The Decisiveness Mirage

Why France Governs by Decree but Cannot Make Decisions Stick

A field guide to the integration deficit — and how France can reconnect decision with legitimacy.

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1. Executive Summary

France appears to be a state that knows how to decide. The constitutional architecture of the Fifth Republic concentrates executive power to a degree unmatched in other Western democracies. The technocratic elite is among the world's most accomplished. Reforms are announced with intellectual clarity, legislative speed, and presidential authority. And yet, decade after decade, the same pattern repeats: a bold reform is announced, perceived as imposed, met by mass mobilisation, and either withdrawn, diluted, or pushed through with such visible disregard for opposition that the legitimacy wound deepens. The next reform begins with a shallower reservoir of trust. The cycle tightens.

France is not failing randomly. It is running a stable loop.

This report argues that the loop is not a curse or a cultural inevitability. It is the symptom of an **integration deficit**—a missing connective architecture between national decision and local reality, between symbolic intensity and functional delivery, between the energy of critique and the possibility of co-creation. France does not lack decisions. It lacks the capacity to make decisions that stick.

The integration deficit has two dimensions, which reinforce each other. **Outer deficit:** a hyper-centralised state that produces uniform policies with no effective translation layer to adapt them to diverse territorial conditions. **Inner deficit:** a political arena that amplifies conflict and symbolism but does not process them into synthesis, leaving civic energy with no structured channel except the street. The result is a high-energy system with no integration layer—a system that crackles with intensity and exhausts itself in spectacle.

The solution is not another list of reforms announced from the Élysée. It is to build the missing architecture deliberately: a territorial translation layer with real authority and fiscal capacity, a permanent deliberative infrastructure that gives structured weight to citizen voices, and a culture of safe-to-fail experimentation that tests policies before they become national laws. These investments are organised around living testbeds—energy transition, integrated mobility and housing—where outer and inner capacity can prove themselves together.

The report names the political immune system that will resist any such upgrade: the Jacobin centralising reflex, the spectacle that rewards conflict over construction, the street that functions as a veto because no deliberative channel exists. It proposes a transition architecture that works with these forces rather than against them—low-visibility high-learning zones, regional Trojan Horses, cross-ideological funding covenants, safe-to-fail pilots, and scaling by attraction rather than mandate.

The concrete first step is a network of **Territoires d'Intégration Adaptative** (TIAs): 3–5 pilot territories with integrated governance mandates, standing citizen deliberative bodies, and the legal flexibility to experiment. Success is measured not solely by outputs but by **policy half-life**: how long a reform survives and remains effective before being reversed, diluted, or abandoned.

The European dimension is essential. Germany, as the companion report in this series argues, suffers an execution deficit—money and projects are available, but the administrative machinery to deliver them is fragmented and slow. France suffers an integration deficit—decisions are made quickly but do not endure. Together, the Franco-German engine is simultaneously slow and brittle. Repairing both deficits is a European strategic interest.

France possesses immense resources: intellectual clarity, state capacity, civic engagement, and a proud tradition of holding power to account. The task is not to abandon these strengths but to give them the architecture they have always lacked—the translation layer, the deliberative channel, the permission to experiment. France does not need more decisions. It needs decisions that survive contact with reality. That is not a matter of will. It is a matter of architecture. And the architecture can be built.

1. The Decisiveness Mirage

1.1 The Reform Loop

France is not failing randomly. It is running a stable loop.

The sequence is so familiar that any reasonably attentive French citizen can recite it before a minister finishes the press conference. A reform is announced—bold, necessary, framed as the only responsible path. Immediately, it is perceived as imposed: a Parisian abstraction, blind to the lives it will disrupt. Within days or weeks, the street fills. Mass mobilisation follows, passionate and performative, drawing the nation's moral attention. The government, caught between conviction and the spectacle of resistance, retreats. It dilutes the reform, delays it, or withdraws it entirely. A residue of bitterness settles over the public sphere. Trust erodes another notch. The next reform, whenever it arrives, begins with an even shallower reservoir of legitimacy.

Then the cycle repeats.

This is not a story about one government or one era. The Juppé reforms of 1995 attempted to restructure pensions and social security; weeks of strikes forced their abandonment. The Contrat Première Embauche of 2006 was meant to ease youth unemployment; student blockades and union marches killed it before it could take effect. The carbon tax that sparked the

gilets jaunes

in 2018 was economically rational, environmentally urgent—and politically dead within months. The pension reform of 2023, pushed through by constitutional sleight of hand, survived on paper but left a wound that will shape French politics for a generation.

Each of these episodes had its own texture, its own grievances, its own protagonists. But the structure beneath them was the same: **a decision produced by a capable centre, perceived as illegitimate by a significant portion of the population, contested through extra-institutional means, and ultimately metabolised into political damage rather than durable policy.**

France has not solved this loop. It has learned to live with it, to expect it, to budget for it in the currency of ministerial careers and presidential approval ratings. The loop has become the background radiation of French governance. This report argues that it is not inevitable. It is the symptom of a specific, diagnosable deficit—an integration deficit—that can be addressed once it is named.

1.2 The Surface Story: A State That Acts

From a distance, France looks like a state that knows how to decide.

The constitutional architecture of the Fifth Republic, designed by Charles de Gaulle to overcome the parliamentary paralysis of the Fourth, concentrates executive power to a degree unmatched in other Western democracies. The President, when supported by a legislative majority, can govern almost by decree. The *ordonnances* mechanism allows the executive to legislate in domains normally reserved for Parliament. The *49.3* procedure—used most recently in the pension reform battle—permits the government to pass legislation without a vote, daring the opposition to bring down the government in response.

Behind this institutional machinery stands a technocratic elite of genuine distinction. The *grandes écoles*—ENA, Polytechnique, Sciences Po—produce a governing class steeped in the Cartesian tradition of abstract reasoning, clarity of expression, and confidence in the possibility of rational administration. When a French senior civil servant presents a reform, it typically arrives with impeccable logic, thorough legal drafting, and a sense that the general interest has been identified and can now be implemented.

For much of the post-war period, this model delivered. It built high-speed rail, nuclear energy infrastructure, and one of the world's most respected healthcare systems. It transformed a rural society into a modern industrial power. The French state, at its best, is capable of ambition, coherence, and genuine public service. These remain real assets, not just nostalgic memories. The capacity to conceive bold reforms is not France's problem. The problem lies downstream.

1.3 The Reality: Brittle Decisiveness

The appearance of strength conceals a more fragile operational reality. French reforms are frequently announced with confidence and then contested, diluted, or abandoned. What looks like decisiveness at the moment of proclamation turns out, on closer inspection, to be a form of brittleness. The state can push, but it struggles to make the push stick.

The numbers tell part of the story. France's public expenditure sits around 57% of GDP—among the highest in the developed world. The state has substantial resources, and it deploys them. Yet trust in national government hovers around 29%, according to recent polling, and has been declining for years. Citizens report a pervasive sense that public services are deteriorating, that the state is simultaneously omnipresent and absent, that the taxes they pay do not return to them in the form of visible, reliable public goods.

This is the French edition of the spending mirage: the belief that more state spending, more state authority, or one more decisive reform decree will resolve the underlying dysfunction. The money is allocated, the decree is signed, and the system absorbs both without producing the expected result. The high level of public expenditure does not correspond to a high level of perceived public value. The strong executive does not correspond to a high rate of durable policy success. Something in the architecture between intention and outcome is failing.

The *gilets jaunes* movement of 2018–19 was a particularly vivid demonstration. The trigger was a fuel tax increase—environmentally rational, fiscally coherent, and announced with the usual Parisian confidence. But the tax was perceived, correctly, as indifferent to the lives of those who depend on cars to navigate peri-urban and rural France, where public transport is scarce and distances are long. The state had made a decision *about* these populations without making a decision *with* them. The result was not a policy adjustment but a national conflagration that consumed the better part of two years and ended with the tax's withdrawal. The state acted. The decision did not survive contact with reality.

This is the pattern that the Reform Loop describes. It is not a failure of individual politicians or specific administrations. It is an emergent property of a system that can produce decisions but cannot integrate them—cannot connect them to the lived experience of citizens, cannot absorb and metabolise dissent, cannot translate abstract intention into durable local reality.

1.4 France's Untapped Advantages

Before plunging into the diagnosis, it is worth pausing to recognise what France has going for it. Too many analyses of the country's difficulties read as though the nation were a patient in need of rescue. That is not the spirit of this report.

France possesses a set of genuine, durable strengths that a more capable governance system could mobilise rather than suppress. The country's intellectual culture, rooted in a Cartesian tradition of rigorous questioning, remains a global asset. The willingness to confront authority—to debate, to protest, to demand that power justify itself—is not a pathology. It is a democratic resource. The state's administrative capacity, for all its rigidity, includes cadres of talented, motivated public servants who joined government to serve the public good. And the sheer level of civic energy—the fact that millions of French citizens will take to the streets, engage in collective deliberation, and care deeply about public affairs—is the envy of many democracies where apathy is the deeper problem.

The issue, then, is not that France lacks energy, talent, or ambition. It is that these resources are not integrated. The energy of the street has no structured channel into policy. The talent of the civil service is trapped in silos that discourage cross-sectoral collaboration and local experimentation. The Cartesian clarity of debate generates heat but rarely light. The system is rich in assets and poor in the architecture that would allow those assets to combine into something greater than their sum.

This is the integration deficit at its most tangible. And at the heart of that deficit lies a tension that French political culture has never fully confronted.

1.5 The Hidden Tension: Equality vs. Adaptability

France's republican tradition treats equality as a first principle. The motto is carved onto every public building:

Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité

. And in the dominant interpretation, equality has come to mean something quite specific: uniformity. The same rules for everyone, everywhere. The same rights, the same obligations, the same public services, regardless of local circumstance. Any deviation from this uniformity is suspected of undermining the universal character of the Republic itself.

This is a noble instinct. It protects against local tyrannies, prevents a patchwork of privileges, and reflects a deep commitment to the equal dignity of every citizen. But it also creates a structural problem that the reform loop makes painfully visible.

Uniform solutions, by their nature, cannot be adapted to diverse local realities. What works in the dense urban fabric of the Île-de-France may be disastrous in a depopulating rural département. What is reasonable for a young professional in Lyon may be untenable for a single parent in a peri-urban zone with no public transport. When the centre imposes a uniform rule, it guarantees that the rule will fit some contexts badly. Those who are poorly served by the rule experience it not as equal treatment but as institutional indifference—as a state that claims to speak for everyone while ignoring their particular lives.

The result is the collision that feeds the loop. Uniform solutions collide with diverse realities. The collision produces resistance. Resistance, in the absence of structured deliberative channels, becomes protest. Protest, amplified by the political spectacle, forces the centre to retreat—or to push through with such visible disregard for opposition that the legitimacy wound deepens.

This is not an argument against equality. It is an argument that the current understanding of equality—equality as sameness—is making the system less capable of delivering what equality actually promises: a state that serves all its citizens well. A more adaptive republic would not abandon universalism. It would deepen it, by learning to distinguish between the principles that must be uniform and the implementation that must be context-sensitive. That distinction is currently absent from French governance culture. Building it is one of the central tasks of the integration architecture this report proposes.

