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Article

## French Court Ruling Convicting Marine Le Pen: Implications for the Future of the Far Right in France

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### ***Abstract***

*This article examines the political and institutional repercussions of the French court ruling convicting Marine Le Pen, leader of the National Rally, of embezzling public funds and barring her from holding public office. Using a case study approach, the study analyzes how the verdict reshapes the trajectory of the French far right, the internal dynamics of the National Rally, and broader debates on judicial independence and democratic legitimacy. It explores competing interpretations of the ruling—as either a manifestation of rule-of-law accountability or an instance of political targeting—while assessing its impact on public opinion and electoral prospects ahead of the 2027 presidential election. Drawing on polling data and political reactions, the article argues that the ruling may paradoxically reinforce populist narratives of victimhood in the short term, even as it introduces strategic uncertainty for the party’s future leadership. Ultimately, the study highlights the tension between legal accountability and symbolic politics, positioning the case as a critical moment in the evolution of contemporary European populism.*

**Keywords:** *French judiciary, National Rally, Marine Le Pen, Jordan Bardella, European Parliament, Populism, Far-right politics, Political polarization, Rule of law*

## Introduction

Marine Le Pen, leader of the far-right National Rally party in France, has long been a controversial figure in French and European politics. Since succeeding her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, as party leader, the party has seen its presence grow in the political and media landscape, even making gains in French legislative elections and European Parliament elections. It now holds the largest bloc in the National Assembly (the French lower house), and Marine Le Pen herself reached the second round of the French presidential elections, facing President Emmanuel Macron in both 2017 and 2022.

However, qualification for the second round of the presidential election did not prevent Marine Le Pen and 12 members of her party from being convicted of embezzling public funds by the Paris Criminal Court on March 3, 2025. The total damage was estimated at approximately €2.9 million, relating to funds from the European Parliament that were used to pay individuals who were in fact working for the far-right party. The French judiciary ruled that Le Pen would be barred from running for public office for five years, effectively preventing her from contesting the 2027 presidential election. She was also sentenced to four years in prison, two of which are to be served under electronic monitoring.

The significance of this research lies in its analysis of the repercussions of the French court's decision to convict Marine Le Pen on France's social and political landscape. It examines how major judicial rulings shape the trajectory of political parties—particularly the party under study—and how French public opinion responds to such decisions. In doing so, the study adds an important dimension to understanding the relationship between the judiciary and politics in democratic systems.

### *Research Objective*

This research aims to analyze the details of the conviction issued by the French judiciary, its repercussions for the political and personal future of the leader of the National Rally (RN), and to assess the impact of this decision on the party's popularity and political discourse, particularly in the context of preparations for upcoming elections.

### *Research Problem*

This research seeks to address the central question: “Was the French court's decision influenced by hidden political pressures, or was it a fully independent judicial ruling based solely on legal evidence?”

To explore this, the study further examines two sub-questions: How independent is the judiciary in cases with clear political dimensions? And how do such decisions shape public trust in judicial institutions?

### *Research Hypothesis*

The main hypothesis of this research is that the popularity of the National Rally will not decline significantly and may even increase among certain groups. This is based on the possibility that

the party's supporters may interpret the decision as part of a "political conspiracy" against them, thereby reinforcing the cohesion of their base and strengthening loyalty to the party and its leadership.

### *Research Methodology*

The topic will be studied using the case study method in dissecting the details of the French court's decision and its political repercussions.

## **The Origins and Ideology of the National Rally and Its Political Role**

France is the home of the emergence of extreme right-wing movements and parties. One of the repercussions of the French Revolution was the emergence of forces and figures who adopted radical visions, positions and policies accompanied using armed violence and repression against opponents. This led to the division of political forces into a right-left dichotomy, which has persisted and become deeply entrenched in shaping the French political system across all historical periods up to the present.

In this regard, Article (4) of the French Constitution issued on October 4, 1958, specifies the function of political parties: *"Political parties and groups participate in the exercise of the right to vote. They are formed and carry out their activities freely. They must respect the principles of national sovereignty and democracy. The laws guarantee the right to express different opinions and the fair participation of political parties and groups in the democratic life of the nation,"* (French Constitution, 1958). The freedom of formation and exercise granted to them by the Constitution did not prevent successive governments from banning small local or national extremist parties, whether right-wing or left-wing.

