

the unpopularity of the executive [led by Macron] and the importance of immigration in the campaign." Indeed, the far-right figureheads in the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, and Austria aren't exactly spring chickens, yet they too appeal to youth voters with a similar formula of anti-EU, anti-immigrant, and anti-elite doomerism which paints the leaders of their country as being corrupt and detached. For Yanis Ouadah, who joined the National Rally in 2021 and is now a local party representative in southwestern France, the party's anti-immigration, tough-on-crime message resonates with students who fear they are competing with recent immigrants for access to housing among other benefits. "When you see that the French can't find housing in their own country but that foreigners can, we are asking for a national priority [in access to housing], something that more and more young people agree with," he told POLITICO before the election.

Over in the Netherlands, two students who cast their first-ever votes for anti-Islam politician Geert Wilders last November, struck a similar chord when asked to explain their choice. "I'm not against refugees, not at all," said a 20-year-old student in Rotterdam named Chess van Leeuwen. "But if it gets too much, in times of crisis, we have to think about ourselves." Regardless of what else Wilders stands for, "the Netherlands comes first for him," he added. Ouadah, who hopes to become a police officer, also linked his political choice to his perception that criminality has run rampant in France. "We can no longer go out safely," he said. "Look at the number of knife attacks taking place. We have a government that clearly doesn't care about the French." Ouadah also mentioned what he called "extremism" on display during pro-Palestinian protests in recent months as a factor helping the National Rally. Another oft-cited factor: COVID

and the lockdowns that confined youths at a time when many were due to leave their homes to start university. The lockdown orders that were handed down by leaders across Europe within a few weeks in 2020 helped cement the idea that political elites were high-handed and insulated from the effects of their policies. Such grievances are deeply entrenched among right-wing voters in many European countries. Then there's the subject of the song captured on video in Sylt. Nearly a decade after the bloc opened its doors to a record number of refugees fleeing war in Syria, undocumented migration to the Continent has dropped sharply even if legal migration remains elevated. Yet immigration remains by far the number one issue for right-wing voters, intermingled as it is with fear of a "Great Replacement" of white Europeans by dark-skinned, mainly Muslim immigrants from outside the bloc — a term coined by French

intellectual Renaud Camus which now permeates the right-wing "meme-o-sphere".

Far-right wave here to stay

In many ways, the surge in youth support is disconnected from reality. After hitting a high of more than 10 percent in October 2022, Europe's inflation rate is now back down to two percent. The same goes for unemployment, which, at six percent on average across the EU according to Eurostat, is far below the 12.2 percent average joblessness rate reached in 2013. In other words, on the economy, migration, and the effects of the pandemic, Europe has already weathered the worst of the storm. But the lingering effects of these convulsions are shaping politics today and perhaps for many years to come. The challenge facing Europe's elites today is sizing up the consequences of the bloc's youth-led shift to the right. In France, the Bardella generation will return to the polls to vote

in a new national parliament during a two-round election on June 30 and July 7. The snap election, called by Macron, will show whether the shock performance of the National Rally last Sunday was an outburst of protest voting or a seismic shift in the country's politics that will cement the far-right party as a leading political force. While pollsters say voters are unlikely to install Bardella as his country's youngest-ever prime minister, the National Rally could well expand its number of seats in the National Assembly, paving the way for yet another attempt by either Le Pen or Bardella himself at winning the presidency in 2027. Leading up to the vote, the far-right's performance is already shaking up the country's political landscape. Eric Ciotti, leader of the conservative Les Républicains party, broke a long-standing taboo by announcing he would seek local alliances with the National Rally — only to be denounced by several of his party's heavyweights.

In Germany, the abysmal performance by the three parties in Olaf Scholz's ruling coalition hasn't triggered a snap election, but it may have signed the government's death warrant. While the chancellor has ruled out calling an election, he could yet face a vote of confidence that might lead to his replacement, possibly without an election. If Scholz goes, the country's most likely next leader would be Friedrich Merz, a conservative member of the Christian Democratic Union whose party won the most votes in the June 9 election. Whatever twists and turns the next weeks and months will deliver, young far-right voters will shape European politics for years, if not decades, to come. Political allegiances forged in young adulthood tend to last lifetimes. Europe's "foreigners out" generation may have arrived in a surge; it's unlikely to ebb away anytime soon.

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Expect EU to finally fine a far-right France

By Bjarke Smith-Meyer, Gregorio Sorgi, and Giorgio Leali
Reporters

PERSPECTIVE

France has always been too big, too powerful, and — most crucially of all — too much a part of the cozy EU establishment to be fined for its financial sins. But the party might be over. As the European Commission prepares to name and shame the latest batch of governments that

have flouted budget rules, France's easy ride no longer looks sustainable. The EU's top brass is under pressure from across the bloc to finally crack down on the budget bad boy and set the country on a course that could ultimately see it penalized. The prospect of Marine Le Pen's far-right Nation-

al Rally (RN) forming a government in Paris after President Emmanuel Macron called a snap election has changed everything. It has sent a shudder through the EU's bureaucracy in Brussels — and in Frankfurt, the seat of the European Central Bank — officials have told POLITICO.