1.6 The Real Question

At this point, a familiar impatience may arise.

So what is the answer? Which reforms should France adopt? What should the government do?

The argument of this report is that the very form of these questions is part of the problem. They assume that the next decree, the next reform package, the next moment of executive decisiveness will break the loop—when all evidence suggests that the loop is generated by the system's architecture, not by the content of any particular policy.

The real question is not "What should France reform next?" It is "How does France become capable of sustaining the reforms it already knows it needs?" The challenge is not to identify the correct policy—though good policy matters. The challenge is to build the integration capacity that allows any policy to be translated intelligently into local reality, to absorb and learn from dissent, and to persist long enough to deliver results.

The rest of this report is devoted to that question. It diagnoses the integration deficit in its outer and inner dimensions. It describes what rebuilding integration capacity would look like in practice. It names the political immune system that will resist any such effort. And it proposes a concrete first step: a set of territorial integration pilots designed to demonstrate, below the threshold of national spectacle, that a different way of governing is possible—and that it works.

France does not need more decisions. It needs decisions that survive contact with reality. That is not a matter of will. It is a matter of architecture.

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2. The Integration Deficit: A New Diagnosis

2.1 What "Integration Capacity" Means

The term "integration" has a bureaucratic ring. In European policy circles, it often refers to the coordination of immigrants into host societies, or the harmonisation of regulations across member states. That is not what is meant here.

Integration capacity, in the sense that matters for France's current situation, is the ability of a governance system to connect. To connect the centre to the territory—so that national decisions are informed by local knowledge and adapted to local conditions. To connect decision to legitimacy—so that those affected by a policy have meaningful input into its design and feel ownership of its outcomes. To connect critique to co-creation—so that the energy of dissent, which France possesses in abundance, becomes a resource for better policy rather than a veto on all change. And to connect symbolic ambition to functional delivery—so that what is announced in Paris becomes what is experienced in the lives of citizens.

When integration capacity is high, a society can absorb conflict, translate abstract goals into concrete improvements, and sustain reforms long enough for them to work. When it is low, even the most intelligent policy collapses under the weight of its own imposition. The reform is announced, the street fills, and the government retreats. Not because the policy was wrong, but because the system lacked the connective tissue to make it legitimate, local, and durable.

The central metaphor of this report is that France is a **high-energy system with no integration layer**. The energy is everywhere. It is in the intellectual brilliance of the *grandes écoles* graduates who design the reforms. It is in the passion of the street protests that oppose them. It is in the ambition of the President who stakes his mandate on transformation. It is in the civic engagement of citizens who feel deeply about the direction of their country. This is not a society suffering from apathy, passivity, or a shortage of ideas. It is a society crackling with intensity.

But intensity without architecture is not a strategy. It is a storm. And France has been living inside that storm for decades, mistaking the thunder for debate and the lightning for decisiveness. The integration deficit is the absence of the structures, habits, and institutions that would channel all that energy into outcomes that last.

This deficit has two dimensions—outer and inner—and they feed each other in a loop that is as stable as it is destructive.

2.2 The Missing Translation Layer

Before examining each dimension separately, it is useful to identify the single most important architectural gap. It sits between the national decision and the local reality—and currently, in France, almost nothing occupies that space.

A national policy is, by necessity, abstract. It is drafted in Paris by highly trained generalists who must design rules that apply, in principle, to the entire territory. But the territory is not uniform. The conditions of a

quartier prioritaire

in Marseille are not those of a wine-growing commune in the Gironde. The infrastructure needs of a mountain village in the Hautes-Alpes are not those of a tech hub in the Toulouse suburbs. A reform that makes perfect sense on the drawing board of a ministry must, at some point, be translated—adapted, contextualised, embedded—into the specific realities of the places where it will actually operate.

In a healthy governance system, this translation is performed by a thick middle layer: regional authorities with real autonomy, local governments with fiscal capacity, trusted intermediary organisations that bridge state and society, and a culture of pragmatic adaptation that allows frontline public servants to adjust rules to circumstances without waiting for permission from headquarters.

France has systematically stripped this middle layer of its substance. The Jacobin tradition, reinforced by centuries of centralising instinct, concentrates authority at the summit and then wonders why the base does not recognise itself in the decisions that descend upon it. The

échelons

that do exist—communes, intercommunalités, départements, régions—overlap in ways that confuse responsibility, compete for resources, and still leave vast gaps in the capacity to translate national intention into local action.

The result is a system with a powerful brain and a weak body. The decision is strong. The translation is weak. The implementation is fragile. This is not a philosophical observation. It is an architectural description of why the French Reform Loop repeats.

2.3 Outer Deficit: The Hardware

Outer capacity is the institutional and physical infrastructure through which collective decisions travel from intention to outcome. It includes the distribution of authority across levels of government, the information systems that allow policymakers to see what is happening on the ground, the administrative pipelines that deliver services, and the legal frameworks that enable—or prevent—experimentation.

When outer capacity is high, a government can design a policy in the centre, translate it intelligently at the regional and local levels, adapt it to context, implement it efficiently, and learn from the results. When outer capacity is low, the centre decrees and the periphery endures—sometimes obeys, sometimes resists, rarely co-creates.

France's outer deficit is not primarily a question of competence. The French state employs capable, dedicated people at every level. The deficit is structural. It is the result of a system that centralises authority while fragmenting the administrative landscape, that controls tightly from above while providing weak coordination laterally, and that prizes uniformity over adaptability to the point where local innovation becomes nearly impossible.

The hyper-centralisation is well known. Paris remains the gravitational centre of political, economic, and cultural life to a degree unmatched in other large European nations. Major policy decisions are taken by a small circle of actors in the executive branch, often with limited consultation beyond the capital. The

préfets

, who represent the state in the territories, are appointed by and report to Paris; their role is more about ensuring compliance than enabling local initiative. The fiscal autonomy of regions and intercommunalités is among the lowest in the OECD. When a mayor wants to experiment with a new approach to urban transport or social housing, the path to doing so winds through a labyrinth of national regulations, subventions conditionnées, and administrative approvals that can take years to navigate.

At the same time, the administrative landscape is cluttered with overlapping layers—the famous

mille-feuille territorial

—that confuse accountability without distributing meaningful power. A citizen struggling with a failed public service often has no idea which level of government is responsible, because in practice, no single level is. Responsibility is shared, which means it is diffused, which means it is avoided.

The absence of a culture of policy prototyping compounds the problem. The French legislative process is designed to produce national laws, uniformly applicable, after exhaustive debate in Paris. There is no strong tradition of safe-to-fail experimentation at the regional level, where a new approach can be tested on a small scale, evaluated honestly, and either abandoned without political catastrophe or scaled with evidence of success. The rare experiments that do occur—the

expérimentations

authorised under Article 37-1 of the Constitution or through specific legislative clauses—remain marginal, under-funded, and largely ignored by the national political conversation.

The missing middle layer is not just an administrative inconvenience. It is a structural explanation for why French reforms so often feel imposed. There are too few institutions with the legitimacy, the resources, and the local knowledge to take a national framework and make it work in a specific place. The decision jumps directly from the minister's cabinet to the citizen's doorstep, and because no translation occurred along the way, the citizen experiences the policy as an alien intrusion. The

gilets jaunes

were not wrong to feel that the fuel tax had been designed without them. They were accurately perceiving an integration failure.

2.4 Inner Deficit: The Operating System

If the outer deficit is the missing hardware—the translation layer, the territorial capacity, the experimentation infrastructure—the inner deficit is the missing software. It is the collective cognitive, emotional, and cultural capacity with which the French political system perceives, interprets, and responds to complexity.

France does not suffer from a passivity of mind. On the contrary. The country possesses one of the world's most sophisticated traditions of critical thought. Cartesian scepticism—the systematic doubt that questions all received authority—is not an imported academic fashion. It is woven into the national intellectual identity. The capacity to analyse, to critique, to unmask hidden interests, to demand that power justify itself: these are real assets. They are essential to democratic health. No serious analysis of France's difficulties should begin by pathologising its critical tradition.

But critical intelligence without a constructive channel is like a powerful engine without a transmission. It generates enormous torque, but none of it reaches the wheels. France's inner deficit is not that citizens mistrust authority—a certain scepticism of power is civically necessary. It is that the system provides no structured pathway through which that mistrust can be converted into co-creation. Mistrust generates heat. It fills the airwaves with denunciation. It fills the streets with crowds. But it does not, in the current architecture, generate better legislation, more responsive institutions, or reforms that survive.

It is useful to distinguish between two forms of mistrust. **Epistemic mistrust** is the healthy questioning of claims, the demand for evidence, the refusal to accept authority on its own terms. This is the Cartesian inheritance, and it is a democratic resource. **Systemic mistrust** is the condition in which no institution is believed to be acting in good faith, no process is considered legitimate, and no outcome is accepted as fair—regardless of the evidence. Systemic mistrust is not a cognitive stance. It is a social climate. And in France, the climate has been deteriorating for decades.

This deterioration is intimately connected to the nature of the French political spectacle. The national political arena does not function as a processor. It functions as an amplifier. It amplifies conflict—every disagreement becomes a moral drama, every strike a referendum on the government's legitimacy. It amplifies symbolism—the President's word, the minister's rhetorical flourish, the deputy's indignation—while providing almost no visibility into the slow, unglamorous work of implementation and adaptation. And it amplifies the emotional temperature of public life, making calm deliberation feel like a betrayal of conviction, and compromise like a surrender of principle.

This is not the fault of the media alone, or of a particular political style. It is an emergent property of a system in which the symbolic level—the realm of national rhetoric, presidential authority, and ideological clarity—has become almost entirely disconnected from the functional level where policies actually touch lives. The President announces a great transformation; the citizen experiences a deteriorating bus service. The gap between the two is the integration deficit made visible. And the spectacle thrives in that gap, filling it with noise rather than narrowing it with action.

The Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat of 2019–20 offers a revealing case. Under the pressure of the *gilets jaunes* crisis, the government convened 150 randomly selected citizens to deliberate on climate policy. The process was serious, well-facilitated, and produced a set of ambitious, thoughtful proposals. It was a demonstration that French citizens, when given the architecture to deliberate rather than just denounce, are more than capable of complex, future-oriented reasoning. Many of the Convention's proposals were partially or fully adopted into the Climate and Resilience Law. But key recommendations—including those touching on the most politically sensitive areas—were ignored or diluted. The executive treated the Convention as a consultative exercise, not as a partner in co-legislation. The result was a residue of cynicism: another proof, for those who needed proof, that the state asks citizens for their views and then does what it intended all along.

This is not an argument against citizens' assemblies. It is an illustration of what happens when the inner operating system remains unchanged: even a well-designed deliberative process is absorbed into the spectacle rather than allowed to transform the decision-making architecture. The inner deficit is not a shortage of good intentions. It is a lack of institutional structures that take deliberation seriously enough to give it real weight, and a lack of cultural habits that value synthesis over victory.

