of Fear?

Right-wing Populism and the COVID-19 Crisis  
in Europe

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### About this publication

During the COVID crisis, France's right-wing populist party Rassemblement National (RN) has yo-yoed between a strategy of "normalisation" as a legitimate political force and its "anti-establishment" roots blaming the French government for covering up the real causes and diverting attention away from its shortcomings by trying to disempower its citizens by means of authoritarian measures.

For the party, the economic reactions to the crisis and the EU bailout plan embody an "anti-national vision" which is robbing France of any possibility of taking effective action against the crisis and undermining its national sovereignty.

The RN's fearmongering strategy has so far failed to strengthen the political power of the right-wing populists.

Lastly, it will not be possible to weigh up the consequences of this strategy until there is a clearer idea of the economic and social fallout of the crisis.

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# The Profiteers of Fear?

## Right-wing Populism and the COVID-19 Crisis in Europe France

The radical and extreme right-wing political parties in Europe were quick to understand how the criticism of their respective governments' handling of the health crisis could be turned to their advantage. Depending on the countries, the criticism varied with the number of victims of the epidemic<sup>1</sup>, and the more or less drastic character of the lockdown measures. The radical and far right parties' communication generally revolved around three main topics: (1) sowing doubt as to whether the epidemic actually originated from animals in China, by introducing a number of theories involving plots; (2) criticism of globalisation and the opening of borders, presented as the main cause of the virus's propagation; and (3) the contradictory request for more stringent government action to curb the epidemic, combined with criticism of the lockdown's supposed infringement of personal freedoms.

This note documents the manner, in which the Rassemblement National (RN) responded to the restrictions of individual rights and public life enacted from mid-March to the end of June<sup>2</sup>. The RN's position statements were issued against the backdrop of the local council elections. The first round of voting took place as planned on 15 March, but the second round, initially scheduled for 22 March, was pushed back to 28 June because of the health-related state of emergency. This measure had such an impact on voter turnout (44.66% in the first ballot; 41.86% in the second ballot) that it created quite a controversy.

It is important to bear in mind that the RN's political response to the COVID epidemic will in all likelihood change, depending on the outcome of the lockdown and the advent of a second wave of contamination. Here again, there is an electoral context, since the departmental and regional elections are still planned for March 2021, before a presidential election in April 2022, for which Marine Le Pen, the President of the RN, announced back in January 2020 that she would be running.

### THE ANTI-SYSTEM STANCE

- 1 In France, more than 31.000 deaths had been recorded at as end of August 2020.
- 2 By government order, the so-called „confinement“, i.e. exit restrictions for individuals and a partial economic lockdown came into force on 17 March and lasted until 11 May. Only after a transitional phase, the so-called „déconfinement“, was a certain normality restored from 15 June onwards.

The radical right likes the idea of “hidden causes”, according to which any historical event, any fact, even if verified, is in reality sparked by mysterious causes that “the powers that be”, in particular the media and “the elite”, want to hide from the people in order to conceal the decisive, underground and concerted action of “lobbies” said to be governing the world. The RN, whose historical roots are clearly on the far right, has nevertheless undertaken, since 2011 and Marine Le Pen's arrival as its leader, to recentre its image and “normalise” its image in order to one day gain power, either alone or in coalition. It must pursue this initiative while remaining an anti-system party, opposed to both the left and the right<sup>3</sup>. Accordingly, it could only respond to the measures taken by Edouard Philippe's government in a manner in line with its character as an anti-system group. Hence, Marine Le Pen's decision as early as 30 March, to proclaim the idea of the “State lie”, i.e. a “government strategy” consisting of “hiding the level of weakness of the State, of our stocks, of our country's unpreparedness”, lying “about the borders, the supposedly unnecessary masks, the supposedly unnecessary tests themselves, rather than telling the truth”.<sup>4</sup> Even in exceptional circumstances, the RN could not adopt an attitude of national unity. It is therefore the only group to have gone so far in criticising the State, but it could not adopt a discourse as radical as that of the very small groups situated to its political right. They denounced the “totalitarian-type lockdown”, which “ruins the country” and “under the fallacious pretext of public health” will allow the State to “give permanent status to a large number of freedom-destroying measures.”<sup>5</sup>