After all, it's one thing to let off a pro-EU, statesmanlike leader for the type of reckless spending that endangers the economic stability of the eurozone. It's quite another if it's carried out brazenly by a nationalist firebrand who doesn't think the rules are worth the paper they're written on in the first place.

"If an irresponsible [French spending] plan was put on the table, and the Commission said 'no problem,' then the whole fiscal framework is lost," said Zsolt Darvas, a senior fellow at Brussels' influential think tank Bruegel, referring to the way the EU's executive arm gets to run the rule over governments' budgets. "Other populist parties would forever disregard the rules."

In the old days, the European elite could afford to be candid about how much slack it allowed France. It was Jean-Claude Juncker, the previous Commission president, who eight years ago explained why Europe's budget cops had turned a blind eye to France's poor public finances. "Parce que c'est la France," he said. Simple as that.

(The fact that Juncker's economy commissioner was French might have helped too.)

Eye-watering

France's economy under Macron is little better than in those days. His government has already pledged budget cuts worth about €20 billion to bring down a budget deficit — the difference between annual spending and income — which reached 5.5 percent of GDP last year. France's public debt is forecast to climb to 114 percent of GDP in 2025.

Those are eye-watering figures: EU rules force countries to have, or at least work toward, annual deficits of three percent and debt at 60 percent. France is among a dozen countries that will receive a red flag for breaching the bloc's deficit threshold. This will put them into what's called an "excessive deficit procedure," which requires governments to take action



Supporters of the French far-right National Rally (Rassemblement National - RN) party react with joy after the polls closed during the European Parliament elections, in Paris, France, on June 9, 2024.
SARAH MEYSSONNIER/REUTERS

to rein in their spending — and to set out in detail how they're going to do it. It's a typically drawn-out EU process that can take years but ultimately, they could be fined.

And the trouble is, the economic plans of National Rally, if it takes power, could make the figures worse not better.

"Someone can always promise the Moon," Macron's finance minister, Bruno Le Maire, told France Info. "They [National Rally] couldn't care less about public money."

The party has campaigned on a program that mixes tax cuts and protectionism and — although prospective prime minister, 28-year-old Jordan Bardella, appeared to row back on it in recent days — undoing Macron's pension reforms and lowering the retirement age to 60 for some workers.

That would detonate a bomb under the country's public purse, as the average age of the population increases. "If RN implements its fiscal policies, then there's no chance it can follow the [EU] fiscal rules, and if it doesn't follow the fiscal rules, then the Commission will have to follow the [excessive deficit] procedure," said Nils Redeker, deputy director of the Jacques Delors Institute, a Paris-based think tank. If the party followed through with its plans "the economic damage could be quite big".

Losing trust

But the markets are already jittery. The French stock market suffered its worst week in more than two years. In the days before Macron's election announcement, a credit-rating agency downgraded the country over the cost of servicing its debt — a sign of failing

confidence. And it comes at a time when the Brussels bureaucracy is at its most vulnerable. Following the European Parliament election, the EU must decide whether Ursula von der Leyen remains president of the Commission, and then she, or whoever replaces her, must name new commissioners.

"The quickest way for von der Leyen to lose the trust of the smaller member states before she's even nominated for a second term is by letting large member states, like France and Italy, off the hook under the new fiscal rules," one diplomat from a northern European country said on condition of anonymity.

The whole point of the rules is to avoid the contagion effects of massive debt that almost toppled Greece at the start of the 2010s and was in danger of rip-

ping apart the whole currency area. The crunch point won't come this week. That's more likely in the fall when countries have to present roadmaps for how they're going to reduce their debts and deficits, by which time France will have a new government.

Backroom deals

This is the first test for the EU's reformed spending rules, which were suspended since the Covid pandemic. They came back into force this year, and governments are under pressure to toe the line.

In the days of Juncker's infamous quote, the deal-making that resulted in France escaping a fine was less than transparent. Officials say there is no longer appetite for such backroom negotiation.

This is even more the case because northern governments negotiated strict deficit and debt safeguards into the reforms to ensure countries are kept in check and continue to be — at least theoretically — punished with fines if they go astray.

Markets first, Commission second

This could all be moot. Financial markets might have their say before the Commission even gets a chance. National Rally would be wise to see the mess that followed the spending plan presented by then-UK Prime Minister Liz Truss two years ago — which included huge tax cuts, sent markets into a tailspin, and resulted in her almost-immediate downfall.

"If it happened in the UK, then it could happen in France," Bruegel's Darvas said.

Or, as Redeker from the Jacques Delors Institute put it: "What the Commission does is probably of secondary importance."

"The reaction of markets might have a more immediate impact than the EU's fiscal rules."

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