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France

How the National Front Changed France

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Marine Le Pen has taken the National Front into the French mainstream without shedding the party's far-right politics. Over the summer Jean-Marie Le Pen was expelled from the National Front (FN) — the far-right party he cofounded, led for nearly four decades, and is the largest of its kind in Europe. The expulsion, which Le Pen is contesting, was the culmination of a months-long family feud between Jean-Marie and his successor and daughter, Marine Le Pen.

At issue were a series of comments Jean-Marie made in April of this year. First, in an interview on the flagship current affairs show Bourdin Direct, he repeated his claim, made at various junctures in his career, that the Nazi gas chambers were “a detail” of the Second World War. Furthermore, he insisted that all kinds of patriots are welcome in the FN — fervent Pétainists (collaborationists with Vichy France) just as much as fervent Gaullists.

Shortly after, he accepted an interview with Rivarol — a publication that sports a masthead of traditional and antisemitic far-right thinkers that the current FN leadership shuns. Granting an interview with such an outlet would have rankled on its own. But Jean-Marie then doubled down on his earlier claims, reiterating that Pétainists have a place in the FN (as well as defenders of French Algeria, Gaullists, former Communists, and all patriots “who have France at heart”).

The remarks, and the very bitter personal feud that ensued, make excellent copy for gossip columns and shows. But they also offer an excellent point of entry for understanding the recent history and evolution of the FN — which, under Marine, is undergoing a process of “de-demonization,” ostensibly distancing itself from toxic extremism.

The Mariniste Era

After becoming party leader in January 2011, Marine Le Pen passed her first big test. In the [2012 presidential elections](#), she garnered 17.9 percent — surpassing her father's personal best of 16.9 percent (in 2002) and putting the party's disappointing 2007 showing of 10.4 percent (for which she was widely blamed) behind her.

She's since consolidated that electoral success. The FN won eleven municipalities in last March's elections, and in the European elections two months later, the party scored a first-place finish with nearly 25 percent of the vote, netting twenty-four seats in the European Parliament. This has scored the FN additional media coverage of its castigation of EU institutions, which it holds responsible for many of France's current woes.

James Shields, a specialist on the FN, [points out](#) that “the FN gained more executive power in March 2014 than at any time in its forty-two-year history.”

Purges of opponents (since the early 2000s) and increasing party membership have further strengthened Marine's position. The party now has considerable momentum going into December's regional elections — widely understood to be a barometer for the 2017 presidential elections, in which Marine is seen by many as the leading contender in the first round.

So what are the characteristics of this revamped and revitalized National Front?

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Most conspicuous is its brandishing of the republican idiom. Adherents of French republicanism profess an allegiance to the values of liberty, equality, and fraternity; separation of church and state; and liberal democracy and the rule of law. Conventional wisdom in France has long posited an unbridgeable divide between the French Republic and the National Front – its populism, dubious commitment to democracy, and racism putting it beyond the bounds of political respectability.

Marine has set out to prove them wrong. At her inaugural presidential speech, to the evident discomfort of some in the audience, she proclaimed the FN “a great republican political party” and asserted ownership of “liberty, equality, fraternity.” Instead of harking back to pre-Rousseau ideals, she stressed the need to recover the spirit of the Fifth Republic – a mythical golden age in which President de Gaulle’s France prospered domestically and commanded respect internationally – and declared that those around her were the true defenders of the republic.

Like any concept, “the republic” and “republicanism” mean different things in different contexts. But since the rise of neo-republicanism in the 1980s and 1990s, it has increasingly been used as a reference point to insist on the inadequacies of France’s Muslim communities – a tendency which has been reinforced in recent years by both [politicians](#) and [intellectuals](#).

In appropriating the idea of republicanism, Marine undercut the very language used to quarantine the FN – to stigmatize it as beyond the pale – and created an effective narrative vehicle to propel its reactionary message. Frontists were no longer rednecks but guardians of [secularism \(laïcité\)](#), the separation of church and state, and defenders of beleaguered European minorities and victimized groups. As Marine put it – alluding to the “Muslim threat” – “in certain districts of cities it’s not good to be a woman, a homosexual, a Jew, or even French or white.”

