4 Pro-European, anti-EU?

The National Rally and European integration

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Introduction

The National Rally (Rassemblement National, RN – previously Front National)¹ is one of the best-known and well-studied far right parties in Europe. The party was originally founded in 1972 with the aim of bringing together the different strands of the French far right.² Under the charismatic leadership of Jean-Marie Le Pen, in its first ten years of life the party struggled to gain relevance. Following this initial period, referred to in the party as the ‘crossing of the desert’,³ it started gaining some traction in local elections. The RN’s first national-level success came in the European Parliament elections of 1984, when it garnered 10% of the vote and elected its first MEPs. Ever since, the RN has been a force to be reckoned with: while the party has struggled to gain representation at the national level, especially since Marine Le Pen took over the helm of the party in 2011, it has grown into an electoral force representing over one-fifth of the French electorate.

In recent years, the RN’s positions on European integration have firmly established it as one of the most Eurosceptic actors in Europe. Most notably, Marine Le Pen advocated a ‘Frexit’ in her 2012 and 2017 campaigns, and although she has since abandoned this policy as too divisive, the RN remains broadly sceptical of the European construction. Opposition to the European Union (EU), however, was not the RN’s starting point, nor is its position on Europe devoid of nuance.

Analysing the RN’s approach to European integration, this chapter argues that the party’s relationship with Europe is more complex than the term ‘Euroscepticism’ suggests. From a historical standpoint, the RN has shifted from moderate support for the European Economic Community to staunch opposition to the European Union. As far as ideology is concerned, the RN has long presented an ambivalent position on Europe, constructed on the one hand around a vague backing for an abstract form of European cooperation based on civilisational proximity with other European countries, and on the other hand, on its opposition to the EU as a concrete form of European collaboration that stifles national sovereignty. Finally, it should also be noted that in spite of its opposition to the EU, from a

practical standpoint, the RN owes part of its success to it. As with other far right parties, the RN has greatly benefitted from engaging in EU politics, as the EU has provided it with a series of financial and symbolic resources that it would not have otherwise had access to. As Catherine Fieschi eloquently put it, despite their anti-Europeanism, parties such as the RN 'have gained enormously from the solemnity, ritual and political symbolism of the European arena and from the credibility derived through seats in the European Parliament'.⁴

The following sections tease out these complexities. The chapter opens with a brief discussion of the relationship between the far right and Europe. It then hones in on the RN's conflicting relationship with the European Union, exploring in turn the evolution of its positions on European integration, its ambivalent ideological approach to Europe and briefly addressing the practical advantages it has gained from engaging in EU politics.

European integration and the far right

Far right parties are amongst the most studied phenomena of recent decades.⁵ Existing research has focused on a variety of topics, including their ideological background,⁶ the reasons for their success,⁷ and their effect on national politics.⁸ While in early years, most research focused on these parties' positions on migration, in recent years, their positions on Europe have attracted more attention. As opposition to European integration has become an increasingly visible and shared feature of the far right,⁹ studies have emerged analysing how far right parties articulate their positions on Europe,¹⁰ the root causes of their Euroscepticism,¹¹ as well as the reasons and effects of varying patterns of opposition across parties.¹²

Scholars analysing far right positions towards Europe have noted that, while these actors are frequently presented as 'hard' Eurosceptics,¹³ their relationship with Europe is frequently more complex and diverse than one might expect.¹⁴ Looking at the development of far right positions over time, for example, researchers have noted that while far right parties converged on a Eurosceptic position, this was frequently not their starting point.¹⁵ Well known examples of this trend include the Freedom Party in Austria and the Northern League in Italy, who both shifted from overall support to strong opposition to the EU.

