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A Green Coalition Gathers Strength in Europe

By STEVEN ERLANGER

BRUSSELS — One of the real victors in this month’s elections for the European Parliament is a 64-year-old former radical, an ebullient Franco-German who has turned his efforts to transform society from revolution to ecology.

During the student uprisings of May 1968, the Franco-German, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, was known as Danny the Red, but now he is Danny the Green, and he has directed and ridden the suddenly fashionable political wave of environmentalism into considerable influence.

Behind his articulate, vivid presence and sense of fun, Mr. Cohn-Bendit’s Europe Écologie coalition of European Green parties came in third in French voting for the Parliament, winning 16.28 percent of the vote. It was just behind the squabbling Socialists, who had only 16.48 percent, and ahead of a presumptive presidential candidate, François Bayrou of the centrist Democratic Movement, or Modem.

The European Parliament is the only directly elected institution of the European Union, and voting took place in all 27 member states. One reason for the coalition’s success, Mr. Cohn-Bendit said in an interview in his Brussels office, is that it concentrated on European issues and the idea of a better future, instead of turning the vote into a referendum on the French president, Nicolas Sarkozy. There was also an element of collaborative fun and joy, he said, evident in the coalition’s campaign videos, which were viewed thousands of times on the Internet.

“We said that on the European level, we can deal with the crises that confront us,” he said. “We have a project for Europe, an idea — the ecological transformation of our way of production and way of life, with a social shield to protect the people who are negatively affected by the process of transformation.”

The Green parties want to defend the future of everyone, he said. “It’s not for the privileged,” Mr. Cohn-Bendit said. “It’s for the survival of mankind.” If Mr. Sarkozy campaigned on the idea of working more to earn more, Mr. Cohn-Bendit said, the Green coalition urged, “Work differently for a better life.”

More than that, he said, the coalition was “the only group who had fun in the campaign.” President Obama “won by trying to redefine the American dream, and we have to redefine the European dream,” he said.

“Obama won because he gave hope to people, and we want Europe to give hope to people,” Mr. Cohn-Bendit said.

So far in this economic crisis, Europe has given little hope, said Mr. Cohn-Bendit, who is the only person to have been elected to the European Parliament from both Germany and France. “The problem is that Europe
reacted nationally,” he said. “They didn’t get the momentum necessary to give a coordinated, European answer.”

The lack of an answer is what doomed the Socialists all over Europe in this election, he said. The Socialist narrative and its ideology are outdated, he said, “not fit for modern society.” And in general, but especially in France, Socialist leaders are perceived to be “completely out of touch,” while they squabble for personal position and the presidential candidacy three years from now, he said.

“It’s become too personalized,” he said, “so it’s not a collective productive effort.” In the competition of personalities, he said, “you can’t beat Nicolas Sarkozy.” Rather, Mr. Cohn-Bendit said, “You’ve got to have an alternative project” — a positive new model for society around which voters can gather.

In this election, in which the French turnout was roughly half that of the 2007 presidential race, the Ecologists attracted a number of Socialist voters who did not turn to Mr. Bayrou. Jérôme Fourquet, of Ifop, the French Institute of Public Opinion, said some voters who helped the Socialists win municipal elections in March 2008 turned to the Ecology coalition. “These are precisely the middle-class voters that the Socialist Party could not attract that Europe Écologie steered away from Modem,” Mr. Fourquet said.

Marc-Olivier Padis, editor in chief of the monthly magazine Esprit, said the election “shows that a part of the electorate is hesitating — the center-left, which was disappointed by Ségolène Royal and was able to vote for Bayrou in the presidential election, was disappointed this time by Bayrou,” he said, referring to another former Socialist presidential candidate. “If there is a center in France,” he said, “it is about Europe.”

The Socialist leader, Martine Aubry, called the vote “an important electoral defeat” and said the party had “six months to change course.” Her plan is to bring together a “sages council” of other Socialist leaders — nearly all of them her bitter rivals.

The magazine Marianne commented, “The Socialist Party needs to undergo shock therapy, and Martine Aubry proposes six months of chamomile.” As for the “sages,” the magazine said, “Given the affection they feel for each other, metal detectors will need to be installed at the entrance.”

Mr. Sarkozy, meanwhile, did very well, winning 27.87 percent of the vote. Despite low popularity ratings, he consolidated the center-right and became the first French president since 1979 to lead his party to victory in a European Parliament election.

His victory was echoed elsewhere, as center-right parties like the Christian Democrats, led in Germany by Chancellor Angela Merkel, did well throughout the Continent.

After these elections, Mr. Sarkozy is preparing to start the second phase of his presidency with a speech on Monday and a reshuffle of his cabinet. He is expected to keep the prime minister, François Fillon, and the foreign minister, Bernard Kouchner. But he is likely to shift ministers in the areas of justice, agriculture, education and the environment, while trying to keep lines open to the Socialists and to immigrants.

Mr. Sarkozy is already moving to try to attract the environmental vote. “What is fascinating about Sarkozy is the rapidity with which he can react,” Mr. Cohn-Bendit said. “There’s a Green vote on Sunday, and on Monday he makes a big proposal on renewable energy, etc. He doesn’t stop. He says, ‘O.K., society wants it, I’ll go in this direction.’”
On Thursday, Mr. Sarkozy invited Mr. Cohn-Bendit; Cécile Duflot, the head of the French Greens; and Pascal Durand, an adviser to a well-known environmentalist and likely Green coalition presidential candidate, Nicolas Hulot, to the Élysée Palace. “Sarkozy realized there was a green wave in France,” Mr. Cohn-Bendit said afterward, “and he wants to surf it.”

Mr. Sarkozy is now discussing an idea to create a global organization for the environment with the Brazilian president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

The next challenge for Mr. Cohn-Bendit and his coalition will be the French regional elections next March. The Greens intend to run in the first round of voting, to gauge their strength, and then go into coalitions with others, probably the Socialists. “But you have to think regional, the way we thought European,” Mr. Cohn-Bendit said.

Jeanette Coombs contributed reporting from Paris.