The success of the party’s renovation was partly due to its opponents – particularly former President Nicolas Sarkozy, who has aggressively melded republican language with Frontist-style discourse, even renaming his party, once known as the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), The Republicans. In adopting some of the far right’s rhetoric, Sarkozy helped [legitimize the FN](#), allowing it to enter the select category of respectable “democratic” and “republican” parties.

The victory of François Hollande and the Socialist Party (PS) in the 2012 elections seemed to promise a change, with the center-left party lamenting the mean-spirited state to which the “republican tradition of secularism” had been reduced.

But their opposition was rather qualified. Hollande vowed, prior to his election, to champion republican values by insisting on unisex timetables in public pools, after outraged reports that one local authority had reserved an hour class per week for a group of obese women, some of whom were Muslim.

And perhaps most striking was Hollande’s [reference](#) to “Français de souche” – roughly translated as “ethnic French,” a term that even Marine Le Pen has studiously avoided. Furthermore, Arnaud Montebourg, a key figure in the Socialist Party, has referred to a “consensus” between the Socialists, the UMP, and the FN on immigration. This is something of an exaggeration – no other party matches Marine’s commitment to renege on freedom of movement across Europe’s frontiers, cut net immigration to ten thousand annually, and “encourage” unemployed “foreigners” to leave – but does accurately capture a clear trend in contemporary French politics.

As for France’s prized intellectuals, it is ironic that some have lent ideological legitimacy to the FN while heaping scorn on it. One particularly instructive example is the feminist journalist Caroline Fourest, who has argued in a book and documentary on the FN’s president that Marine Le Pen’s republicanism is inauthentic – that she in fact stands for the negation of its tenets, of which Fourest is a proud adherent.

Yet in addition to her tendentious but award-winning blurring of radical Islamism and French Muslims, Fourest was fined in court last year for her slurs against a young Muslim woman who was attacked in a Paris suburb, suggesting she either made up the story or was beaten up by her own family and then made a false report.

In the same vein, alluding to the Charlie Hebdo attacks, Fourest claimed that a rally against Islamophobia in Paris in March was “spitting on the dead of January 7.” The abyss that Fourest takes for granted between herself and Le Pen seems at least partially illusory.

Apart from this favorable context, what lies behind this refurbishment of the FN's image and what is its significance?

De-Demonization

In a recent interview on [BBC Hardtalk](#), an interviewer asked Jean-Marie Le Pen whether the rift in the party stemmed from jealousy over his daughter's success and opposition to her efforts to detoxify the party. This explanation didn't make sense, the elder Le Pen replied, because his daughter had been president of the FN since 2011.

He might have added that this ideological course had been embraced since she first entered the spotlight in the 2002 presidential elections. In the interim, she had climbed to the top echelons of the party, thanks to her father's machinations, against considerable opposition within the FN ranks.

One reason many in the party disliked Marine was their aversion to Jean-Marie's patrimonial maneuvering. But they were also more than skeptical about Marine's promotion of de-demonization. No one in FN circles would deny that the FN is portrayed poorly in the media, or that the party is electorally hobbled as a result. Not a single FN militant would object to de-demonization in this sense — fighting impingements on the party's ability to circulate its patriotic message.

But de-demonization is a tricky affair. The translation of “dédiaboliser” as “detoxify” in the BBC interview is illuminating. Detoxification connotes that the body in question is toxic and it is this that must be rectified. Dédiabolisation is more slippery — it is unclear whether that body has the “devilish” qualities that are to be removed, or whether, it is simply that their enemies' misrepresentations must be corrected.

It is this ambiguity that provokes tension within the party over the term. As the president, Marine Le Pen has to walk a tightrope between burnishing the party's image and jettisoning or renouncing its substance. The importance of political discourse in the FN — often performative rather than substantive — only makes the question of image rehabilitation more delicate.

Projects looking to improve the FN's image have always had rigid parameters — appropriate respect and dues to the party's old guard was expected and demanded, above all to Jean-Marie himself, who considers the FN his personal property. Indeed, Marine was delivered to the summit of the party precisely on that basis. Given Jean-Marie's advanced age, it was considered acceptable that his daughter run the estate on his behalf — and even apply a personal touch while doing so — but never to forget who owned the house.

