
FRANCE'S FAR-RIGHT BOY WONDER

-

24.04.2019

Politico (24 April 2019)

Jordan Bardella is leading election campaign for Marine Le Pen, and is in line for a prominent role in Brussels.

COGNAC, France □ Jordan Bardella leaned into the wooden cask, inhaled deeply and let out a satisfied "Aaaah!" like he was reconnecting with an aroma from distant childhood.

At 23, Bardella □ the standard-bearer for Marine Le Pen's National Rally (RN) in next month's European Parliament election □ is too young for any memory to be very distant. And as someone who grew up in a rough Paris suburb, it's safe to say wooden casks in rural France were not a big part of his childhood.

But his visit to the barrel-maker's workshop in Cognac and a tour of the region famous for the brandy that bears its name showed he's already the consummate politician.

Bardella has never held national public office, but his position at the top of the National Rally's electoral list all but guarantees him a seat in the European Parliament. As the new face of the French far right, he will be well placed to play a prominent role at the heart of a new, enlarged Euroskeptic bloc □ a group composed of right-wing populists from big parties in France, Germany, Italy and Austria as well as a myriad of smaller forces.

Joined together by opposition to mass migration, hostility to Islam and a desire to transfer powers back to national governments, the new group will seek to radically alter the EU. Whether it will be successful is open to question; pro-EU parties are projected to have a majority in the Parliament, and previous efforts to unite Euroskeptics have foundered. But Bardella will be in the thick of the fight.

"I joined the National Front for Marine Le Pen — more for her than the party" — Jordan Bardella

Tall, clean-shaven Bardella represents everything Le Pen wants her rebranded movement to be: shorn of the Holocaust denial, anti-Semitism and open xenophobia it has been known for since it was founded in the 1970s by her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen.

Having ditched the name National Front last year, the party presents itself as the political home for salt-of-the-earth folk, rooted in French traditions, who love their country and want to protect it from meddling Brussels technocrats and fear that Muslim migrants will take French jobs and replace French culture. Under the surface, however, it's not clear that the party has shed many of its old attitudes.

Struggling in the suburbs

Bardella was raised by a single mother who struggled to make ends meet as a teaching assistant in the troubled Parisian suburb of Seine-Saint-Denis, known for large ghettos of descendants of immigrants from North Africa and other parts of that continent.

He was drawn to Le Pen's politics even as a teenager. He started hanging up campaign posters in his neighborhood when he was 16, for her first presidential campaign in 2012.

Marine Le Pen speaks in Beaucaire, France, on April 20, 2019 | Sylvain Thomas/AFP via Getty Images

"I joined the National Front for Marine Le Pen — more for her than the party," Bardella told POLITICO in Cognac.

The admiration is mutual. Le Pen picked Bardella to lead the RN list in the European election even though many senior party members were not sold on him, and rival factions were jockeying for the position.

"I needed convincing, I was worried about his age, I wasn't the only one either ... But Marine Le Pen had a personal preference for him," said Gilles Lebreton, an outgoing RN MEP who was campaigning alongside Bardella in Cognac.

Lebreton said he had been won over by Bardella's assured performances since his nomination.

"For a young man who is 23, he has a bright future, he is very at ease, we can now say it was a very good choice," Lebreton said.

At the barrel-maker's workshop, Bardella wandered affably around with the owner, listening with apparent great interest to the minutiae of the craft. He lamented that "traditional artisanal jobs are not valued anymore," when the owner told him he is having a hard time recruiting.

Bardella told a rally that "the EU is a zombie, a life-impeder."

The owner's struggles are not because the traditional French business of Cognac-making is in decline. Far from it. The business is booming, with exports, mainly to the United States, increasing by 11 percent in 2018.

But when, at his second stop of the day, a distiller explained to Bardella that they ran their own collective quota system locally and managed stocks, he immediately exclaimed, "You see? Wherever the European Union doesn't get involved, things work!"

He later told a rally that "the EU is a zombie, a life-imperder."

The new Euroskepticism

When Bardella reaches Brussels, polls predict he will join a widely expanded battalion of Euroskeptics — with Italys League set to send the largest contingent. Other far-right parties, including the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), are expected to make gains and send larger delegations to Parliament too.

Because these parties favor national interests, to the point of being branded as xenophobic, they face an inherent challenge in uniting behind common policies, but the Leagues leader, Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, has expressed confidence that he can build an association of Euroskeptics that will be a major force over the next five years.

Italy's League leader Matteo Salvini has expressed confidence in building a bloc of Euroskeptics across the Continent | Daniel Mihailescu/AFP via Getty Images

While Bardella will have instant stature as one of Le Pens key lieutenants, he will also have to vie for influence with the AfD's Jörg Meuthen, and other sharp critics of the EU with long experience in Brussels, including Polish MEP Ryszard Legutko, who is a leader of the European Conservatives and Reformists Group.

Like other far-right parties, National Rally has shifted its line on the EU in response to the political debacle in the U.K. over Brexit.

The party now puts more emphasis on the idea it can change the EU from within, with its allies from other countries. It has rowed back from its trademark calls for France to abandon the euro and to quit the EU altogether.

Instead, its election program is built on turning the current EU into a "European Alliance of Nations," getting rid of the European Commission, scrapping the Common Agricultural Policy, and setting strict new guidelines for the parts of the EU that are left. In effect, that would mean the end of the EU as it is currently conceived, with huge knock-on effects for the euro and other cornerstones of the European project. But that's not something the RN chooses to emphasize.

