

A Socio-Economic Analysis of the “Yellow Vests Manifest” in France

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This study conducts a comprehensive socio-economic analysis of the “yellow vests movement” in France. The research categorises and profiles various contributions to this movement, and identifies the potential causes of the yellow vest manifest. The paper aims to uncover and specify the nature, composition, content, significance and perspectives of this movement and suggests conceptual approaches to the assessment of the movement.

Key words: *Manifest, yellow vests, movement, rhizome, state.*

Introduction

Initially, this study was intended to be titled as “On poverty and wealth in France: a socio-economic analysis of the ‘yellow vests manifest’,” though this was found to mirror and potentially plagiarise I.T. Pososhkov’s title “The book of poverty and wealth.” In 1724, half a century before this publication, Russian economist and social philosopher A. Smith identified the special significance of the material axis of human society, the central pivot on which the key spheres of human activity are attached, held and developed, as involving economic, social, political and cultural elements. Pososhkov maintains that poverty and wealth are both conditions and results of idleness and labour, frugal management and predatory exploitation multiplied by parasitism. For Pososhkov, analysis of the causes of poverty and wealth is the key to understanding societal changes, both evolutionary and revolutionary, that affect and shape the future image and structure of the country (Pososhkov, 2004). Considering these similarities and the compact volume of a journal article, the authors of this study chose an abbreviated version of the name of the published work.

This article therefore aims to conduct a comprehensive socio-economic analysis of the “manifest (declaration) of yellow vests” in France. This analysis will generalise the grouping

of requirements in relevant directions and profile the classification division of these considered directions. In doing so, the nature, composition, content, significance and various perspectives of this movement will be identified and examined in order to determine the cause of this movement and to diagnose conceptual approaches to appropriately assess the yellow vests movement.

Methods

This study employed historical, logical, comparative and systemic research approaches in its design, as well as examinations of documentary sources. Socio-economic and content analysis were also conducted on media and communications (both press and electronic), and on scientific works of domestic and foreign researchers in the fields of economics, sociology and French history.

Discussion

Despite the short-lived media coverage of the yellow vests manifest, which lasted roughly half a year in the mass media, many publications devoted to the movement have since appeared. Within scientific and scholarly literature, however, published works related to the topic are lacking. The main part of academic articles are related to the promotion and justification of various conceptual approaches to the assessment of the yellow vests movement.

Supporters of the first approach are positioning the yellow vests movement as a *Jacquerie*, or a peasant anti-feudal uprising in new historical and sociocultural conditions (Gilets Jaunes, 2018). Adherents to the second approach believe that an uprising is taking place in France and on its peripheries against the dictates to protest central authorities (Maligorne, 2018). Followers of the third approach argue that society is faced with the socio-psychological phenomenon of mass revenge by the French working class for the neoliberal policy pursued by the ruling circles, which resulted in deindustrialisation, capital outflows abroad, bankruptcy of enterprises, non-payment of loans and growth of external corporate debt (Delpirou, n.d). The fourth approach suggests that the movement is a manifestation of discontent felt by the population of suburban areas near “metapoles”, or core city centres. Residents of these areas are regularly forced to travel long distances via personal or public transport for work, shopping and entertainment purposes (Cauchebrais, 2018). Despite existing discursive differences, diagnostics of conceptual approaches to the assessment of the yellow vests movement can potentially lead to expert assessments of the manifest.

Most analysts have applied the concept of “uprising” to characterise the protest actions of the yellow vests. In addition, almost all researchers attribute the failure of the French

government's tax, energy, transport and housing policies as initial the trigger for the movement. Studies also emphasise the increasing property polarisation of society, with the working class (or "popular class") and the contrasting bohemian-bourgeois segments of the population ("bobos"). According to D. Brooks, "bobos" are highly educated people mixing equally within the bohemian world of creative self-realisation and in the capitalist realm of ambition and financial success (Bruks, 2013). Representatives of the new information age elite are considered as the *bohemian bourgeois*, thus creating the acronym of *bobo*, which has since become widespread as a common noun.

