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Centre for European Studies Summary Report: 2026 Fieldwork in Hauts-de-France

In September 2026, I spent a month in Hauts-de-France on the first leg of fieldwork for my Masters (MA) thesis, which examines how long-term deindustrialisation shapes political disaffection and far-right affect among 18- to 29-year-olds in Hauts-de-France and North East England. I am grateful to the Centre for European Studies for the travel support that made this trip possible.

I was based in Marcq-en-Barœul, in the Métropole Européenne de Lille, and travelled across the Nord and Pas-de-Calais departments. Much of my time was spent in the libraries of the Université de Lille, building a collection of French-language sources. These included local evaluations of youth policy, regional histories of the mining basin and its industries, and strategic plans from municipal, departmental, and regional governments, as well as from youth support agencies. Much of this material was written for local use and is rarely cited in English-language scholarship. It gives the French side of my comparison a substantial material base, and it shows how local institutions describe, in their own terms, the problems my thesis studies.

Having previously lived in Arras, Pas-de-Calais, I was already familiar with the bassin minier. However, returning as a researcher, I was struck by how deeply industrial history remains etched into the landscape. Slag heaps still tower over fields where coal pits once thrived. Today, quiet towns retain imposing railway stations, grand squares, and wide boulevards. These were built during an era when coal and heavy industry made this one of France's wealthiest, most productive regions. While these spaces preserve their historic legacy, local economies have yet to recover what was lost.

Spending time in these towns left me with two distinct impressions: a fierce pride of place, juxtaposed with a profound sense of marginalisation. Although Hauts-de-France sits just a short trip from Paris, Brussels, and London, it often feels bypassed. High-speed trains routinely cross what was once the industrial core of northern France, usually bound for major metropolises elsewhere. This reality brings to life what some academics term the geography of discontent,

which is an argument that becomes far clearer when witnessed in person than through maps and electoral data alone.

As one of metropolitan France's youngest regions, Hauts-de-France boasts a remarkably youthful demographic, and Lille itself holds one of the country's largest student populations. This energy was palpable everywhere, especially at the renowned Braderie de Lille, Europe's largest open-air market and street fair. Alongside the traditional flea market stalls, political associations from across the ideological spectrum set up stands alongside grassroots groups advocating for social solidarity and environmental justice. Observing these organizations compete for the engagement of a young crowd provided a compelling reminder of the diverse pathways into French political life and the intense contestation for youth attention.

On the day I left Lille, local high school students joined a growing wave of school blockades that had started in the Paris region the week before. Protesting over crowded classrooms, teacher shortages, and demanding schedules, their actions coincided with wider public-sector strikes against the government's proposed austerity budget. This moment underscored the central question of my thesis: whether young people in marginalised regions look for solutions within mainstream politics, turn toward radical alternatives, or withdraw from politics completely. Seeing these young people take to the streets was a direct reminder that these choices are far from abstract concepts.

The trip also showed me how difficult it can be to research politically sensitive questions. Organisations working with young people were generous with their time, but many were reluctant to go on the record once conversations turned to political attitudes. In a region where politics is personal and often tense, frontline workers are right to be cautious about what they say publicly. Those conversations still sharpened my understanding of the local context, and I have adjusted my recruitment approach for the rest of the project as a result.

Overall, my time in France was the best possible preparation for the second leg of my fieldwork, which I am now carrying out in North East England. It also deepened my interest in the geography of discontent, a question I expect to stay with me well beyond this thesis. Thank you again to the Centre for European Studies and to Professor Achim Hurrelmann for supporting this research.