2.5 How the Two Deficits Reinforce Each Other

The outer and inner deficits are not independent. They form a reinforcing loop that tightens with each iteration.

The outer deficit—the hyper-centralised, territorial-blind, translation-poor hardware—produces policies that fail locally. A fuel tax that made sense in the abstract collides with the realities of peri-urban life and triggers a national crisis. A pension reform that looks necessary on the ministry's spreadsheets is experienced as an assault by millions of workers whose specific circumstances were never genuinely considered. These failures are not accidents. They are the predictable consequence of a system that cannot translate.

When policies fail, trust erodes. Citizens conclude, not unreasonably, that the state does not understand them and does not care to try. Systemic mistrust deepens. The inner operating system, already prone to amplifying conflict rather than processing it, becomes even more volatile. The next reform begins with an even lower

stock of legitimacy, making failure more likely still.

In response, the centre typically does not decentralise or invest in translation. It does the opposite. It tightens control. It doubles down on the spectacle of decisive action, using the tools of executive authority—the *49.3*, the *ordonnances*, the presidential address—to push through policies over the heads of a resistant population. This produces short-term victories that are also long-term accelerants of the loop. The reform is passed. The legitimacy wound deepens. The next collision is prepared.

Breaking this cycle requires addressing both dimensions simultaneously. Upgrading the outer hardware without upgrading the inner operating system would produce better-designed policies that still collide with the wall of systemic mistrust. Cultivating a more deliberative political culture without the institutional infrastructure to translate deliberation into implementation would produce more frustration, not less. The integration deficit is a single thing with two faces. It must be met with a coherent response.

The next section describes what that response looks like in practice: how France can build the outer translation layer, cultivate the inner deliberative capacity, and create living testbeds where integration proves itself.

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3. What Building Integration Capacity Looks Like

The integration deficit diagnosis carries a practical implication: if France's core problem is not a shortage of decisions but a lack of connective architecture, then the central task is not to produce a better list of reforms. It is to build the translation layer, the deliberative infrastructure, and the territorial capacity that make reforms viable in the first place—and then to let that capacity reveal what is worth doing next.

This section describes what that investment looks like in practice. It is organised around three categories: upgrading the outer translation hardware, cultivating the inner deliberative operating system, and creating living testbeds where the two prove themselves together. None of these are sectors. None belong to a single ministry. They are the enabling substrate on which future sectoral decisions will either integrate or unravel.

3.1 Upgrading Outer Translation: Territorial Rebalancing and Mediating Institutions

If France's outer deficit is the absence of a translation layer between national intention and local reality, then the highest-return investment is to build one. This is not about cosmetic decentralisation or adding another *échelon* to the already cluttered administrative map. It is about giving the territories—the *intercommunalités*, the *bassins de vie*, the régions—the three things they currently lack: genuine authority, fiscal capacity, and the institutional density to mediate between the state and the citizen.

Real Territorial Authority. France has layers of local government, but their powers are circumscribed and overlapping. A *maire* may be the most visible representative of the Republic, but when it comes to housing, transport, or energy policy, the levers are held in Paris or distributed across so many competing bodies that no one is accountable. The first upgrade is to clarify responsibility and give it teeth. Regions and intercommunalités should be granted genuine decision-making power over integrated spatial planning—housing, mobility, energy, and economic development treated as a single design space—with the legal and fiscal instruments to act. This is not federalism. It is functional subsidiarity: the principle that decisions should be taken at the level where the relevant information and the affected populations live.

Fiscal Autonomy. Real authority requires real budgets. Currently, local government finance in France is a thicket of conditional grants, earmarked subsidies, and centrally determined tax bases. This gives the state enormous leverage—and strips localities of the capacity to set priorities, experiment with new approaches, or build the administrative muscle that long-term planning requires. A capacity-oriented reform would shift a meaningful share of public revenue to the territorial level, paired with transparent accountability for outcomes. The goal is not to starve the centre but to give the periphery the resources to translate national ambitions into local action.

Rebuilding the Mediating Middle. Between the ministry in Paris and the citizen on the street, France needs more institutions that can bridge. This means investing in the capacity of local governments, but also in the ecosystem of associations, *syndicats*, professional networks, and civic organisations that form the connective tissue of a healthy democracy. The *gilets jaunes* emerged from a vacuum of representation: the unions did not speak for peri-urban commuters, the parties did not mobilise them, and the state did not see them. Filling that vacuum requires a deliberate strategy of institutional investment—supporting the organisations that can aggregate interests, facilitate dialogue, and carry local knowledge upward.

A Culture of Policy Prototyping. The French legislative imagination defaults to the national law. This is deeply embedded in republican culture: the idea that the general will, once expressed, applies uniformly. But complex problems do not yield to uniform solutions, and the attempt to impose them generates the backlash the Reform Loop describes. An alternative is available: a systematic culture of experimentation before legislation. The constitutional and legal mechanisms already exist in embryonic form—Article 72 allows territorial authorities to derogate from national regulations for experimental purposes. But the practice remains marginal, under-funded, and politically invisible. A serious translation upgrade would make territorial experimentation a routine, respected, and well-evaluated part of the policy process. Pilot first. Evaluate honestly. Scale what works. Abandon what does not. This is not an assault on republican universalism. It is the method by which universal principles are made to work in a diverse territory.

Digital Infrastructure for Territorial Equity. A translation layer also needs information. The state cannot adapt to realities it cannot see. A national digital platform that integrates data across housing, transport, energy, health, and environmental indicators—accessible to both policymakers and citizens—would make visible the territorial variations that uniform policies currently ignore. This is not a Paris-centric dashboard for technocrats. It is a distributed information commons that empowers regions and municipalities to understand their own situations, model the likely effects of different policy choices, and coordinate with neighbours without waiting for instruction from above.

These five investments—real territorial authority, fiscal autonomy, a mediating middle, a culture of prototyping, and digital infrastructure—constitute a coherent outer translation upgrade. They are mutually reinforcing. Together, they would create the institutional tissue that currently does not exist between the national decision and the local reality. The policy would no longer jump from the minister's cabinet to the citizen's doorstep. It would travel through institutions that can adapt, explain, and embed. The translation layer would no longer be missing.

3.2 Cultivating Inner Integration: Deliberative Infrastructure

If the outer upgrade builds the hardware of translation, the inner upgrade builds the software of integration. France's political culture is rich in critique and poor in synthesis. The task is not to suppress the critical energy—that would be both impossible and undesirable—but to give it architecture. To build channels

through which dissent can become co-creation, and deliberation can become decision.

From Ad-Hoc Assemblies to Permanent Deliberative Bodies. The Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat demonstrated that ordinary citizens, when given time, information, and facilitation, are capable of grappling with complex, technically demanding questions and producing coherent, ambitious proposals. It also demonstrated that the executive, in the current configuration, is free to ignore them. The next step is not another one-off assembly convened at the President's discretion. It is the institutionalisation of deliberative democracy at multiple levels—national, regional, and local—with formal standing, guaranteed access to information, and a statutory right to a government response. A permanent Citizens' Chamber, or a network of regional deliberative councils, would shift the political operating system from one that occasionally consults to one that structurally integrates.

Mandatory Response and Iterative Refinement. The key design principle is that deliberation must have consequences. If a citizens' assembly produces recommendations, the government must respond publicly, explain which proposals it will adopt and which it will not, and give reasons that can be scrutinised. This is not a veto. It is a transparency mechanism that forces the executive to engage seriously rather than performatively. Over time, the process becomes iterative: the assembly refines its proposals in light of the government's response, the government adapts its policies in light of the assembly's reasoning, and trust accumulates through repeated, visible interactions.

Futures Literacy as Civic Competence. A political culture that is perpetually surprised by events cannot govern well. France needs to invest in the capacity to think about the future in a structured, pluralistic way—not to predict what will happen, but to expand the range of plausible futures that can be imagined and prepared for. Futures literacy programmes, integrated into schools, universities, public administration training, and community organisations, would gradually shift the collective operating system from reactive to anticipatory. This is not a luxury. It is an essential component of a state that wants to govern rather than be governed by events.

Channels for Critique That Lead to Synthesis. Perhaps the most delicate and important inner capacity investment is cultural. France's tradition of critique—of *contestation*—is a genuine strength. But it needs to be complemented by a tradition of synthesis—of taking the best insights from opposing positions and weaving them into something more robust than either could produce alone. This cannot be mandated. But it can be cultivated. Cross-ideological funding covenants, which require structurally diverse stakeholders to co-design projects in order to access public funds, are one mechanism. Training in facilitation, mediation, and systems thinking for public servants, journalists, and civic leaders is another. The goal is not to eliminate conflict. It is to give conflict a productive architecture—to transform the amplifier into a processor.

3.3 Living Testbeds: Where Integration Proves Itself

Capacity does not develop in the abstract. It develops through application—through the attempt to solve real, pressing problems in real places, using the new outer and inner tools together. France needs a portfolio of ambitious, integrated projects that serve as testbeds where translation and deliberation prove their value. These are not "sectors" to be funded. They are arenas where the integration capacity this report argues for can be demonstrated, refined, and made visible to the rest of the country.

The Energy Transition as Territorial Integration. France's energy future—nuclear, renewable, decentralised—will be decided in Paris. But its implementation will unfold in the territories: where wind turbines are sited or not, where grids are upgraded, where jobs in fossil-dependent regions are lost and new ones created. A capacity-oriented approach would select a handful of regions—perhaps Occitanie with its solar and wind potential, or Grand Est with its industrial transition challenge—and give them the authority, the resources, and the deliberative infrastructure to design their own energy transition pathways within a national framework. The national government sets the carbon targets and the regulatory standards. The region, in collaboration with its municipalities, businesses, unions, and citizens, decides how to meet them. The result is not a uniform national plan imposed from above but a federated ecosystem of transition strategies, each adapted to local conditions, each building legitimacy as it builds infrastructure.

Integrated Mobility, Housing, and Land Use. France's housing crisis, transport bottlenecks, and territorial inequalities are not separate problems. They are a single spatial system fragmented across policy silos. A capacity-oriented approach would create integrated planning frameworks at the *bassin de vie* level—the scale at which people actually live, work, and move. This means treating housing, transport, energy efficiency, and public services as a single design challenge, with a single accountable authority and a single participatory process. A handful of territories could pioneer this integrated approach, demonstrating that it is not only more coherent but also faster, cheaper, and more legitimate than the current fragmented model. The outer capacity (planning authority, fiscal tools, digital coordination) and the inner capacity (citizen deliberation on spatial trade-offs, cross-sectoral collaboration) would develop together. The result would be visible, livable, and replicable.

The

Transition Écologique

as a Legitimacy-Building Project. France's ecological transition will be the defining challenge of the coming decades. It will require changes in how people heat their homes, move through their territory, and earn their living. If handled as a series of national decrees—tax this, ban that, mandate the other—it will trigger the Reform Loop with increasing intensity. If handled as an integration project, it becomes an opportunity to rebuild the relationship between the state and its citizens. The living testbeds are the laboratories where this alternative approach is developed. They will not always succeed. Some experiments

will fail. Some regions will make choices others reject. That is the point. The testbeds exist to learn, and to make that learning visible, so that the nation as a whole can discover what works without gambling its entire social contract on a single roll of the dice.