The RN was not only critical about the way the pandemic was being handled, it also expressed its views on the pandemic's origin and the treatments used to stop its spread. The first topic stems directly from the RN voters' propensity to believe in alternative theories to the idea, accepted by the World Health Organization, that the virus was spread by human contacts following a contamination of animal origin. This propensity is above average, as shown by a survey published

- 3 Opening her presidential campaign in 2017, at a meeting in Lyon on 5 February, Marine Le Pen stated: „against the cash-driven right and the cash-driven left, I'm the candidate of the people's France“.
- 4 Statement by Marine Le Pen on the public radio France Info, 30 March 2020.
- 5 Cf. the interview with Thomas Joly on the Islamophobic and sovereignist website Riposte laïque: <https://ripostelaique.com/le-confinement-impose-un-controle-de-masse-de-type-sovietique-et-ruine-le-pays.html>

in March by IFOP: while 26% of French people believe that the virus was created intentionally in a laboratory, 40% of RN-voters believe that the coronavirus was produced “intentionally” and 15% that it was produced “accidentally” (see Reichstadt/Fourquet 2020). Interviewed on 30 March, again on France Info, Marine Le Pen said she “had no opinion on the matter”, but that: “It is only common sense for people to wonder whether this virus has a natural origin or whether it might have leaked out of a laboratory”. It is therefore a stance that does not exclude the possibility of a voluntary or accidental propagation from the P4 laboratory in Wuhan, which, it should be pointed out, was built with French funding and technology. In the end, the RN adopted a position expressed by the MEP Annika Bruna, who called for an international committee of enquiry to be set up on the origins of the epidemic, and asked China to give the committee access to its territory, but favoured the hypothesis of an animal transmission connected to the activity of the “wet markets” and human contact with wild animals that were unfit for human consumption<sup>6</sup>.

## THE RN AND ANTI-ELITIST ALTERNATIVE TREATMENTS

From January 2020, a scientist, Prof. Didier Raoult, the head of the Institut Hospitalier Universitaire Méditerranée-Infektion in Marseille, minimised the extent and seriousness of the virus. More importantly, he began treating it with a common antimalarial drug called chloroquine. Prof. Raoult became a prominent media personality, to the extent of being considered a “policy marker” in French public debate. The city where he exercises is the capital of the Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur region- a RN stronghold. The intensive media attention for his treatment, his debates with the executive<sup>7</sup> and his personality, marked by a strong “anti-establishment” dimension, forced the RN to take position on his ideas, but also on the need for the party to find serious arguments to incriminate “the elite” in the poor management of the pandemic. When the government was refusing to generalise the prescription of chloroquine because of its side-effects and unproven effectiveness, Marine Le Pen took up the issue and stated, cautiously: “I think all doctors in private practice, who know what they are doing and are familiar with the possible side effects of this drug, should immediately be allowed to prescribe it to infected patients with mild symptoms”<sup>8</sup>.

However, she allowed MEP Gilbert Collard to publish an opinion piece on the party’s official website that, under the cover of defending Prof. Raoult against the government, was a violent and conspiratorial accusation against the supposed joint “interests” of the former health minister, Agnès Buzyn, and her husband Yves Lévy, former director of INSERM (the French National Institute of Health and Medical Research).

Both supposedly acted jointly to oust Prof. Raoult<sup>9</sup> with the aim of establishing their exclusive power over the field of medical research. Once again, an RN strategy can be seen at work on two levels. On the one side, the caution of the party’s president, who stated on the television channel LCI on 24 June that “If it is proved that chloroquine is effective and that the government avoided or even banned its use, we have all the ingredients of a major health scandal”. On the other, her non-interventionist stance towards other leaders of the movement from publicly taking more clear-cut and radical positions.

## THE PROSPECT OF AN ORWELLIAN SOCIETY: THE RADICAL RIGHT DEFENDING PUBLIC LIBERTIES

A totalitarian society as described by George Orwell in his novel “1984”, is underpinned by the omnipresence of a State that keeps watch over its citizens, their behaviour and their thoughts, thereby abolishing freedom of expression. The COVID-19 crisis has enabled the radical and extreme right to form the idea that “elite classes” are knowingly taking advantage of the health emergency to hasten the establishment of an authoritarian form of government. In order to criticise the State and the government the French Rassemblement National party adopted, a rather unexpected angle for a party that defends a model of a strong State and a non-liberal democracy: the defence of individual freedoms against the measures taken to ward off the pandemic and which could threaten citizens’ freedoms.