The National Rally, previously known as the National Front, has been—and remains—a controversial and divisive force in the French political scene due to its extreme right-wing ideology, ideas, and programs, as well as the political influence and personal charisma of its founder, the late Jean-Marie Le Pen, and his daughter and successor, party leader Marine Le Pen, along with the political and media discourse they have advanced. Therefore, the party can be regarded as a significant and influential actor in France's political, social, and cultural landscape.

The National Rally is widely regarded as one of the most successful right-wing populist parties and a source of inspiration for similar movements across Europe, having achieved notable gains both domestically in France and in European Parliament elections. The party has undergone several phases of development and political influence, which can be broadly divided into two main periods. The first is the founding phase, led by its founder Jean-Marie Le Pen, beginning with the party's establishment in 1972 and lasting until 2011, when leadership passed to his daughter, Marine Le Pen.

This initial period saw significant transformations in the party's orientation, organizational structure, and political activity, alongside growing electoral success at both national and European levels. Marine Le Pen's rise to the presidency not only resolved internal leadership questions but also clarified the party's future direction. Her leadership strengthened the party's effectiveness, improved its public image, and facilitated its integration into the French political mainstream. Moreover, the party expanded its agenda beyond security and immigration, presenting itself as a credible alternative to governing parties rather than merely a source of political disruption (Ivaldi & Maria Elisabetta, 2016: 138).

Marine Le Pen's first task after being elected party leader was to implement a "de-demonization" agenda aimed at shedding the party's far-right image and enhancing its credibility. However, the changes introduced also reflected the continuation of a dynastic model of leadership characterized by strong centralization and hierarchical organization. Marine Le Pen capitalized on this transformation, particularly through media and social media engagement—appearing frequently on television and radio—to reshape the party's ideological discourse and adopt a more "populist," or at least "neo-populist," orientation.

The party increasingly positioned itself as a defender of "the people" against globalization, outsourcing, and mainstream parties such as the Union for a Popular Movement and the Socialist Party, which it accuses of betraying the public (François, 2014: 52–53). At the same time, it has been argued that Marine Le Pen's populism also reflects resistance to sharing welfare benefits, perceived by supporters as hard-won entitlements (Marcus, 1995: 105).

The ideology, policies, and programs of the National Rally are based on several key principles, most notably:

***Emphasis on national identity:*** The party highlights the perceived existential threat to French identity posed by foreigners and immigrants. This threat is framed as coming from two directions: historically from the east, associated with communist ideology in the former Soviet model, and from the south, associated with what is described as an Islamic threat (Marcus, 1995: 103).

***National preference:*** A fundamental element of its economic doctrine, "national preference" prioritizes French citizens in access to limited state resources such as healthcare, housing, and social welfare benefits (Marcus, 1995: 103).

***Foreign and security policy vision:*** The party's outlook is grounded in the idea that France has a unique global mission. It advocates restoring national independence and prioritizing French national interests, arguing that relations with European Union should not come at the expense of sovereignty and that ties with the United States should remain balanced.

***Rejection of globalization and market liberalization:*** The party views the ideology of globalization as an embodiment of the hegemony of a global superpower, particularly the United States. At the same time, despite elements of neoliberal rhetoric and some criticism of the welfare state, "the party adopts a pro-market liberal economy and combines traditional left-wing

themes of social and economic protectionism and anti-globalization with strong working-class appeal” (Ivaldi & Elisabetta, 2016: 17).

Regarding the electoral performance of the National Rally, since its founding, the party has participated in all elections for the National Assembly (Parliament/Lower House) and the European Parliament, aiming to consolidate its presence on the political scene. However, it was unable to surpass the 5% threshold required for entry into the National Assembly during the 1970s and until the mid-1980s, as it remained in a formative stage, seeking to attract and persuade different segments of French society of its political project and socio-economic program.

At the same time, the French party system was characterized by strong polarization and competition between two major blocs—the right and the moderate left—which by the mid-1980s had shifted toward the ideological center, limiting the party’s electoral gains. The number of seats the party won in the 2017 elections was insufficient to form a parliamentary group, as the rules of the National Assembly require at least fifteen deputies, with groups playing a central role in parliamentary organization and committee formation.