Another hurdle in the de-demonization project is the FN's orientation toward political power. Over time, the party has oscillated between aspiring to power and distancing itself from it, but party culture has always dictated that a certain balance be maintained.

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At times, this tension has come to a head. In 1999, the party split into two factions, one of whom supported Le Pen senior, the other who favored his number two, Bruno Mégret. The feud turned on Mégret's conviction that Jean-Marie contented himself with provocation and had turned the FN into his personal patrimony. Mégret wished to rebrand the party, widen its appeal, and draw in supporters from the mainstream right.

The upshot of the contretemps is that de-demonization today risks vindicating Mégret's position if it doesn't hew to prescribed norms — an eventuality to which Jean-Marie loyalists are all the more sensitive to given the central role that former Mégretistes occupy in the [top echelons](#) of the FN today. There's some resentment in the party among those who see the high-ranking Mégretistes as dubious renegades, and it is striking that Marine has been at pains to deny [any parallel between her trajectory](#) and that of Mégret.

Marine herself is not oblivious to the importance of managing the FN's precarious balance. She is prepared to throw a bone to those nostalgic for the days of her father's leadership, as demonstrated by her [calculated](#) remarks in 2010 comparing Muslims praying in the street to the German occupation of France in World War II. (She was charged with incitement to racial hatred for making the comments.)

But in at least two ways, her leadership has failed to convince Jean-Marie and the party's old guard that she is giving sufficient weight to their expectations, priorities, and preoccupations.

Some pockets of the FN, particularly longtime members, think Jean-Marie's daughter has moved the party line too far toward integration with the mainstream and too far away from opposition or provocation. One former secretary general, for instance, [has complained](#) that

the FN has today become a vote-catching party, an electioneering pigsty. Like all the other parties . . . within the FN, everyone takes their position according to the state of opinion. That's exactly the opposite of Jean-Marie Le Pen. He was capable of defending his ideas even if they weren't popular. His daughter defends what is popular whatever the ideas.

Marine's ambition to transform the FN into a formation capable of taking power is a path that arguably carries a burden of justification within the party; after all, those who prefer outsider status and resist modification and possible dilution of the Front's axioms and loyal personnel can point to the achievement of the Lepenization of the political mainstream from without.

Indeed, it would be difficult to come up with another European political party that has exerted so much weight on public discourse from a position of perennial opposition. And as [Shields argues](#), "it is a fact insufficiently acknowledged that Le Pen voters have been critical in determining the outcome of every presidential election in France since 1988."

Tellingly, in the notorious April interview, Jean-Marie also pronounced himself in "total disagreement" with Marine's claim that Lepenist controversies and provocations overshadowed the work of the FN. He insisted that, on the contrary, it was a means to get its ideas exposure, intervene in debates, and shape public opinion.

The stakes involved in proving FN's respectable, republican credentials are particularly high when it comes to antisemitism. As FN vice-president Louis Aliot [explained](#):

De-demonization only relates to antisemitism . . . When distributing leaflets in the street, the only glass ceiling I saw, it wasn't immigration or Islam. It's antisemitism that stops people voting for us. There's only that. From the moment

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you get rid of this ideological barrier you free up the rest. Ever since I've known her, Marine Le Pen agrees with that. She can't understand why and how her father and the others can't see that that's the obstacle.

Key party figures like FN National Treasurer Wallerand de Saint-Just have also stressed the undesirability of this far-right tendency and accepted that "French people of the Jewish faith are perfectly integrated into our society." Conversely, the FN has advertised itself to French Jews as their "[best shield against Islamic fundamentalism](#)."

Such overtures create a problem, however. Had the new FN leadership simply abstained from antisemitism, even proscribed it within the party's ranks, they would have been unmolested in doing so. That is to say, they would not have come under internal party pressure to increase antisemitic gestures.

However, publicly eschewing such bigotry, rather than discreetly letting it go by the wayside, essentially meant deeming Jean-Marie a hindrance if not an embarrassment — acknowledging that his honorary presidential role (which he unflinchingly mentions) was in fact doled out to humor him while putting him out to pasture, rather than invest him with any power. Seen in this light, appearing in the pages of Rivarol and discussing Pétain and the Nazi gas chambers was no coincidence.