Results

The yellow vests (fr. - *Gilets jaunes*) first socially and significantly declared themselves in France on Saturday, November 17th, 2018. Mass protest actions performed by yellow vest participants occurred throughout various regions of the country, including the capital of Paris. According to the Minister of the Interior of the Fifth Republic¹, K. Castaner, 282,710 people took part in collective demonstrations that day (Gilets_Jaunes, 2019). The immediate reason for the protest actions were increases in fuel tax and gasoline prices. The protestors' decisions to wear yellow vests as their trademark sign was due to a number of reasons. Firstly, in accordance with French law, all drivers must keep such vests in their vehicles to wear during emergencies; secondly, the brightly-coloured yellow vests were distinctly noticeable at a distance; third, the vests symbolised the labouring uniform of society's working classes, and finally, they provided a "unifying thread and a bright call for weapon" (Friedman, 2019).

The term "weapon" is not an exaggeration here, as indicated by the means of attacks carried out by the most radical yellow vest representatives during clashes with the police and gendarmerie. These attacks utilised paint bottles, smoke bombs, Molotov cocktails, metal rods, baseball bats and stones, and were met with brutal law enforcement retaliations such as the release of tear gas, water cannons, batons, stun grenades and rubber bullets. Such actions resulted in tragic statistics during the second half of November, 2018: more than 10 protestors were found dead and 3,000 were injured, as well as 2,000 injured civilians and over 1,000 injured police and gendarmes (Kolichestvo, 2019). In connection with the scale and intensity of these street battles throughout different French cities, the argument of Talleyrand, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Emperor Napoleon, should be noted: "The bayonets are good to all except one – you cannot sit on them" (Nechaev, 2013).

This almost half-year fierce confrontation between the yellow vests and the authorities forces society to pay close attention to the causes of the "grapes of wrath" that have ripened and

¹ The Fifth Republic (Fr.-Cinquième République) is a form of democratic government in France since 1958 after the adoption of the current Constitution of the country, initiated by General and Prime Minister Charles de Gaulle.

flourished in modern France. The researchers of this paper thus suggest that to do so, a socio-economic analysis of the content of the “manifesto (declaration) of yellow vests” is imperative. This manifesto was voiced by the yellow vests via social networks and transmitted to deputies of the French National Assembly, and included a list of requirements to the government of E. Macron. These appeals of the yellow vests, which began with the substantiation of economic measures, were subsequently supplemented with a range of social, political and environmental requirements (Dmitriev, 2018). This allowed the authors of this article to group the requirements put forward into relevant areas, as seen in the following sections, and to then carry out a classification division within them.

Economic requirements

Taxes and fees

1. Stop raising fuel taxes.
2. Progress the scale of income tax to expand the number of rates and steps.
3. Raise taxes on large corporations and reduce taxes on small businesses.
4. Stop the tax breaks program “to promote competitiveness and employment”.
5. Stop the austerity policy to cease debt payments at the expense of the poor (80 billion euros found sheltered from taxes as a result of tax fraud).
6. Eliminate income tax on payments by the employer or pension fund.
7. Establish equal taxes for all entrepreneurs, regardless of citizenship.

Wages, pensions and jobs

8. Increase the minimum wage from 1,150 to 1,300 euros per month.
9. Increase the minimum pension from 630 to 1,200 euros per month.
10. Index salaries and pensions of all citizens in accordance with inflation.
11. Maximum salaries to no higher than 15 thousand euros per month.
12. Deputies should not receive a salary in excess of the average salary, and their travel expenses should be subject to strict checks.
13. Allocation of sufficient funds for court, police, gendarmerie and army personnel. Their overtime must also be paid or compensated.
14. Equal pay and rights for all employees in France, regardless of nationality.
15. Save the joint pension system; prevent pension reform based on self-accumulation of pension capital.
16. Create jobs for the unemployed.
17. Limit the number of fixed term labour contracts for large enterprises and provide more perpetual contracts.
18. Prohibit charging interest when customers use payment cards.



Industry, transport, gas and electricity, trade and small businesses

19. Protect the French industry and prohibit the transfer of production to other countries.
20. Cancel the privatisation of gas and electricity supply and ensure the reduction of prices for these services.
21. Prohibit the sale of state land and institutions, such as airports.
22. Encourage rail freight.
23. Send the toll on motorways in full for the maintenance and repair of French roads and road safety.
24. Give preference to small businesses in cities and city centers.
25. Stop building large shopping areas that harm small businesses.
26. Provide free parking in city centres.

Social requirements

Homelessness and rental housing

1. Solve the urgent issue of homelessness.
2. Reduce housing rest, primarily for students and citizens with non-permanent employment.

Social insurance, disability benefits and childcare

3. Create an equal social insurance system for all citizens, including self-employed and individual entrepreneurs.
4. Increase disability benefits.
5. Provide supplements for the care of children who cannot attend school until the age of 10.

