

# “When in France, do as the French do!”: The Front National and the European Union

## A Battle for the Preservation of French Culture

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**Abstract.** With the rise of the far-right in Europe, previously unpopular right-wing parties emerge from the shadows to rival the dominant parties of their state. One such political party which has benefited from the wave of far-right movements in Europe is the Front National (FN) in France. One of the most distinguishing features of the FN is its criticism of the European Union (EU), arguing that the EU has contributed to the decline of France, specifically, the decline of French sovereignty. Embracing its Euroscepticism, the FN is the only outspoken anti-EU party in France, allowing it to further promote its role as the sole protector of the French culture. This paper contends that the condemnation of the European Union by the Front National is embedded in a cultural nationalist argument, where the EU is viewed as encroaching on the state’s ability to provide for and look after “the French people,” thereby being detrimental to the interests of France.

### Introduction

Euroscepticism, which was once at the periphery of European politics (Brack and Startin, 2015), is becoming mainstream as the rise of the far-right spreads across Europe (Chakelian, 2017) with right-wing parties gaining traction and support, emerging from the shadows to rival the dominant parties of their state. The Front National (FN) in France, is one such political party which has benefited from the wave of far-right movements in Europe. One of the party’s distinguishing features is its criticism of the European Union (EU), arguing that the EU has contributed to the decline of France, specifically, the decline of French sovereignty (Statham and Koopmans, 2009). The objective of the FN has been to create an economically stable and thriving French state for the French people, which, according to the FN, has not been accomplished because of external forces, with the main culprit being the EU. Moreover, the FN embraces Euroscepticism, since it is the only outspoken anti-EU party in France, and further promotes its role as the sole protector of the French culture (Goodliffe, 2015). This article contends that the condemnation of the European Union by the Front National is embedded in a cultural nationalist argument, with the EU infringing upon French sovereignty, considered as complete autonomy in the political and economic field, which prevents France from protecting and preserving its culture. Thus, the FN argues that the EU encroaches on the state’s ability to provide for and look after “the French people,” thereby being detrimental to the interests of France.

Euroscepticism is the questioning of or objection to the European integration process and doubts about the benefits of the European Union, displayed in discourses and behaviors of political actors/politics (Flood, 2002). Furthermore, Euroscepticism can be divided into two camps,

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principled and contingent Eurosceptics (Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2008). The principled (hard) Eurosceptics oppose the EU and the process of European integration. Furthermore, they contend that withdrawal from the EU is in the best interest of the state. On the other hand, the contingent (soft) Eurosceptics do not directly oppose being members of the EU and the European integration process. The primary concern is in policy areas that are seen as disadvantageous to the state, with EU interests being at odds with the state's interests (Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2008). Following the above definitions, the Front National can be classified as a hard Eurosceptic, where it directly opposes being a member of the EU, demands more sovereignty and less interference from the EU, and is opposed to the process of furthering European integration (Lazone, 2017).

Although the FN can be classified as an extreme right-wing party, adhering to the politics of a strong state, nationalism, xenophobia, and racism (Carter, 2005), it is better categorized as an extreme right populist party (Rydgren, 2004). The FN has characteristics that are populist in nature, in that they seek further legitimacy by claiming they represent the will of the "people," specifically the will of the French people, believing that referendums will "permettre un réel exercice de la démocratie directe" (Le Pen, 2012, p.8). Furthermore, the FN has incorporated a populist argument primarily under Marine Le Pen (Rothwell, 2017). Le Pen promised to protect the identity of French culture, arguing that the EU infringes upon the state's capability to ensure that the voice of French citizens is not drowned out amongst the cacophony of voices that is the European Union. The Front National's national populist argument is revealed in its advocacy for a French state for the French people (Ramdani, 2017). The FN's conception of the French people lies primarily with citizenship (What does France's National Front stand for? 2014) claiming benefits only for those of French nationality (Le Pen, 2012). The FN defines French nationality, or citizenship, as the assimilation to the French culture and proficiency of the French language (Le Pen, 2012).

