

IF MARINE LE PEN WINS: A EUROPEAN GUIDE TO A FAR-RIGHT FRANCE

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SUMMARY

- Marine Le Pen's candidacy for president means Europeans should prepare for a France wholly different to the one they know.
- A Rassemblement National government would be hostile to the EU and a disruptive partner on numerous issues facing Europe; including on Russia, enlargement, climate and migration.
- The party is divided over whether and how to work with other right-wing parties in France; and how to position the country within Europe and the Western alliance.
- Le Pen is likely to work in a "duo" with party leader, Jordan Bardella, but there are notable differences between their outlooks. As Le Pen is now the official candidate for the RN, Europeans should pay attention to her views, not his.
- European political leaders would struggle to influence a Le Pen-led government, but nor should they expect a unified European far-right to emerge. They would be wise to begin their preparations now.

Note: This policy brief is a second edition of an [earlier paper](#) published on June 9th 2026. It updates the prior analysis in light of Marine Le Pen's confirmation that she will run for the French presidency.



The restoration of a matriarch

In the early hours of November 2nd 1976, a bomb exploded outside the Paris home of the far-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen and his family. The perpetrators were never found. His youngest daughter, Marine, 8 years old at the time of the attack, later seethed that the family was not shown “the slightest sign of solidarity or compassion” by the French authorities. Today, as Marine Le Pen launches into her fourth—and most competitive—bid for France’s presidency, that quote reveals something of the woman who might soon occupy the Elysée Palace. If she wins, European policymakers will need to understand this self-defined outsider and how her family’s and party’s long years in the political wilderness shape her domestic and international agenda.

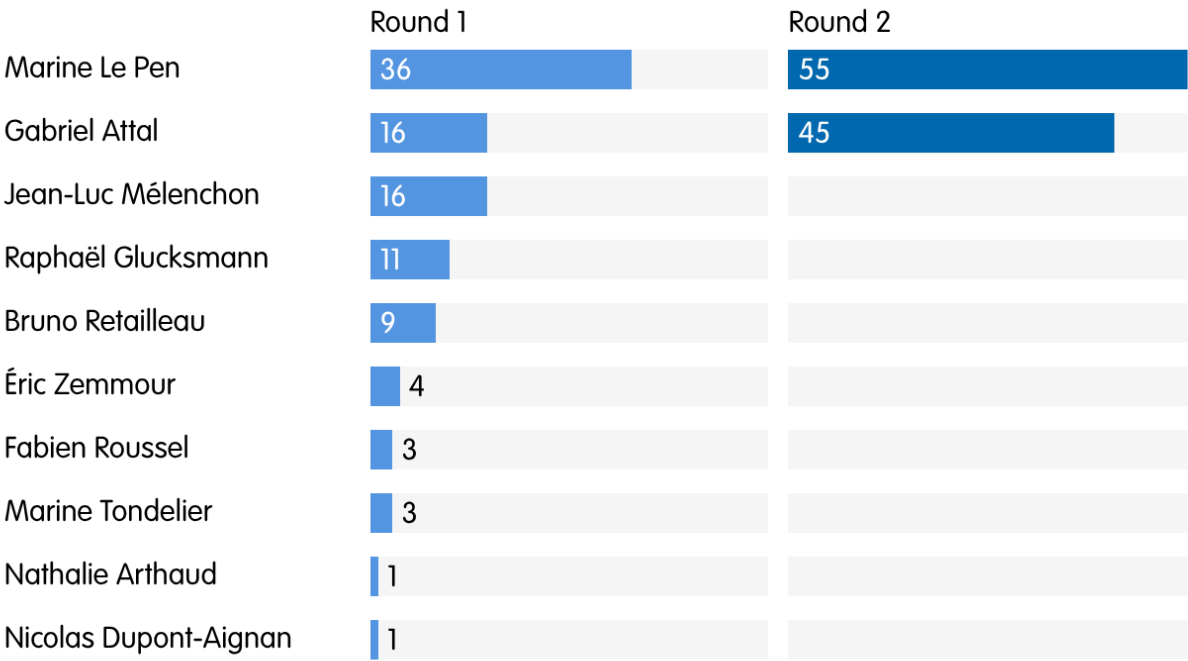
That insurgent self-perception may seem odd now. After all, the National Rally (Rassemblement National, RN) is far ahead in polling for the first round of the election, is accepted by an increasing share of French polite society, and is close to some of the country’s most powerful economic elites. But it still explains why the rest of Europe should brace for the possibility of a French president who sees herself as a rebel against the country’s and the EU’s established norms and institutions. As this paper will argue, a Le Pen presidency of France would be a significantly more formidable challenge to European orthodoxies than Giorgia Meloni is in Italy or Viktor Orbán was in Hungary.