What unifies these three investment domains—outer translation, inner deliberation, and living testbeds—is that they are all investments in the system's ability to integrate. They do not compete with the urgent challenges France faces. They are the prerequisite for any challenge to be met without triggering the Reform Loop that has consumed so much ambition.

The next section confronts the uncomfortable reality that has been lurking beneath this entire discussion: even the most intelligently designed integration investments will encounter fierce resistance from the political immune system that the current architecture sustains. Understanding that resistance—and designing around it—is the subject to which we now turn.

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4. The Political Immune System: Why Integration Fails

4.1 The Jacobin Immune Response

Every political order develops reflexes that protect its existing distribution of power. In France, the most deeply embedded of these is the Jacobin instinct: the conviction that when a problem appears, the solution should be designed in Paris, stamped with the authority of the state, and applied uniformly across the territory. This is not a cynical posture. It is a sincere inheritance, passed down through centuries of state-building, from the revolutionaries who swept away feudal particularism to the Gaullist architects of the Fifth Republic who sought to give the nation a decisive executive. The Jacobin tradition is not a pathology. It is an identity.

But identities can become rigidities. The Jacobin immune response activates whenever a proposal shifts significant authority away from the centre. It does not announce itself as a defence of privilege. It speaks the language of republican universalism, of national solidarity, of the indivisibility of the Republic. It warns that decentralisation will create a patchwork of inequalities, that local elites will capture regional institutions, that the general interest will be dissolved into a thousand particularisms. These are not bad-faith arguments. They are genuine concerns, rooted in real historical experience. But they function, in practice, as an immune barrier that prevents the system from developing the very translation layer it needs.

The technocratic elite that staffs the upper reaches of the French state embodies this reflex. The *grands corps*—the Conseil d'État, the Inspection des Finances, the Cour des Comptes—recruit from a narrow band of *grandes écoles* and socialise their members into a culture of abstract, generalist excellence. These are talented, dedicated public servants. But their training and their career incentives reward the design of elegant national solutions, not the patient, messy work of territorial adaptation. A brilliant reform drafted in the Rue de Grenelle is legible and promotable. A successful local experiment in the Haute-Vienne is invisible. The immune system is not a conspiracy. It is a structure of incentives that makes centralisation feel like competence and devolution feel like abdication.

When a serious proposal for territorial rebalancing surfaces—real fiscal autonomy for régions, genuine decision-making power for intercommunalités, a statutory role for citizens' assemblies—the Jacobin immune response does not reject it outright. That would be crude. It praises the intention. It raises thoughtful questions about feasibility, equity, and constitutional compatibility. It commissions a study. The study takes two years. By the time it reports, the political window has closed, and the proposal joins the long list of French reforms that were promising in principle and impossible in practice.

4.2 The Spectacle Trap

If the Jacobin reflex defends the centre's authority, the spectacle trap ensures that any reform that does escape the centre becomes a symbolic battlefield rather than a functional improvement. The French national political arena is uniquely powerful—and uniquely dysfunctional. It amplifies everything. It amplifies the President's every utterance, the minister's every rhetorical flourish, the deputy's every moment of televised indignation. It transforms policy disagreements into moral dramas and political tactics into tests of republican virtue. But it does not process. It does not synthesise. It does not convert the energy of conflict into the architecture of compromise.

This is not a media problem, though the media ecosystem certainly contributes. It is a system property. Because so much authority is concentrated at the summit, every issue rises to the summit. Because every issue rises to the summit, every issue becomes a national spectacle. And because the spectacle rewards clarity, conviction, and conflict, it punishes the ambiguity, patience, and collaboration that integration requires. A minister who announces a bold decree is seen to be acting. A minister who spends two years facilitating a regional deliberation process, negotiating with local stakeholders, and piloting multiple approaches is invisible—until something goes wrong, at which point the invisible becomes a scandal.

The spectacle trap is intimately connected to the translation gap. When a policy is announced in Paris and applied uniformly, there is nothing local to mediate the public's reaction. The citizen's experience of the policy is direct, unmediated, and often negative. The spectacle then amplifies that negative experience, turning individual frustrations into national narratives of state failure. The president who promised transformation is now the president who imposed suffering. The loop tightens.

Crucially, the spectacle does not need to be deliberately manufactured by any particular actor. It is an emergent property of a system in which the symbolic level of politics—the presidential address, the legislative theatre, the televised debate—has become almost entirely detached from the functional level where policies touch lives. The spectacle fills the gap with noise. It makes the President simultaneously the most powerful figure in the state and the most exposed to every disappointment the state generates. The concentration of symbolic authority at the summit is, paradoxically, a source of immense fragility. The executive can command attention, but it cannot command the outcomes that would justify the attention it receives.

4.3 The Street as Unintegrated Energy

France possesses one of the world's most vibrant traditions of popular mobilisation. The capacity of French citizens to fill the streets, to strike, to make their presence felt at the heart of the capital, is not a failure of democracy. It is an expression of it—a sign that people care enough about public affairs to disrupt their own

lives in pursuit of political change. Many democracies would envy such civic energy. Many are dying for lack of it.

The problem is not that the street exists. The problem is that the street has become, in the current architecture, a veto rather than an input. The energy of mass mobilisation has no structured channel into the policy process. When a reform is announced and perceived as illegitimate, the options available to opponents are limited. They can vote—but the electoral calendar is slow and the President, once elected, governs with a parliamentary majority. They can lobby—but the

corps intermédiaires

that once aggregated and transmitted social demands (unions, professional associations, local notables) have steadily weakened over decades. What remains is the street. It is the last lever available when all other channels feel blocked.

And the street works, in a narrow sense. It can force the withdrawal of a carbon tax, the dilution of a pension reform, the resignation of a prime minister. But it cannot build. Each victory is a negation—a reform stopped, a policy reversed—not an affirmation of a shared future. Each mobilisation leaves behind a residue of bitterness: among the protesters who feel they were not heard until they screamed, and among the wider population who feel held hostage to the passions of a militant minority. The street protects against the worst impositions of a detached centre. It does not, and cannot, fill the integration deficit. It is a symptom of that deficit, not a solution to it.

The missing piece is the deliberative channel: the institutional space where protest energy can be converted into policy proposals, where grievances can be examined and translated into design specifications, and where the moral force of popular mobilisation can become the political legitimacy of durable reform. That channel does not currently exist in France, or exists only in embryonic, consultative forms that the executive is free to ignore. Until it is built, the street will remain simultaneously indispensable and insufficient—a permanent, exhausted warning that the system cannot hear what its citizens are saying.

4.4 Who Gains, Who Loses from Integration

To design around the immune system, one must first map it honestly. A capacity-oriented reform agenda—building the translation layer, the deliberative infrastructure, and the territorial testbeds—would reconfigure the French state in ways that create clear winners and equally clear losers. Naming them is not an act of hostility. It is a prerequisite for strategy.

Those who stand to gain are the diffuse and currently under-served constituencies that a more integrated system would empower. Territorial communities, from rural *communes* to peri-urban *bassins de vie*, would gain real authority over the decisions that shape their daily lives. Small and medium-sized enterprises, currently caught between complex national regulations and weak local support structures, would find in

strengthened intercommunalités a more responsive partner than the distant ministry. Citizens seeking reliable public services—the working parent who needs functional childcare, the elderly resident who depends on local health infrastructure—would benefit from a state that is present and adaptable rather than merely omnipresent in rhetoric. Reformers who have watched their best efforts dissolve in the acid of the Reform Loop would finally have an architecture that gives their reforms a chance to survive. And the citizens whose only current channel is the street would gain a deliberative seat at the table—not as a replacement for protest, but as a complement that makes protest less frequently necessary.

Those who stand to lose are more concentrated, more institutionally articulate, and better positioned to resist. First, the Parisian administrative fiefdoms. A genuine shift of authority to the territories would diminish the power of the central ministries, the *grands corps*, and the technocratic networks that currently shape national policy with limited accountability. The loss is real. The individuals involved are often talented and public-spirited. But their institutional interests are aligned with the preservation of the Jacobin architecture, and they will defend it, consciously or not, with the full repertoire of bureaucratic delay.

Second, the symbolic politicians who thrive on the spectacle. The national arena rewards the grand gesture, the televised confrontation, the presidential announcement. A system that moves significant decision-making to the regional level, that privileges slow deliberation over rapid decree, and that measures success by policy half-life rather than rhetorical impact, is a system that offers fewer opportunities for this kind of political performance. Some politicians will adapt. Some will resist.

Third, the elite networks that broker access to centralised power. When decisions are made in Paris by a small circle of actors, access to that circle is a valuable commodity. Lobbyists, senior civil servants moving between public and private sectors, and influential figures in the Parisian establishment all benefit from a system in which influence is concentrated and tradeable. A more polycentric, transparent, and participatory system would erode those rents. The defence of the current architecture will not be framed in terms of privilege. It will be framed in terms of efficiency, expertise, and the need for strong national leadership. But the material interests beneath those framings should not be ignored.

The missing middle deserves a special note. The very mediating institutions that an integration upgrade would strengthen—unions, professional associations, regional civil society organisations—are today weak and often mistrusted. Rebuilding them is not simply a matter of funding or legal recognition, though both matter. It is a generational project of institutional regeneration. The current weakness of the middle layer is both a cause and a consequence of the integration deficit. Addressing it will require patience, resources, and a tolerance for slow progress that is itself a test of the adaptive capacity the reform seeks to build.

4.5 The Narrative Strategy

Given the immune system described above, the way the integration agenda is

talked about

is not peripheral to its success. It is central. A reform proposal that announces itself as a radical break with the Jacobin tradition—explicitly anti-Parisian, explicitly decentralising, explicitly a critique of republican universalism—will trigger every immune response simultaneously. It will be painted as a threat to national unity, a surrender to localism, and an abandonment of the equality that the Republic guarantees.

The task, therefore, is to frame the agenda not as a rupture but as a **deepening**—a fulfilment of republican promises that the current architecture, for all its centralised ambition, has failed to keep. The argument is not that universalism is wrong. It is that universalism, to be real, must be embodied. A Republic that claims to serve all citizens equally but cannot adapt its policies to the lives those citizens actually lead is not living up to its own standard. The integration architecture—the translation layer, the deliberative bodies, the territorial capacity—is not a departure from republican principles. It is the condition for those principles to become tangible.

This framing must be paired with an honest acknowledgment of France's critical tradition. The Cartesian instinct to question authority is not an obstacle to integration. It is the cultural foundation on which integration must be built. The goal is not to produce a docile population that accepts whatever the state proposes. It is to produce a deliberative infrastructure that takes critique seriously—that gives it a structured, consequential role in shaping the policies it currently only opposes. The message is:

You are right to demand that power justify itself. Here is a mechanism through which that demand can become a regular, institutionalised part of how France governs itself.