Furthermore, per Hainsworth (2008) the nationalist-populist discourse of the FN builds upon Barres' work, in stating that in France, the French are first, and foreigners are second<sup>2</sup>. The FN does not define what exactly constitutes the "French culture." The party has mainly argued that the French culture is based on European cultural traditions in a sovereign French state (Fagge, 2016) and frequently contrasts French culture with Muslim culture to categorize French culture as distinct and blames the EU for preventing France from preserving its culture.

Anderson (1983) depicts the nation as an imagined community in which its members construct an identity that is distinguished by the way in which its members imagine and/or think about such community/nation. Nationalism then becomes an act of the consciousness of the nation's members, or rather a state of mind of its members (Kohn, 1946). Therefore, nationalism can be viewed as the link between the concept of the state, nation-state and the state (Development of nationalism, 2000) and nationalism that focuses on a nation's culture highlights the individual aspects of such imagined community and becomes a mean for addressing the universal and allows such community to become distinct from others surrounding it (Todorov, 1989). Cultural nationalism can refer to the ideas and practices of a community, i.e., the nation, that focuses on the cultivation of a nation (Woods, 2015), thus promoting the national culture of the nation/community (Cultural nationalism, 2000). Moreover, according to Woods (2016), the end-goal of cultural nationalism is to provide the nation with an identity, destiny, and history, by using key players, such as intellectuals, to promote its view of the nation to the national community. For this paper,

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<sup>2</sup> Maurice Barres was a French Politician and writer, known for his fervent nationalism (Maurice Barres, 2001). Barres was considered an intransigent nationalist, and his novels, entitled *Les Bastions de l'Est*, were used as French propaganda during World War I.

cultural nationalism is defined as the promotion of the preservation of a nation's culture, which refers to the ideas, practices, and language(s) of the members of such community/nation. Analyzing the economic policies of the EU and their effect on French sovereignty, this paper will examine the FN's argument that the EU encroaches on the state's sovereignty and prevents it, in a cultural nationalist aspect, from promoting and preserving French culture. Thus, the primary analysis of the article centers on the FN's criticism of key economic and immigration policies of the EU, which as argued by the FN, is leading to an erosion of French culture.

This article is organized into four sections. In section one, it provides a brief history of the Front National and its electoral success analyzing the evolution of the FN's views on the EU. It focuses on the party's desire to retain sovereignty and how this has affected its perspective on the EU, from Le Pen, the father to Le Pen, the daughter. In section two, it examines how the EU, as argued by the FN, encroaches on French sovereignty by analyzing its institutions and economic policies that are viewed as detrimental to the preservation of French sovereignty and culture. In section three, it assesses the populist argument of the Front National, focusing on the concept of "heritage populism," which has emerged under the leadership of Marine Le Pen, claiming France as a state only for the French. Section four examines the arguments put forward by the FN against the EU and how the FN has used cultural nationalism to promote its agenda. Finally, the article concludes by relating the risks of interdependent economies in a globalized world and briefly considers the significance of the 2017 French presidential elections.

### **History of the Front National and its Views on the EU**

The Front National was founded in 1972 as the National Front for French Unity (FNUP), as a coalition of parties that could become a respectable parliamentary party (Shields, 2007). The FN declared itself to be right-wing from its inception with the intention of creating support for the nationalist cause, seeking to reconcile the differing views of the coalition parties, so as not to provoke discontent in voters. During the 1970s the Front National functioned only on the fringes of French politics, so that between 1972 and 1981, the FN began its journey to evolve into a mainstream party (Davies, 1999). As a recently formed party, its first electoral program was slightly moderate, and its primary concern was communism which it, along with other right-wing parties, viewed as the biggest threat. In 1978, the FN, under the growing influence of Duprat, a founding member, the party adopted its hard-line stance on immigration. In 1978, after the death of Duprat, Jean Pierre Stirbois could exert influence over the party, preparing it for electoral success, building upon the work of Duprat (Shields, 2007). In 2011, the FN came under the leadership of Marine Le Pen, daughter of the former President of the party Jean-Marie Le Pen (Lockett and Devlin, 2017). Under Marine Le Pen, the party also underwent a washing-down of its radical roots and enjoyed popularity in the French elections of 2016.

