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## THE NATIONAL FRONT FOCUS IS NATIONAL POLITICS, NOT EUROPE

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**W**hen the National Front came out top with 26% of the vote – a historic score – in the European elections last month, the party's leader Marine Le Pen could rightly claim a spectacular victory. Having pushed the centre-right UMP into second place and crushed the governing Socialists into third place with 14% of the vote, she was quick to call for new general elections in France. The FN only has two deputies in the National Assembly but its ability to set the agenda at home is growing. Having done well in the municipal elections a few weeks before the European poll, the party now boasts a well oiled grass roots organisation, a steadily rising number of local councillors and mayors. Now a much larger group of FN deputies in the European Parliament will be added to the party's capacity to undermine main-stream parties which Marine Le Pen accuses of cronyism, technocratic policy making and consensus politics. Gone are the days when her father Jean Marie Le Pen was seldom invited to participate in televised debates. His daughter has cleaned up the image of the party and by discarding her father's crude anti-semitism positioned it as a party ready to govern.

Her victory quickly opened up new wounds in the UMP over the leadership of Jean François Coppel who was forced to resign shortly after the European elections, in early June after allegations of corruption. Caught between Alain Juppé, a former Prime Minister, who is now acting as one of the caretakers of the party until a new leader is chosen in the autumn and Nicolas Sarkozy, a former President, UMP increasingly looks as if it might implode. The party militants worship Sarkozy, oblivious of the fact that his strategy of moving further right than Marine Le Pen during the presidential election campaign of 2012 alienated centrist voters and encouraged former UMP supporters, disappointed by his five years in power (2007-2012) to vote for the FN. Alain Juppé, in sharp contrast to the former president will have no truck with the FN's overtly racist and anti-European policy.

The Socialists meanwhile were left to lick their wounds: their main challenge today is that President François Hollande has turned into his party's major problem. His poll rating stands at 18%, the lowest on record for a French head of state since the foundation of the Fifth Republic in 1958; his party's score in the European

elections was abysmal and followed hard on the heels of municipal elections in March when the Socialists lost more than 150 towns including such long standing bastions as Limoges and Roubaix. All of which suggests the president will not be able to recover sufficiently to win re-election in 2017. His U turn has come very late in the day: instead on pilling on tax increases on the average voter and companies, he is now cutting taxes and promoting business friendly policies. The president finds himself in the unprecedented position of being much less popular than his new tough sounding centre-left prime minister Manuel Valls. François Hollande's only hope of re-election in 2017 is predicated on a strong economic rebound and a sharp fall in unemployment. Neither looks likely at present. Nor are French rulers helped by a self flagellating press which likes to paint the country in lurid political colours and argue that it is about to collapse. That is patently untrue but this theme of decline suits Marine le Pen's purpose perfectly. La France aux Français is a vacuous slogan and the idea that you can roll back the map of Europe to pre-EU days is absurd but it holds some attraction to voters who feel lost in the modern world, voters to whom the two leading parties, which are in disarray, are not speaking.

Marine le Pen faces the question of eventual alliances with other right wing parties in Europe in the European Parliament. None of them make very comfortable bed fellows: the Dutch extreme right hate the Arabs more than the FN does, the British UKIP finds the FN too right wing; as for the Hungarians and the Greeks they are more extreme than any of their far right fellow travellers and probably qualify as neo-fascist parties. Marine le Pen has more to lose than to win by entering into a formal alliance with any one of them. The likelihood is that the new FN deputies in the European Parliament will simply continue what they have done all along – undermining the cosy consensus of pro-European politics and accusations of out of touch technocratic bureaucrats in Brussels.

Her eyes are firmly set on the next presidential election in 2017. The party's victories in the two recent polls have shown its growing capacity to bring out the vote; more deputies, more local councillors, more mayoralities give it greater leverage to influence the debate in France, to articulate the frustrations of many French people who feel they are adrift in a world – in a country, which is changing very fast and in ways they do not like. Whether France is more racist today is debatable – after all people of North African and African origin make up 10-12% of the population, their numbers are too large to be ignored, they cannot be expelled – many of them are in any case French citizens. If unemployment does not drop or, worse, rises between now and 2017, the FN could easily come second in the first round of the presidential elections. This has already happened, in 2002. Were it to happen a second time round, were the UMP unable to rebuild itself into a moderate party of the right, French politics will become even nastier.

Europe will, for the foreseeable future, remain a sideshow for Marine Le Pen but offers a convenient stage on which to throw tantrums. A convenient whipping boy maybe but here she is in good company as the loss of love or respect for the European Union and its institutions is one of the hallmarks of the old continent in 2014. Half the French electorate simply refuses to vote, not out of apathy, but because it rejects its political elite, knows it are cut off from the real problems of France and is angry at the corruption which flourishes on both side of the political spectrum. None of the FN's economic policies is likely to stop France becoming more integrated in the global economic system. What its leaders can, and will do, is whip up further the feelings of frustration and anger at their elites, and the EU. French – and European policies, are set to become more raucous and much nastier in the years ahead.