The narrative must also speak to each of the policy mindsets that coexist uneasily in the French political landscape. To the order-and-stability mindset, it must show that integration increases legal coherence and administrative reliability—that algorithmic legal pruning and territorial clarification reduce the chaos of overlapping competencies. To the achievement-and-efficiency mindset, it must show clear pathways to measurable outcomes: reduced decision-to-implementation times, higher rates of reform survival, better returns on public expenditure. To the inclusion-and-care mindset, it must embed equity and participation as design requirements throughout—polycentric governance is inherently more participatory than centralised command, and the living testbeds must include communities, not bypass them.

The core message is deceptively simple:

France is not weak. It is disconnected. The state has never been more present in the lives of its citizens and never felt more absent. The task is not to choose between a strong state and a responsive state. It is to build the architecture that makes the strong state responsive—and therefore legitimate, and therefore durable.

This is a message that can be spoken from any political platform without contradiction. And it carries the full integration agenda inside it.

The political immune system is powerful, but it is not omnipotent. It can be worked with, routed around, and in some cases gently decommissioned—provided one understands its structure and designs accordingly. The next section turns to the concrete mechanisms of that design: the transition architecture that gives the integration agenda a chance of surviving contact with the system it intends to upgrade.

5. Working with the Grain: Transition Architecture for France

5.1 The Principle: Bypass the Spectacle

There is a recurring temptation in French politics: the belief that the right reform, announced with sufficient authority by a determined executive, can cut through the cycle of resistance. This belief is understandable. It draws on the Gaullist confidence that the President embodies the nation and that the Republic's institutions, properly wielded, can overcome particular interests. But half a century of experience—from Juppé to Macron—suggests that the Reform Loop is not impressed by presidential will. The spectacle devours determination as readily as hesitation.

The alternative is not to abandon ambition. It is to change how ambition is introduced. In Germany, the immune system is bureaucratic inertia—layers of federal coordination, overlapping competencies, a culture that equates slowness with prudence. There, the strategy is to build administrative capacity beneath the threshold of political controversy. In France, the immune system is the national political spectacle. Every significant reform becomes a symbolic battle, amplified by a media ecosystem that rewards conflict, and processed through a centralised arena that has almost no capacity for synthesis. The spectacle does not block change; it

consumes

it, turning policies into performances and opponents into moral enemies before the first euro is spent or the first service is delivered.

The principle for France, then, is: **bypass the spectacle**. Start where attention is low. Build where results can be demonstrated before they are debated. Create visible proofs of a different way of governing that become harder to dismiss than to imitate. This is not a tactic of stealth out of a lack of democratic conviction. It is a recognition that the national arena, in its current configuration, is structurally incapable of processing complex, adaptive reform. To bring the reform to the arena too early is to feed the spectacle, not to change the country.

This principle translates into a specific operational doctrine: **Low-Visibility High-Learning Zones**. These are territorial spaces—a région, a cluster of intercommunalités, a *bassin de vie*—that are given the authority, resources, and legal flexibility to develop integrated governance approaches away from the national spotlight. They are not secret. They are simply not front-page news. Their work is technical, iterative, and locally embedded. They do not seek presidential endorsements or legislative fanfare. They seek results. And when the results are visible—when a region has demonstrably shortened permitting times, built a functioning citizen deliberation process, or designed an energy transition pathway that commands local legitimacy—then, and only then, does the national conversation begin. But it begins on different terms. It begins with evidence, not prophecy.

This doctrine is the organising logic for the four mechanisms that follow.

5.2 Regional Trojan Horses

The most effective vehicle for bypassing the spectacle is the region. Not the région as a mere administrative layer in the current

mille-feuille

, but as a genuine laboratory for integrated governance. The term "Trojan Horse" is used here deliberately, not to imply deception, but to name a strategy: an initiative whose surface appearance is legible and acceptable to the existing system, while its deeper logic quietly builds the new architecture.

Consider a concrete example. The French government could invite a small number of régions to become **"Territoires d'Excellence Administrative"**—a name so anodyne, so reassuringly technocratic, that it would attract minimal ideological fire. The stated mandate would be to simplify administrative procedures, improve coordination between *échelons*, and reduce the regulatory burden on citizens and businesses. This is a mission that the order-and-stability mindset can support (it makes the existing system more rational), the achievement-and-efficiency mindset can champion (it reduces costs and delays), and the inclusion-and-care mindset can accept (it makes the state more accessible).

But inside this wrapper, the territories would carry a more transformative payload. They would receive genuine authority over integrated spatial planning—housing, mobility, energy, and economic development treated as a single design challenge. They would be equipped with a regional digital twin, providing real-time visibility into resource flows and social indicators. They would be required to establish a standing citizen deliberative body with a formal government response obligation. And they would be given a block grant with significant fiscal autonomy, replacing a patchwork of conditional subsidies, to align resources with locally determined priorities. The "Excellence Administrative" framing would be accurate—these territories would indeed be pioneers of better administration. But the better administration they pioneer would be the translation layer France currently lacks.

The same pattern can be applied to the deliberative infrastructure. Rather than announcing a national Citizens' Chamber that would immediately become a constitutional battleground, the government could embed permanent deliberative bodies within the governance structures of the pilot territories—and then, as they demonstrate their value, allow the practice to spread. The framing is not "democratic revolution" but "improving public consultation." The substance is a structural shift in how legitimacy is generated.

Occitanie, Grand Est, and perhaps Bretagne or Pays de la Loire are plausible candidates. Each faces a distinct configuration of challenges: Occitanie with its renewable energy potential and demographic growth, Grand Est with its industrial transition and cross-border interdependencies, Bretagne with its strong regional

identity and agricultural transformation. The point is not to select the most willing regions, but to select regions where the challenges are real, the civic infrastructure exists, and the contrast between old and new governance logics will be demonstrable.

5.3 Cross-Ideological Funding Covenants

One of the immune system's most effective strategies is to keep potential coalitions for change fragmented. The environmental NGO, the agricultural union, the industrial employer federation, and the municipal mayor all operate in separate worlds. They speak different languages. They mistrust each other's intentions. They encounter each other primarily as adversaries in the spectacle, where conflict is rewarded and collaboration is invisible. As long as they remain in their silos, they can be managed, placated, or ignored individually. The immune system can handle distributed complaints. What it cannot easily handle is a coalition of structurally opposed actors making a shared, constructive demand.

The mechanism for creating such coalitions is the cross-ideological funding covenant. The principle is straightforward: a significant portion of public investment funds, particularly those directed toward the territorial integration pilots, should be made available

only

to project consortia that include structurally diverse stakeholders who must co-design the proposal and share accountability for its outcomes.

This is not a suggestion that the Confédération Paysanne and the MEDEF should be forced to hold hands. It is a suggestion that the money should be conditional on their doing the hard work of joint problem-solving—and on producing something concrete from it. The funding covenant functions as a forcing device. It creates an economic incentive for exactly the kind of cross-silo collaboration that the spectacle discourages and the current architecture does not require.

The mechanism has several advantages in the French context. First, it provides political cover. When an environmental NGO and a manufacturing association jointly sponsor a regional energy project, neither can easily denounce the other's motives without undermining their shared initiative. The project develops a political resilience that a single-actor initiative lacks. Second, it surfaces hidden common ground. Professionals who spend months working together on a concrete challenge—designing a local transport network, planning a housing development, structuring a skills training programme—often discover that their ideological caricatures of each other dissolve in the face of practical necessity. Third, it builds relationships that persist beyond the individual project, gradually weaving the connective tissue of a more integrated political culture.

The covenant approach is not a substitute for democratic politics. It is an infrastructure for making democratic politics more productive than performative. It gives the mediating middle—the unions, the professional associations, the civic organisations—a concrete stake in building rather than blocking. Over time, the experience of joint creation can begin to shift the default posture of French public life from opposition to co-production, at least in those domains where the covenants operate.

5.4 Safe-to-Fail Pilots

The French state has a well-known aversion to experimentation—not because French policymakers lack creativity, but because experimentation implies the possibility of visible failure, and visible failure, in a system governed by the spectacle, becomes political liability. The result is a legislative culture that moves directly from concept to national law, with no intermediate step where an idea can be tested, refined, or quietly abandoned without anyone losing face.

A safe-to-fail pilot is an experiment deliberately designed to overcome this aversion. It is bounded in scope—a specific territory, a limited timeframe, a predefined set of activities. It is explicitly framed as a learning exercise, not a policy commitment. Its participants, from the regional prefect to the citizen panel members, are publicly assured that mixed results are expected and that honest failure will not be punished. And it has political cover: a senior minister or regional president publicly declares that the pilot is an experiment, that learning is the primary output, and that no career will be damaged by an unexpected finding.

The key design innovation is the evaluation framework. French pilots have traditionally been judged by whether they achieve their stated targets—so many housing units built, so many tonnes of carbon reduced. A capacity-oriented pilot adds a different metric: **policy half-life**. How long does a reform or initiative survive before being reversed, diluted, or abandoned? A pilot that achieves its environmental targets but collapses politically the moment the funding covenant expires has a short half-life—and is a failure in capacity terms, however impressive its technical metrics. A pilot whose outcomes are modest but whose governance architecture proves durable and begins to spread to neighbouring territories has a long half-life—and is a success, however unspectacular its initial numbers.

The qualitative scale introduced earlier provides a shared language: short half-life (weeks or months, like the carbon tax), medium half-life (partial survival with significant dilution, like aspects of the pension reform), long half-life (stable integration into the system's operating logic). The goal of the pilots is explicitly to move from short to long—to build the conditions under which reforms can age. This is not a metric that any French ministry currently tracks. Making it visible, and tying it to the pilots' governance design, is part of the capacity-building.

The Territorial Integration Pilots proposed in Section 7 are the primary vehicle for this approach. They would be designated as safe-to-fail zones, with regulatory exemptions where necessary, protected evaluation frameworks, and a learning mandate. Their function is not to produce a blueprint that the rest of France must follow. It is to generate visible, documented, transparent experience with a different governance model—and to let that experience speak for itself.

5.5 Scaling by Attraction

The French tradition of reform-by-decree assumes that once a good idea has been identified and validated at the centre, it should be generalised across the nation through legislation. This is the replication-by-mandate model. It is consistent with the Jacobin architecture. It is also, as the Reform Loop demonstrates, a reliable generator of resistance. Mandated replication threatens local autonomy. It invites performative compliance without genuine ownership. It hands the spectacle a ready-made target: another Parisian imposition, however well-intentioned, to be resisted on principle.

The alternative is scaling by attraction. Instead of mandating that all régions adopt the governance model developed in the pilot territories, the central state makes the pilots visible, transparent, and accessible. Their results—both successes and failures—are published in forms that other régions can understand and learn from. Their methods are documented in ways that make replication straightforward. Their leaders and participants are supported to share their experience with peers. The state's role shifts from commander to enabler: it lowers the cost of voluntary adoption, celebrates early adopters, and creates conditions in which doing the new thing becomes easier and more rewarding than persisting with the old.

