



By: Zaki Laïdi

Who stands to benefit from Jordan Bardella's antisemitism scandal?



Jordan Bardella is little known outside of France. But if Marine Le Pen, the leader of the far-right National Rally (RN), wins next spring's presidential election—as appears **increasingly likely**—he will, she says, be her prime minister.

The question is whether the growing scandal around Bardella will cause Le Pen to change her mind and, if not, how that will affect her chances of victory.

The scandal kicked off on September 28, when the French investigative news outlet **Mediapart reported** that an examination of written exchanges from 2013 had revealed barefaced antisemitic remarks by Bardella. “The Jew has to dominate other people, crush them and rob them,” **read one message**.

On October 1, after Bardella denied the veracity of the claims, Mediapart published the **full set of exchanges**.

Mediapart's source, whom one can assume is close to the RN, downloaded the messages from Meta.

Bardella still calls the texts “crude forgeries,” but there can be little doubt that the messages were sent from an account in his name.

This puts Le Pen in a tough spot. She has spent the last decade attempting to differentiate herself from her father and the RN's founder, Jean-Marie Le Pen, who was convicted numerous times of antisemitism and inciting racial violence. (Antisemitism is illegal in France.)

She wants to turn the RN into a **respectable populist party**—one that will act as a bulwark against immigration, especially from Muslim countries.

In fact, she is seeking to portray the RN as a protector of French Jews from Islamist threats and a strong supporter of Israel.

Bardella is supposed to attract center-right voters

Bardella's crude antisemitism undermines this effort, invoking a history the RN wants to forget.

While this might not have much impact on the first round of the election, because the RN's far-right base is solid, it could affect Le Pen's prospects in the second-round run-off, when she will need to attract votes from the traditional right.

The 31-year-old Bardella—ostensibly too young to have political skeletons in his closet—was supposed to play a key role in broadening her appeal.

Distancing the RN from its antisemitic, Vichyist past is part of the equation, but so is reassuring voters about the party's plans for the economy

Distancing the RN from its antisemitic, Vichyist past is part of the equation, but so is reassuring voters about the party's plans for the economy.

Whereas Le Pen's statism—reflected in her opposition to raising the retirement age—casts doubt on her commitment to markets, Bardella has been much more open to market-based solutions.

So, while Le Pen is responsible for winning working-class support, Bardella is supposed to attract center-right voters.

Both will be essential to victory, particularly if the RN's second-round opponent is the far-left Jean-Luc Mélenchon.

What if the scandal dies down quickly?

Bardella seems to be banking on the current scandal being forgotten by the time France goes to the polls.

If the remarks were entirely false, as he claims,

Bardella would simply ask Meta to export his own Facebook account records, which only he is in a position to request. (He has not done so.)

Moreover, he would presumably demand a swift court appearance to confront Mediapart.

Instead, he has opted to lodge a defamation suit, which will not go to trial for at least two years.

One can only assume that he wants the word “defamation” to make headlines, but not the lawsuit’s outcome, hoping that once Le Pen is elected president, and he is named prime minister, attention will be elsewhere.

This scenario is plausible: the scandal dies down quickly, Le Pen reconfirms Bardella as head of the RN, and the presidential campaign is launched in earnest

If there are no new revelations, this scenario is plausible: the scandal dies down quickly, Le Pen reconfirms Bardella as head of the RN at the end of this month, and the presidential campaign is launched in earnest.

This outcome would not displease Mélenchon. If Le Pen is his second-round opponent, he will be able to respond to any antisemitism accusations leveled against him by pointing to the Bardella affair.

Only the center-right candidate Édouard Philippe, who served as prime minister under President Emmanuel Macron in 2017–20, stands to benefit from a decline in support for Le Pen, as he would be able to capture part of her base.

So far, however, the public does not seem overly troubled by the Bardella revelations.

Bardella’s party foes must show restraint

That could change if new revelations emerge. Bardella certainly has adversaries within the RN, reportedly including Le Pen’s niece Marion Maréchal.

The RN’s “number twos” have often ended up being pushed aside to make way for a member of the Le Pen family.



Bardella certainly has adversaries within the RN, reportedly including Le Pen’s niece Marion Maréchal

So it is perhaps not surprising that Maréchal thinks Bardella is an interloper. Nonetheless, ensuring Le Pen’s victory remains the top priority, so Bardella’s party foes must show restraint.

There is a third possibility: the revelations about Bardella act as a slow poison. The damage from the scandal appears to be contained for now, but doubts may nonetheless set in.

This could lead Le Pen to sideline Bardella quietly and choose a different prime minister.

Le Pen would need to manage such a change tactfully, but it would expand her options for the second round.

French presidential campaigns are rarely predictable. In 2002, few imagined that Jean-Marie Le Pen would reach the second round against Jacques Chirac. In 2017, the election was upended by the revelation that former Prime Minister François Fillon—then the presidential frontrunner—had created a phantom job for his wife.

Today, it is impossible to predict how the

Bardella affair will affect the outcome of the next presidential election.

But even if it does not damage Le Pen's chances, it makes Bardella highly unlikely to be chosen as prime minister.

Zaki Laïdi, Professor of International Politics at Sciences Po, is a former special adviser to the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of the European Union (2020-24).