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Only one thing is certain about the result of France’s presidential election next year: President Emmanuel Macron’s decade in power will come to an end. Who replaces him is an open question, with any number of conceivable outcomes. The exact field of candidates is not yet clear, not even in Macron’s centrist camp, where two former prime ministers—Édouard Philippe and Gabriel Attal—are vying for primacy. French presidential election campaigns are

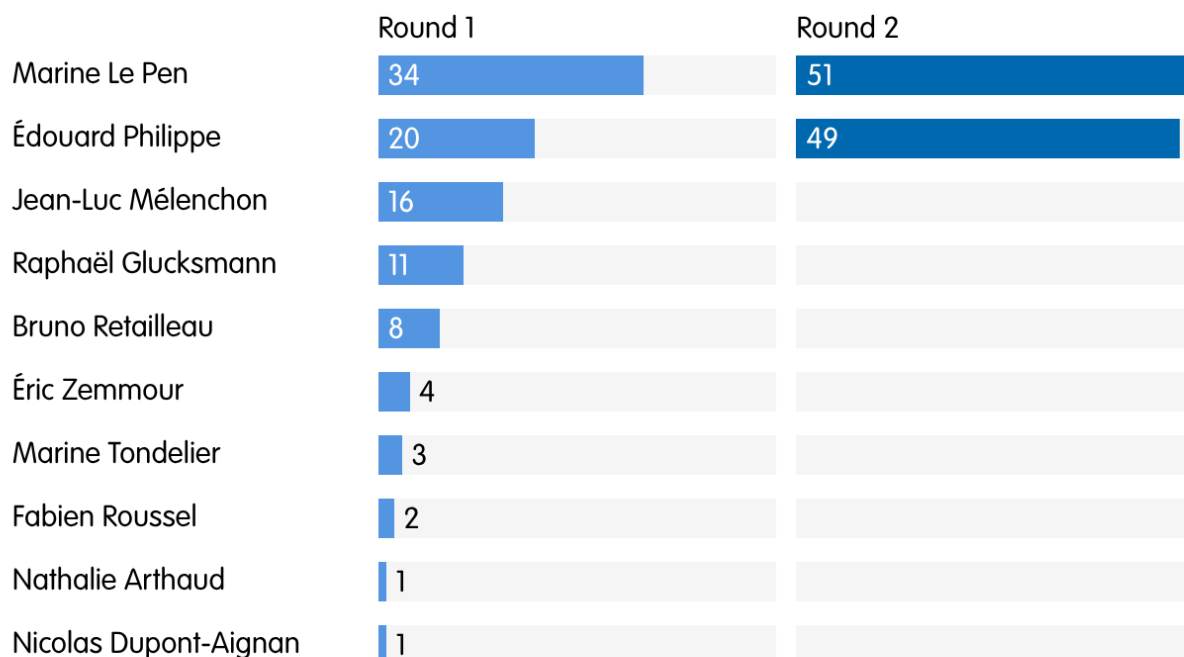
often volatile; both those in 2017 and 2022 saw major shifts over the half-year before polling day. But current polling suggests that the RN party candidate is on track to win the first round, on April 18th 2027, and to stand a good chance in the second, due on May 2nd.