Scaling by attraction is slower than scaling by mandate in the short term. It does not produce a dramatic national announcement or a clean legislative text. But it is vastly more durable. A région that chooses to adopt an integrated governance framework after seeing it work in a neighbouring territoire is far more likely to implement it thoughtfully, invest in the necessary local capacity, and persist through difficulties than a région that is ordered to do so by a circular from Paris. The immune system is not triggered, because the system is not being attacked; it is being offered an upgrade that it can evaluate on its own terms.

Over time, as more régions adopt the new practices and adapt them to their own conditions, what began as an isolated experiment becomes a norm. The centre's role evolves from guardian of the uniform model to coordinator of a diverse but coherent network. The integration architecture spreads not because a President decrees it, but because enough territorial actors have experienced its value that the old way of governing becomes harder to justify. The Reform Loop, in those territories, slows. Policies begin to age. The spectacle, deprived of the fuel that uniform imposition provides, loses some of its heat.

This is a theory of change that requires patience. It asks the French state to tolerate diversity, to accept that some regions will move faster than others, and to resist the temptation to rush a successful experiment into premature national legislation. These are not instinctive postures for a system shaped by centuries of centralisation. But they are the postures of a system that wants to learn. And learning, in the end, is what the integration deficit most fundamentally obstructs.

The transition architecture described here—low-visibility zones, Trojan Horse wrappers, cross-ideological covenants, safe-to-fail pilots, and scaling by attraction—is not a formula for painless transformation. Any significant shift in how France governs itself will generate anxiety, resistance, and moments of visible conflict. These mechanisms are not a way to avoid those responses. They are a way to work with them, to channel France's immense political energy into the slow, patient construction of a system that can integrate what it currently amplifies.

The next section moves from architecture to action, outlining the concrete first step: the proposal for Territorial Integration Pilots and how they might be brought into being.

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6. A Concrete First Step: Territorial Integration Pilots

6.1 The Logic of the Pilot

A framework without a first step is a thought experiment. The integration agenda outlined in this report is deliberately ambitious: it proposes a structural shift in how the French state relates to its territory, its citizens, and its own political energy. But structural shifts do not begin everywhere at once. Attempting to impose them nationally would be to commit the very error this report diagnoses—another Parisian decree, another trigger for the Reform Loop, another reform consumed by the spectacle before it has a chance to prove itself.

The wiser path is to begin with contained, protected experiments that demonstrate the new logic in practice and let success do the work of persuasion. This section proposes the establishment of **Territoires d'Intégration Adaptative** (TIAs): a small number of geographically defined zones in which the outer translation layer, the inner deliberative infrastructure, and the living testbeds described in Section 4 can be developed in an integrated way, with regulatory flexibility, transparent evaluation, and an explicit mandate to learn.

The proposal is not speculative. It draws on precedents that already exist in French law and practice. Article 72 of the Constitution permits territorial authorities to derogate from national regulations for experimental purposes. The

expérimentations

authorised under Article 37-1 have allowed limited deviations in fields such as health and transport. What has been missing is the ambition to use these mechanisms at a systemic rather than sectoral scale, and the political will to protect them long enough for their results to become visible. The TIA concept fills that gap.

6.2 Selection Criteria

The pilots should not be selected purely on the basis of political convenience or enthusiasm. The goal is to create a credible proof of concept, and credibility depends on choosing contexts where the challenges are real, the conditions are representative, and the local capacity to engage seriously is present.

Five criteria should guide selection:

Problem density. The territory should face a meaningful cluster of interconnected challenges—for example, industrial transition combined with demographic decline, or housing pressure combined with transport bottlenecks, or renewable energy potential combined with land-use conflicts. The point is not to find the most distressed territory, but to find territories where the interconnectedness of challenges is unmistakable and the limitations of siloed approaches are visibly costly.

Existing civic infrastructure. The territory should have a baseline of functioning institutions, active civil society organisations, and some history of cross-sector collaboration—even if fragmented. The TIA is not a state-building mission from scratch. It is an upgrade to a system that already has some capacity to absorb it. A territory with dense networks of associations, engaged local elected officials, and a tradition of social dialogue would accelerate quickly. A territory with no prior experience of cross-sectoral collaboration would struggle.

Political willingness. At least one significant political actor—a president of a région, a mayor of a major intercommunalité, a cross-party coalition—must be genuinely committed to the experiment, not merely tolerant of it. This commitment must include willingness to accept public scrutiny of mixed results and to protect the pilot through its inevitable difficult phases. Without this cover, the safe-to-fail framing collapses.

Scalability relevance. The territory should be reasonably representative of broader French conditions, not an exotic outlier. Diversity across the selected pilots is essential: metropolitan and overseas, industrial and agricultural, growing and shrinking, northern and southern. If the pilots succeed only in uniquely favourable microclimates, their lessons will be dismissed as irrelevant to the rest of the country.

Manageable scale. The territory should be large enough to contain meaningful systemic interactions—a *bassin de vie* with its commuting patterns, its labour market, its energy infrastructure—but small enough to be governable as a single learning entity. A région, a département, or a cluster of intercommunalités would be appropriate. The entire national territory would be too large for an initial experiment; a single commune would be too small.

A transparent selection process, with published criteria and an open call for expressions of interest, would itself be a signal of the new governance logic. It would invite territorial actors to step forward voluntarily rather than be conscripted—an essential foundation for scaling by attraction.

6.3 Core Design Features

Each TIA would be shaped by local conditions and priorities, but all would share a set of core design features that embody the integration framework.

Integrated governance mandate. The pilot territory would receive a tailored package of regulatory flexibilities and coordination authorities that allow it to treat energy, housing, mobility, economic development, and public services as a single integrated design space. This does not mean abolishing existing institutions or creating a new layer of government. It means giving the institutions already present in that territory permission to coordinate differently—and providing them with the shared data, the facilitation support, and the fiscal autonomy to do so.

Territorial digital backbone. Each pilot would deploy a regional digital platform—a scaled, local version of the national digital infrastructure described in Section 4. This would provide real-time visibility into resource flows, infrastructure utilisation, environmental indicators, and social outcomes, allowing decision-makers and citizens alike to see the systemic interactions that are currently invisible. The platform would also serve as a unified coordination tool across *échelons*, reducing the administrative friction that currently consumes so much local capacity.

Standing citizen deliberative body. Each TIA would incorporate a permanent citizens' assembly or equivalent deliberative body, composed of randomly selected residents, provided with expert facilitation and access to the territorial digital backbone, and empowered to produce recommendations on major territorial decisions. The assembly would not replace elected bodies. It would provide a structured channel for collective sensemaking that is currently absent—the very deliberative infrastructure the Climate Convention demonstrated in ad-hoc form and the system failed to institutionalise. Crucially, the executive authority in the territory would be legally obliged to respond publicly to the assembly's recommendations and to explain the reasoning behind its decisions.

Cross-ideological funding covenants. A significant portion of the pilot's investment budget—perhaps 30 to 50 per cent of new project funding—would be conditional on joint applications from structurally diverse stakeholder groups. A renewable energy project, for example, might require co-sponsorship from an environmental association, a local employers' federation, and the relevant intercommunalité. A housing initiative might require partnership between a social landlord, a tenants' association, and a transport authority. This would force the collaborative muscle to develop early and generate projects with broader legitimacy and more resilient design.

Adaptive learning framework. The pilot would be evaluated not primarily against fixed output targets—so many housing units, so many megawatts—but against a set of systemic capacity metrics. The most important of these is **policy half-life**: how long do the initiatives developed within the TIA survive and remain effective? A short half-life signals that the integration architecture is not yet functioning. A long half-life signals that decisions are beginning to stick. Additional metrics include: decision-to-implementation timelines, cross-échelon coordination frequency, citizen trust indicators, deliberative participation rates, and the rate at which neighbouring territories voluntarily adopt similar approaches.

The evaluation would be conducted by an independent learning partner—a consortium of research institutions—and published transparently in real time. The pilots exist to generate knowledge, not just outcomes. That knowledge must be accessible to other territories, to the national government, and to the public. Transparency is the engine of scaling by attraction.

6.4 Budget, Governance, and Legal Basis

Budget. The pilots should be funded generously enough to be serious but not so lavishly that their results are dismissed as the product of exceptional resources. A rough envelope of €300 to €700 million per pilot over a five-year initial phase would be appropriate. The majority would be directed toward the capacity-building infrastructure itself—the digital platform, the deliberative processes, the coordination staffing, the evaluation—rather than toward traditional capital projects. The capital projects would come later, informed by the capacity that has been built. The total investment across three to five pilots would represent a fraction of one per cent of annual public expenditure—trivial in budgetary terms, transformative if the learning is applied.

Governance. Each TIA would be governed by a tripartite board comprising territorial elected representatives, state delegates, and civil society leaders. This is not a standard administrative structure. The tripartite design is essential to prevent any single actor from capturing the pilot. The territorial government provides democratic legitimacy and local knowledge. The state provides resources, regulatory exemptions, and the assurance that the pilot's legal framework will be respected. Civil society provides connection to lived experience and a counterweight to institutional inertia. Decisions would be made by consensus wherever possible, with a transparent mechanism for resolving irreconcilable disagreements.

Legal basis. The constitutional and legislative instruments for territorial experimentation already exist. Article 72, paragraph 4 of the Constitution allows territorial authorities to derogate from national laws and regulations on an experimental basis. Article 37-1 authorises the government to grant experimental powers by decree. What has been missing is the political will to use these instruments at a systemic scale. The TIAs would require a dedicated *loi d'expérimentation*—an Experimentation Act—specifying the scope of regulatory exemptions, the governance structure, the evaluation mandate, and the conditions under which pilot status can be extended, modified, or terminated. The legislation should include a sunset clause: after five years, the pilots must either be renewed on the basis of demonstrated results or wound down in an orderly fashion. The temporary nature of the legal basis is politically protective; it assures sceptics that the experiment is bounded and reversible, while giving the experiment enough time to demonstrate its value.

6.5 How to Measure Success

The success of the TIAs must be measured in terms that connect directly to the integration deficit diagnosis.

Outer capacity metrics would include: average time from policy decision to local implementation, number of cross-échelon coordination agreements in operation, percentage of public services accessible through a single territorial digital portal, speed of regulatory conflict resolution, and administrative cost per project delivered. Baselines would be established before the pilot begins and tracked transparently.

Inner capacity metrics would include: citizen trust in territorial governance, participation rates in deliberative processes, diversity of stakeholders engaged in collaborative projects, reported sense of agency and complexity tolerance among citizens and officials, and the rate at which local innovations are adopted by neighbouring territories without central mandate.

Policy half-life would be the signature metric. For each major initiative within the TIA, evaluators would track how long it survives in recognisable form before being reversed, diluted beyond effectiveness, or quietly abandoned. A short half-life—weeks or months—indicates that the integration architecture has not yet taken hold. A medium half-life—partial survival with significant modification—indicates progress. A long half-life—stable integration, adaptation without erosion—indicates that the Reform Loop has been broken, at least in that domain and in that territory.

Systemic outcome metrics would include: carbon emission reductions, housing affordability trends, transport mode shifts, economic diversification indicators, and territorial equity indices. These are not direct outputs of capacity-building; they are the downstream results that capacity-building enables. They should be tracked but not treated as the primary evaluation criteria, because capacity-building is a medium-to-long-term investment, and judging it solely by short-term outcomes would replicate the impatience that feeds the spectacle.

