

The Le Pen family feud goes to the heart of what the Front National stands for

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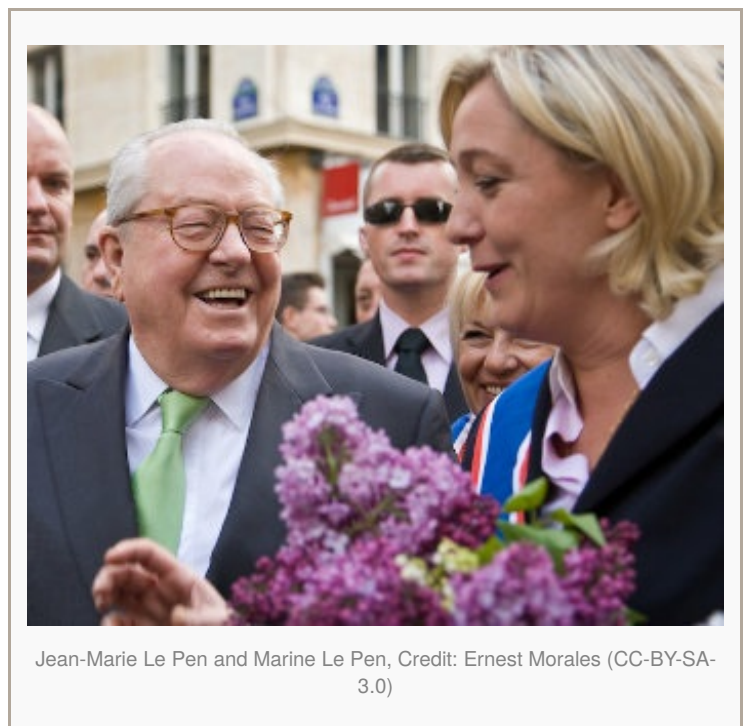
On 13 April, Jean-Marie Le Pen, the founder of the Front National, announced that he would no longer be putting himself forward as a candidate for the party in French regional elections to be held later this year. The announcement came amid a much publicised row between Jean-Marie and his daughter, Marine Le Pen, who currently leads the party. [Patrick F. Merle](#) writes that while the feud has been developing for some time, the way in which Marine Le Pen chooses to deal with the fallout will have an impact on the party's future development ahead of the next French presidential election in 2017.



Some onlookers may qualify the latest Le Pen family feud, so ubiquitous in French and international media over the last two weeks, as a French adaptation of *Game of Thrones*, an epic drama featuring two leaders engaged in a battle where acerbic exchanges replace swords in an attempt to place their political party at the helm of France by 2017.

Although this father-daughter rivalry, a recurrent pattern since Marine Le Pen was elected in 2011 as president of the [Front National](#) (FN), fails to surprise political analysts and reporters alike, the current crisis appears more destructive than ever before for the far-right political party as it seeks momentum ahead of the forthcoming regional elections in December.

Recent survey data collected between 8-10 April from a representative stratified adult sample paint an unequivocal picture. Findings from *IFOP* for the main regional daily *Ouest France* revealed that 67 per cent of people adhering to FN ideas would like Jean-Marie Le Pen to quit the party. Additionally, more than 60 per cent of French surveyed and more than 70 per cent of voters close to FN stated that the fact that Jean-Marie Le Pen shares his perspectives as a representative of the party constitutes a major disadvantage for that political force.



Jean-Marie Le Pen and Marine Le Pen, Credit: Ernest Morales (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

The latest episode in the feud between Jean-Marie, the founder of the party and an honorary leader, and his daughter, who is projected to win the first round at the 2017 presidential elections by several polling firms, occurred on 2 April, after Jean-Marie reiterated his trademark racist and anti-Semitic opinions. Speaking on national media, *BFTV* and *RMC*, he once again qualified the Nazi gas chambers as a detail in World War II history. Moreover, he constructed a direct criticism of the current French Prime Minister Manuel Valls by pointing to his Spanish heritage. "Valls has been French for 30 years, I have for 1,000", Le Pen said, lamenting that France is governed by immigrants.

Marine Le Pen, who has recurrently crafted messages to separate herself from the aggressive rhetoric of her father and consequently delineated a strategy to de-demonise the Front National and gain a wider popular vote, promptly condemned such statements. "Jean-Marie Le Pen seems to have descended into a strategy somewhere between

scorched earth and political suicide,” she said. Yet, the 86-year-old honorary leader reached out to a far right weekly, *Rivarol*, to further defend his position in an interview published on 9 April.

Speaking on national television about the necessity for her father to consider stopping his political career, particularly his decision to represent the party at the regional election, Marine confirmed that the Front National had engaged a judicial procedure against his actions and statements. Jean-Marie’s future may be partially determined on 17 April at the next executive committee.

Answering the concerns publicly put forward by his daughter, he announced in *Le Figaro* that he had withdrawn from the race in the Southeastern Provence-Alpes-Cote d’Azur (PACA) region and asked his grand-daughter Marion Marechal-Le Pen to be on the ticket instead. The French regional elections are scheduled for 6 and 13 December.

A family feud or something more?

Beyond the usual attention generated by Jean-Marie’s direct, xenophobic and anti-Semitic remarks, this political joust has reached a higher level of salience in the media in France and abroad as it comes at a time when French voters have voiced their dissatisfaction against the current government in the latest [local elections](#).

Moreover, Marine Le Pen, whose party garnered high levels of support at the 2014 European elections and again at the March 2015 local elections, with more than 5 million voters in the first round and more than 4 million during the second round, has been consistently eager to position the Front National as a party of the French people: a political force capable of taking the country out of its morose economic phase and pessimistic overarching mood.

The family feud has been a lead story in news media many times before. A few recent episodes suffice to illustrate the gradual division that has developed between father and daughter. In 2005, Jean-Marie had already expressed in *Rivarol* how the German occupation had not been that inhumane after all, a comment that had prompted his daughter to take a back seat and dissociate herself from such extreme statements. However, Marine became more vocal once elected president of the FN. Indeed, when on 22 April, 2011, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, a leading news weekly, published on its website a picture of a Front National candidate performing the Hitler salute before a Nazi flag, she decided to exclude him: a sanction described by her father as excessive.

In 2014, Marine further condemned all forms of anti-Semitism after her father uttered offensive remarks alluding to the French Jewish artist Patrick Bruel. She had publicly qualified her father’s behaviour as a political mistake. A final bout in that combat came in November 2014 as Jean-Marie expressed his disagreement with his daughter’s suggestion that the party should consider adopting a different name. Speaking on *BFTM* and *RMC*, he had evoked the dilution of the party’s values after the arrival of political figures from other tendencies and spoke of a strong betrayal toward its voting base.

The Le Pen family has become increasingly prominent in French politics in recent years. The current rift, larger than ever before, therefore prompts a discussion on the evolution of the party during this period. While prior academic work has focused on the reasons behind the FN’s electoral success, underlining the demographics of its voters, the far-right materialist values of its supporters, and additional economic criteria, future work may concentrate on the nature of the issues on the FN agenda and whether they have changed over the years.

Empirical studies might reveal, for instance, whether Marine Le Pen’s attempt to de-demonise the party has affected its popular standing to the degree intended, as it has moved away from the image carved out by her father. Ultimately, the key question that remains is whether given the current salience of the FN and the Le Pen family in particular, the latest developments will have an impact on the decisions made by French voters in the regional elections later this year, and the presidential election in 2017.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor

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