Opposition to the EU amongst far-right parties is also not homogenous. First, different parties display varying levels of Euroscepticism, going from more 'compromising' positions to openly 'rejectionist' ones.¹⁶ Second, these parties also display a measure of ideological ambivalence on Europe depending on how it is defined. As Fieschi, Schields and Woods pointed out, far right parties present two competing visions of Europe. On the one hand, relying on a civilisational definition of 'Europe', they display a pro-Europeanism constructed around the idea of a shared ethnic and cultural background amongst Europeans. On the other hand, driven by a fear of

federalism, further integration and loss of sovereignty, they express a more cautious approach to the European Union as a concrete body.¹⁷

Finally, it bears noting that the far right's opposition to the European Union has not prevented them from taking part in, and benefitting from, the process of European integration. In fact, the EU has been one of the unwitting supporters of these parties, providing them with resources which have facilitated their establishment and growth. In particular, the proportional and 'second order' nature¹⁸ of European elections has made it easier for their members to be elected as MEPs, and election has come with a series of financial, symbolic and ideological resources that they could use to consolidate their position in domestic politics.¹⁹ Accession to the European Parliament has also given them the opportunity to build transnational alliances with like-minded parties across Europe and enhance their legitimacy at home as a result.²⁰ In other words, while opposition to EU integration is frequently presented as a marker of marginalisation,²¹ it has also been a source of increased success for these parties.

In sum, while far right parties are frequently viewed as a 'homogenous Eurosceptic bloc',²² their approach to Europe is more complex than commonly stated. From a historical standpoint, their positions have evolved over time. From an ideological perspective, they display ambivalence both within parties and across countries. Finally, in more practical terms, far right parties have also benefitted from the process of European integration that they appear to reject.

The Rassemblement National and European integration

The Rassemblement National's approach to the European Union displays several of the characteristics described above. Historically, the party shifted from support for European unity to stark opposition to the process. Ideologically, the RN's position is constructed around a distinction between 'Europe' as a civilisation and positive form of identification, and the EU as a concrete and negatively connotated political construction. Pragmatically, finally, the RN has been amongst the main beneficiaries of the process of European integration, as the EU has given it access to the resources that have helped it sustain its growth.

Europositive to Europhobe: the historical evolution of the RN's positions on Europe

The Rassemblement National's views on European integration evolved significantly over the course of its history, with the party moving from 'euroenthusiast' positions in the early 1980s to 'euroreject'²³ positions from the late 1980s and 1990s onwards. In the early years of its existence, the RN displayed a broadly positive view of European integration and collaboration. Speaking from a strong anti-communist perspective and perceiving Europe

to be deeply endangered, it viewed collaboration amongst European nations as a means for Europeans to defend themselves from the Soviet Union, while reacquiring relevance in a bipolar world. The RN's positive approach to integration was well-summarised by Jean-Marie Le Pen in his programmatic book *'Les Français d'Abord'* (The French First), in which he argued that given the historical circumstances,

one can now accept the creation of a united Europe in front of external threats. One never associates by natural reflex. When one creates a society, it is because one does not have the means to act alone. It is certain that the threat of Soviet Communism (and the dangers of disintegration by subversion it entails) is also Europe's great chance. It can allow it to define itself precisely against a certain form of danger.²⁴

Along with this commitment to European unity in the face of danger, the RN pushed for a European defence that could restore Europe (and its nations) from the decline which ensued following the Second World War, returning it to the status of an international power. Thus, while the party also displayed some more critical stances concerning specific aspects of the EU construction, its opposition remained rather moderate.

The RN's pro-Europeanism was, however, short-lived. From the middle of the 1980s, responding to changes within the party and the European Union, the party began a slow but secure shift towards opposition to the European Union. As far as the EU was concerned, the introduction of the Single European Act marked the beginning of an increasingly close cooperation between European countries based on a primarily economic agenda. This development was at odds with the party's view that European collaboration should be guided by the aim of transforming Europe into an international power able to stand up to the Soviet Union. For example, Bruno Mégret criticised the Single European Act as one which did not do anything to remedy the EU's lack of common defence projects and the absurdity of '350 million Europeans asking 230 million Americans to defend them from 270 million Soviets'.²⁵ This critique was entwined with the idea that by privileging economic cooperation, the EU did little to reinforce the common identity of Europeans and their sense of needing to unite against external dangers.²⁶ Within the party, the arrival of a group of more markedly Eurosceptic politicians such as Yvan Blot and Jean-Claude Martinez, as well as an increased knowledge (and scepticism) of European processes derived from having become part of the European Parliament prompted a shift to more critical stances which crystalized into firm opposition during the campaign against the Maastricht Treaty.²⁷