Voting intention in first and second rounds of presidential election:
Gabriel Attal as centrist candidate



Source: Polling of French voters by Harris Interactive and Toluna, July 8th 2026
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Voting intention in first and second rounds of presidential election: Édouard Philippe as centrist candidate



Source: Polling of French voters by Harris Interactive and Toluna, July 8th 2026
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The RN went through months of speculation over who would represent it at the presidential election. In March 2025, Marine Le Pen was convicted of embezzling European parliamentary funds and received a five-year ban on standing for election. Over recent months, Jordan Bardella, the RN's untested young leader and Le Pen's protégé, was talked about as the party's best hope.

On July 7th 2026, however, the Court of Appeal reduced Le Pen's ineligibility penalty, which enabled her to run. It also required her to serve a year of house arrest with an electronic ankle tag. That evening, Le Pen announced that she would seek the presidency and would appeal to the Court of Cassation. The penalty is suspended until France's highest court rules on the case, which could take place as late as April 2027.

Her candidacy has significant implications for the rest of Europe. Le Pen is an experienced campaigner and an established (though also divisive) figure in France. Her bid for the presidency is perhaps more likely to survive the heat of the campaign than a Bardella run would have. The fact that she is the candidate probably increases the chances of the French far-right coming to power for the first time since Marshal Pétain, the puppet leader of Vichy France.

Le Pen is marked by the RN's long years in the wilderness. She believes in radical solutions. As president, she would likely be a confrontational and abrasive force in Europe.

To reiterate, the outcome of the election remains wide open. But the scale of the potential rupture of a Le Pen win means policymakers elsewhere in Europe must both understand the RN and prepare for that eventuality. To that end, the authors of this paper have extensively researched the party's Europe and foreign policies. The following study is based on in-depth interviews with an array of senior RN figures and external experts as well as analysis of the party's speeches, legislative proposals, voting records and electoral programmes. The result is a series of five theses about what a Le Pen win next year would mean for Europe.

Understanding an RN presidency

Point 1: Marine Le Pen's candidacy reaffirms her primacy inside the RN, although her duo with Bardella will endure



Marine Le Pen's decision to run for president despite her second conviction—and in contradiction of her own prior statements—is a reminder of her centrality to the RN. She is still the party's dominant leader. The decision also dispelled the illusion that Bardella constitutes a real alternative to her leadership. It showed that today's RN is still Marine Le Pen's inheritance and achievement.

The party was founded as the National Front (FN) in 1972 by Jean-Marie Le Pen, along with French former members of the Waffen-SS and nostalgists for colonial French Algeria. It drew together different threads of the far-right. For decades most French citizens considered it beyond the pale. When Jean-Marie Le Pen narrowly made it into the second round of the 2002 presidential election, it shocked both France and Europe. He was roundly defeated by 82% to 18% by then-president Jacques Chirac.

Taking the reins of the party from her father in 2011, however, Marine Le Pen pursued a strategy of “dédiabolisation” (“detoxification”). This saw her expel Jean-Marie from the party in 2015 over his racist and anti-Semitic comments. After her resounding defeat to Macron in 2017 she intensified the process, renaming the party and dropping its commitment to “Frexit” (leaving the EU).

In 2019, she appointed a fresh-faced young activist from a deprived Paris suburb to lead the RN’s campaign for the European Parliament election. Jordan Bardella delivered the party’s first ever first-placed result in a national election and was rewarded with the RN presidency in 2021. He would play a central role in the party’s 2022 presidential campaign—a much closer contest—and in its triumphant win in the 2024 European vote. Le Pen further empowered Bardella when she announced he would be her choice for prime minister. When it looked like she might be banned from running, Bardella became her natural replacement as a presidential hopeful.

Nevertheless, despite Bardella’s rapid rise and growing public profile, the RN remains firmly in Le Pen’s hands. For nearly half a century, the promotion of family members, such as Marine Le Pen’s niece Marion Maréchal, and a significant turnover at lower levels of the party has kept power with the Le Pen clan. Many of the party’s cadres remain more loyal to her than to Bardella, and were determined that she should run rather than him.