In the 2022 legislative elections, however, the National Rally achieved a major breakthrough, securing 17.30% of the vote and forming, for the first time, a significant parliamentary bloc with 89 seats (Al-Dahlaki, 2024: 250).

In French presidential elections, and in the context of demonstrating the strength and popularity of the party and his ambitions as the party’s leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen participated in several electoral cycles and achieved notable gains. Most prominently, in the 2002 election, he secured an unprecedented result with 16.9% of the vote, advancing to the second round against Jacques Chirac, which he ultimately lost, receiving 17.8% of the total vote. This outcome was described as a political earthquake and a wake-up call for moderate French political forces, underscoring the need to unite against the far right. At the time, many voters resorted to “punitive voting,” supporting Chirac despite reservations (Shields, 2007: 196).

In the 2012 presidential election, opinion polls indicated that Marine Le Pen was a serious contender, though she did not advance to the runoff. She ran again in 2017, reaching the second round, where she faced Emmanuel Macron, who won with 65.82% of the vote compared to her 34.18% (Nordstrom, 2017). In the 2022 presidential election, she once again reached the second round but was defeated by Macron, despite achieving the highest result for a far-right candidate under the Fifth Republic, established in 1958. Macron received 58.5% of the vote, compared to 41.5% for Le Pen (Al-Dahlaki, 2022).

In this regard, we refer to the accusation leveled by President Emmanuel Macron against Marine Le Pen during the televised debate ahead of the 2017 presidential elections, when he accused her of “*financial subservience and dependence on Putin’s broader project, and submission to values that are not our own.*” This allegation stemmed from a loan Le Pen obtained from the First

Czech-Russian Bank, which she denied (Vie Publique, 2017). The National Rally party also reportedly received a loan of eight million euros from Laurent Foucher, a French businessman with investments in the Republic of Congo. These funds were channeled through the UAE-based financial company Noor Capital and deposited into the party's accounts at the end of June 2017, shortly before being transferred to Le Pen's presidential campaign account (Laske & Turchi, 2019).

It is also worth noting that French prosecutors questioned billionaire Pierre-Édouard Stérin in June 2024 as part of an ongoing investigation into campaign finance violations linked to the National Rally. According to the Marseille prosecutor's office, the inquiry concerns loans totaling 1.8 million euros granted to several party candidates for the 2020 municipal and 2021 regional elections, including in major cities such as Lyon and Nice. In parallel, the European Public Prosecutor's Office has opened an investigation into alleged misuse of funds by the now-defunct Identity and Democracy group in the European Parliament, of which the National Rally was a member (Goury-Laffont & Sollety, 2025).

It is also worth noting that French prosecutors questioned a French billionaire in June 2024 who was allegedly seeking to use his wealth to promote a radical liberal and anti-immigrant agenda, as part of an ongoing investigation into campaign finance violations involving the National Rally party. The Marseille prosecutor's office stated that it had questioned Pierre-Edouard Sterin, a media mogul who made his first millions with the gift card company Smartbox.

The questioning formed part of an investigation into loans totaling 1.8 million euros granted to several National Rally candidates to finance campaigns in the 2020 municipal and 2021 regional elections, including in major cities such as Lyon and Nice. In parallel, the European Public Prosecutor's Office has launched an investigation into alleged misuse of funds by the now-defunct Identity and Democracy group in the European Parliament, of which the National Rally was a member (Goury-Laffont & Sollety, 2025).

## **Details of the European Funds Embezzlement Case**

In a French court ruling considered by political and media circles to be a political earthquake with far-reaching repercussions on the French political scene, and potentially even at the European Union level, the French judiciary issued a verdict convicting Marine Le Pen of embezzling public funds. The court also ruled to disqualify her from running for office, with the sentence to be carried out immediately. Alongside Le Pen, the Paris court convicted eight other members of the European Parliament from her party in connection with the same case. As a result, Le Pen will, most probably, be unable to run in the upcoming presidential elections. The court estimated the total damage at €2.9 million, as the European Parliament was charged with the costs of individuals who were effectively working for the far-right party. Although her seat in the French parliament will not be threatened, Marine Le Pen may be barred from running in the 2027 presidential election. This follows the confirmation of her political disqualification, which will be enforced immediately (Le Monde, 2025).

