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The French ‘finishing school’ educating the far-right leaders of tomorrow

By Renee Bertini, CNN

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Institut de Formation Politique (IFP) director Alexandre Pesey delivers a speech during the "Convention de la Droite" in Paris on September 28, 2019.

Paris (CNN) — The first time he walked through the doors of the Institut de Formation Politique (IFP), French student Jacques Smith noticed the cozy atmosphere and the elite feel of the place – but mainly, that he was “surrounded by right-wing people and right-wing lecturers,” he told CNN.

As an overtly right-wing student, Smith felt it was hard to find his place at the university he attended – Nanterre University, just outside Paris – which he perceived as “very, very on the left” – so he joined the Union Nationale Interuniversitaire (UNI), the right-wing national student union. It was during those early days of his studies that one of his mentors at UNI suggested he should consider training at IFP.

Offering practical and theoretical classes in journalism, politics and business, IFP has become something of a “finishing school” for right-leaning youth in France. Having fostered networks and community for a new, politically minded class of right-wing – or even far-right – activists and professionals, the school has trained alumni who are sitting MPs, are organizing electoral campaigns, speaking on CNEWS – France’s equivalent of Fox News – or even working as far-right influencers on social media.

In a year when France’s far-right had its best-ever electoral results, IFP’s role as a nursery for its political class is more important than ever.

“The aim of IFP is very clear to me,” said Smith. “It’s to shape right-wing youth to create a new generation ready to take on the challenges of the country.”

It’s already seen success in that. According to the school’s director, IFP has trained more than 2,200 students since it opened in 2004, and about 40% of them now have responsibilities in political settings.

Of some 50 members of the close entourage of far-right pundit and former presidential candidate Eric Zemmour, identified by French daily Le Monde, at least one-fifth have ties with IFP – as former students, instructors, speakers, financial supporters or admirers.

“We try to maximize their chances of having high-responsibility positions,” said Alexandre Pesey, director and co-founder of the institute, in an interview with CNN.



VALERY HACHE/AFP via Getty Images

Far-right pundit and politician Eric Zemmour, center, delivers a speech following the first round of voting in France's parliamentary elections, in Cogolin, on June 12, 2022.

Providing an ‘ideological backbone’

Fresh from his own studies, in 2004, Pesey decided to create the school with two colleagues. The trio felt like they were missing “a place for involved young people (...) who are attached to their country,

their history, their culture and identity,” he said.

The director prefers not to politically qualify the education the school provides, but he admitted “on a scale from left to right, clearly, it’s quite on the right.”

Some of its seminars are titled: “A lawyer faces the Islamist menace”; “Preserving our freedom of speech, a challenge of our times”; “The values of the right”; “Gender, Veganism, Nativism: decrypting the semantics of the left.”

Students can follow a core curriculum of seminars or get specific training in journalism, politics or entrepreneurship. Classes are held in person either in the evening or over the weekend, to fit with the students’ university or work schedules. They pay a fee to attend IFP but may get scholarships from school donors.

IFP does not offer state-recognized qualifications or diplomas, so most students attend alongside formal university studies. “I see it as something extra to complete my education,” said Smith. “It’s given me the ideological backbone of the right.”

Networking opportunities

“Beyond the intellectual and practical dimensions of their formation, there is a networking dimension,” said Pesey. The links students form are both horizontal – amongst their peers – and vertical – with guest speakers, mentors and like-minded professionals.

“There are things that were created because people met at IFP,” said Samuel Lafont, 34. “It gives people concrete ideas.” Lafont was one of the early students of IFP, having first followed the school’s seminars in 2009. Today, he is mostly known for his role as digital strategist for Zemmour’s electoral campaign.

He was also one of the minds behind the “Manif pour tous” (Demonstration for all) movement, which organized protests against gay marriage in 2012 and 2013. He described it as a key moment when a lot of far-right and conservative youth groups came together and started connecting, both in person, and through online activism.





FRANCOIS GUILLOT/AFP via Getty Images

Supporters of the anti-gay marriage movement "La Manif pour tous" (Demonstration for all) wave flags in front of the Eiffel Tower during a mass protest on May 26, 2013 in Paris against a gay marriage law.

The high-flying contacts on offer at IFP might include media entrepreneurs, magistrates, MPs, or directors of prestigious research programs.

It's a powerful opportunity. "I know that if I ever need to switch jobs (...) there are plenty of people that I know through IFP that I can call," said Smith.

Teaching against the current

Schools like the Paris Institute of Political Studies, known as Sciences Po, or École Nationale d'Administration (now Institut National du Service Public) – the selective "grandes écoles" of France – are historical institutions, considered an express ticket to top-flight careers in the country.



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However, for many on the right, they represent the mainstreaming of leftist teaching – and some are disparaging of what they offer.

"It's a lot freer at IFP," Lafont told CNN. "Sciences Po really just teaches you a one-track way of thinking, it's very mainstream, some things you can say and some you cannot," he added.

Zemmour, who came in fourth in the first round of voting in the presidential election, has called IFP the "counter-Sciences Po," underlining the reactionary nature of the kind of teaching it provides.

"The idea had sprouted in the right that one of the reasons for their political defeat was the absence of an elite of intellectually formed executives," said researcher and far-right expert Jean-Yves Camus, "and that the cause of this absence was that even if you enter university as a right-winger, you are shaped by a dominant teaching that is oriented to the left."





Daniel Derajinski/Hans Lucas/Reuters

IFP alumnus Alice Cordier, pictured in 2021, is the president and founder of the far-right feminist group "Collectif Némésis."

"Today, the right faces a certain censorship," said Alice Cordier, 24, an IFP alum and now instructor. "We see woke ideology and other extreme ideologies that aim to censor people who think like me." IFP advised her as she was laying the foundations of what is now the far-right feminist and anti-immigration group "Collectif Némésis," with chapters all over France and in Switzerland.

IFP, on the other hand, "facilitates the creation of ties between politicians and young people, something which, on the right, is not necessarily very developed," said Cordier. Moreover, IFP encourages students to be more ambitious by showing them they "all have a role to play, no matter our status," she said.

Currently, the right is the majority in France, said Camus, but "nevertheless I have the impression that they still feel as if they are the minority." This may have played into IFP's creation, he added.

Right-wing politicians of tomorrow

While some analysts are reluctant to credit IFP with any impact on French politics, the presence of its alumni in the political scene speaks volumes. Chief among them is perhaps Zemmour's digital strategist Lafont, along with some 20% of Zemmour's inner circle around election time – as identified by *Le Monde* – with links to IFP. Twenty-three-year-old IFP alum Stanislas Rigault founded the youth wing of Zemmour's campaign, *Génération Z*.

Zemmour's closest team members even called IFP directly to recruit young people trained there in the runup to the presidential race, according to the student Jacques Smith. "I think during the launch of Zemmour's campaign, IFP was at the center of the game," he said.

Marion Maréchal, the niece and potential successor of far-right presidential candidate Marine Le Pen and former member of the French National Assembly, has even created her own school modeled on IFP, in Lyon.

Lafont and Cordier agree that a lot of what makes a school relevant in France is the power its name holds. They acknowledge that the "grandes écoles" so despised by the right still hold great power in the job market and political arena. "If you are in a good school you can relax," said Lafont.

However, they say that the IFP brand now carries the same weight in French right-wing circles.

"It's the best school that presently exists for truly educating oneself about themes that are important to the right," Cordier told CNN. She often sends young women from her collective to follow seminars at the school.

The school says demand for places outstrips supply.

"The right-wing politicians of tomorrow will all have gone through IFP," said Cordier. "Of that I am almost certain."