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National Rally's Prospects for Success in the May European Parliament Elections

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In 2017, both Marine Le Pen and her party suffered defeat in presidential and parliamentary elections, respectively. Her renamed party, National Rally, was weakened by accusations in court that it had fraudulently used public money and from an outflow of members. However, at the end of 2018, her party managed to overtake the president's in the polls and has a chance to win the elections to the European Parliament (EP). It is bolstered by growing dissatisfaction and criticism of the government among the public as well as low competition from other opposition groups.

National Rally (NR, formerly National Front), led by Marine Le Pen, in the latest Ifop public opinion poll (15 December 2018), overtook President Emmanuel Macron's party, La République en Marche, 24% to 18%, respectively.

NR's 11 percentage point (p.p.) growth in a year (from 13%) may be a surprise since after Macron's victories in the presidential and parliamentary elections it seemed he had found an effective method to marginalise extreme parties dividing the French political scene into "pro-European progressives" and "anti-European nationalists." In just one and a half years, this strategy has seemingly reached its limits.

The Destabilisation of Le Pen's Party after Defeats. The change in the trend belies the more widespread impression that Le Pen's formation, after a series of internal crises, had significantly weakened. The direct result of the 2017 defeats was the departure from the party of its vice-president, Florian Philippot. In addition, more than 50,000 members resigned from the party in the last year (of 90,000). This led to the closure in the summer of 2018 of about one-third of the party's 100 offices.

Another blow to the group was the failure of plans to form a coalition with independent politician Nicolas Dupont-Aignan. In September 2018, the leader of the French Uprising party rejected a proposal to create a joint list with Le Pen in the European elections. However, Dupont-Aignan—whose party is polling around 7%—has not excluded a post-election alliance with Le Pen.

Undoubtedly, Le Pen's most serious problems are court-related and financial matters. In addition to allegations the party is funded by Russian special services, in June 2017, both she and several MEPs were charged with criminal offences, including the defrauding of €6.8 million from the EP in 2009–2017. The charges are based on the EP salaries of over a dozen MEP assistants who performed party tasks in France. One of those charged was Nicolas Bay, who has long been selected to top the NR list in the May EP elections. A court decision to suspend for cautionary reasons the payment of a €1 million grant to NR caused serious financial problems for Le Pen's party.

The Reasons for the Increase in Le Pen's Popularity. Despite facing numerous crises six months ahead of the European elections, NR is increasingly popular in France. The most important reason is the growing dissatisfaction with the Macron government. It has been unable to reverse the negative trend that six

months after becoming president led to a 19-point drop in confidence (from 57%). The weakening poll figures reflect the ineffectiveness of his economic reforms and the unpopular—some call it arrogant—style of his presidency. The liberal reform of the country's labour code, the increase in the general social security contribution (Contribution Sociale Généralisée, or CSG) by 1.7 p.p. (from 7.5% to 9.2%), and the tax reduction of 10% on the richest French (conversion of joint-wealth tax to tax only from real estate) influenced the perception of Macron as the “president of the rich” and one detached from the life experience of the average French citizen. The recent [“yellow vest” mass protest movement \(number about 400,000 people across France\)](#), started in reaction to an increase in the fuel tax, confirmed the scale of the opposition to the president's government. [The increasingly rebellious electorate, collectively referred to as “forgotten France” by Le Pen since taking leadership of the party in 2011](#), may give her party further votes, for example, it is supported by 40% of employees in the industrial sector. Le Pen has been earnestly seeking attention from the protesters while at the same time respecting their request that politicians do not engage with their movement directly. According to the first polls since the start of the protests, Le Pen voters constitute the largest group of yellow vest movement supporters: 40% of the protesters voted in the presidential election for Le Pen and as many as 91% of her voters support the protests.

Another reason for the increase in support of Le Pen's group is the poor performance of other opposition parties. For the neo-Gaullist party, the Republicans, which have 13% support, it remains difficult to create a common front amid its disintegration since its candidate lost the presidential election. The left, on the other hand, is shattered into its radical wing—Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Unsubmissive France (11%)—and moderate Socialist Party (7.5%).

By withdrawing the most radical elements from LePen's party programme—i.e. the withdrawal of France from the single currency and returning to the franc, and from a referendum on “Frexit”—she counts on the increasing disaffection of moderate voters, mainly Republican sympathisers. What's more, the recent success in elections of parties similar to NR, Eurosceptic and anti-immigrant parties in Germany, Austria, Italy and Sweden, have shown that Le Pen's ideology is not just a French *spécialité de la maison* but increasingly part of the political dynamic in the EU.

Conclusions and Perspectives. Le Pen's political formation's advantage in opinion polls over Macron's pro-European party six months ahead of the EP elections gives her a chance to repeat the success of 2014 when National Front won with 25%.

Macron's weakness will exacerbate the political confrontation in the election campaign in France, which can be seen in the new initiatives pushed through by the presidential camp. To stop the growth of public and electoral support for NR, Macron first intensified the social reforms, including announcing on 13 September 2018, a strategy of counteracting poverty. Second, his government urgently plans to introduce new regulations on the status of Islam in France, in particular, the method of financing places of worship, thus responding to the demand of the part of the French electorate afraid of the “Islamisation” of the society. Neither were Macron priorities and are undoubtedly a sign of preparation for a renewed electoral confrontation with Le Pen. However, in doing so, Macron enters positions already occupied by his main rival, which does not bode well for him.

In the case Le Pen and her party are successful in the May election, she plans to create an alliance of Eurosceptic and anti-immigrant forces, preferably as part of a new group in the EP. To accomplish this, on 1 May 2018, in Nice, she inaugurated a new movement—the Union of European Nations—consisting of the Italian Ligia, Austrian FPO, Dutch PVV, Polish KNP, Czech SPD, Bulgarian Volya, and Greek Nea Dexia. The alternative minimum is to focus its political capital at the EU level within the structure of the Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENW) group. The introduction of a large representation of Eurosceptic politicians from NR, along with other parties from the ENW to the EP would give it blocking capability, for example on votes on federalisation of EU asylum policy, and on postings to EU executive positions after 2019.

Le Pen's success would involve at least two areas of risk for Poland. The first would be the rise in influence in the EP of one of the most pro-Russian parties in Europe (for example, in 2014, FN received a €9.4 million loan from the First Czech-Russian Bank, associated with the Kremlin and based in Moscow). The second is that the promotion of economic protectionism at the EU level by Le Pen is contrary to the Polish interest. The leader of NR is even more likely than Macron to limit what the French have described as “unfair competition” from cheaper employees from Central Europe. Moreover, she plans in a more determined way than the current government to stop investments from France to countries in the region. Le Pen increasingly emphasises the need for the more effective protection of jobs in France, which is aimed also to attract the “yellow vests,” for whom this represents a top demand.