When the government called a vote in early May on a two-month extension of the state of health emergency, the National Assembly deputy Bruno Bilde accused the prime minister and president of using “guilt, infantilisation and threats” against the French people, by insinuating that the State could postpone the end of lockdown or even stop citizens going away on holiday, if they were insufficiently compliant with the precautionary measures.<sup>10</sup> On 3 May, Marine Le Pen said she “shared French people’s concerns” about the establishment of the SYDEP and Contact COVID files, set up in order to identify and contact people who had been in close physical proximity to an infected person. She requested “to establish a committee within the National Commission of Informatics and Liberties, with lawyers and magistrates to oversee a file, the data in which could only be retained for an extremely limited period of time anyway”, and voiced her disapproval of allowing people who were not doctors to have access to medical data<sup>11</sup>.

Lastly, the RN attacked the government about its intention to unmask fake news circulated about the epidemic, by including on its website a section offering a “coronavirus detox”

6 Cf. <https://rassemblementnational.fr/communiqués/pour-combattre-les-causes-du-coronavirus-exigeons-une-commission-d'enquete-internationale-independante-sur-son-origine/> (visited the 27.8.2020).

7 Prof. Raoult was initially a member of the scientific board set up on March 11 to advise President Macron, but later resigned.

8 Statement on the France Info radio station on March 30.

9 Cf. <https://rassemblementnational.fr/tribunes-libres/covid-19-et-chloroquine-mais-quel-courroux-anime-le-couple-buzyn-levy-contre-le-professeur-raoult/> (visited the 27.8.2020).

10 Cf. <https://rassemblementnational.fr/communiqués/culpabilisation-infantilisation-menaces-le-gouvernement-renvoie-les-francais-a-lecole-maternelle-avant-la-deconfiture/> (visited the 27.8.2020).

11 Interview on the BFM-TV channel, 3 May 2020.

with press articles judged to be “accurate and verified”. In an interview with the national conservative weekly *Valeurs actuelles*, published on 22 March 2020, Marine Le Pen responded: “the government is the greatest supplier of fake news since the beginning of the crisis”<sup>12</sup>.

## CRITICISM OF THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL MEASURES

The RN published in July 2020 a “black book on the Corona crisis” (Cf. *Rassemblement National 2020*). Right from the first pages, referring to the GDP drop related to the COVID crisis<sup>13</sup> the party states that: “What started as a health crisis very soon turned into a political crisis and triggered an economic crisis of unprecedented gravity since the second world war,”. What sets the RN apart is not so much this common observation, but the fact it sees the health crisis as revealing France’s “structural collapse” and the “French decline”<sup>14</sup>. This collapse, it says, first became obvious in the shortcomings of a health system subjected, since 2007, has been the general revision of public policies, aiming for large cuts in public spending: in other words, the financial control of spending with a view to withdrawing State funding and lowering the public deficit: the destocking of masks and then the destruction of part of the stocks built up, until there were no remaining reserves of FFP2 masks, is part of the cost-cutting measures brought in after the H1N1 health crisis.

True to its economic doctrine of industrial sovereignty, the RN found grounds for criticism in the fact that the decision to destroy the stocks had been based on the supposed capacity of Chinese factories to produce masks in great quantities and in a very short time frame if necessary. In a question posed orally to the government in the National Assembly on 11 February, Marine Le Pen went a step further and challenged the very principle of applying the law of supply and demand to vitally essential products such as medicines. She criticized the state entrepreneurial management methods that lead to the “inventory stocks shortages and a strategy of demand-synchronous Just-in-time Production”. This fed the terribly dangerous market for fake medicines: “Given that 80% of the active principles in medicines are produced in China and India, we can well imagine the consequences of the crisis on production! Big pharma, however, which obeys only the law of supply and demand, prioritises supplies to the countries that pay the best”<sup>15</sup>. The RN insisted on being the first party

that warned about the dangers of strategic economic branches’ relocations.

