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Editors: Sławomir Dębski (PISM Director) ● Katarzyna Staniewska (Managing Editor)
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The Importance of Donald Trump's Electoral Success for Marine Le Pen's Presidential Campaign

Łukasz Jurczyszyn

Donald Trump's victory increases Marine Le Pen's chances in the presidential election in France, because it legitimises her thesis about major upcoming global political changes. It also strengthens her argument about the importance of the role of national identity and the necessity of regaining national control over the economy and society. However, during the campaign her party the National Front will not play up ideological similarities between Le Pen and Trump, because it could mobilise her opponents and turn anti-American resentment, still strong in French society, against her.

Marine Le Pen was the only candidate for the French presidency to officially support Donald Trump in the U.S. presidential election, and his victory was enthusiastically received by her party the National Front (FN). On election night, Le Pen tweeted her congratulations to Trump, even before the official result was announced. His victory is particularly beneficial for her for several reasons.

The Triumph of Democracy. Marine Le Pen has consistently high public support, at around 24 to 26%. According to most opinion polls, she will pass through the first round of the election. However, in the second round, her projected 33% support certainly will not be enough to overcome potential rivals such as new Republican leader François Fillon or the socialist candidate, which will be probably Manuel Valls. The FN leader's extreme views and radical language, according to which her political opponents are "corrupt elites" while she operates "in the name of the people" and "on behalf of the defence of democracy", have worked against her, and a significant part of French society believes that Le Pen should not take the highest office in the country.

The success of Trump, who used similar political rhetoric during his campaign, and whose chances at the outset were thought to be slim, can win Le Pen new voters. Trump, presenting himself as an anti-establishment politician, showed by his victory that radical change is possible, and could neutralise the negative connotations of such electoral preferences in the eyes of French voters.

Moreover, the broader international context favours Le Pen. Anti-establishment and far right parties have been successful in many countries. This demonstrates a growing rebellion against the political class, not only in the U.S. but also in the UK and Italy. In a referendum in the latter, the vast majority of the population rejected reforms proposed by former prime minister Matteo Renzi. Similarly, Le Pen's chances will increase if the anti-immigrant Freedom Party (PVV), currently ahead in the polls, wins the parliamentary election in the Netherlands in March.

Trump's election as president may therefore represent the optimum moment for Le Pen's strategy, which she has built since taking over leadership of the National Front in 2011. This strategy is based on the "dédiabolisation" of the party, which has been entering the mainstream of French politics by getting rid of "fascist" factions. In this way, the FN can increase support not only among voters who feel threatened by globalisation, open borders and liberal economics, but also those who previously voted for mainstream parties. It is to the latter group that Le Pen directs proposals similar to those preached so successfully by Trump.

Opposition to Immigration. Trump, who is planning the mass deportation of illegal immigrants from the United States, and wants a wall to be built on the border with Mexico, reinforces one of Le Pen's main political messages, namely the reduction and better control of immigration. The last two years contributed greatly to the intensification of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim public sentiment in France. The country is particularly vulnerable to attacks in the

name of the Islamic State, due to the large number of non-integrated citizens of immigrant backgrounds. The attacks in Paris (2015) and in Nice (2016) killed a total of 226 people. The ongoing refugee crisis has also had an impact on anti-Muslim public sentiment, as has the increased terrorist threat. For Le Pen, these factors represent an opportunity to weaken accusations of racism and Islamophobia, which tend to arise whenever the FN joins the public debate on the problem of the integration of immigrants in France. Today, the party's arguments for the deportation of all illegal immigrants and the tightening of external borders are viewed as more an expression of concern for national security than racism. Le Pen states that France will never have any chance to fight the current terrorist threat until it regains full control of its borders. Le Pen wants to limit legal immigration to 10,000 people per year (with preference for skilled professionals and students). She believes that the first step should be to stop the influx of immigrants who are known to have terrorist links. She declares, like Trump, that once she becomes president she will order the deportation of all illegal immigrants from the country.

Revamping Economic Policy. Marine Le Pen criticises the current economic order, which has plunged France into long-lasting recession, and proposes radical changes in this area. She advocates "economic patriotism," as opposed to the hitherto dominant neo-liberal model of globalisation. Le Pen's economic policy ideas are not far from Trump's, so a new direction in the U.S. will strengthen Le Pen.

Since 2008, France has been mired in economic crisis. The annual rate of growth of the economy has not exceeded 1.2% in recent years. Unemployment rose to 10% in 2016 (from 9.9% in 2015), which means 3.5 million people out of work. These years of crisis have contributed to the growth of potential support for the National Front. In regional elections in 2015, 43% of the working class, and 35% of farmers and small entrepreneurs (the groups most affected by the slowdown), voted for the party. These are the people who would benefit most from Le Pen's promises to increase the minimum salaries for the low paid (by about €200), cut the cost of living, and pay generous monthly "second child" family benefits of €1,170.

Still on the economy, Le Pen, like Trump, not only opposes the TTIP agreement (which is the epitome of "wild globalisation" and protects the interests of multinational corporations), but she is also very critical of European integration. She supported Brexit and considers that France has suffered economic losses due to the adoption of the euro, which is a major obstacle to the country's urgently needed re-industrialisation. Therefore, she is planning France's withdrawal from the common currency and the re-adoption of the franc. She has announced that, as president, will carry out comprehensive negotiations with all EU Member States, which, as she expects, will end with the return of the European "currency snake" (the European Monetary System of the 70s, which consisted of reducing the volatility of foreign exchange). Importantly, in the face of a chaotic, and, for the UK, increasingly negative Brexit, Le Pen no longer speaks so openly of the possibility of "Frexit." However, she remains consistent in promoting her promise of "monetary sovereignty," despite the fact that the vast majority of the French are against the idea of abandoning the common currency (approximately 70%).

Far of "the Van der Bellen Effect." Le Pen will probably reference Trump's slogans in her campaign, as she represents a similar ideology and programme. However, she will try to avoid direct references, which could be risky for three reasons.

First, French society has traditionally held strong anti-Americanisation attitudes. This is due largely to historical resentments (de Gaulle's era, opposition to the omnipresence of American culture and business), and to criticism of the Pax Americana, especially as a result of increased U.S. military interventions and the promotion of globalisation. The unexpected success of U.S. foreign policy critic François Fillon in the French Republican primaries to some extent confirmed the scepticism toward the United States.

Second, Donald Trump cannot count on having a good reputation in France, because he is associated with the archetypal billionaire's ruthless treatment of his employees. The French fear that his foreign policy will mean the sacrifice of values and morality to contractual logic. Furthermore, the president-elect is in favour of restricting the right to abortion, which may provoke great dislike in France, where there is overwhelming support for the right to choose and which has the most liberal abortion laws in the EU.

Third, excessively highlighting convergence with Trump's programme could mobilise Le Pen's opponents. There was a surprisingly large turnout at France's first centre right primaries (4.5 million voters), which could have been caused by fears of a populist victory similar to those in the U.S. and the UK. François Fillon has already been backed by more than 3 million voters. Taking into account the rather weak candidates from the left of the political spectrum, the election could result in a coalition of opponents to the populist Marine Le Pen. That happened recently in the repeated second round of the presidential election in Austria, in which the extreme right candidate Norbert Hofer was ultimately defeated by independent Alexander Van der Bellen. Le Pen can therefore, to some extent, count on the "Trump effect," but she cannot ignore the "Van der Bellen effect."