Now that the party is back behind its leader, Le Pen will continue to highlight the duo she forms with Bardella—as she did on prime-time television when she launched her campaign. She once again promised to make him prime minister if she becomes president. Running a “ticket” to the French presidency is unprecedented and anathema to the function. But it has a distinct advantage: broadening her voter coalition while keeping the party together.

Le Pen’s own political base has two main parts. First, an anti-elite and disaffected working- and middle-class electorate in the northern post-industrial Pas-de-Calais region that she has represented since 1998 (as a councillor, MEP and in the National Assembly), And, second, a chain of strongholds along the Mediterranean coast, which adhere to long-term RN positions hostile to immigration and taxes.

By contrast, Bardella appears more economically liberal and temperamentally closer to other parts of the French right, including the conservative flank of the Republicans (LR, the rump centre-right force) and culturally reactionary forces like Éric Zemmour's far-right Reconquest. He is also more engaged with the wider European right, especially Meloni in Italy. Within the RN itself this aligns him more with a more bourgeois and younger new electorate.

Over the last year, Bardella had even started to sand down some of the party's most abrasive ideas. Where Le Pen cleaves to some of the party's old Putin-friendly instincts on Russia, he has spoken in defence of Ukraine's sovereignty. He also broke from Le Pen on pensions reform, suggesting dropping the fixed retirement age and moving to a more contributory system. Where Le Pen went to Budapest to help out an embattled Orban, he struck a friendly tone towards Germany and even met with the country's ambassador in Paris. All this created expectations in Brussels and other EU capitals that a President Bardella might be closer to the bloc's economic orthodoxies and more open, at least, to compromises.

Le Pen's candidacy firmly relegates him to a subordinate position within the party. Gone, too, is the spectre of a somewhat more conciliatory RN presence in the Elysée Palace if the party wins power next year. "Bardellism cannot exist, as it is ultimately Marinism", Jean-Philippe Tanguy, a senior RN figure, has said. The reassertion of Le Pen's primacy within the RN thus makes the party both more likely to take power and more likely to disrupt the rest of the EU and its foreign policies if it does.

Point 2: An RN presidency would be a rupture in French and European politics



France is a highly centralised state, and its president wields executive power more akin to an American president than to counterparts in its European neighbours. The country also remains a pivotal power in Europe as one of its two nuclear-armed countries and half of the Franco-German motor that long drove the European project.

News of an RN win would therefore send shockwaves around the continent, stunning the mainstream. It would also lift the spirits of much of Europe's radical right after a difficult 2026 in which its pre-eminent governing leader, Orban, lost power and its links with Trump turned out to be liabilities. After all, the RN has been unapologetic in its support for fellow “patriots” across Europe. Le Pen campaigned for Orban, and Bardella has engaged closely with Meloni and her government in Italy and Nigel Farage's Reform in the UK.

Farther afield, the RN has been increasingly welcomed by fellow nationalists like Israel's Likud government, which hosted Bardella and other far-right leaders in 2025. The Trump administration has professed its own commitment to supporting “patriotic parties” and would react favourably to an RN win. This is despite Bardella's and Le Pen's efforts to cool their party's earlier enthusiasm for the US president.

The RN would revel in the sense of rupture. In private, party leaders compare their potential accession to power to left-winger François Mitterrand's historic victory in 1981—which they see

as the only true political change France has undergone in the last 50 years.

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Thus empowered, the RN would want to enact its programme. Although foreign and defence policy may not be its top policy priority, “fixing” France’s relationship with the EU is bound to be one.

In its 2019 and 2024 European election campaign manifesto, the RN suggested transforming the European Commission into a mere secretariat of the EU, leaving legislative initiative only to the European Council. The party decries attempts to expand qualified majority voting, refuses any new transfers of competencies on foreign and defence policy to the commission—and seeks European allies in that endeavour.

The RN is vehemently against EU common taxation and borrowing. Both Le Pen and Bardella have proposed slashing the French contribution to the EU budget (by “between €2bn and 3bn”, as Bardella suggested, which would be equivalent to 9-14% of the French payment in 2024. RN MPs have already put forward several amendments to the budgetary laws to that effect. In July, Bardella has even advocated reducing the contribution by half. In place of European joint spending, the party wants the creation of a sovereign wealth fund to back “sovereign industries” in defence, technology and energy.

The party’s antipathy towards NATO means it plans to prioritise national-level defence instead. The RN has committed to maintaining current defence spending, but argues this should support France’s own military-industrial infrastructure first and foremost. Even if it has paused an earlier plan to leave NATO’s integrated command, at least for “as long as the war [in Ukraine] goes on”, Le Pen revived the idea as recently as May 2026.

The strictly national principle applies to energy too. The RN has promised to lower French energy costs, notably by opting out of EU-wide electricity pricing (which often depends on gas prices less relevant to France’s nuclear-heavy energy system) and thus allegedly reducing the French production price. And, despite claiming to be concerned about the consequences of climate change, the RN is relentless in its opposition to the European Green Deal and its insistence that French nuclear energy should exempt the country from EU climate strictures.

Overall, if Le Pen were to become president, the RN’s highly disruptive European agenda would inevitably put France on a path to confrontation with European partners and institutions. As the fight against the EU is both a symbolic and a policy priority for the RN, other European leaders may have to find a way to accommodate some of the demands in order to prevent French vetoes. For example, they might offer a rebate on the budget—especially if it can be

compensated in other ways, such as allowing a tax on digital services to compensate for the budget loss.

Point 3: The RN's inexperience and lack of interest in foreign policy would make France an erratic partner, especially in a crisis



Europe's best hope, in the event of a Le Pen presidency, may reside in the fact that foreign policy would not be the top priority for the RN in power.

First, the RN's foreign policies often remain vague or only partially formed. Despite its long-standing presence in the French political landscape, the party has no national governing experience and only in 2022 won a significant share of seats in the National Assembly. With little network among the French diplomatic establishment, RN leaders have rarely engaged closely with foreign policy debates. The party prefers to hide behind references to General de Gaulle's pro-independence foreign policy to justify criticisms of the EU or NATO without being too specific.

According to RN insiders, the party's foreign policy decisions emanate from private discussions between Le Pen and Bardella, with the occasional counsel of the advisory group Les Horaces. If she attains power in 2027, Le Pen may seek to attract more experienced figures from the traditional right (from LR or UDR) or from the military to lead on top foreign policy positions.

Second, the RN is clearly prepared to change its tone on international topics when political expediency dictates. RN figures privately insist that foreign policy cannot win it elections, but

can lose it ones. They blame Le Pen's defeat in April 2022 on her failure convincingly to pivot away from Russia after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine two months earlier.

The party abandoned Frexit after the UK's Brexit turned out to be a disaster. It curbed its old openness to strongmen such as Putin (repaying a contentious loan to a Russian bank in 2023) and Syria's Bashar al-Assad. In recent years, it attempted to erase its anti-Semitic past by adopting a strongly pro-Israel line. Since February 2022, the party has walked a tightrope: paying lip service to Ukraine's right to self-defence while criticising sanctions against Russia as costly to French consumers and opposing some military aid to Kyiv as escalatory. Having greeted Trump's re-election in 2024, the party has become a nimble critic as his erratic foreign policies have made alignment with him a political liability.