The RN took in the same way the side of the job categories most affected by the lockdown measures. On 21 March, it requested that the Banque de France immediately release 10 billion euros of special aid in the form of an immediate cash injection, for businesses with fewer than 1,000 employees, the SMEs and VSEs, tradesmen, shopkeepers, farmers and self-employed workers. One sector, namely private hospitals, received support from the RN that was not particularly consistent with its denunciation of the “ultra-liberal principle”. *Le Livre noir du coronavirus* states: “COVID has revealed the open war on private medicine conducted by the Health Ministry’s ideologists.” (*Rassemblement National 2020* : 19) This statement is, however, at odds with the party’s discourse attacking President Macron, said to embody the interests of the financial sector, but becomes more meaningful in the light of the fact that his two successive health ministers, Agnès Buzyn and Olivier Véran, are, by profession, practitioners in public hospitals. The lampoon published by the RN claims that “Much to the annoyance of the private practitioners, private clinics and laboratories, even in the veterinary sector, that offered their services in vain, the minister deliberately excluded general medicine from the system of screening, treatment and hospitalisation.” This statement is partly false. When the epidemic officially entered stage 3 in mid-March, 500 clinics and 300 private-sector establishments were incorporated into the plan to increase emergency care facilities, by government decision.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, private practitioners always received patients with COVID symptoms, except for cases with serious symptoms, in which case the patients were requested to immediately call the medical emergency services.

## GLOBALISATION AND THE EU: TWO UNIVERSALLY DESIGNATED CAUSES

Finally, from one end of the radical and far right spectrum to the other, the health crisis proved to be an opportunity to once again lay the blame on both the European Union<sup>17</sup> and especially globalisation. In this regard, the party alimanted a discourse on the absolute necessity of restoring borders. Marine Le Pen was the first to have asked for health checks at airports, including for intra-European travellers. In a broader perspective, she attributed the health crisis to the “ultraliberal globalization (...) which seals the disappearance of borders, nation-states and state strategies, and hands over the workings of the world into the invisible hand of the market”<sup>18</sup>.

Moreover is the RN’s attitude to the management of the health crisis was dictated by a belief that “The European Union, an organisation inspired by mercantile principles and

<sup>12</sup> Cf. <https://www.valeursactuelles.com/clubvaleurs/politique/interview-marine-le-pen-le-gouvernement-est-le-plus-gros-pourvoyeur-de-fake-news-depuis-le-debut-de-cette-crise-117518> (visited the 27.8.2020).

<sup>13</sup> The economic performance was in the second quarter 13,8% under the last quarter’s.

<sup>14</sup> According to an IPSOS-Steria poll conducted in 2016 for Sciences-Po, *Le Monde* and the Fondation Jean Jaurès, 86% of French people believed their country was in decline, while 62% thought that the decline was not irreversible. A significant fact is that SMEs were the type of organisation viewed most favourably by those polled (82% of positive opinions), as against only 27% for the European Union and 8% for political parties.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/15/cr/2019-2020/20200139.asp> (visited the 27.8.2020)

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Le Monde*, 10 April 2020 : Coronavirus : pourquoi les établissements de soins privés sont restés en deuxième ligne.

<sup>17</sup> Even though it lets the EU Member States take responsibility for health matters.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Le Monde*, 10 April 2020 : Coronavirus : pourquoi les établissements de soins privés sont restés en deuxième ligne.

which sees itself first and foremost as a great market, finances the free trade orgy to the detriment of the industrial sovereignty of Europe's nations, of the levels of social protection and of our health systems" (Rassemblement National 2020 : 73). Taking hostility to the EU as an underlying principle, Marine Le Pen responded to the Franco-German proposal of a €500 billion European recovery plan in these terms: "The French people must read between the lines of the announcements made by Macron and Merkel: we are going to lose even more sovereignty, pay even more for the EU, and perhaps move towards a European tax in the future. It is not progress, it is a federalist forging ahead regardless of the consequences!"<sup>19</sup>.