From the 1990s onwards, the RN adopted a strongly Eurosceptic stance. In addition to the previously noted changes in leadership, a few additional factors may help explain this shift. First, the RN found itself acting in a radically different political context. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the

emergence of a multi-polar world removed (or at least reduced) the need for European collaboration in military terms. Second, the party responded to further evolutions in the European Union following the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty. If the Single European Act entrenched a certain course of economic integration, the Maastricht Treaty represented a qualitative shift in the process of integration, leading the EU to increasingly intrude on 'core state powers'.²⁸ In the RN's eyes, the EU's newly acquired powers represented an unacceptable relinquishing of national sovereignty, which led it to develop its critique of the EU as a power-hoarding body aimed at destroying the sovereignty of European nations. Finally, opposition to European integration also offered a strategic advantage to the RN. Faced with a primarily pro-EU political class, adopting strong anti-EU positions allowed the party to distinguish itself from other political actors, while appealing to sectors of public opinion who opposed European integration, but could not find a party to represent these views.²⁹

Opposition to European integration remains an integral part of the RN's message to this day. While the party has oscillated in its views concerning exit from the European Union,³⁰ it remains a strong advocate of a different model of integration (a 'Europe of the Nations') based on the preservation of national sovereignty. The following section discusses the RN's ideological approach to European integration in more depth, teasing out additional areas of ambiguity in the party's stance.

Pro-Europe, anti-EU: the RN's ideological approach to 'Europe'

The historical evolution of the RN's positions on European integration is not the only source of ambiguity in the party's approach to Europe. In fact, the party's ideological approach to the EU is marked by a dual discourse where the RN claims to support a rather abstract 'European civilisation' while at the same time opposing the concrete political project of the EU as both against this European civilisation and its finest product: the nation state.

The RN's claim to be 'pro-European' dates back to its early years. The definition of Europe as a distinct civilisation, for example, was well fleshed out in the previously cited 1984 programmatic book 'Les Français d'Abord', in which Jean-Marie Le Pen defined Europe as

a historic, geographic, cultural, economic and social ensemble. It is an entity destined for action. Europe is currently divided, in decline. Europe is retreating to the borders of the Year 1000, but it guards the possibilities for rebirth, should she rediscover a spiritual, intellectual and political unity and all that has been its spirit: that is, a will to act for civilisation, to refuse to be submerged and vanquished.³¹

The identification of a distinct European civilisation was accompanied by a claim of belonging to it, and, by the end of the 1980s, the assertion that it

represented this true 'Europe' against an ever-encroaching EU. Coinciding with the development of more critical positions on the EU, this 'pro-Europe, anti-EU' discourse is well-summarised in a 1991 party guide aimed at activists, where it is stated that

the debate on Europe is completely distorted, because there are in fact two radically different conceptions of Europe. One is founded on the idea that the world is destined to homogenise and unite, and that Europe in this perspective is nothing but a stage. (...) The other is founded on the idea that the survival of European nations is threatened and they have to unite to preserve their identity and retrieve their power. Europe is thus conceived as a means to defend the independence of nations or of national identities. The first conception is that of a cosmopolitan or globalist Europe; the second is that of Europe understood as a community of civilisation. The first one destroys the nations, the second one ensures their survival. The first one is an accelerator of decline, the second an instrument of renaissance. The first is the conception of the Brussels technocrats and of establishment politicians, the second is our conception.³²