Retirement age and pension provisions

6. Reduce the retirement age from 62 to 60 years. For citizens engaged in physical labour like bricklayers and butchers, the retirement age should be 55 years.
7. Ensure the welfare of the elderly and cease financial advantages over the elderly.

School education and social and transport infrastructure of small settlements

8. Limit classroom capacity to 25 students from kindergarten to the final year of study.
9. Stop the closure of small railways, post offices, schools and maternity wards, and block the reduction of social and transport infrastructure of small settlements.



Health care

10. Increase budget subsidies for psychiatry.

Illegal and forced migration

11. Cease illegal and forced societal migration.

12. Provide fair treatment of refugees and allocate sufficient housing, safety, food and education for children. Work with the UN to open refugee camps around the world to provide those in need of asylum.

13. Return to their countries those who do not receive a positive response to a request for asylum.

Political requirements

Constitutional reform

1. Fix the notion of the “people's referendum” in the Constitution. The proposal, which collected 700,000 signatures, should be finalised by the National Assembly and submitted to a popular vote within 1 year.

2. Return the 7-year term for the President of the Republic to dissolve his election with the parliamentary elections.

3. Cancel lifelong benefits for former presidents.

Integration policy

4. Implement a genuine integration policy declaring that living in France means becoming a Frenchman. Implement such supplements as French history courses and civic education with certificates of completion.

Environmental requirements

Environmental taxation

1. Impose a tax on marine fuel and kerosene.

Environmental production

2. Start the production of cars on a hydrogen engine, which are more environmentally friendly than electric cars.

Energy saving

3. Introduce planning for energy saving housing to increase environmental friendliness and reduce costs.

Careful reading of these economic, social, political and environmental requirements indicate that the yellow vests manifest is not fragmented, but rather thoughtful, systemic and radical. The implementation of such requirements would lead France, the birthplace of the four revolutions (1789, 1830, 1848, 1871), into its fifth revolution in history. This conclusion is based on the key principles proclaimed by the yellow vests: social justice, equality and guarantees of civil rights and freedoms. The principles under consideration are therefore pivotal in the course of strategic management of macro- and microsystems in society (Vinogradova, 2008).

The government of E. Macron planned to raise the fuel tax from January 1st, 2019, which should have led to an increase in the cost of gasoline by 2.9 eurocents and an increase in the cost of diesel fuel by 6.5 eurocents per litre (Vlasti, 2019). Authorities simultaneously needed to control air pollution, however, and to comply with the 2016 Paris Climate Agreements. Combined with the liberalisation of the labour market, the elimination of pension benefits for civil servants and the destruction of 120,000 jobs in the public sector, this increase in fuel tax inevitably caused fury among wide sections of French society.

At present, most citizens of the Fifth Republic do not earn high incomes. In the poor category, French economists and sociologists include people with incomes below 60% of the country's average income. The poverty line in France is fixed at the level of 1015 euros per person per month, with 13.6% of citizens, nearly 9 million people, receiving incomes below this amount. This poverty average is more than both Finland (11.6%) and Denmark (11.9%). Further, if France did not have social benefits, almost a quarter of the population (23.6%) would be below the poverty line. Moreover, according to the latest UNICEF data, more than 3 million French children, virtually every fifth child in the country, live below the poverty line (Safronov, 2019; Tazik et al., 2019).

A comparative representation of the minimum size of labour (minimum wage) for the European Union countries in 2018 is presented in Table 1 below. This data indicates that France is only in 5th place out of the 28 countries included in this analysis, and is behind such countries as Luxembourg, Ireland, the Netherlands and Belgium.

Table 1: Minimum wage in Europe in 2018 (Srednie, 2019)