The pooling of the debt and the final agreement concluded on the recovery plan did not meet with a warmer reception. In a press release dated 21 July, the RN claims that the plan is a trick that deprives France of any chance of effectively supporting its economy. Worse still, at a time when a wave of bankruptcies and redundancies is looming for autumn, France has decided to harm itself financially in order to feed an ideological and anti-national vision of Europe called the "European Union"<sup>20</sup>. This response is in line with some of the party's longstanding political choices: denouncing France's supposed dependence on the policy directions suggested by Germany within the framework of Europe; a self-serving budgetary approach, where any expenditure that benefits anyone other than French taxpayers is judged inherently unnecessary, and harmful because it potentially increases the tax pressure on citizens. Lastly, brandishing the spectre of a European tax enables the RN to fuel the fear of a transition from a national State<sup>21</sup> to a European federal State that would mark the disappearance of France.

## CONCLUSION: THE RN MAY HAVE FAILED (SO FAR) TO EFFECTIVELY LEVERAGE THE HEALTH CRISIS

The RN couldn't find angles of attack towards every themes. First, the pandemic spread with no connection whatsoever to the migrations observed in late February on the island of Lesbos, then elsewhere in Greece, thereby undermining any use of the theme of immigration as a vector of disease. The trip to Greece of the RN MEPs Jordan Bardella and Jérôme Rivière in early May received only minimal coverage, whereas it had been designed to generate an association in French people's mind between migratory flows and disease. Marine Le Pen did indeed try to make French people in lockdown believe that "some districts", implying those with a high percentage of residents from foreign countries, were not complying with lockdown measures and, because of this lack of public-spiritedness, were not covered by the republican pact. On 24 March, she stated that: "there has been no response

from the State as to what should be done in a certain number of districts where clearly (...) a section of the population says 'we don't care about lockdown rules.'" But, for reasons to do with her quest for respectability, she was unable to go as far as the movement *Génération identitaire* and its supporters, including Damien Rieu, now working as a parliamentary assistant to the RN MEP Philippe Olivier; Rieu has become a "whistleblower", publishing tweets and videos to associate drug trafficking and a refusal to comply with lockdown, circulating images of a black woman refusing to submit to a police identity check, or rejoicing in the repatriation of Algerian citizens blocked in France by the health crisis.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, the party tried to link the pandemic issue with that of security, a key concern of its voters. For instance, the RN protested against the decision, made during the state of health emergency, to facilitate the early release of prison inmates.<sup>23</sup> However, this type of discourse against the State's supposed laxism, like the discourse that also links immigration and criminality, appeared well before the health crisis and has pervaded the party's discourse since its inception, so in fact the epidemic has not, on the whole, changed its ideological approach to the matter.

The measurable outcome of the policy chosen by the RN to talk about the pandemic is that Marine Le Pen's popularity rating, according to an ELABE poll on 7 May, had risen 3 points to 26%, while the level of confidence in the President Macron's handling of the crisis had dropped sharply (to 34%, down 10%). If the 2022 presidential election were to be held now, Marine Le Pen would tie with the current president (both scoring 28%). Though soundly defeated in the second round (45% as against 55% for her opponent), she would top her 2017 score (33%), considered an unbeatable "glass ceiling" up until now (Cf. IFOP 2020). This type of poll is, obviously, to be taken with the necessary precautions nearly two years before the presidential elections.

The impact on the party's results at the local council elections was also limited. In the first round, the RN's supporters did not turn out to vote in greater numbers than those of the other parties. In the small number of RN-led cities, most of the outgoing mayors were re-elected, but the abstention rate was higher than nationwide.<sup>24</sup> The RN's only real victory occurred in Perpignan, a city with a population of over 120,000, where one of the party's main leaders, Louis Aliot, who was already a National Assembly deputy, was elected mayor in the second round with 53.09% of the votes, thanks to a campaign where he put his affiliation to the RN in the background. Many liberal and conservative voters from the right and the centre choose to switch sides to rid themselves of a local political class discredited by populism, declining

<sup>19</sup> Tweet from the 18th May 2020.