Another pivotal figure in the Le Pen family feud is the thirty-four-year-old Florian Philippot, the FN's vice-president and the brains behind the party's strategy and communications. Philippot has been a particular target of Jean-Marie — who has leveled homophobic insults at Philippot and besmirched him as a socialist, a Chevènementist, a Gaullist, a provocateur — and the founder's senior loyalists. Some have even mobilized to [get rid of him](#), believing Philippot has manipulated Marine into veering leftwards.

Indeed, Philippot is the figurehead of a group of Chevènementistes within the party — people whose worldview was molded by the politics of Jean-Pierre Chevènement, the former education minister, defense minister, and interior minister who by the 1990s was a dissident Socialist and the personification of neo-republicanism. If the republican turn within the FN can't be laid solely at the feet of its ex-Chevènementiste recruits, they considerably added to its momentum.

More precisely, there are several ways in which Philippot contravenes the acceptable bounds of de-demonization. First and foremost, he has ignored the unwritten understanding that appropriate dues be paid to the party — especially its elders. Conspicuously bypassing any time in bread-and-butter party work, Philippot shot to the front of the party line, a move that was concocted by his introduction to MLP by Paul-Marie Co«teaux, another Chevènementiste to whom she was close.

When he joined the FN in October 2011, Philippot made a point of stressing that he had never voted for Jean-Marie, and that he wouldn't have worked for the FN with the party's founder at the helm, particularly because of its economic program. To top it off, there is a widely perceived [sneer](#), expressed by Jean-Marie himself, that he would only have received a light punishment for his comments earlier this year but for Philippot's power in the party.

Even before this, Philippot's perceived arrogance was accentuated by his profile as the archetypal technocratic elite against which the party had always railed. He is a graduate of the highly selective École Normale d'Administration — a breeding ground for the country's administrative and political top brass. If in leapfrogging to the number two spot Philippot is seen not to have paid his dues, the same goes for his circle, which is regarded as having been granted an excessive number of top positions.

While Jean-Marie may say that Gaullists have a place in the FN, Philippot's outspoken admiration for de Gaulle does not sit well — again, an affront that is perceived along generational lines. A core, founding element of the FN

revolved around right-wing activists whose political teeth were cut on the Algerian war of decolonization, and who hold de Gaulle in contempt, seeing him as the liquidator of the French empire. As Roger Holeindre, a cofounder of the FN, remarked in May, “for a guy like me who served in Algeria, being represented by a Gaullist faggot is a bit much.”

The Party of Its Founder

Marine Le Pen’s FN has had significant success recasting itself as a regular political party. Polls in 2012 showed 51 percent of respondents judging the FN to be “a party like the others”; a sharp drop in the share of respondents who considered the FN “a danger” (53 percent); and a rise in the percentage of those with a “good opinion” of the FN leader (35 percent). The party has had particular success in attracting a female electorate that had been turned off by Jean-Marie’s leadership.

Part of this improvement is a result of the party’s careful tending to its image; these days disappointed skinheads are turned away at public FN demonstrations and gatherings, and militants caught expounding racist, antisemitic, or homophobic comments are strictly disciplined. Two of the best-known expulsions are Yvan Benedetti — who pronounced himself (jokingly, he claimed) as “anti-Zionist, antisemite, and anti-Jew” — and Alexandre Gabriac, photographed doing a Nazi salute.

The growth of social media has made people like Benedetti and Gabriac a major headache for modernizing far-right party leaders. Benedetti and Gabriac, for their part, say their ouster was really about purging loyalists to Bruno Gollnisch — a resolute acolyte of the senior Le Pen who is bitterly opposed to de-demonization. Though, of course, the two rationales are not mutually exclusive.

The Front hasn’t made a clean break with its old guard — figures like Gollnisch are still represented in the top ranks — but Shields points out, they are now surrounded by a host of younger delegates for whom the past does not have the same significance.

In addition, it’s important not to exaggerate these divisions at the political level, regardless of how fraught they may be at the personal level. A recent quantitative and qualitative [study](#) by Cécile Alduy and Stéphane Wahnich examined five hundred speeches, texts, declarations, and interviews with Jean-Marie and Marine between 1987 and 2013. They conclude that for all the refurbishments and additions to the FN repertoire, it remains the party of its founder. Marine’s deft semantic strategies — which at once reach out to new voters and appeal to the predilections of the existing electorate — simply conceal this continuity.

