

The Trump, Putin, Le Pen nightmare is two-thirds reality



Marine le Pen. Global implications of a win would be far-reaching. MICHEL EULER

AFR, Gideon Rachman (as published in the Financial Times in London), 22 Nov 2016

This time last year, I wrote that "I have a nightmare vision for 2017: President Trump, President Le Pen, President Putin." So, after Donald Trump's victory, the next question is whether Marine Le Pen can indeed capture the French presidency?

Following this weekend's centre-right primary, it seems likely that Ms Le Pen will face a run-off in May against either François Fillon or Alain Juppé. Both are Hillary Clinton-style establishment figures, who would be ideal opponents for the leader of the far-right. The consequences of a victory for the far-right in France would be drastic for both European and world politics. A Le Pen presidency could well lead to the collapse of the EU. She wants to pull France out of the European single currency and to hold a referendum on France's EU membership.

Even if Ms Le Pen softened her stance in office, it is hard to see how Angela Merkel's Germany could work with a nationalist and authoritarian France. With Germany and France set on radically different paths, Franco-German antagonism would return to the heart of European politics.



François Hollande. His approval ratings recently hit an astonishing low of 4 per cent. Mosa'ab Elshamy

The global implications of a Le Pen victory would also be severe. Four of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council would be occupied either by undemocratic governments (Russia and China), or by democracies led by nationalist rightwing leaders (US and France). Under such circumstances, the international legal order could crumble, as might once again become right.

Of course, even post-Brexit and post-Trump, there is nothing inevitable about a Le Pen victory in France. For what it is worth, the opinion polls still show her likely to lose decisively in the second round of the election. And although Ms Le Pen has moved to embrace the Trump White House and has been keenly supported by Mr Trump's "alt-right" advisers, there are important differences between the Trump and Le Pen phenomenons.

Unlike Mr Trump, the National Front has been around for decades and is more of a known quantity to voters. France's bitter memories of the Vichy regime of the 1940s may also mean that the country is better inoculated against far-right politics than the US.

Set against that, however, is the possibility that French voters, who might have feared that a Le Pen presidency would turn their country into an international pariah, may now feel that Mr Trump's victory has given them "permission" to vote for the far-right.

The objective conditions for a turn towards authoritarian nationalism are clearly stronger in France than in the US. France has been subjected to savage terrorist attacks by Islamist extremists. There are large, poorly integrated Muslim populations in most big cities. Unemployment among the general population is over 10 per cent.

Establishment despised

Above all, the political establishment is despised. The approval ratings of President François Hollande recently hit an astonishing low of 4 per cent. The political, social, economic and international environments could not be more favourable for Ms Le Pen.

In recent years, Ms Le Pen has moved to distance herself from her father, Jean-Marie, whose racist views are embarrassingly open. These days, Ms Le Pen's rhetoric is indeed less inflammatory and dishonest than that of Mr Trump. But the French far-right leader has had her moments. She has, for example, compared Muslims praying in France's streets with the Nazi occupation.

On the other side of the channel, there might even be some in the British government who would quietly welcome the prospect of a far-right victory in France. While the current French government is leading the demands that Britain must pay a heavy price for Brexit, Ms Le Pen has applauded the British decision to quit the EU. A Le Pen victory might even solve the Brexit problem since there might no longer be an EU left for the UK to leave. Boris Johnson, UK foreign secretary, hailed the "opportunity" represented by the election of the pro-Brexit Mr Trump, and might sniff similar "opportunities" in the rise of Ms Le Pen.

More sober heads in London, however, must surely realise that the rise of the French far-right cannot ultimately be good news for Britain. A National Front victory in France would mean that the forces of authoritarian nationalism would be flourishing across Europe, from Moscow to Warsaw to Budapest and Paris. Under Mr Trump, the US could no longer be relied upon as a stabilising force to push back against political extremism in Europe.

Instead, many in Europe are now looking towards Ms Merkel, who has just announced that she will be running for a fourth term as German chancellor, next year, as the anchor of European stability. But the challenges facing Ms Merkel are truly daunting. She confronts a hostile Russia to the East and a Middle East in flames to the south. Mr Trump has been openly contemptuous towards Ms Merkel.

Within the EU, Germany's relations with southern Europe have been poisoned by the euro crisis, while its relations with eastern Europe have been soured by the refugee crisis. Meanwhile, Britain has voted to leave the bloc. The election of Ms Le Pen in France could be the final blow to the vision of Europe represented by Ms Merkel, and constructed by generations of European leaders, since the 1950s. gideon.rachman@ft.com

Financial Times