### ***Electoral Success***

The Front National rose to prominence in the 1984 European Elections, when the party won 10 out of 81 French seats with almost 11 percent of the vote (Shields, 2007). From this year forward, the FN would usually garner between 10 to 15 percent of the national vote. In 2002, Jean-Marie Le Pen got through to the second round of the presidential election (Shields, 2007), where likewise, Marine Le Pen could accomplish the same (Lockett and Devlin, 2017). Although the FN has succeeded in establishing itself as a contender in French politics, it could never grasp

political power, but it has succeeded in developing itself as a formidable force in French politics. Thus, it is essential to analyze its Eurosceptic attitude and the foundational basis for this success.

### ***Early Views on the European Union***

The Front National has always been against any form of European federalism, and the party advocated for a strong, rigidly defined geopolitical bloc that would allow the preservation of the national identity of France (Davies, 1999). During the 1970s, the FN's discourse on Europe overlapped with its views on the West, which it saw as beneficial to the defense and protection of France. It viewed the European Union as a powerful bloc that could counter external forces that threatened the European states, but France could retain its identity. However, the Front National's views on Europe would change in the 1980s, when the party became extremely anti-American, its attack and fears of an ever-closer Europe became evident.

The signing of the Maastricht treaty would prove to be the turning point for the FN, with Le Pen arguing that France would disappear in a European Union that was becoming more federalist in character and power (Davies, 1999). Instead of a united Europe, the Front National advocates for a Europe of Nations, with the state retaining full sovereignty and control over its affairs (Davies, 1999), echoing the argument of former French President, Charles de Gaulle (Will, 2014). Furthermore, the FN's case that the EU is becoming more federalist and encroaching in states' affairs is reminiscent of that of Charles de Gaulle and his opposition to Qualified Majority Voting (QMV), which led to the Empty Chair Crisis of 1965. Like QMV was for De Gaulle (Dinan, 2015), the Maastricht Treaty proved a pivotal moment in the FN's discourse towards the European Union. The treaty officially established the European Union and paved the way for a common currency (Kenealy et al., 2015). The FN champions the conservation of the French people, their culture and the ability for France to preserve the interest of the French. In economic terms, the FN's views are hostile to what it calls savage competition, resulting from deeper European integration and globalization. The Maastricht would require political integration that would weaken France's sovereignty by having to implement policies that were not designed for the French state. Therefore, the Front National argued that the decline of French sovereignty would lead to an erosion of the French culture.

### ***Contemporary Views on the European Union***

Although the Front National has never been a single-issue party (Atkin and Tallett, 2003), its Euroscepticism has allowed its populist approach to thrive, solidifying its argument as a party for the French people against a European elite that will destroy the identity of the French nation. The FN calls for a renegotiation of the treaties of the European Union to allocate more powers to the state and allow France to regain its lost sovereignty (Statham and Koopmans, 2009), specifically, control over its economic affairs. The Front National argues that under the increasing powers of globalization the state cannot perform its primary purpose, which is to protect the culture of France, because of its suppression of national borders (Evans, 2000). Furthermore, the FN argues that the nation is the only agent capable of protecting its citizens and no foreign powers should come prevent this from happening. The Single European Act, according to the FN, achieved a sufficient level of economic liberalization and should not have resulted in the signing of the Maastricht Treaty. Marine Le Pen stated that the state knows what is in the best interests of its citizens, claiming that the European Union has made itself the judge, censor, bailiff, and tax

collector of its member states (OxfordUnion, 2015). To further illustrate her point, Le Pen criticized the EU stating that its power over the nation states ranges from determining the size of fishing nets to the grading of fruits and that its sole purpose is to redefine the state and its structural organization.