Furthermore, the removal of especially extremist figures from official positions does not mean the informal external connections don’t remain — the culture of the far right is distinctly porous. Purges can only go so far without collapsing the party’s entire infrastructure. In other words, one misses vital aspects of the FN if one restricts examination to its formal members and structures.

Of all the pressure groups outside the party apparatus trying to influence the FN’s political line, the most active at the moment is Bloc identitaire (BI). This organization includes both unknown young entryists and high-profile figures like Philippe Vardon, an unofficial leader of BI.

Kept at arms length by Le Pen senior, BI differs from the FN in promoting French regional identities as part of a broader ethnically based European civilization (in contrast to the FN’s centralized nation-state line). But it converges

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with the Front in its critique of globalization, and its rejection of immigration and “Islamization.”

Though the number of its adherents is unremarkable, BI punches above its weight through agit-prop operations devised for media impact — a 2012 occupation of a mosque roof in Poitiers, public distribution of soups containing pork, and providing unsolicited “anti-scum” security on the metro.

BI is also closely associated with the apocalyptic “great replacement” theory. Ethnic Frenchmen and women, the thinking goes, are being submerged under the demographic weight of non-European immigrants. Suggested solutions usually include expelling unacceptably dark sections of French society.

While sympathizing with their concerns, Marine Le Pen distances herself from the ideas of the identitaires even as she welcomes their participation in the FN on an individual basis.

Although Philippot has criticized the racialist basis of “the great replacement,” other party bigwigs are influenced to varying degrees by the outlook of the identitaires. For her part, twenty-five-year-old party star Marion Maréchal-Le Pen — the granddaughter of Jean-Marie and the Fifth Republic’s youngest-ever deputy — takes a compromise position, allowing that a population replacement is under way, but arguing it can be resolved by sealing the borders and assimilating immigrants.

In fact, there are distinct echoes of “the great replacement” rhetoric in recent FN language regarding the refugee crisis, which has provided a useful rallying point and distraction for the party from the demoralizing Le Pen family feud.

The humanitarian pretenses of the new FN — Marine positions herself in the lineage of the abolitionist Victor Schoelcher, for instance — were dropped in an instant. Instead MLP [expressed](#) her physical disgust at the inhabitants of the infamously dire refugee camp Le Jungle, reserving her concern for the local police, who regularly harass the camp’s refugees.

In addition to the identitaires, there are other elements, either within the FN or connected to it, that belie the party’s claim to squeaky-clean respectability. For instance, the revolutionary nationalists, represented by the likes of Christian Bouchet — a sort of éminence grise of the tendency’s thought and historiography, who the FN selected in 2013 to lead its list for municipal elections in Nantes, France’s sixth largest city. So too with David Rachline — one of the current FN stars as the twenty-seven-year-old mayor of Fréjus and senator for the Var département in southeast France.

The revolutionary nationalist current subscribes to a differentialist variant of racism, stressing the importance of separation and purity rather than supremacy, exalting Arab nationalism, and vociferously railing against American imperialism and “Zionism.”

The latter signifies here not a principled rejection of settler colonialism, racism, and human rights abuses, but rather a shorthand for rehashed antisemitic notions of a worldwide Jewish plot. In this, they are closely aligned with figures like Alain Soral and famous comedian turned full-time racist Dieudonné M'bala M'bala, one of whose daughters is godfathered by none other than Jean-Marie.

A sub-strata of revolutionary nationalists who also have a home in the FN are those militants who emerged from the GUD student movement (Groupe union défense), which was launched in 1968. Its former leader, Frédéric Chatillon, is a childhood friend of Marine Le Pen and has recently landed in legal trouble, accused in his capacity as head of

the communications agency Riwal of filing fraudulent claims for election campaign materials given to FN candidates.

An intimate of Chatillon and fellow GUDiste from the 1990s, Axel Loustau, is also a stakeholder in Riwal and a treasurer of Jeanne â€” a micro-party that functions as part of the FN financing structure, and which has also come under investigation. Loustau's far-right credentials include violent actions during the 2013 Manif pour tous demonstration against gay marriage and threats against journalists. To say the least, the alleged financial improprieties, dubbed "GUD business," are decidedly inconsistent with the FN's constant railing against venal, self-interested political elites.