The evaluation would be published in accessible, visual formats—public dashboards, annual learning reports, peer exchange workshops—designed to make the pilots' experience legible to other territories, the national government, and the broader public. Transparency is the engine of scaling by attraction. The more visible the learning, the harder it becomes for the old logic to dismiss it.

6.6 A Note on Timing

France is not static. The pressures that generated the

gilets jaunes

and the pension reform standoffs have not dissipated; they have been absorbed into a political landscape that is increasingly fragmented and volatile. The next major reform attempt—whether it concerns the ecological transition, the fiscal framework, or the structure of the state itself—will enter the same loop unless the underlying architecture changes.

The TIAs should be launched within the current political cycle. The legal framework can be drafted within a year. The first pilots can be selected and operational within two. The window is not infinite. It will close when the next crisis reshuffles the agenda and the old reflexes reassert themselves.

The proposal is not to delay other necessary actions while the pilots run. The energy transition, the housing effort, the territorial cohesion agenda—all of these must proceed. But a small fraction of the available resources should be invested in the capacity that will determine whether those efforts succeed or dissolve into

the spectacle. The TIAs are not an alternative to action. They are the mechanism for ensuring that action becomes increasingly intelligent, increasingly legitimate, and increasingly durable over time.

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7. Coda: From Deciding to Integrating

7.1 The Wealth That Matters

France is rich. Not merely in the monuments and the cuisine and the cultural memory that draw the world to its doorstep, but in the resources that make governance possible. It possesses a state that can conceive, legislate, and command. It possesses a citizenry that cares—passionately, inconveniently, magnificently—about public affairs. It possesses intellectual traditions that question power with a rigour most democracies have forgotten. It possesses ambition. It possesses energy.

And yet every decade or so, sometimes every few years, the same loop tightens. A reform is announced. It is perceived as imposed. The street fills. The government retreats or pushes through with visible disregard. Whatever survives of the reform is haunted by the circumstances of its birth, and the reservoir of legitimacy that the next reform will need is shallower than before. The loop has become the background noise of French governance—so familiar that it passes almost unnoticed, like the hum of a refrigerator that no one remembers to repair.

This report has argued that the loop is not a curse, a character flaw, or an inevitability. It is the symptom of an integration deficit: a missing architecture between national decision and local reality, between symbolic intensity and functional delivery, between the energy of critique and the possibility of co-creation. France does not lack decisions. It lacks the capacity to make decisions that stick.

The spending mirage—the belief that more state resources or more executive authority can substitute for this missing architecture—is as seductive in France as anywhere. France already spends among the most of any developed nation on its public sector. It already concentrates more authority in the executive than most of its peers. Neither has broken the loop. More spending will not build the translation layer. More decrees will not create the deliberative infrastructure. The mirage must be seen for what it is: the belief that intensity can replace integration.

7.2 The Shift

The shift this requires is subtle but radical. It is the difference between treating the state as an instrument of national will—a lever to be pulled with sufficient force—and treating it as a living system that must connect, translate, and learn. It is the difference between asking "what should France decide next?" and asking "how does France become capable of sustaining the decisions it already knows it needs?"

The first question belongs to the Jacobin inheritance. It assumes that the problem is located in the quality of the decision—find the right policy, frame it clearly, push it through, and the nation will follow. The second question belongs to a more complex understanding of how societies actually change. It recognises that even the best policy will be rejected if it is experienced as an imposition, and that rejection, in a system with no deliberative channels, becomes spectacle—amplifying conflict, eroding trust, and preparing the ground for the next failure.

The integration architecture this report proposes—the translation layer, the territorial rebalancing, the deliberative infrastructure, the living testbeds—is not a policy preference among others. It is the condition for any policy to succeed. It is the missing prerequisite that French governance has evaded for decades, because building it requires the centre to cede some of its symbolic authority and the spectacle to lose some of its cultural dominance. These are not losses; they are trades. The centre gains durability. The spectacle gives way to substance.

The Reform Loop is stable, but it is not eternal. The same state that built the loop can decide to build something else. That decision will not look like a presidential address or a dramatic legislative moment. It will look like a small number of territories being quietly authorised to govern differently, and succeeding, and being noticed, and being imitated. It will look like the slow construction of institutions that currently do not exist—the translation layer, the deliberative channel, the safe-to-fail space—and the slow accumulation of evidence that they work. It will look, in short, like the opposite of the spectacle.

7.3 The European Dimension

France does not govern alone. The Franco-German partnership remains the central axis around which European integration turns. When that axis functions, Europe moves. When it seizes, Europe stalls.

The twin reports in this series identify complementary paralyses. Germany suffers an execution deficit: money and projects are available, but the administrative hardware to deploy them is fragmented and slow. France suffers an integration deficit: decisions are made with impressive speed, but the connective tissue to translate them into durable local outcomes is absent. Germany slows Europe. France destabilises it. Together, they produce a European Union that is simultaneously incapable of decisive action and incapable of sustaining the actions it does take.

Fixing one without the other would be an incomplete repair. A Germany that accelerates its execution but continues to operate alongside a France whose decisions unravel will find its faster decisions unravelling too. A France that builds integration capacity but remains coupled to a Germany that cannot decide will find its durable policies starved of the European frameworks they need. The twin deficits are distinct, but they interact, and the European project is their shared victim.

This is not an argument for a European superstate or for the dissolution of national sovereignty. It is an argument that the capacity deficits of the Union's two largest member states are a European strategic concern. The pilots proposed in this report and its German counterpart—Adaptive Governance Pilot Regions in one, Territoires d'Intégration Adaptative in the other—could, over time, become nodes in a European network of learning territories. What begins as national repair could become a model for European governance: polycentric, adaptive, translation-rich, legitimacy-building. The Franco-German engine does not need to be replaced. It needs to be rewired.

7.4 A Final Word

The French Republic has always known how to speak. It speaks in declarations of principle, in presidential addresses, in the eloquent fury of the street. What it has not yet built is the architecture that would allow what is spoken to become what is lived—durably, equitably, in the thousands of

bassins de vie

where the Republic either delivers or betrays its promises.

The integration deficit is not a condemnation. It is a diagnosis. And a diagnosis, once named, can be addressed.

The money is there. The talent is there. The energy is there. What has been missing is the connective tissue: the institutions, habits, and cultural permissions that would allow all that intensity to cohere into something that lasts. This report has described what building that connective tissue would look like. It has named the immune system that will resist. It has proposed a path that works with the grain of the French system rather than against it. It has offered a first step: the Territoire d'Intégration Adaptative, a space where the new logic can be tested, demonstrated, and allowed to spread.

The rest is not a matter of analysis. It is a matter of choice.

France does not need more decisions. It needs decisions that survive contact with reality. That is not a matter of will. It is a matter of architecture. The architecture can be built. The only question is whether France will permit itself to build it—not in the grand amphitheatre of the spectacle, but in the quiet, patient, unglamorous work of making the Republic present in the lives it claims to serve.

Afterword: A Note on This Report Itself

This report has argued that transformative ideas, to survive in a system governed by the spectacle, must be introduced in ways that bypass its most destructive dynamics. It has proposed low-visibility zones, Trojan Horse mechanisms, and scaling by attraction. It would be inconsistent not to apply that same logic to the

report itself.

The argument presented here is, in its underlying structure, a systemic intervention. It sees the French situation from a perspective that integrates the legitimate concerns of multiple political traditions—republican universalism, liberal efficiency, social solidarity—while diagnosing the architectural gap that prevents any of them from being realised durably. But the report has deliberately avoided announcing itself in theoretical terms. It has spoken the language of state capacity, territorial delivery, and democratic legitimacy—terms that the existing system can hear without immediate immunological rejection.

If you have found the argument useful, the conceptual vocabulary exists to take it further. The Spiral Dynamics framework offers a fuller map of the value systems at play in French political culture. Adaptive governance theory offers a deeper toolkit for designing institutions that learn. The references in the appendices provide entry points.

But the report's primary purpose is not to recruit readers to a framework. It is to make one thing visible that was previously invisible: the integration deficit at the heart of France's recurring cycle of decision and retreat, and the possibility of addressing it with the same seriousness that France has always brought to its most ambitious projects. If that has been achieved, the report has done its work. What you do with that vision is, by design, up to you.

Appendix A: Value Systems and Policy Mindsets — A Guide for the French Context

A Note on This Appendix

The main body of this report avoids specialised terminology from developmental psychology or cultural theory. It speaks the language of state capacity, territorial delivery, and deliberative democracy. This appendix offers a complementary lens for readers who wish to understand the deeper value-system dynamics at play in French governance. It is optional, but it makes the report's underlying logic fully transparent.

A.1 The Basic Insight

Different groups and institutions tend to operate from different centres of gravity in how they think about governance, resources, and change. These are not personality types or party affiliations, though they correlate loosely with both. They are underlying value systems—ways of constructing what feels real, legitimate, and important.

Each value system represents a coherent response to particular life conditions. None is "better" in any absolute sense. Each has characteristic strengths that emerge under certain conditions and characteristic blind spots that emerge under others. The challenge of governance in a complex society is to integrate the legitimate concerns of multiple value systems without being captured by any single one.

The framework used here draws on Spiral Dynamics integral theory. What follows is a simplified map of the systems most relevant to contemporary French governance.

A.2 The Value Systems in the French Arena

Order and Stability (sometimes called "Blue"). In the French context, this mindset takes the form of the Jacobin tradition: the conviction that the Republic is one and indivisible, that the state embodies the general will, and that uniform rules applied by a central authority are the guarantor of equality and national cohesion. Its strengths are legal clarity, institutional memory, and a genuine commitment to the rule of law. Its blind spots are rigidity, an allergic reaction to territorial differentiation, and a tendency to treat procedural correctness as a substitute for practical effectiveness. Institutions: Conseil d'État, Cour des Comptes, the prefectoral corps.

Achievement and Efficiency (sometimes called "Orange"). This is the world of the *grandes écoles*, the inspection des finances, and the technocratic elite that moves between public administration and corporate leadership. It values expertise, competition, measurable results, and strategic optimisation. Strengths: intellectual firepower, capacity for complex system design, and a focus on performance. Blind spots:

indifference to the lived experience of those not part of the elite circuit, a tendency to dismiss what cannot be quantified, and a willingness to impose technically optimal solutions that lack social legitimacy. France's engineering and economic modernisation owes much to this mindset, but so does the recurrent perception of a *caste* governing from above.

Inclusion and Care (sometimes called "Green"). This mindset prioritises equity, participation, protection of the vulnerable, and ecological awareness. In France, it finds expression in the associative sector, the ecological movement, parts of the trade union tradition, and the social economy. Strengths: empathy, commitment to community, insistence that those affected by decisions have a voice. Blind spots: consensus-dependency, difficulty with hard trade-offs, a tendency to moralise conflict and to be captured by the spectacle as much as it critiques it. France's vibrant protest culture draws energy from this mindset; its inability to channel that energy into durable institutional outcomes reflects its limits.

