France's Political Whodunit

J'accuse globalization.

By Sophie Meunier

Who slew Lionel Jospin? Amid the postmortems about the defeat in the presidential elections of the French left led by former Prime Minister Jospin and the rise of the far right under Jean-Marie Le Pen, a major culprit of this electoral assassination escaped detection: globalization. Or more precisely, France's tortured political discourse about globalization contributed directly to Jospin's defeat and indirectly to Le Pen's strength.

True, few industrialized countries have made more of a show of their misgivings about globalization. Witness the wide public support for the campaign by José Bové, erstwhile sheep farmer, against McDonald's specifically and globalization generally or the public uproar that ensues whenever foreigners threaten France's *exception culturelle*. But for all the seeming intensity of public feeling aroused by globalization, it barely emerged as a topic of debate in the campaign for the presidential election.

The truth is that French feelings toward globalization are considerably more ambiguous than those of Monsieur Bové: According to one French opinion poll, while 72 percent are "suspicious" of globalization, 53 percent agree that it is "a good thing for France." The main ruling parties, from the left as from the right, have mirrored the public's ambiguity, engaging in a discourse that has straddled the fence.

Jospin was especially adept at "globalization by stealth." His government adapted the French economy and society to the requirements of a globalizing world, but without being straightforward about it. Thus, the Socialist-led government accelerated the privatization of state enterprises, significantly cut France's historically high rate of taxation (even the top rates), and made France home to the world's second highest volume of executive stock options. At the same time, the government covered its tracks with such apparently antiglobalization measures as the 35-hour workweek and the "law on new economic regulations," which, had it passed, would have prevented companies from laying off workers unless firms were near bankruptcy. Jospin sent six ministers to Porto Alegre, Brazil, for the 2001 World Social Forum, a meeting designed to counter the World

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Economic Forum. Jospin even took Bové to dinner. Jospin and his allies thereby sent the message that they did not really know where to stand and that globalization was potentially bad.

The results of this fudging were felt in the shocking results of the first round of the French presidential elections, in which Le Pen obtained more votes than Jospin and in the end brought the conservative Jacques Chirac back to Élysée Palace for another term. Analysts have mostly focused on crime and racism to explain Le Pen's strong showing in the initial round, but Jospin's attempt to finesse globalization was as big a reason.

The third effect of avoiding a discussion on the virtues of globalization was to cede the ground to those, such as Le Pen, who spent the electoral campaign pointing out its vices. For Le Pen, it was easy to put in parallel, or even link, the increased flow of immigrants and globalization. Indeed, one of the new highlights of his presidential campaign was the denunciation of *Euromondialisme*—a pejorative term coined by his National Front party to express a fear of what is dictated to France by remote strangers.

The Socialists can now pursue two strategies for the longer run. Either they align their actions with their rhetoric or their rhetoric with their actions. The first strategy would be to swing back sharply to the left, becoming more antiglobal and anti-Europe, balking at profound reform of the state, and refocusing on traditional leftist demands, such as a higher minimum wage. The second would be to reform and modernize, moving away from the left of the left. In this case, the Socialists would have to confront and accept their own economic conversion and teach their electorate to like globalization, even if it is a "managed" version. This strategy is more risky in the short run, since it would alienate and radicalize the far left, but this tactic may prove more fruitful in the longer term.

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The Socialist government's doublespeak had several effects. First, it helped splinter the left. Massive votes went for Trotskyist candidates (11 percent) and for former Socialist minister Jean-Pierre Chevènement (5 percent), all overt adversaries of globalization. Why vote for a pale, hesitant copy when you can get the original?

Second, the government's ambivalence strengthened the hand of those who argue that the state is powerless in the face of global constraints. In 1999, when tire-maker Michelin announced massive layoffs amidst record profits, Jospin declared that the French could not expect the state to fix everything and that the state was no longer responsible for administering the economy. Jospin's own camp was the first to rebel. When, two years later, food giant Danone announced layoffs but remained extremely profitable, Jospin played his cards differently. He pulled out of his hat a bill to prevent companies from laying off workers. The electorate was left to wonder who controlled the levers of the economy and whether it mattered who they voted for if, in fact, Brussels or stateless shareholders were really in charge. Consequently, aside from the true believers at the extreme ends of the spectrum, many French voters abstained in the first round or cast protest votes for eccentric candidates.

If the Socialists choose the first strategy, presidential elections that pitch starkly pro-global, pro-Europe candidates against the forces opposed to integration will not just be the stuff of current events but the shape of things to come. But if French policymakers and politicians deal forthrightly with the challenges ahead rather than trying to finesse or deny them, the French could finally make the educated choice their politicians have so far helped them avoid—between a culture and economy based on narrow French exceptionalism and a vibrant, more open France. FP