Influenced by the ideas of the French intellectuals of the *Nouvelle Droite*,³³ and drawing on arguments made by RN leaders in their speeches and in the first number of the party magazine *Identité*, dedicated to 'Rethinking Europe', the passage clearly draws out the distinction between 'Europe' as the party understands it, and the EU as a concrete political project. While the passage above was still influenced by a Cold War mentality, insofar as Europe is seen as needing to unite in front of a 'danger', it is notable that the distinction between Europe and the EU has remained a visible feature of the party to this day, with Marine Le Pen claiming, for example, that 'even though we are resolutely opposed to the European Union, we are resolutely European, I'd go as far as saying that it is because we are European that we are opposed to the European Union'.³⁴

Whereas 'Europe' represents a positive form of identification, the RN's opposition to the EU centres around the view that the EU is a concrete threat to national (and European) identity and sovereignty. This line of critique has also evolved through time. In the late 1980s, for example, the EU was mainly criticised for doing little to protect European identity and foster the 'renaissance' of Europe and its nations as world powers. From the early 1990s onwards, criticism of the EU centred more strongly on the concept of national sovereignty. In this line of criticism, the EU had become a threat to a nation's ability to rule itself and take the decisions that it saw fit. This aspect was also presented as part of a larger ploy to dilute national identity and facilitate the emergence of a 'world-government'.

It is on these two axes that the RN's critique of the EU still builds today. On the one hand, 'Brussels' is accused of harming national sovereignty through excessive supranational legislation and unacceptable limitations on what a

nation can do. On the other hand, it is accused of facilitating migration and globalisation, two trends which deeply harm national identity. The view of the EU as a harmful construction has led the party to call for a fundamental renegotiation of France's place in the EU and a reform of the Union in the direction of a 'Europe of the Nations', with the possibility of leaving the project should this process be unsuccessful. The importance of this goal to the party was most evident in its 2017 presidential programme, where the very first article stressed the need to

Regain our freedom and the control of our destiny by returning (monetary, legislative, territorial and economic) sovereignty to the French people. For this, a negotiation with our European partners will be pursued, followed by a referendum on our belonging to the EU. The objective is to reach a European project that respects the independence of France, of national sovereignties, and which serves the interests of the people.³⁵

In sum, whereas the RN acknowledges the existence of commonalities between Europeans, and even claims to belong to a European civilisation, this does not lead it to support the EU. Rather, the EU is presented as violating core European values such as national identity and sovereignty. This vocal critique of the EU, however, does not prevent the party from taking advantage of participation in EU institutions. It is to this factor that the chapter now turns.

The benefits of Europeanisation: the RN as beneficiaries of the EU

The RN's opposition to European integration has not prevented it from benefitting from European integration. Taking part in European elections and joining the European Parliament, in fact, has provided the party with 'legitimacy, resources and patronage'³⁶ which have helped it become a regular presence in French and European politics.

In electoral terms, the RN has benefitted from the European Parliament elections' proportional system. While in national elections, the two-round majoritarian system, coupled with the continued ostracization of the party on the part of mainstream actors, made it hard for the RN to gain seats in the *Assemblée Nationale*, the proportional system used in European Parliament elections made it easier it to be elected. Thus, while the RN was present in the French Parliament only between 1986 and 1988, and again after 2012, it has been a regular presence in the European institutions since 1984.

Being a part of the European Parliament has come with both financial and symbolic benefits. Financially, the European Union provides its MEPs with the requisite resources to perform their jobs, and MEPs can gain access to additional funds when they form or join a transnational party group. For a party struggling with its finances, these funds provided material resources which could be used to form its political cadres and maintain a visible presence

at the national level³⁷ – although the RN has not always made use of the funds in a manner which is in line with the EU guidelines.³⁸