Integrative and Systemic (sometimes called "Yellow"). This mindset prioritises functional fit, whole-systems thinking, and the capacity to integrate multiple perspectives without being captured by any single one. It emerges as a response to the limitations of all single-system approaches in the face of complex, interconnected challenges. Strengths: flexibility, comfort with uncertainty and experimentation, willingness to design institutions that match the complexity of the problems they address. Blind spots: can appear detached, overly intellectual, or politically naïve to those operating from other mindsets. In France, this mindset is nascent—visible in some territorial innovation labs, in the design of the Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat, and in pockets of administrative modernisation—but not yet institutionalised.

A.3 The Integration Deficit as a Value-System Clash

The French governance system is dominated by the interplay—and frequent collision—of the first three mindsets. The Jacobin Blue insists on uniformity; the technocratic Orange designs elegant national solutions; the contestatory Green mobilises against both when their consequences are felt as illegitimate. Each has essential contributions to make. But the system lacks the integrative architecture that would allow them to co-create rather than collide.

The outer capacity investments proposed in this report speak to all three: they offer the technocratic Orange measurable improvements in efficiency, the Jacobin Blue enhanced coherence and legal clarity, and the contestatory Green genuine participation and territorial responsiveness. The inner capacity investments—deliberative infrastructure, channels for critique to become co-creation—offer the contestatory Green a structured voice, the technocratic Orange better decision quality, and the Jacobin Blue a pathway to legitimacy that does not depend solely on central authority.

The pilot territories are the spaces where this integration can be attempted. They are not an attempt to impose a "higher" mindset. They are an attempt to build an architecture that honours and utilises the strengths of all three while compensating for their blind spots—to move from the spectacle of collision to the quiet work of integration.

Appendix B: International Analogues and Precedents

The proposals in this report are not without precedent. The following examples illustrate existing implementations of capacity-building and integration-oriented reforms.

B.1 France's Own Precedents: The Climate Convention and Territorial Experimentation

The **Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat** (2019–2020) is the most significant recent French experiment with deliberative democracy. One hundred and fifty randomly selected citizens, supported by expert facilitation, produced ambitious proposals for reducing carbon emissions by 40% by 2030. The process was well-designed and demonstrated that ordinary citizens are capable of grappling with highly complex policy questions. The outcome, however, was mixed: many proposals were diluted or ignored by the executive, generating cynicism. The Convention is both a proof of concept and a cautionary tale: deliberation without formal government response obligations and institutional embedding will be absorbed by the spectacle.

Territorial experimentation already has a constitutional and legal foundation in France. Article 72, paragraph 4 permits territorial authorities to derogate from national regulations on an experimental basis. Article 37-1 allows the government to authorise experiments by decree. The *loi organique* of 2003 and subsequent legislation have enabled limited experiments in health, transport, and social policy. However, these remain sectoral, under-funded, and politically invisible. The TIA proposal extends this existing legal framework to the systemic scale.

B.2 Estonia: Digital-First Government

Estonia's e-governance infrastructure processes over 99% of public services online through a unified digital identity layer. Citizens can access their complete data trail with full transparency about who has viewed their information. Building permits are issued in days. The system was built incrementally after independence, with a clear legal framework and interoperability standards. Key lesson: digital transformation is not a technology project but a governance project requiring sustained political commitment. For France, the Estonian experience demonstrates that a unified digital backbone can dramatically reduce administrative friction while increasing transparency—without requiring the concentration of data in a single Parisian centre.

B.3 Finland: Futures Literacy and Anticipatory Governance

Finland has embedded futures thinking into government through multiple channels. The Committee for the Future in Parliament conducts foresight exercises. Sitra, the Finnish Innovation Fund, has run nationwide futures literacy programmes demonstrating measurable increases in participants' sense of agency and

complexity tolerance. At the regional level, anticipatory governance zones integrate futures methods into planning. Key lesson: futures literacy can be systematically cultivated and yields tangible improvements in decision-making confidence. For France, this offers a model for shifting the collective operating system from reactive to anticipatory.

B.4 Taiwan: Digital Democracy Infrastructure

Taiwan's vTaiwan and Join platforms combine digital deliberation with real policy impact. vTaiwan uses structured processes of open consultation, facilitated deliberation, and consensus-seeking to develop policy proposals on contentious issues. It has produced legislation that would have been politically impossible through traditional channels. Key lesson: citizen deliberation works at scale when well-facilitated, digitally supported, and given genuine policy weight. For France, this is a demonstration that deliberative infrastructure can complement representative institutions rather than undermine them.

B.5 United Kingdom: Asymmetric Devolution

The UK's devolution deals have created Combined Authorities with tailored powers over transport, housing, skills, and economic development, in exchange for accountable governance structures. Greater Manchester's health and social care devolution is a leading example. Key lesson: asymmetric devolution—giving different regions different powers based on readiness and need—can work politically and administratively when accompanied by robust evaluation. For France, this model suggests that territorial differentiation need not threaten national unity but can enhance it by making the state more responsive to diverse conditions.

B.6 Germany: Adaptive Governance Pilot Regions (Cross-Reference)

The companion report in this series proposes Adaptive Governance Pilot Regions for Germany—territorial zones with integrated governance mandates, deliberative infrastructure, and safe-to-fail experimentation. The French TIA proposal is designed as a parallel but distinct mechanism adapted to the French institutional landscape. Together, the two proposals could form the basis for a European network of learning territories.

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Appendix D: Anticipated Objections

D.1 “Isn’t this just regionalisation by another name? France has tried decentralisation before and it didn’t solve the trust problem.”

Decentralisation in France has been real but incomplete. The 1982 Defferre laws transferred significant responsibilities to regions and départements, but they did not transfer genuine fiscal autonomy, nor did they simplify the overlapping

mille-feuille

. More importantly, they did not build the deliberative infrastructure or the translation layer that connects local decisions to citizen legitimacy. The TIA proposal is not about moving administrative boxes from Paris to the regions. It is about creating integrated governance zones where authority, resources, deliberation, and experimentation operate together. It is a qualitative shift, not a quantitative one.

D.2 “How does this respect republican universalism? Doesn’t differentiated governance undermine equality?”

Republican universalism is a commitment to equal dignity, not to uniform treatment regardless of circumstances. A state that applies the same rule to a dense urban quartier and a remote rural commune may be uniform, but it is not treating citizens equally if the rule fits one context and fails the other. The integration architecture proposed here does not abandon universal principles. It gives them teeth by allowing the Republic to adapt its implementation to the diversity of the territory it claims to serve. Equality is not sameness; it is the guarantee that every citizen receives a response appropriate to their situation. The Jacobin tradition has sometimes conflated the two. This report argues for a richer, more mature universalism—one that is present and effective, not just rhetorically uniform.

D.3 “Aren’t the pilots just an excuse to delay hard decisions? We need urgent action on climate, pensions, and social justice.”

The pilots are not proposed as an alternative to urgent action. They are proposed as a mechanism for ensuring that urgent action does not collapse into the Reform Loop, which delays action far more effectively than any experiment ever could. The carbon tax was urgent, rational, and dead within months. The pension reform was urgent, passed, and left a wound that will shape politics for a decade. The pilots are a parallel track: a small fraction of public resources invested in building the capacity that makes decisive action durable. The climate transition, the housing challenge, and the territorial cohesion agenda must all proceed. The question is whether they will proceed through the old loop or through an architecture that gives them a chance to survive.

D.4 “France has a proud tradition of street protest and direct democracy. Won’t institutionalised deliberation suppress genuine dissent?”

Institutionalised deliberation is not a replacement for protest. It is a complement—a channel that makes protest less frequently necessary. The French tradition of *contestation* is a democratic asset. The problem is not that the street exists; it is that the street is currently the *only* effective channel for dissent, because all other channels are blocked or ignored. A standing citizens’ assembly with a formal government response obligation does not prevent citizens from demonstrating. It gives them an additional, structured avenue to influence policy before the only remaining option is to fill the streets. The goal is not to suppress the street but to build a system where the street is a last resort rather than a first instinct.

D.5 “The state already experiments. Article 72 and the *expérimentations* have existed for years. Why haven’t they solved the problem?”

Existing experimentation mechanisms are narrow, sectoral, under-funded, and politically invisible. They tinker at the margins without challenging the underlying architecture. The TIA proposal applies the experimentation logic at a systemic scale: integrated governance across multiple domains, genuine fiscal and regulatory flexibility, a deliberative body with real weight, and transparent evaluation designed to enable scaling. The legal instruments exist. What has been missing is the political will to use them ambitiously and the protection to let them run long enough to generate visible results. The TIA fills that gap.

D.6 “This sounds like a technocratic fantasy. How can you bypass the spectacle when the media and political class feed on it?”

The spectacle is not bypassed by fighting it directly—that would be self-defeating. It is bypassed by starting where attention is low. The TIA pilots are deliberately designed to operate below the threshold of national media interest. They are territorial, technical, and incremental. Their initial results will not make the evening news. That is the point. Once they have demonstrated visible, tangible improvements—a region where permitting is faster, a deliberative process that commands local trust, an energy transition plan that was co-constructed and is being implemented—the narrative shifts. The spectacle can still attack, but it must attack something real rather than something imagined. That changes the terms of the debate. The spectacle is powerful, but it is not all-consuming. It can be drained of fuel by the slow accumulation of evidence.

Appendix E: About the Author and Method

The Author

This report was written from outside the French policy establishment. Its author is not a former minister, a senior civil servant, or an accredited expert on French public administration. The perspective offered here draws on a sustained engagement with complexity science, developmental psychology, governance theory, and a comparative study of European political systems—pursued not from within any single institutional core but from a position of systemic curiosity.

The distance from institutional power is both a limitation and a resource. It limits access to the granular, day-to-day texture of French policy-making. But it also enables a freedom of diagnosis that proximity to power often discourages. The report does not claim insider knowledge. It claims a coherent lens—one that may prove useful to those who do hold institutional positions and are searching for frameworks that make sense of what they are experiencing.

Feedback, criticism, and dialogue are welcomed. The argument is offered in the spirit of collaborative sense-making, not definitive pronouncement.

A Note on Method

This report was developed through a structured, multi-model synthesis process. I engaged several large language models in parallel, each prompted to approach France’s situation. I then wove their contributions together.

This method is an experiment in cognitive amplification: using AI not to automate analysis but to deliberately juxtapose multiple strategic intelligences, surfacing patterns and tensions that might otherwise remain invisible. The report is richer for that polyphony. It is also, like any work of synthesis, provisional. It makes no claim to finality. It claims only that the lens it offers merits testing against reality—and that the testing, in the end, is what matters most.

The Country Reports Series

This report is the second in a series of Country Reports for Systemic Change. The first examined Germany through the lens of a twin execution deficit and proposed Adaptive Governance Pilot Regions. Future reports will examine Sweden, India, the European Union, and others, each asking the same underlying question:

Is the real bottleneck money and decisions, or is it the system’s capacity to use them wisely?

Together, the series aims to build a comparative, integrative framework for diagnosing and addressing the adaptive capacity deficits that hold nations back.