Aznavour before hip-hop

In Cognac, Bardella was pleased to hear how well the region's signature business is going — "a sign of the value of French terroir." But he was quick to underline he isn't a fan of American hip-hop, whose artists have helped make the drink popular.

He told the crowd he wants the May 26 election to be "a referendum on Macron's policies."

He said his favorite song is "His Youth" by Charles Aznavour, the legendary French crooner who is most popular among the retired. The song is a call to take advantage of every moment of one's twenties. Aznavour sings "we must drink our youth until intoxication."

Bardella chooses to interpret that exhortation differently than many people his age. He spends most of his time campaigning. But he says his life is like that of "maybe not every 23-year-old, but almost." In his downtime, he said, he likes seeing friends and watching series on Netflix: "Narcos," "La Casa de Papel," "Dark." He doesn't mention a single French series.

The region of Cognac is not in the post-industrial wastelands that have traditionally been far-right hunting grounds. Emmanuel Macron handily won both rounds of the presidential election here in 2017. Nevertheless, much less stigma seems to surround the far-right party than it did a few years ago.

Bardella's next stop was a local distillery, which almost exclusively supplies Cognac giants like Hennessy and Rémy Martin. Barely 15 minutes after his arrival, the owner suggested Bardella marry one of his daughters — an offer he carefully deflected.

Despite the National Rally's rebrand, the party's DNA does not seem fundamentally changed. At rallies and campaign stops, its supporters readily expressed xenophobic and Islamophobic views to POLITICO.

"Islam is a threat, we are invaded by them," retiree Georges Clot said. "We give so much to migrants who don't pay taxes," added Dominique Rayrat, who runs one of the distilleries. "Islam is not compatible with France. France is a Christian nation," said Pascal, an artisan.

People protest against a National Rally campaign meeting in Saint-Ebremond-de-Bonfosse, France on February 9, 2019 | Charly Triballeau/AFP via Getty Images

Despite being the party's new face, Bardella employs tactics long associated with it, like pushing false information and fear-mongering about immigrants replacing white, Christian French people. He has claimed that the Treaty of Aachen signed by France and Germany in January would lead to Paris sharing its seat at the United Nations Security Council. Confronted with the fact that the treaty says no such thing, Bardella told a French radio interviewer that "we have the right to have a different opinion."

He told POLITICO that what pushed him into politics was "seeing first-hand" the effects of violence, Islamism and immigrant populations not assimilating to French society, but was unable to provide a specific example.

Five days after a gunman shot and killed 50 worshipers at two mosques in New Zealand, Bardella did not disavow the theory of "the great replacement" cited by the alleged killer and embraced for years by the French far right. Instead, he backed tenets of the theory, according to which white French people are being replaced by Muslim immigrants, that have been dismissed by scholars as based on distorted statistics.

He declared on television that the suburb he grew up in is "submerged by mass migration ... by Islamist fundamentalism ... there is a substitution of population."

Taking on Macron

The day after his visit to Cognac, Bardella held a rally with Le Pen in the town of Mer in the Loire

Valley. He told the crowd he wants the May 26 election to be "a referendum on Macron's policies."

A couple of hours earlier, some local people were unaware of the big political event about to take place in their midst. But some expressed the same grievances about the lack of public services and unease about immigrants that the National Rally has campaigned on.

According to POLITICO's projections, the National Rally is on course to win 20 European Parliament seats in May's election, a close second behind Macron's La République En Marche with 21 seats.

In a well-kept municipal park, Christophe and Sophie watched their three children play in the warm, early spring sunshine.

"One of our sons needs a speech therapist, but there aren't any left in Mer. We called 20 in the area, we finally found one but he put us on a waiting list for four months before he could see us, and he was still 20 kilometers away," Sophie said. She's a legacy leftist who recently switched to the Greens.

Her husband agrees with some of the far right's ideas, especially when it comes to immigration. "When I was a child in school here in Mer, Turkish immigrant kids would call me a pig," he said. "I didn't understand then why they did, but as I grew older I realized some of them don't want to mix with us." Nevertheless, he said, he has given up on politics and no longer votes.

In the town hall up the street, a scene reflected the changing France that many National Rally voters struggle to accept. A Turkish-French man was marrying a French convert to Islam, in the secular wedding room, officiated by a female deputy mayor. All the women wore Islamic headscarves, and guests were seated according to gender, with women on the right and men on the left.

"It doesn't bother us that the RN is holding a rally up the street, we are in a free country, with free speech," said Ilhami, the 43-year-old brother of the groom. His father brought him over when he came to Mer in the 1970s to work in a factory. About a hundred families from the same village in Turkey followed suit and stayed. But they don't all feel French. Ilhami said he will not apply for French citizenship, even though his 19-year-old son was born in France and is a citizen.

"I'm not interested in becoming French, I have a country and a president," he said in reference to Turkey and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

This kind of divided loyalty is one of the issues Le Pen and her party underscore when denouncing immigration.

It's a message that resonates. According to POLITICO's projections, the National Rally is on course to win 20 European Parliament seats in May's election, a close second behind Macron's La République En Marche with 21 seats.

The party's success has some in the area worried. A small group of locals gathered outside Bardella and Le Pen's rally, carrying signs that read "no to racists and nationalists" and "no to the far right, a threat to our future."

"The [far right] is growing, its real and we will see it in the next election, I expect them to even get into power [in France]," said Ang  lique, breaking down in tears as she hugged her two young children aged 8 and 5, whom she is raising with her Moroccan husband.

"I brought my children here today to show them that there are people who will defend them and stand up for them," she added.

Kaynak/Source: