



The French Front National: Between the Old and the New

Maria Elisabetta Lanzone

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The French Front National is now one of the most successful political protest forces in Western Europe. The party is preparing to participate in the April 2017 Presidential election where the migrant crisis and the capacity of the government to provide security from terrorist attacks will be pressing issues.

According to some scholars, such as [Cas Mudde](#), the French Front National (FN) now appears to be one of the most successful populist radical right parties in Western Europe. Since the mid-1980s, the FN has established itself as a permanent force in French politics. Nowadays, the party appears to offer strength in a climate where European security appears weak and vulnerable. Flourishing in a France characterized by strong concerns about the migrant/refugees crisis and recent terrorist attacks by Islamic extremists, the party is currently placed in a European ideological space of extreme right protest, often dominated by racism and xenophobia. The FN supports a concept of “Europe of Nations” and protectionism. These ideas have been encouraged by the recent winning of the “leave” campaign in the UK referendum and the Donald Trump’s rise in the USA. What are the origins of the FN, its current strategies and its role in the contemporary political landscape (at national and supranational level)?

From Jean-Marie to Marine: a family party

Since Marine Le Pen took over party leadership from her father in 2011, the FN has entered a new stage of its political development, which demonstrates its

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adaptability and an ability to survive its founding leader: Jean-Marie Le Pen. However, the party has an even longer history in French politics. It was founded in 1972 from a small neo-fascist organization, *Ordre Nouveau*, as an electoral umbrella for nationalist groups to run in the 1973 legislative elections. The FN remained electorally irrelevant during the first decade of its starting phase. Its turning point was the 1984 European elections where it obtained about 11% of the vote. From the mid-1980s, the party maintained a sort of electoral stability (between 11 and 15% of electoral support). Since 1984, the FN has also fielded candidates in all local and regional elections, winning representation in regional, departmental and municipal councils, as well as in the European Parliament.

The change of leader in 2011 reinforced the party's electoral appeal: the FN under Marine Le Pen has enlarged its base of support, reaching new heights in the 2012 Presidential election with about 18% of the vote. The FN also topped the 2014 European election winning a quarter of the national vote and 24 seats, which allowed Marine Le Pen to establish leadership over the pan-European nationalist right. Success at the national level has been corroborated locally. In the 2014 municipal election, the party won 11 municipal councils and 1,544 councillors, outperforming its previous record (1995).

The departmental elections of March 2015 showed another surge in FN support at 25% of the vote, with 62 local councillors. In 2015 again (December) the party participated in the regional elections and it obtained a new record. In particular in two regions (Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur and Nord-Pas-de-Calais-Picardie) the FN arrived at 40% of the vote during the first round of elections.

Under Marine Le Pen's leadership, party change has been embedded in the concept of "de-demonization" (*dédiabolisation*). As Gilles Ivaldi suggests, de-

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demonization is primarily characterized by the attempt to detoxify the party's extremist reputation, while simultaneously preserving its populist radical right potential for voter mobilization. The current FN seeks to improve its credibility through party modernization and professionalization. Whilst the 2011 leadership election represented a first notable step towards greater intra party democracy, there is little evidence of a more substantial move towards a party "normalization", neither ideologically nor organizationally. Instead, the party has taken a process of "Marinization" (personalization) whereby Marine Le Pen has successfully replaced her father as charismatic leader, both inside and outside the party.

The 2011 congress represented probably the most important change in the French Front National organizational path, with Marine Le Pen taking over the party. Following Jean-Marie Le Pen's decision to step down, the party had initiated an internal leadership campaign. During the same campaign against Bruno Gollnisch, [Marine Le Pen](#) had indicated that she would turn the party into a professionalized and more effective party organization: "I want to create a renewed, opened and well-functioning party", [she said](#). In 2011, the FN had experienced its first change of leader since 1972, together with a new executive team and a new logo. The "new" FN has pushed an agenda, which aims primarily to shed its extreme right profile and to achieve agency credibility.

A "Europe of Nations"

The FN articulates a strong populist anti-establishment agenda. It opposes European integration, exemplifying the "hard Euro-scepticism" defined by [Aleks Szczerbiak](#) and [Paul Taggart](#) as "a principled opposition to the EU and European integration". Its opposition to Europe concerns a wide range of institutional, economic and national identity issues. The FN's concept of a

“Europe of Nations”, argues that institutional cooperation should only take place between sovereign nation-states, opposes the EU as a supranational entity, and criticizes the EU as elitist and bureaucratic. A pledge for a return of competences and powers to the national level has been central to the FN electoral platforms since the early 1990s. The 2014 FN ’s programme featured primarily the promise to shed the Euro which was portrayed as “ a jail” serving the “sole interests of bankers and the wealthy”, and from which the French people “should free themselves”.

