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# ‘This is a political earthquake’

## Le Pen’s guilty verdict has thrown French politics into chaos. Adrienne Woltersdorf on the impact on the far right and the 2027 presidential election

**The long-awaited verdict in the trial for embezzlement of EU funds against the leader of the far-right *Rassemblement National* (RN) has caused quite a stir. What were the reactions in France?**

Shock, disbelief and statements that severely damage trust in the democratic system. In short, it is a verdict with consequences on many different levels. Not only is Marine Le Pen facing at least two years in prison and a fine of €100 000. The court also deemed it appropriate to ban the politician from running for political office for five years with immediate effect. If the planned appeal trial confirms the sentence by the summer of 2026, this effectively bans her from running in the 2027 presidential election.

**Le Pen’s *Rassemblement National* could now try to misuse the ruling for their own political campaign. What do you think of that?**

Le Pen and her party remain adamant about their innocence even after the verdict has been announced. In doing so, they are falling into their own propaganda trap. The Le Pen camp appears to be seriously shocked. Le Pen herself left the courtroom while the verdict was still being read out, clearly showing her contempt for the rule of law. As a reminder, the leadership of the RN, an anti-EU party, had systematically embezzled millions in EU funds over a period of 12 years. The court thus by no means punished Le Pen more severely than other fraudsters in France or even other high-ranking politicians.

But the RN succumbs to the delusion that laws do not apply to them. The ruling has decapitated the party, cutting off the figurehead who had already dreamed of becoming France’s next president. Naturally, the RN is fuming. However, the party reacted quickly and immediately began distributing flyers and launching a media campaign to incite the public against what they saw as a ‘democratic scandal’. After all, Donald Trump has shown the way: legal defeats

can be used as a template for successful victimisation campaigns.

**It is difficult to understand why centre-right parties more or less agree with the RN's criticism. How can this be explained?**

The reactions from the moderate right, but also from the left-wing populist party *La France insoumise* (LFI) and, in some cases, even from the current government, are disturbing. This shows once again the depth of the crisis in which French democracy finds itself. Instead of clearly defending the rule of law, as the Socialists did on the day of the ruling, these parties as well as the government are playing into the RN's hands. After an initial eloquent silence, employees of Prime Minister François Bayrou, who is himself involved in an affair concerning parliamentary assistants, announced that he was 'worried about the reasons for the judgement'. In 2024, he had already described the scenario of Le Pen's immediate ineligibility as 'disturbing'. Last year, the current minister of justice, Gérald Darmanin, also called a possible conviction of Le Pen 'shocking'. Numerous politicians from the centre-right have labelled the verdict 'politically questionable' or even 'dangerous for democracy'. In doing so, they are distorting the facts and calling the entire rule of law into question. *That* is dangerous, not the ruling itself.

**The ruling will thus have far-reaching political consequences. What does this mean with regard to the 2027 presidential elections?**

There will certainly be massive political consequences. But it is not a politically motivated judgement. The court must apply laws that have been grossly and systematically disregarded here. Of course, this will now fuel conspiracy theories of all kinds. Because of all people, the politician who, according to today's polls, would have the best chance of being elected to the French presidency in 2027, has had this path blocked by the court — for good reason. This is a political earthquake. Many voters, especially supporters of the RN, will not accept this. The ruling could even have consequences beyond France at the EU level, as it is obviously too easy to trick the EU system and embezzle funds. This must also alarm other parties with MEPs.

**What has been the reaction on the progressive side so far? Are there differences between the socialists and the extreme left?**

Once again, Jean-Luc Mélenchon surprised everyone with one of his typical hook shots. Incidentally, the LFI leader has also been under investigation for offences and irregularities during his time as an MEP since an investigation was opened in 2018. Although he read out his party's neutral statement, Mélenchon emphasised that he

'fundamentally' rejects the provisional enforcement with regard to ineligibility. Disregarding the constitutional judgement, he also emphasised that the decision to remove a member of parliament from office should be left to the people. His statements have caused a great deal of anger and resentment within the French left. For him and his candidature for the presidency, the prospect of losing his far-right opponent is strategically disadvantageous.

For the remaining left, the tone was clearly different. Here, reference was made to the rhetorical attacks of the *Rassemblement National*, which is always ready to criticise the corruption of the other parties, the supposed 'upper castes'. Green and left-wing politicians rightly criticised the attacks on the rule of law, which had already been badly damaged by the government under President Emmanuel Macron. On the Socialist Party (PS) side, Emmanuel Grégoire, MP and candidate for mayor of Paris, emphasised equality before the law. He also underlined that those who believe they can boast of 'consecration by polls' in order to free themselves from respect for the law are mistaken. Former president and current PS MP François Hollande commented that the prime minister shouldn't feel 'disturbed', as he is, after all, the guardian of the law.

**What impact will the ruling have on further competition between the parties and the political system as a whole?**

It is clear that the RN will now have to regroup. Because in the party's solar system, Le Pen is the sun around which everything revolves. However, the voter base is likely to be quite resilient and will continue to support the party even with a new leadership. Le Pen's unelectability is now paving the way somewhat prematurely for her ally and current chairman, Jordan Bardella — and also for a reorganisation at the top of the party. The RN has always claimed to have a strategic plan for all eventualities in its pocket and to be practically ready to govern. However, we have not yet noticed much of this. It also remains to be seen how the political field as a whole will be reorganised. After all, the cards could now also be reshuffled for the other right-wing conservative parties with a view to 2027. One thing is certain: Things are starting to move in France.

*This interview was conducted by Philipp Kauppert.*



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