Le Pen's National Rally received money from the European Parliament for parliamentary assistants who were working either partially or wholly in favor of the party. These allegations,

relating to the years 2004 to 2016, have haunted Marine Le Pen and her party for years. The total number of defendants in the case is 28. The amount of money involved is approximately €7 million (\$7.3 million). Le Pen repaid €330,000 to the European Parliament in 2023; however, her party insisted that this was not an admission of wrongdoing.

A conviction for Le Pen would have serious consequences. The prosecutor requested a five-year ban from holding public office if she were found guilty, which would effectively end her hopes of running again in the 2027 presidential election. The prosecution also called for the sentence to be applied immediately, not only after a legally binding ruling from a higher court. The investigation into the case began in 2015, involving the National Rally's head of personnel along with 24 other members, and extended to contracts for political aides between 2004 and 2016. It also included figures such as an assistant and a secretary of Marine Le Pen who received their salaries from recruitment bonuses under false and fabricated pretexts (Eremnews, 2025).

As part of the campaign targeting the National Rally, on July 9, 2025, French authorities raided the headquarters of the National Rally as part of a major investigation into whether the party violated campaign finance laws during the last election. Prosecutors said the investigation, which began the previous year, is examining whether the party partially financed its campaigns through illegal loans between January 1, 2020, and July 12, 2024.

Party leader Jordan Bardella confirmed this on platform X, stating that the National Rally headquarters, "including the offices of its leaders," had been searched. Bardella described the raids as "unprecedented" and "a serious attack on pluralism," although several other party headquarters in France have been raided in recent years, including those of the center-right Republicans and the far-left France Unbowed. He added that "emails, documents, and accounting records belonging to the party" were confiscated, and later claimed in a subsequent post on X that the investigations were based on "a vague, undefined criminal offense" and were politically motivated (Jory-Lafont, 2025).

## **Echoes and Reactions to the Court's Decision**

Reactions to the French court's decision varied and were marked by a clear division between those who supported and endorsed the ruling and those who condemned and rejected it, describing it as political targeting aimed at preventing Marine Le Pen from running in the 2027 presidential elections. This division was not confined to the French political and media scene but extended to differing positions among far-right leaders in Europe and the United States, as well as the Russian stance on the matter. We will review these positions as follows:

### *The Positions of Marine Le Pen and the National Rally*

Marine Le Pen appeared in a television interview hours after the verdict, during which she commented on the ruling. Speaking on TF1, she demanded a swift appeal hearing and affirmed that she would not retire from politics, describing the verdict against her as a "political decision."

*“I will not allow myself to be eliminated in this way,”* she declared, referring to practices she believed were *“the preserve of authoritarian regimes.”* In a hearing before the National Assembly the following day, she asserted that the judiciary had used a “nuclear bomb” to prevent her from winning the 2027 presidential election.

Jordan Bardella, the leader of the National Rally and a potential replacement for Le Pen in the 2027 presidential election, said the court had *“sentenced French democracy to death.”* Bardella called for popular protests, stating, *“Through our peaceful mobilization, let us show them that the will of the people is stronger.”*

### *The Positions of French Political Actors*

Regarding political actors’ positions on the ruling, they were varied and divided between those who considered it a purely judicial decision and others who viewed it as an unprecedented political targeting of a political figure. Sources close to the right-wing French Prime Minister Francois Bayrou reported that he expressed his “displeasure” with the ruling, although his entourage added that he does not intend to comment publicly on the court’s decision. Bayrou had previously been tried for defrauding European Parliament assistants, who were suspected of actually working for the MoDem party, and was acquitted in February 2024.

Former French President Francois Hollande stated that the “only response” to the condemnation of Marine Le Pen was *“to respect the independence of the judiciary,”* adding that *“it is unacceptable in a democratic system to attack judges and the court.”* Following Le Pen’s conviction, the Socialist Party issued a press release calling for *“respect for the independence of the judiciary and the rule of law”* (Henley, 2025).

Jean-Luc Melenchon, leader of the far-left France Unbowed party, stated in a television interview following Marine Le Pen’s conviction: *“The decision to dismiss an elected official should be in the hands of the people”* (Le Monde, 2025).