Gauchisation

As part of his continual denunciations of Philippot and his socio-gaullisme, Jean-Marie never misses a chance to decry the gauchisation (leftward drift) of the FN's discourse. FN representatives are also constantly tarred with comparisons to the [Parti de Gauche's](#) Jean-Luc M lenchon, considered to be at the far left of the electoral political spectrum.

The charge of a left turn is not restricted to polemical assaults on the party; it also informs the analysis of many journalists and scholars. James Shields notably [argues](#) that the party has developed "a left-leaning agenda of anticapitalism and social welfare provision."

But this characterization is a misconception.

There is certainly plenty in the party's discourse that would not look out of place in a left program. Rising inequality, precarity, sustained high unemployment levels, a financial system unmoored from the needs of the general population â€” all are topics that appear in Marine's public addresses (to be solved by protectionism and a strong state supporting reindustrialization, employment, and growth). Particular scorn is reserved for the neoliberalism of Socialist and conservative governments alike.

Moreover, Marine's book outlining her political vision is peppered with references to left or progressive figures: FDR, Paul Krugman, Jacques Sapir (who has recently recommended that all anti-euro forces join with the FN, which, he assures us, has undeniably changed), Serge Halimi, Pierre Bourdieu, Karl Polanyi, Lenin, Marx.

There's additional ammunition for those positing a leftward shift. Various figures in the party have left backgrounds. And the FN has scored well among demographic groups who historically support left parties. In the 2012 presidential election, Marine received 33 percent of the working-class vote, and in the 2014 European elections, the FN's 25 percent first-place tally broke down as follows: 43 percent among manual workers, 38 percent among low-skilled non-manual workers, 37 percent among unemployed voters, and 30 percent of those from low-income households.

But winning traditional left constituencies is not the same as being left-wing. Nonna Mayer [notes](#) the low number of FN voters who self-identify as left-wing and argues that the strongest characteristics of FN voters remain ethnocentrism and authoritarian attitudes. Like her father, Marine's supporters are least concerned about social inequalities and injustices, which they see contemptuously as left-wing causes mainly benefiting immigrants.

And for all the comparisons to M lenchon, he and the FN could not have differed more over the recent Air France layoffs and subsequent workers' reaction. For his part, M lenchon assailed the media's outrage at the ripping of an Air France executive's shirt rather than the violence of laying off 2,900 workers. In contrast, the FN mumbled about

government irresponsibility in letting the situation arise, whilst Philippot complained about unions politicizing the situation.

The FN itself, of course, does not claim to be left-wing, but instead neither left nor right. A more precise way of putting it is that the FN has adopted a two-track economic policy in an attempt to appeal to two core elements of its base at once.

Marine articulates the statist protectionist track aimed at declining industrial areas, particularly in the north and east. And Marion Maréchal-Le Pen is viewed, in contrast to most of the youth figures in today's FN, as a potential Trojan horse for Jean-Marie is the spokesperson for the low tax, minimal-state liberalism that appeals to the party's middle-class demographic in the southeast.

In recent weeks, with attacks on its purported leftism (particularly from Sarkozy's Republicans) taking a toll, FN discourse has been leaning hard toward the latter line in an attempt to reassure bosses and management.

Looking Ahead

"This," Marine Le Pen declared earlier this year, "is the Front's moment." And indeed, both Marine and the party as a whole are in a strong position ahead of regional elections next month and presidential elections in 2017.

Yet it remains to be seen how much energy will be expended on the protracted Le Pen feud, and how it will impact the FN's electoral strength and political culture. It may be that the party continues to triumph in a political environment that is in light of the gloomy economic picture in France and Europe, as well as the renewed impetus for the language of war and suspicion the tragic attacks in Paris have provided now accepts many of its presuppositions.

On the other hand, de-demonization could deliver sharply declining returns, the FN could come up against the limits of insurgent populist parties, or seemingly slight internal fractures could develop into noticeable gulfs.

But uncertainty is no reason for complacency. Even in the nadir of its electoral fortunes, even when its momentum was seemingly neutralized or reversed, the FN has still shown itself adept at shaping French public life for the worse.

[Jacobin](#)