The FN’s distrust of European integration revolves around immigration and issues of national identity, and it is often linked with welfare-chauvinist positions. The FN’s hostility towards the EU is underpinned by the party’s traditional ethno-nationalist policies. As Mudde suggests, the FN’s anti-EU positions are incorporated into a typical populist radical right agenda, which combines nativism, authoritarianism and anti-establishment populism.

The party is notorious for its politicization of immigration issues. During the 1980s, Jean Marie Le Pen laid out the basis for a potent ethno-nationalist and welfare-chauvinist “master frame”, which later diffused throughout Europe. In 2014, the European campaign by the FN was marked by the continuation of xenophobia and welfare-chauvinism, showing no significant departure from the party’s traditional ethno-nationalist ideology.

The FN committed to “defending, in all circumstances, France’s values, identity, traditions and way of life” against what would be stigmatized as a “sieve Europe”. The party’s 2014 platform lashed out at the Schengen agreement, campaigning on withdrawal, and claiming that the FN would close France’s borders to “stop uncontrolled immigration and put an end to the free movement of Roma and delinquents across Europe”. In line with its 2012

manifesto, the FN proposed policies, which would remove the possibility within French law to regularize illegal migrants. The party's 2012 presidential platform featured a range of nativist policies, including the FN's traditional "national preference" scheme, which seeks to give priority to the French people over foreigners in welfare, jobs and housing.

A product of France's political system and climate?

French political parties are characterized by their instability, organizational weakness and fragmentation. As one of the oldest parties in France, FN has shown greater signs of stability over time. Since 1972, it has experienced only one change at the top and it has retained its name. The *Parti Socialiste* (PS – Socialist Party), currently the most important centre-left party in France, underwent important organizational changes since 1971 as it opened itself to other political forces. Parties of the right exhibit an even greater degree of volatility over time. In 2002, the loose electoral alliances of the 1980s and the 1990s between the Gaullists and the Centre-Right gave way to organizational merger with the creation of the *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire* (UMP – Union for a Popular Rally), which was an attempt by the centre-right to consolidate its identity.

In 2007, the new president of the UMP, Nicolas Sarkozy, was elected in the presidential election. In 2011, however, disgruntled liberals and Christian Democrats left the UMP to form an independent party, the *Union des démocrates et indépendants* (UDI). Following Sarkozy's defeat in 2012, the UMP entered a period of high ideological, leadership and strategic factionalism. In November 2014, Sarkozy returned to the UMP and won the leadership election with a large internal consensus. He pushed important changes to the party statutes, including a renaming of the party to *Les Républicains* (The

Republicans). Recently, the party reorganized itself around a new right-wing leader, François Fillon, who became the Presidential candidate in view of 2017 appointment and after a victory during an open primary election.

The same event has generated a new political and social weakness in France, also fuelled by the election of Donald Trump as US president in November 2016. In current context, France is faced with another crucial battle between populist radical right and establishment (right again) forces. The unexpected victory of Fillon in the Republican primary, Socialist President François Hollande's decision not to run again, may be complicating Le Pen's efforts to turn her political success into an electoral victory in the two rounds of voting scheduled for April 23 and May 7, 2017. In fact, there are themes, such as Islam, insecurity and immigration, with which the FN is able to rule the debate in general and worry public opinion.

The FN has been able to acquire a new agenda, a sort of "cultural hegemony", a "vocabulary" even more used also by other traditional party from the centre-right area. France remains, therefore, pervaded by a strong wave of right-wing extremism. In this changed and menacing context, the FN maintains a high appeal and it is ready to prepare its battle in the 2017 Presidential election and probably it is going to reinforce its campaign and its strategies. In any case, it has become (and remained) a constant presence in the French political system.

Image credit: [Blandine Le Cain/Wikimedia Commons](#).

Maria Elisabetta Lanzone, PhD, is Research Fellow and Teaching Assistant at University of Genoa (Italy). She is expert in comparative populism, Euro-scepticism and migration policies. She is the author, with Gilles Ivaldi, of the

book chapter *From Jean-Marie to Marine Le Pen: Organizational Change and Adaptation in the French Front National* (2016, Palgrave Macmillan). From April 2015 she is also member of the ERMES Laboratory at University of Nice-Sophia Antipolis (France).

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