<sup>20</sup> See: <https://rassemblementnational.fr/communiqués/union-europeenne-vers-un-impot-europeen/> (visited the 27.08.2020)

<sup>21</sup> As a State collecting taxes in exchange for public expenditure that benefits citizens in one way or another

<sup>22</sup> See: [https://oeilsurlefront.liberation.fr/les-idees/2020/03/20/identitaires-rn-comment-l-extreme-droite-veut-profiter-du-coronavirus\\_1782297](https://oeilsurlefront.liberation.fr/les-idees/2020/03/20/identitaires-rn-comment-l-extreme-droite-veut-profiter-du-coronavirus_1782297) (visited the 27.8.2020)

<sup>23</sup> A release is possible at most two months before the end of a sentence, except for those convicted of terrorism and criminal offences.

<sup>24</sup> In Béziers 56.02%; in Fréjus, it topped 61%; in Hayange, it reached 63.8%.

political support and the unsatisfactory social and economic situation.<sup>25</sup>

The RN's management of the coronavirus crisis has, therefore, not enabled the party as yet to achieve an increase in popular support. However, its influence on French people during the health crisis will be seen in the medium term. Since August, the epidemic is spreading again and the wearing of a mask in public has become mandatory nationwide. A second wave of the pandemic has not been ruled out. The economic crisis's tangible repercussions on the economy and employment have not yet become fully apparent. Accordingly, the RN's strategy with regard to COVID will need to be assessed in the light of these prospects, more specifically to know whether its seemingly anxiety-provoking character and tendency to dramatize the overall situation in France will bear fruit.

During the COVID crisis, France's right-wing populist party Rassemblement National (RN) has yo-yoed between a strategy of "normalisation" as a legitimate political force and its "anti-establishment" roots blaming the French government for covering up the real causes and diverting attention away from its shortcomings by trying to disempower its citizens by means of authoritarian measures.

For the party, the economic reactions to the crisis and the EU bailout plan embody an "anti-national vision" which is robbing France of any possibility of taking effective action against the crisis and undermining its national sovereignty. The RN's fearmongering strategy has so far failed to strengthen the political power of the right-wing populists.

Lastly, it will not be possible to weigh up the consequences of this strategy until there is a clearer idea of the economic and social fallout of the crisis.

The RN's score in the upcoming elections 2021 and 2022 will not hinge solely on COVID either: areas of sovereign responsibility, beginning with public safety and the crackdown on criminality, are taking centre stage again: an ODOXA survey on 22 July 2020 showed that 68% of French people feel unsafe, which is the highest level for 4 years, up 10 points in 6 months (See ODOXA 2020). This happens to be the flagship issue in RN policy since its inception, and it may compound the feeling of a lack of safety on the health front, in a context in which the WHO does not anticipate that the pandemic will be brought under control for another 2 years. The possible conjunction of these two factors with a serious economic crisis gives the RN and its candidate hope of making further headway. However, unless the voting system becomes fully proportional, the party remains without any possibility of becoming a major force in parliament and the conservative right (Les Républicains) is still refusing any alliance with it. In the presidential election 2022, an improvement in

its score does not mean victory, which remains highly unlikely. Nevertheless, if Marine Le Pen were to achieve a score of around 45%, this would mean a victory by default for her opponent, because he or she could gather all the votes that prevent Le Pen's presidency.

<sup>25</sup> For the situation in Perpignan see Nicolas Lebourg's interview by Perpignan's local daily newspaper, L'Indépendant: <https://www.lindependant.fr/2020/06/28/victoire-de-louis-aliot-a-perpignan-nicolas-lebourg-les-gens-ne-lui-feront-pas-de-cadeau,8954532.php> (visited the 27.8.2020).

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# EUROPA

## Right-wing populism and the COVID-19 crisis

In many countries the COVID-19 crisis had initially led to increased trust in government. The restrictions to personal freedoms, curfews, restrictions on social contacts, the closure of large segments of the economy as well as the widening of executive powers in many countries was largely accepted and supported by the public. However, frustration and distrust of government have been increasing the longer the restrictions have been in place. Some countries, such as Germany, witnessed large demonstrations against the counter measures. Moreover, the wide dissemination of fake news and conspiracy theories are influencing the public debate on how to handle the pandemic.

Reports from Sweden, Finland, Italy, France, Spain, and Germany – all countries with large or growing right-wing populist movements and parties explore the question, if right-wing populism in Europe has been able to benefit from the Corona-crisis. A synopsis interprets and classifies the developments in the individual countries in a comparative perspective.

Further information on the project can be found here:

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