Marine Le Pen advocated for a reform of the treaties of the European Union, arguing that France should be allocated more benefits to protect its national identity or face a Frexit (Le Pen, 2017). Support for the European Union by French citizens has affected the argument put forward by the Front National (Goodliffe, 2015). After the crisis of the Eurozone, the level of support for the EU in France dropped dramatically to 30 percent in 2011. Since then, the Euroscepticism of the Front National has mainly focused on economic effects the EU has on the French economy, such as unemployment and debt, linking the negative aspects of the French economy with the European integration process. Importantly, the French have expressed greater discontent with the European Union at the economic level. In 2014, 78 percent of French citizens did not believe that the EU made living costs cheaper and 67 percent did not think the EU created more jobs, calling into question the economic benefits of the European integration process. In the same year, the FN could capture 68 percent of voters who expressed discontent with France's membership in the EU, in the European elections.

The discontent of the French citizens with the EU is mainly due to cuts in social spending because of the Maastricht criteria and the single market (Goodliffe, 2015). However, the rise in discontent and Euroscepticism in France is not a new occurrence. France has experienced a social and economic crisis since the 1990s. The European Union was viewed as a main cause for the high unemployment rate because European integration has led to economic liberalization. The Maastricht criteria set stringent rules for entering the Eurozone, targeting inflation, national debt, interest rates, budget deficit, and exchange rates (Maastricht Criteria, 2017). States that are part of the Eurozone cannot pursue economic policies, such as devaluing the currency to boost exports (Hayes, 2016). Furthermore, the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) is based primarily on the preferences of Germany (Dinan, 2015). The FN argues that France should restore its central bank (OxfordUnion, 2015) and that this would prevent external threats to the French economy.

### **The European Question: French Sovereignty in an Economic and Monetary Union** *FN and the Economic Policies of the EU*

The Euroscepticism of the Front National focuses mainly on the economic policies of the European Union that it views as encroaching on the French state. The FN concentrates its criticism on the Single Market and the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), the fiscal and monetary structure of the EMU, and the Euro. Firstly, regarding socioeconomic costs, the FN argues that the Single Market and the Economic Monetary Union (EMU) have created conditions in which small and medium-sized French firms cannot compete with multinational companies (Le Pen, 2012). Furthermore, the FN claims that the EU places French workers in direct competition with low-wage developing countries (Le Pen, 2012), being one of the causes for the unemployment of French workers, with the unemployment rate fluctuating between 10.5 and 9.6 percent from 1996 to 2017 (France Unemployment Rate, 2012).

Second, the Front National argues that the fiscal and monetary structure of the EMU infringes on French sovereignty by limiting the control France has over its economic policies (Goodliffe, 2015). The FN argues that the Euro is detrimental to the French economy, with Le Pen stating that “for the past ten years, the Euro, the single currency, has failed to deliver on its

promises” (2012: 2). Le Pen (2012) also argued that France should return to using the Franc as its currency, which would boost economic prosperity. The Front National promises that upon abandoning the Euro, France would regain territorial, legislative and monetary sovereignty (Le Pen, 2017). The FN also argues that the strict fiscal criteria of the Euro has forced France to reduce social spending under the Stability Pact, which requires EU member states to remain within 3 percent of GDP annual spending limit (Goodliffe, 2015).

The FN cites these strict fiscal policies as evidence of the EU’s infringement upon French sovereignty and how it can tie the hands of the French government and limit its ability to protect and ensure the survival of the French national identity. The future of the French economy is dependent on decisions made by the European Central Bank in Frankfurt, which does not understand or consider the needs of the French people. The FN has said that the Euro can coexist with the Franc, stating that the Euro’s balance sheet has created an “explosion of prices, unemployment, relocations, and debt” (Le Pen, 2012: 2). Moreover, after the financial crisis of 2009, the FN built its case against the Euro arguing that funds diverted to Greece, Ireland, and Portugal instead of building the French economy, was, in the words of Marine Le Pen, condemning France to “mourir à petit feu” (Le Pen, 2012: 2).