### *External Reactions and Positions*

Several leaders and heads of far-right parties in the European Union and the United States have expressed anger and condemnation over the French court’s decision, describing the ruling as politically motivated and personally targeting Marine Le Pen. In any case, the sympathetic and supportive reactions toward Le Pen are likely to remain limited to media appearances, social media posts, and press conferences. Among these reactions are:

Leaders of far-right European parties have declared their support for Marine Le Pen, including Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who expressed his solidarity by writing “Je suis Marine!” on platform X. Geert Wilders, leader of the Dutch far-right Party for Freedom (PVV), also expressed his shock at what he described as an extremely harsh sentence (Le Point, 2025). Meanwhile, Matteo Salvini, leader of the far-right League party and Italy’s deputy prime minister, considered the ruling a declaration of war from Brussels and a conspiracy by leaders of EU institutions, stating that *“the exclusion of individuals from the political process is*

*particularly troubling in light of the aggressive and corrupt legal battle being waged against President Donald Trump.”*

In the United States, billionaire Elon Musk said that the decision to prevent Marine Le Pen from running “*will backfire,*” adding: “*When the radical left cannot win through democratic voting, it uses the judicial system to imprison its opponents. This is how it operates all over the world.*”

As for the Russian position, it was reflected in a statement expressing regret over what was described as a violation of democratic standards. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov stated that a growing number of European capitals are moving toward “*a violation of democratic standards,*” while also describing the ruling as a French internal matter (Mediapart, 2025).

## **The Options Available to Marine Le Pen and the National Rally**

Marine Le Pen announced that she would not give up and would appeal the decision, while working to garner support from her followers and political forces opposed to the ruling. Simultaneously, she planned a media campaign and public mobilization to pressure the judiciary to reverse its decision. Le Pen reiterated this in her address to the French National Assembly, stating that the French people would not accept the verdict. Indeed, her party organized demonstrations in several French cities.

A potential appeal to the Court of Cassation could be decided within six months. With the presidential elections approaching in mid-April 2027, approximately five to six months would remain. However, the chances of overturning the verdict before the presidential elections are slim. Le Pen’s problem lies in the fact that there is no real guarantee that the Court of Appeal will reach a different conclusion than the lower court. However, theoretically, there are three possible outcomes:

The first option is acquittal on appeal. However, given the well-documented nature of the system in question, achieving this outcome would be difficult. The second, and more plausible, option is that the appeals court reduces the period of ineligibility to one and a half or two years. Since this period would run from the date of the lower court’s decision, it could expire in time for her to meet the eligibility requirements for candidacy. The third option is that the lower court’s ruling is upheld—the likelihood of the appeals judges refraining from imposing ineligibility is low, as, under existing jurisprudence, disqualification from holding office is typically imposed in similar cases (Schmitt-Leonard, 2025).

The Paris Court of Appeal confirmed that it had received three appeals against the decision issued by the Paris Court of Justice and stated that it would examine the case “within a timeframe that allows for a decision in the summer of 2026.” If these deadlines are met, the decision will therefore be issued several months before the 2027 presidential election. The

party's lawyer also announced that he had filed an appeal on behalf of the party and its former treasurer (Wallerand de Saint-Just, 2025).

## **The Impact of the Decision on Le Pen's Popularity and Chances of Running for President**

Following the French court ruling, there is a possibility of increased public support for the party in the short term. This is because what occurred aligns closely with the National Rally's narrative that the populist right is a victim of "the system." It is likely that many of those who voted for the party do not seriously blame Marine Le Pen for the illegal funding of her party with money from the European Parliament, for which she was convicted. It is widely perceived that many French political parties have, at times, resorted to similar practices.

Similarly, her "harsh" punishment—the ban on running for president—may be interpreted as a badge of honor, reinforcing the idea that she is the only one standing up to the establishment. In the long run, however, this level of support may diminish, especially if Marine Le Pen fails to prove her innocence (Schofield, 2025).

The results of polls conducted by various media outlets and polling centers regarding Marine Le Pen's popularity and chances of running for president varied as follows:

Marine Le Pen tops the list of political figures with whom the French feel the most sympathy, with an approval rating of 37%, according to an Odoxa poll conducted by the Mascaret Institute for the Senate and the regional press. A majority of the French do not believe she received special legal treatment: 53% felt she was treated "like any other person subject to the law," according to the same poll.