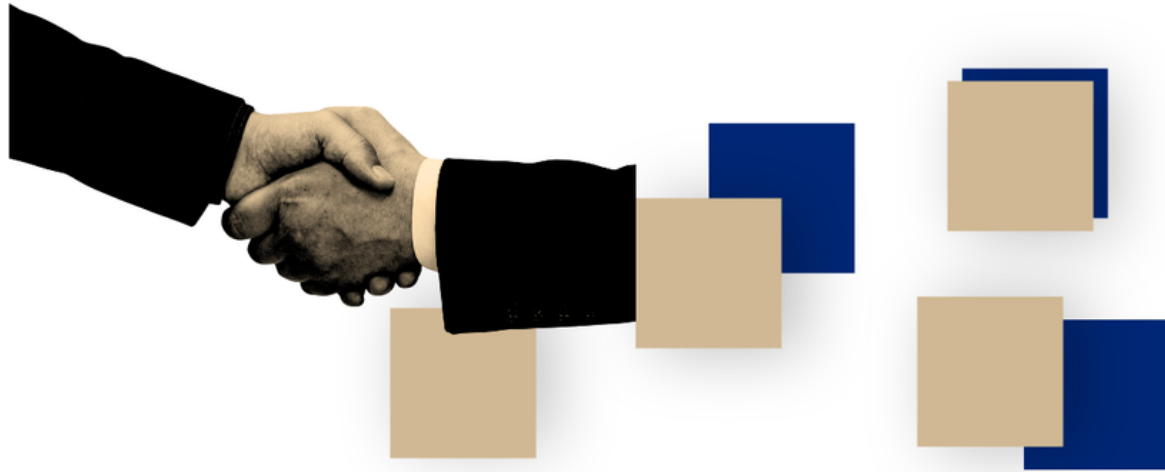
It is safe to assume, then, that, even with Le Pen as candidate, the party will tend towards orthodox language on most foreign policy ahead of the election campaign. It has a vested interest in a campaign that focuses on topics such as immigration, crime and purchasing power (where the party is most confident), rather than one that debates France's role in Europe or global geopolitics (where it is more uncertain and, in some cases, divided).

And even if the party wins power, the domestic agenda will likely come first. This can be summarised as: countering cultural and industrial decline by pursuing “national preference”. In policy terms it would include harsher law-and-order measures (especially on migration and crime), efforts to reverse green policies in the hope of revitalising industry, and prioritising French nationals over foreigners in accessing welfare or public services. European partners should reckon on an RN presidency being most intransigent on EU matters related to those domestic priorities—and possibly being more open to negotiation in other areas.

In sum, however, they should expect a Le Pen foreign policy that is unclear, evolving or even contradictory. Under her leadership, France would take few initiatives and rather behave as a blocker. For example, it is hard to imagine an RN president responding decisively to a security crisis on Europe's eastern flank. If under pressure from EU member states to be tougher on Russia, she would likely seek concessions and negotiations rather than further action.

If it does anything proactively, such a presidency would concentrate on disentangling France from EU policies that contradict its domestic goals. At best, the RN's lack of interest and inexperience may be an opportunity for other European governments to shape some of the outcomes, as long as they keep their expectations low.

Point 4: How broad and how European? The strategic debates running through the RN



Today's RN is infused by two strategic debates that would shape Le Pen's tenure as president.

Movement or coalition?

The first has to do with the RN's political identity: the party is struggling to determine whether it seeks to forge an *union des droites* (union of the right) or whether its outsider populist status remains its core identity.

In the long years the FN and the RN spent on the political margins, the Le Pens' "neither left, nor right" approach appealed to disillusioned voters who rejected all forms of politics. It acknowledged the *cordon sanitaire* between the mainstream right and their parties. Even back in the FN days, Jean-Marie Le Pen crushed several internal attempts to unite the right. Marine Le Pen remains firmly opposed to any such efforts today.

But the RN's proximity to power is challenging its outsider identity. Proponents of a union of the right are multiplying. One is Eric Ciotti, the mayor of Nice and former president of LR, who decided to join forces with the RN ahead of the 2024 snap legislative election. This created a major clash with his party and ended with the foundation of a new outfit (the Union of the Right for the Republic, UDR). The union of the right has also been promoted by Maréchal. She quit the RN in 2021 for Zemmour's Reconquest, though has since drawn back towards her aunt's party.

If she is elected, it is unclear how Le Pen will position herself towards other right-of-centre French parties. Her instinct seems to be that working with them would dilute the RN and prevent it from conducting truly disruptive policies. Given her aversion to compromise and her long years of ostracism by the mainstream political class, Le Pen will struggle to extend a hand to others to form a majority in the National Assembly.