### ***The FN Views on Immigration: Protecting the Cultural Identity of France***

In the same way, the FN links its arguments of preserving the economic sovereignty of France by opposing the free movement of goods and capital which it argues promotes Third-World immigration, that is detrimental to France’s cultural identity (Goodliffe, 2015). The FN also voices criticism on the Schengen agreement, advocating for the exit of France from the agreement to prevent uncontrolled immigration (Lanzone, 2017). The Front National promotes border control, arguing that immigration produces a loss of control over national borders, which restricts the French state’s ability to ensure the survival of the French culture and rights of French citizens (Reungoat, 2015). The Schengen agreement represented the FN’s fear of frontier-less Europe, that would ultimately produce an influx of immigrants into France, threatening the national identity (Davies, 1999). Thus, the core argument of the Front National against the European Union, as viewed in economic terms, is that the EU fiscal policies reduce the French State’s sovereignty which in turn limits its ability to preserve the French culture. Most importantly, by focusing its argument on the defense of the national identity and culture of the French state, the FN can tone down its racists and radical roots.

### **The FN and the Case of Heritage Populism**

In the face of globalization, the fear of losing cultural and economic influence is pervading in Western states (Reynie, 2016) and the Front National has decided to ride in its wake. The FN refers to the decline of French sovereignty as the loss of the ability to protect the French culture and act in its economic interests, which leads to the reduction of the French state’s influence in Europe and globally. Referring to the arguments put forward by the FN, heritage is the characteristics that pertain to a culture of a society, such as langue or traditions, that have historical importance (Heritage, 2017). Per Reynie (2016), heritage populism is the promotion of the protection of French heritage which can be tangible, such as living standards, or intangible, such as a way of life, combined with hostility towards the EU, Islam, and immigrants. The Front National, as argued by Reynie (2016), joined the ranks of heritage populists after the election of

Marine Le Pen as party president in 2011, to distance the party from the anti-Semitism of her father before her (Reynie, 2016). In doing so, Le Pen has succeeded in changing the racist aspect of the party and has labeled the party as the protector of French culture, thus, embedding the FN Euroscepticism in a cultural nationalist argument.

Marine Le Pen criticized the European Union saying that its “irresponsible policy” on immigration has only brought economic migrants into France (Rogers, 2016). As the FN argues, migrants become a financial burden and prevent the French state from safeguarding the rights and values of the French people. Le Pen maintains that France must regain control of its borders (Rogers, 2016), and by doing so, it can ensure the protection of the French social identity (Reynie, 2016). Immigration is further linked to the cultural nationalist argument of the FN when Le Pen stated that taxpayers fund immigration, but cultural assimilation is impossible when criticizing the EU and the European Central Bank. Le Pen indicated that multicultural societies always become multi-confrontational societies (OxfordUnion, 2015). Without borders, Le Pen argued, there can be no sovereignty, no independence, and no state. Le Pen called the EU “technocratic” with the end goal of dissolving the nation-state, which would impede France from protecting the French people, and the values and freedom of the French population.

Identity is a fundamental aspect when considering the Front National’s discourse surrounding the French state (Davies, 1999). The Front National consistently portrays France as a state in need of being protected from external forces that contribute to its decline, specifically, from forces that are non-French, that is, forces that do not understand the French culture. Moreover, not only must France be protected from external forces, such as the European Union, but also internal forces. Those inside the French state that are not assimilated into the French culture and are viewed as non-members of a shared heritage (Hainsworth, 2008) and are perceived as a threat to the preservation of the French culture.

Thus, the discourse on heritage populism has allowed the Front National to broaden its base of support, is more appealing to middle-class workers, small businesses, private and public-sector workers, thereby representing all French citizens (Reynie, 2016). The Front National views the EU as an elitist creation, seeking federal power to dominate Europe. The European Union, as perceived by the Front National, wishes to amalgamate all cultures into one, by eroding the importance of the State. Thus, the Front National is the guardian of the French culture and economy, because the sovereignty of France is dependent upon its economic success, an area in which the European Union has produced only adverse effects.