Nr.	EU country	Abbr.	Minimum wage per month (euros)	Minimum wage per month (rubles *)
1	Austria ²	AT	-	-
2	Belgium	BE	1'562.59 €	115'512.00 RUB
3	Bulgaria	BG	260.76 €	19'277.00 RUB
4	Hungary	HU	418.47 €	30'935.00 RUB
5	Germany	DE	1'498.00 €	110'738.00 RUB
6	Greece	GR	683.76 €	50'546.00 RUB
7	Denmark	DK	-	-
8	Ireland	IE	1'613.95 €	119'309.00 RUB
9	Spain	ES	858.55 €	63'467.00 RUB
10	Italy	IT	-	-
11	Cyprus	CY	-	-
12	Latvia	LV	430.00 €	31'788.00 RUB
13	Lithuania	LT	400.00 €	29'570.00 RUB
14	Luxembourg	LU	1'998.59 €	147'743.00 RUB
15	Malta	MT	747.54 €	55'261.00 RUB
16	Netherlands	NL	1'594.20 €	117'849.00 RUB
17	Poland	PL	480.20 €	35'498.00 RUB
18	Portugal	PT	676.67 €	50'022.00 RUB
19	Romania	RO	407.45 €	30'121.00 RUB
20	Slovakia	SK	480.00 €	35'484.00 RUB
21	Slovenia	SI	842.79 €	62'302.00 RUB
22	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland	UK	1'463.80 €	108'209.00 RUB

² In Austria, Denmark, Italy, Cyprus, Finland and Sweden there is no national minimum wage, in these countries minimum wage laws apply for different professions or minimum wages are set by industry collective agreements.

23	Finland	FI	-	-
24	France	FR	1'498.47 €	110'772.00 RUB
25	Croatia	HR	465.72 €	34'428.00 RUB
26	Czech Republic	CZ	468.87 €	34'661.00 RUB
27	Sweden	SE	-	-
28	Estonia	EE	500.00 €	36'962.00 RUB

The depicted minimum wage in France faces extreme difficulties in rising to a higher level of the social structure. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a French child from a poor family requires 6 generations to climb the social ladder. This means that descendants of the modern poor will ascend into middle-class society in 180 years. For comparison, Scandinavian countries require only 2-3 generations to solve this problem (Il, 2018; Parizi et al., 2019; Zubareva and Orlova, 2018).

Since January 1st, 2018, the minimum wage in France has been 9.88 euros per hour. This equates to 1,498.47 euros per month with a 35-hour working week and becomes 1,153 euros after deducting social contributions. The minimum wage is indexed annually on January 1st and considers factors like purchasing power.

Table 2: Dynamics of development of the minimum wage in France (gross) since 1999; Hourly minimum wage in euros (gross) (35 hours/week)

1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
6.21	6.41	6.67	6.83	7.19	7.61	8.03	8.27	8.44	8.71	8.82
2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	
8.86	9.00	9.19	9.22	9.40	9.61	9.67	9.76	9.88	10.03	

In connection with the insistent demands of the yellow vests, French President E. Macron announced on December 10th, 2018, an increase in the minimum wage by 100 euros to 1,598.47 euros (gross) and 1,231 euros (net) per month, starting from January 1st, 2019.

According to the OECD study “Together: Why the Less Inequality, the Better Everything”, the income gap between 10% of the richest and 10% of the poorest French citizens increased

to 7.4 after 2015. This increase was much higher than Germany's 6.6 and Sweden's 5.8 (Desyat', 2019; Azevedo and Reis, 2019). Despite the fact that this is one of the highest values in EU countries, in 2017 President Macron changed the order of taxation of luxury goods for the rich, who are now acquiring luxury and expensive goods while deducting significantly smaller amounts to the state. This decision was motivated by the deemed importance of returning wealthy citizens to the capital of France and led to the public opinion that Macron was positioning himself as the president of the rich. The yellow vests thus began calling him Louis XIV due to Macron's thrust to absolute power. Macron's leadership was seen by protestors to mirror that of the 17th Century when France had overburdened the population, which caused its own riots and uprisings.

In February of 2019, the unemployment rate in France reached 8.8% and equated to 2.6 million unemployed citizens. In comparison to Great Britain's unemployment rate of 4%, Denmark's rate of 3.7%, the Netherlands' rate of 3.6% and Germany's rate of 3.2%, France is undoubtedly one of the highest countries of unemployment in the European Union (Uroven' 2019).

Further, more than 8 million French citizens experience serious housing problems; of these masses, 3.5 million are on the verge of losing their homes, while homelessness affects in excess of 140,000 citizens (Castaing, 2019; Matandare, 2018; Siregar et al., 2019). These figures are largely due to the liberalisation of the housing policy by French authorities, who factually refused to release state control over housing rentals or legal guarantees of rental provisions.