She may, however, continue using Bardella as a useful bridge to other parties of the right, at both national and European levels. In an interview with *Le Figaro* after Le Pen's official launch of her presidential bid, he insisted that, as prime minister, he would seek to gather the right-wing electorate back to his party in order to build a "solid majority".

It is reasonable to expect that, if Le Pen allows Bardella to forge these links at home, she will let him do so abroad too. If so, Bardella would continue building alliances with the European right spanning conservatives and various families of the radical right, likely with immigration as a focal point. The RN has already demonstrated its ability to build coalitions with other far-right parties and the European People's Party to advance tougher migration legislation in the European Parliament. It would likely continue to do so if elected. Bardella has indicated that he would share this agenda with leaders such as Meloni and German chancellor Friedrich Merz and seek to work with them.

Rival futures

The second faultline within the RN today is between rival conceptions of national sovereignty, a point that came across especially strongly in the authors' interviews with senior party figures. Le Pen and the "old guard" around her have long held the view that France must resist Anglo-American hegemony and EU technocracy alike. They treat Washington and Brussels as equal threats to French autonomy.

Yet a new generation around Bardella—having come of age against the backdrop of the 2015 terror attacks in Paris and the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine—has adopted a more identity-based approach to Europeanness. It acknowledges the need for European cooperation against common threats, as long as this cooperation is "chosen". It is inclined to invoke a shared Western and European cultural affinity.

For example, on Russia and Ukraine, Le Pen and the old guard have continued to blame NATO's enlargement for "provoking" Russia. This fits their antipathy to Washington and Brussels. Their old ideological affinities with Moscow as a counterweight to American hegemony allow them to imagine a future in which Russia might even be a partner in a multipolar order once the war ends. But Bardella has admitted the "naivety" of Europeans in the face of the Russian challenge. Despite a less-than-keenly pro-Ukrainian voting record in the European Parliament, he has also

spoken in favour of Ukrainian national sovereignty and against Russian imperialism.

These debates will continue within the RN—especially because Le Pen has been unwilling to sweep aside Bardella’s “union of the right” and rhetorically “pro-Ukraine” positions. For as long as she wants the electoral breadth he brings, the tension will persist.

Point 5: The likeliest outcome of an RN presidency would be a more isolated France in a weaker EU



The disruptive nature of RN policies towards Europe means France’s relationship with European partners would deteriorate over time.

At first, the RN would likely seek to reassure the financial markets and its international partners. Victory for the party may be accompanied by protests and strikes, and the new government would face economic limitations like France’s high levels of debt. In this context, Le Pen may want to project stability. Nevertheless, the RN has promised to engage on a number of priorities that will put it at odds with other European governments—including those led by the right—as well as EU institutions.

Opting out of the EU-wide electricity pricing could push up prices for other member states; quitting the migration pact would put greater pressure on others; curbing the French contribution to the EU budget would force others to pay more and possibly trigger an infringement procedure. More generally, Paris governing in a spirit of French exceptionalism would roil Europe’s collective efforts on common challenges.

Enlargement could prove an especially inflammatory topic. Plenty of European governments have concerns about bringing Western Balkans countries, Moldova and especially Ukraine into the EU. But if the RN wins the French presidency, it will be the most outspokenly opposed government among major European states. It has warned that enlargement would ruin French agriculture and suppress French wages; intensify the EU budgetary demands on France; and further centralise power within the EU at the cost of individual states. The accession of Ukraine, with its vast agricultural industry, particularly alarms the RN.

The long-term result of these trends would likely be some degree of French isolation. The party's policies and instincts would set Le Pen up for conflict with the European Commission—but also with other national governments, including right-wing counterparts. Although others in the EU might conceivably come around to RN doubts about enlargement, the insistence on French national priority will alienate even ideologically sympathetic forces elsewhere.

Tensions could emerge with other far-right leaders, such as Meloni, over issues like migration. Despite broad ideological alignment on reducing migration, the RN prioritises national sovereignty over the management of borders and migration flows. By contrast, Brothers of Italy has advocated greater EU coordination and burden-sharing. As a result, a cohesive far-right alliance at the EU level should not be taken for granted. If these conflicts escalate, an “empty chair” moment, where France simply withdraws from EU meetings as it did under de Gaulle in 1965, is not unthinkable.

