



By: **Laurent Warlouzet**

The 'Melonization' of Marine Le Pen



Marine Le Pen, the leader of the far-right National Rally (RN) in France, has unveiled an economic program centered on rapid fiscal consolidation—more commonly known as austerity.

In doing so, she has broken sharply with her own party's past and aligned herself more closely with a longstanding trend on the European right.

The RN's move comes just as France is being rocked by protests, with its government struggling to pass a budget for lack of a parliamentary majority. Public debt stands at **119% of GDP**, compared to 102% in Britain and 63% in Germany, and the deficit is expected to reach **5.4% of GDP** in 2026—well above the European Union's 3% ceiling.

To bring it down to 5% in 2027, the government has announced €54 billion (\$60 billion) in deeply unpopular budget cuts.

But Le Pen wants to take austerity further. She is proposing that France mimic Germany's "debt brake" (a legal restriction on the size of budget deficits) by enshrining a "golden rule" in the French constitution.

Crucially, such an amendment would have to be approved by referendum. Suspending it for one year would require 60% support in parliament, and doing so for a second year would require another referendum. Thus, Le Pen has offered a populist vision of fiscal consolidation.

Le Pen wants to give austerity a democratic mandate

Rather than rely on the usual technocratic model in which fiscal, legal, or environmental constraints are embedded in difficult-to-change rules (such as constitutional provisions or European treaty provisions), Le Pen wants to give austerity a democratic mandate.

Whereas Greece had belt-tightening imposed on it by the Troika (the European Commission,

European Central Bank, and International Monetary Fund), French austerity would be endorsed by French voters.

This bold approach contains a major political contradiction that lies at the heart of many far-right parties' agendas.

To deliver her promised savings, Le Pen would need to cut not only immigration-related spending (which is popular with her electorate), but also welfare policies such as pensions and health care (which is not).

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Yet RN voters have historically been drawn disproportionately from rural, working-class, and lower-middle-class areas where public services are already under strain.

Many depend on welfare provisions, and others live in regions suffering from shortages of nurses, teachers, judges, and police. Such voters generally demand more state intervention, not less.

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The contradiction is not uniquely French. Across Europe, the nationalist right is combining demands for stronger state intervention with fiscal restraint.

The RN, Germany's **Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)**, and Reform UK may differ profoundly on many issues, but they are converging on the need to reduce public spending and constrain government debt.

At the same time, Le Pen has been careful to distinguish herself from the AfD, which is more openly radical and racist.

She has kept RN out of the same group as the AfD in the European Parliament, and instead moved closer to Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, who has managed to present herself as part of a new, more respectable nationalist right.

This is a familiar story in France. The far right, once associated with political and economic radicalism, is supposedly becoming more moderate and more “responsible.”

Meloni has cooperated with the European Union on several issues and pursued a cautious economic policy, and Le Pen is now attempting a “Melonization” of her own.

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To sell her massive austerity program, she has invoked none other than Charles de Gaulle, France's most storied 20th-century political leader.

She has even promised a more “constructive” European policy, as did de Gaulle when he returned to power in 1958.

What Le Pen actually wants is to halve France's net contribution to the EU budget.

Yet she is presenting this position not as a revolutionary rejection of Europe, but as a return to the level of net contributions made during Jacques Chirac's center-right administration between 1995 and 2007.

She has even proposed harmonizing excise taxes on alcohol and tobacco with European rates and transferring some of the additional revenue to the EU.

Defender of fiscal discipline

Le Pen's apparent transformation is all the more striking for its repudiation of her own political past.

The reference to de Gaulle would once have been unthinkable, considering that her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, founded the National Front with anti-Gaullists and others nostalgic for the collaborationist Vichy regime.

Le Pen is also attempting to erase the memory of her own anti-European radicalism.



After attacking the huge debts accumulated under Macron, Le Pen is presenting herself as the defender of fiscal discipline—a position typically advocated by classical liberals

It was only a decade ago that she was praising Brexit and musing about the appeal of Frexit.

During the 2017 presidential campaign, she called for France to leave the euro, only to be humiliated by Emmanuel Macron in their crucial televised debate.

She may have learned from these experiences. Her recent speech outlining her economic policies was packed with figures and technical details.

At a time when her party is embroiled in a controversy over **anti-Semitic remarks** attributed to her deputy, Jordan Bardella, she is projecting an image of fiscal responsibility.

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A new pairing of nationalism with neoliberalism

But Le Pen's program is not simply an attempt to make the RN respectable. It could also signal a broader transformation of the European far right.

For decades, the political dividing line over economic policy was relatively clear: center-right and liberal parties defended fiscal discipline and market-oriented reforms, while the **left** and, increasingly, the radical right demanded greater social protection and state intervention.

That alignment may be breaking down as a new political combination emerges. Nationalism, restrictions on immigration, and stronger borders are being combined with fiscal discipline and reduced welfare spending.

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If this combination takes hold, Le Pen could represent a new pairing of nationalism with neoliberalism, an association that has become increasingly popular around the world, as I show in my latest book, *Liberty, Solidarity and Community*.

But since far-right parties draw much of their electoral strength from voters who have the most to lose from austerity, she will need to reconcile the promise of **national protection** with the reality of shrinking public spending.

Whether she can thread that needle may determine not only her own political future, but also that of the broader European nationalist right.

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