### **Analyzing the Role of Cultural Nationalism and the FN’s Argument Against the EU**

As Kohn (1946) so eloquently wrote, it was with a French influence that the Enlightenment spread while promoting the individual and contributing to the inception of nationalism. Furthermore, the era sparked an interest in the past of people, i.e., nations or imagined communities, and a desire to learn about their ideas and customs (Kohn, 1946). The FN embeds its criticism against the EU in a cultural nationalist argument because it seeks to “enlighten” the French community to the detrimental effects of EU economic policies that integrate a myriad of different cultures, which do not take into consideration the diverse aspects of each state’s economy. Thus, the goal of the FN is to promote what it defines as the future or destiny of France, and Le Pen is at the forefront leading the French to their destiny. In other words, the FN seeks to awaken the French, as almost as the calling to arms, to defend their culture and identity, which the party is forging as the sociopolitical climate changes.

Cultural nationalism, therefore, helps tone down the racist roots of the FN's past and allows the party's platform to appeal to citizens of the French state, or as the party contends, those who have assimilated to French culture and the French language whether by birth or assimilation. Critical to the FN's discourse surrounding French culture is its disposition to remain vague on how it defines French culture allowing the party to present itself as the guardian and the party of France, specifically, the party of the French people and culture by contrasting itself with the European Union. It views the EU as a hostile entity that seeks to abolish the importance of the state. Having to cut social spending because of the strict fiscal criteria of the EU has deterred the French state from being able to protect and serve the interests of the French people. More importantly, being a part of the Schengen agreement means that foreigners or those that are not assimilated into the French culture are receiving benefits that should be primarily for the French people. Furthermore, because of the freedom of movement in the EU and its immigration policy, France experiences not only external threats, such as the monetary policy of the Eurozone but also internal threats.

At the forefront of the Front National's propaganda has been the preservation of the cultural identity of France. Under Jean-Marie Le Pen, the FN adopted an ethnic-nationalist argument. However, to broaden its base of support, the party had to undergo a washing down of its racist roots and took a cultural nationalist argument that focused on heritage rather than ethnicity. By focusing on heritage, the Front National could focus its discussion on "France for the French" and advocate for an economically strong state that controls its borders and can ensure the survival of the French people against an encroaching and invasive European Union, with immigration being the primary concern.

Moreover, the FN did not always view the European Union with disdain. From its start in 1972 until the signing of the Maastricht in 1992, the Front National saw the European Union as another way to ensure the protection the identity of the French state, given the communist threat. However, when the European Union became an economic and monetary union the Front National began to view the EU as a threat to France's sovereignty and cultural identity. Since then, the FN has focused on the adverse effects that the EU has had on the French economy, such as unemployment and the cuts in social spending because of the Maastricht criteria. Thus, the EU, as argued by the Front National, limits the choices sovereign states can make to ensure their survival thus limiting its options and resources to preserve the French culture and identity.

## **Conclusion**

Considering that the economies of states are so interdependent in a globalized world, the question arises: "Is the rise of the far-right a final gasp of the nation-state or the beginning of a revival?" The Eurozone crisis has managed to propel Europe into a mist of uncertainty in the face of the fact that if an economy fails, it could mean one for all and all for one. If anything, the 2017 French presidential elections proved once more that the fear of losing influence or status between economies is as real as the desire for economic success, and not only politicians change their tactics, but citizens are swayed by propaganda that promise to meet their needs before the betterment of society. In other words, pride, behind its many masks, is still a grave sin, and its effects on politics risk sociopolitical chaos. The importance of the Front National in French politics has not eroded considering the 2017 French presidential elections. France is a founding member of what is now called the European Union, and the rise of the far-right, especially in France, calls into question the benefits of the EU and its survival if the far-right manages to obtain political power in France.



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