From a symbolic point of view, taking part in EU politics has provided the RN with additional clout and legitimacy. As well as gaining access to a new arena in which to present their ideas, RN MEPs have gained the respectability that comes from public office³⁹ and from participation in transnational collaboration.⁴⁰ While RN-led transnational alliances have not always been successful, they seem to have acquired more momentum in the last two European Parliament legislatures. The EU may also be seen as having provided the RN with ideological resources which have helped adapt its message in a more appealing way. As argued elsewhere, their aforementioned claims to be ‘pro-European but anti-EU’ may have helped them build a less nationalist image, while their focus on issues of sovereignty has brought their discourse in line with the mainstream, which may have made their views appear more acceptable.⁴¹

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that, like other far right parties, the RN has had a complex relationship with European integration. While being supportive of the process in its early years, following changes in the EU, in the party and in the political context, it shifted to a position of radical opposition. Its ideological approach to the EU is constructed around a ‘pro-Europe, anti-EU’ stance in which it supports an abstract European civilisation, while rejecting the concrete political project of the European Union. Finally, while the RN has rejected European integration formally, this has not stopped it from benefitting and taking advantage of the process and the additional resources that participating in European integration has offered it.

The observation that the RN has benefitted from the EU (and still benefits from it) also raises some questions concerning whether for all its opposition, the party (and other hard-line opponents of EU integration belonging to the same party family) would actually benefit from seeing the construction disappear. The EU, after all, may have its uses even for those who disapprove of it, and it is unclear whether if given the opportunity to tear it down, these parties would actually be willing to do so. More likely, they may try to reform it into something more aligned with their views, although it remains to be seen whether a ‘Europe of the Nations’ would be able to function in an effective manner.

Notes

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- 5 Pietro Castelli Gattinara, 'The Study of the Far Right and Its Three E's: Why Scholarship Must Go beyond Eurocentrism, Electoralism and Externalism', (2020), 18, *French Politics*, 314–333.
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- 15 Mudde, (n 6), 158–183; Dimitri Almeida, ‘Europeanized Eurosceptics? Radical Right Parties and European Integration’, (2010), 11, *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, 237.
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- 22 Almeida, (n 15), 244.
- 23 Petr Kopecky and Cas Mudde, ‘The Two Sides of Euroscepticism: Party Positions on European Integration in East Central Europe’, (2002), 3, *European Union Politics*, 297.
- 24 Jean-Marie Le Pen, *Les Français d’abord*, (Carrère - Michel Lafon 1984), 155–156.
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- 26 Olivier Pichon, ‘L’illusion Du Primat de l’économie Ou l’Europe à l’envers’, (1989) *La Lettre de Jean-Marie Le Pen*, 5; Front National, *Militer Au Front*, (Editions Nationales 1991).
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- 28 Philipp Genschel and Markus Jachtenfuchs, ‘More Integration, Less Federation: The European Integration of Core State Powers’, (2016), 23, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 42.

- 29 Emmanuelle Reungoat, 'Mobilizing Europe in National Competition: The Case of the French Front National', (2015), 36, *International Political Science Review*, 296.
- 30 For example, while it advocated in favour of 'Frexit' in the 2002, 2012 and 2017 presidential elections, following the unsatisfactory results of the 2017 presidential election it has abandoned the stance (at least temporarily).
- 31 Le Pen, (n 24), 154.
- 32 Front National, *Militer Au Front*, (n 26), 115.
- 33 Tamir Bar-On, 'Fascism to the Nouvelle Droite: The Dream of Pan-European Empire', (2008), 16, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 327; Tamir Bar-On, 'Transnationalism and the French Nouvelle Droite', (2011), 45, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 199; Pierre-André Taguieff, *Sur La Nouvelle Droite: Jalons d'une Analyse Critique*, (Descartes & Cie 1994).
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- 38 For example, since 2014 the party has been at the centre of a 'fake job' scandal, where some of its MEPs were charged with using EU funds to pay France-based staff.
- 39 Reungoat, 'Mobilizing Europe in National Competition: The Case of the French Front National', (n 29), 299.
- 40 Startin, (n 20), 439.
- 41 Lorimer, (n 19).