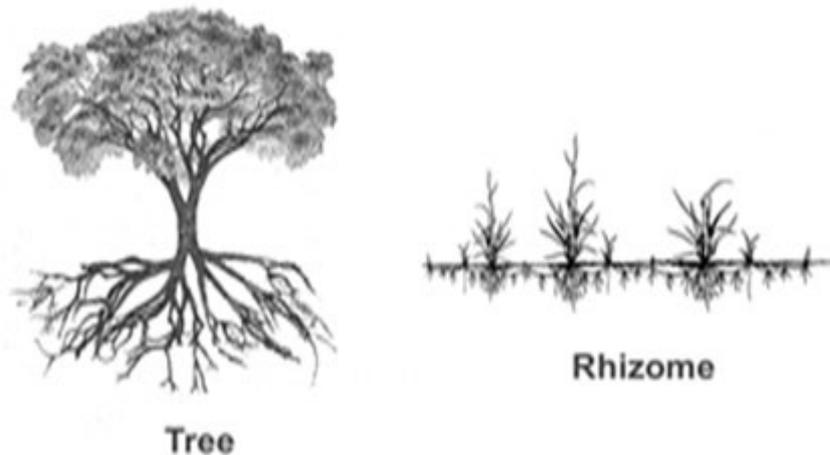
This study aims to address the reasons for the appearance of yellow vests in France and to examine their proposed socio-economic requirements. Despite negative situations occurring in other European countries, the resistance to and attacks on authorities in France acquired not only radical, cruel, uncompromising and even permanent effects. The current study suggests that the yellow vests movement is comparable to *Jacquerie*³, the anti-feudal uprising in France in 1358 during the reign of Charles II of Navarre who was nicknamed by the masses as "Karl the Evil." J. Duby, a prominent representative of the French historical school "La Nouvelle Histoire," concisely identified the leading cause of *Jacquerie*: "It was neither a revolt of the poor, nor a rebellion against the king. This revolt was an outburst of rage [of people] who could no longer bear extortion... One day, they gathered together...gave vent to their anger...and, as it happens everywhere...attacked the robbers" (Dyubi, 2001).

Having emerged from the depths of the virtual networks of the French-speaking Internet, the movement of the yellow vests does not rely on economic, political or cultural establishments, traditional parties or instrumental social institutions, authorities, markets or firms. This

³ At the same time, it is superior in potential, scale and goals.

movement is similar to the rhizome⁴, first introduced and specified in 1972 by the post-structuralists J. Deleuze and F. Guattari (Delyoz, 2007). This multi-directional plexus of horizontal trajectories of multiple social interactions and movements is devoid of hierarchy or centered structure. The yellow vests movement thus has the creative potential to be self-organised, heterogeneous and polyfunctional.

Figure 1. The difference of the vertical (hierarchical) structure from the horizontal (root):



The yellow vests movement is replenished by people from different classes and social groups of society, including farmers, workers, schoolchildren and students, retirees, employees, specialists and liberal professionals. Despite the daily hard work of these individuals, they do not earn enough wages, scholarships or benefits to adequately thrive in society due to the heavy burden of exorbitant taxes. Uniting to express the weekly protest demands, these people displayed courage, bravery, resilience and the desire for freedom, all representative of the folk “Gallic spirit”.

At this new stage in history, a classical dilemma arises that permeates the country’s thousand-year past: administrative and tax despotism or a healthy economy and strong social sphere. As A. Morois, one of the most aphoristic chroniclers of France, emphasised: “Strong reign is expensive. But a reign that is too expensive ceases to be strong” (Morua, 2019).

Conclusion

This study aimed to determine the causes of the yellow vests movement in France and to investigate the depth and complexity of its proposed socio-economic requirements. The phenomenon of the yellow vests is associated in this study with a global civilizational and

⁴ Rhizome (fr. - *rhizome* - horizontal root system).



societal transformation, and was found to be instigated by multiple factors. The movement's economic, social, political, ideological, cultural and ecological ideals and actions crossed the geographical borders of France and spread throughout the world. Yellow vests have thus become a global symbol of radical protest and change. The movement represents *Jacquerie* in form, but its content involves deep and potentially permanent protest against the foundations of civilization and the decay of the socialist system that changed after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The widespread rejection of the idea and practice of a social state, social contract and social partnership has radicalised the consciousness and behaviour of the working class population. Affected individuals who have lost their previous rights, guarantees, guidelines, values and ideals indicate that they are not resigned to accept such losses through the continued movement of the yellow vests. The results of this study confirm the urgent need to focus close attention on developing and strengthening states that create effective and efficient mechanisms of social, tax, demographic and environmental policies, thus building an equitable dialogue between government and civil society.

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