At a time when nationalist parties are rising in other major EU states, including Germany, an RN presidency could encourage unilateralism there too. The result could be doubly paradoxical: a lonelier right-wing France in a more right-wing Europe, and a more nationalist France more exposed to the interference of external powers.

How the rest of Europe can move into “brace position”



As the rest of Europe faces up to the possibility of President Le Pen, the risk is that leaders and other policymakers bunch around one of two poles: complacency (the over-confident belief that she could simply be “handled” like any other challenging leader); and panic (the fatalistic assumption that an RN-led France would automatically mean the beginning of the end of the European project). Of the two courses, the first—the assumption of business as usual—currently looks like the greater risk. But neither is advisable.

This paper has shown that an RN win is a real possibility and would herald great disruption for the EU and its place in the world. It has argued that a Le Pen presidency would see itself ultimately as a radical insurgency against the French and European establishment. But it has also explored some of the complexities and shed some light on how the rest of Europe should think about them. In particular, leaders elsewhere on the continent should:

Abandon all precedents when thinking about an RN-led France

As president, Le Pen would be as fundamentally rooted in French traditions and peculiarities as equivalent leaders are in those of their countries. Trump’s America is simply too different to be closely relevant to France, despite the executive power both presidents wield. Orban’s Hungary does not fit either, with its distinctive tale of state capture and subordination to kleptocratic interests. Meloni’s Italy, meanwhile, is a complex story of creeping authoritarianism at home but emollience internationally. A Le Pen presidency would bear passing resemblances to each, but be *sui generis*.

Seek to understand the party and its instincts

Le Pen is a familiar figure, but her party has never held national power before and has evolved over time. Knowing how it ticks will be essential. This should lead decision-makers to engage with the party now, including by pursuing carefully calibrated efforts to meet with its senior figures to assess their true intentions. The decision of the German government to make contact with Bardella, for example, was the right one—though Europeans should be wary about reading Le Pen’s positions and instincts via Bardella and his circle.

Brace for a wider, but not necessarily more unified, European right

An RN win would be significant for Europe’s far-right. But ECFR’s research points firmly away from the idea of a coherent and durable European “union of the far-right” of any sort. The radical right has an emphatic sense of momentum, but that is not the same thing as a common project. Indeed, dismantling European integration is likely to generate conflicts over budgets and policies on issues like borders, energy, industry and defence—even between governments of similarly nationalist ideological hues.

Manage expectations when seeking to work with an RN-led France

Even in today’s more plural Europe, France is too big and too important to be circumvented entirely in a world of predators. Perhaps there would even be some limited common ground (most likely to be around defence, geoeconomics and building strategic autonomy). There could even be the possibility to mould a party that is still uncertain about its exact foreign policy agenda. But, especially under Le Pen rather than Bardella, this would still be a significantly less predictable, less collegiate and less European France than the one partners have known under Macron.

Prepare to deploy all the arts of European and international politics

An RN-led presidency would be complicated and disruptive. It would call for real diplomatic skill and political leadership in the EU and the rest of Europe, especially in powerful states like Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain and, outside the bloc, Britain. In some cases, the task at hand might be to moderate France and bind it into groups of other states on matters of common and

agreed interest. In others, it would be to build coalitions of the willing where France was reluctant to join. This would be a good time to deepen relationships between Brussels, Berlin, Rome, Warsaw, Madrid and London, as well as other capitals.

The other futures

Europeans prepare for the possibility of Le Pen as president of France, they should keep in mind that an array of outcomes is still possible. There is also a significant chance of a moderate candidate making it to the second round and rallying the republican front once again against the RN. And in today's volatile and fragmented French politics, there is even the possibility of a far-right against far-left runoff. But polls are polls, and probabilities are probabilities. This paper is a response to one major possibility among several—and an urgent call to France's European partners to be ready.

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