Around 24% of the French (and 25% of National Rally supporters) even view the situation as an opportunity for the party, as it could allow it to turn the page on Le Pen. In this context, Jordan Bardella has entered the race for the Élysée Palace. The young MEP also surpasses Le Pen in popularity: 31% of the French prefer him to Marine Le Pen, a figure that rises to 60% among National Rally supporters.

Nearly one in two French people (49%), a 7-point increase in one month, want Marine Le Pen to be a candidate in the next presidential election, according to a poll conducted by Ifop-Fiducial for Sud Radio. On the other hand, 51% of French people said they do not want the National Rally leader to be able to run for the Élysée Palace, a result that has dropped by 7 points compared to a previous survey conducted at the end of February 2025.

However, according to the same poll, only 37% of French people believe that Marine Le Pen will ultimately be a candidate, a figure that has fallen by approximately 37 points in one month. Only supporters of the Republicans (69%) believe their candidate will be competitive. An overwhelming majority of respondents (79%) consider Marine Le Pen to be far-right, including 76% of supporters of the Republican Party. The poll was conducted via an online self-administered questionnaire among a sample of 1,000 people representative of the French

population aged 18 and over (quota sampling method), with a margin of error between 2.8 and 3.1 points (RTBF, 2025).

A poll conducted by the Ifop-Opinion polling institute in early April 2025 predicted that Marine Le Pen, the long-time leader of the French far right, would garner up to 37% of the vote in the 2027 presidential election—more than 22 points higher than in 2022 and 10 points ahead of any other candidate. Frédéric Dabi, the institute’s president, stated that “the page has certainly been turned.” The poll was widely interpreted as confirmation of Le Pen’s successful rebranding strategy in her effort to normalize the far right (Al Jazeera, 2025).

## Conclusion

The French court’s decision against Marine Le Pen was a legal and political blow. However, it did not weaken her influence or undermine the credibility of her party. Instead, the trial became a platform for Le Pen to reaffirm her political narrative. Despite the legal condemnation and moral tarnishing, the National Rally maintained its political relevance by framing the verdict as an act of political persecution, and Marine Le Pen proved resilient in the face of public opinion. This resilience is rooted in a post-truth populist strategy that prioritizes narrative over norms and emotional appeal over factual reality. It has been particularly evident among her supporters, who view the ruling as a symbol of political oppression and an attempt to preempt the 2027 election.

If the French judiciary fails to overturn the appeal and instead upholds the verdict against Marine Le Pen, the options available to the National Rally—and its margin for maneuver to remain politically competitive and enhance its candidate’s prospects in the presidential elections—will, in our estimation, be reduced to one of two:

The first option is to nominate Jordan Bardella, the current party leader. Being young, he could help attract younger voters, and the party may present him as a model of youth leadership. He has already played a significant role in increasing support among younger voters in France; within two years, the percentage of 18- to 24-year-olds who voted for the National Rally in parliamentary elections doubled. However, this option may carry risks for the party, given Bardella’s limited political experience and relatively less developed debating and public speaking skills. He may require time and effort to reach the level of Marine Le Pen. At the same time, he holds somewhat different positions on key issues, such as immigration, where he is more hardline, while in economic policy he appears more liberal and supportive of a laissez-faire approach.

The second option is to nominate Marion Marechal, Marine Le Pen’s niece. She left the party a few years ago to join the far-right party led by Eric Zemmour, from which she has recently separated, and she enjoys considerable acceptance and popularity among the party’s voters.

The case of Marine Le Pen and her party members is not merely a corruption case being examined by the judiciary; it is a test of the ability of European institutions and judicial authorities to confront populist rhetoric that thrives on mobilizing the public and fostering an atmosphere of distrust. It is not simply a matter of reframing a single political figure's conviction as a form of persecution; rather, it is a case study of how the legal process can be transformed into an arena of competing realities shaped by partisan political struggles.

At its core, this case reveals a deeper tension between practical accountability and symbolic politics, and represents a new chapter in the struggle between moderate and more radical forms of populism.

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