

Get ready for a scary fortnight in French politics: a Le Pen presidency really is possible

The race for the Elysée could end up as a horror story for anyone who cares about the wellbeing of France or Europe



A seemingly 'kinder, gentler' Marine Le Pen in Perpignan on Friday.

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The French election is straying from the script. It was meant to be a predictable remake. It has turned into a thriller. It could end up as a horror story.

A month ago, Emmanuel Macron seemed certain to be the first French president to win a second term in 20 years. After Russia invaded Ukraine, his poll ratings soared. He built a 12-point lead in a probable second-round match-up with the far-right candidate Marine Le Pen, and a 15-point lead over all other candidates in the first round.

But with that first round taking place on Sunday, Macron's lead has all but evaporated. In the most recent polls, he only has a two- to five-point advantage over Le Pen in round one, and a two- to eight-point lead over her in the two-candidate runoff on 24 April.

Most French political analysts believe Macron will still prevail. Le Pen has magically evaded, so far, any reckoning for her long years as a Vladimir Putin sympathiser. In

the second round of French elections, the presidential credentials of candidates are put to a greater stress test than in the multicandidate first round.

Le Pen's economic programme is an incoherent mess. Her European policy is Frexit by stealth – unilaterally reducing payments to the EU budget and breaking EU laws she does not like. She also wants to ban all Muslim women from wearing veils in public – not just the burqa, which was outlawed in 2010. She plans to discriminate against foreigners, including EU nationals, with regards to eligibility for benefits.

France is an angry country. It is always an angry country. It is especially angry at present because the Ukraine war has inflated already high petrol, diesel and food prices. But there is no real appetite in France for confrontational policies that would destroy an 80-year postwar political consensus of outward-looking tolerance and European unity.

So Le Pen cannot win. Can she?

Probably not. And yet the opinion polls suggest that if enough leftwing voters stay at home in the second round, refusing to choose between Macron (“the president of the rich”) and a seemingly “kinder, gentler” Le Pen, then she could win. Just.

After covering every French presidential election since 1986 and elections in five other countries, I can think of no parallel for such a late collapse in the position of the presumed favourite. What on earth has happened?

Macron's support has not, in truth, collapsed. It is now averaging 27% – three points higher than it has been for most of the past year. When the Ukraine war began it rose briefly to 31%, as people from the softer left and softer right rallied to the flag and the centrist president.

Equally, there has been no dramatic surge in support for the far right. Le Pen's ultranationalist rival Eric Zemmour has been destroyed electorally by his own years of Putin fellow-travelling. Le Pen's meteoric rise in the first-round polls mirrors Zemmour's decline since the Ukraine invasion.

In mid-February, they were both on about 16%. She is now on 22-24%, with Zemmour slumped at 8-10%. It is one of the great oddities of the campaign that Zemmour has paid dearly for his Putin idolatry but Le Pen – an even more enthusiastic Moscowteer – has not.

Zemmour's extremism on race and Islam allowed Le Pen to present herself as a mainstream politician close to ordinary people. She spotted early the opportunities provided by low wages and high prices. Since the Ukraine invasion, she has reaped electoral benefits by connecting Russian sanctions – of which she disapproves – to the cost of living.

The shift in second-round opinion polls is also not quite so dramatic as it seems – but potentially more significant. Macron's average runoff lead over Le Pen in the past six months has been 12 points, 56%-44%. Several polls now put them within two to

four points. Politico's Poll of Polls, which was a very accurate guide in 2017, gives Macron a six-point lead at 53%-47% (but falling).

There are two main reasons why the projected score is so much closer than when Macron beat Le Pen 66%-34%. First, many more leftwingers say they will stay at home this time. Second, Macron is no longer an upstart, revolutionary-in-a-suit; he is the incumbent.

It is an iron rule of French politics that sitting presidents are detested. The 2017 election second round was a plebiscite against the far right; this one could become a plebiscite against Macron.

Does Macron deserve to be so detested? No, he doesn't. He has made many mistakes. He has sometimes seemed arrogant or aloof. He has failed to construct a convincing narrative of success, during his term of office and during a campaign he entered late, distracted by the Ukraine war.

When he did finally start campaigning, he took what now looks like an electorally brave (or foolish) decision to propose an increase in the standard French retirement age from 62 to 65.

And yet Macron has much to boast about. He has reduced French unemployment to 7.4%, the lowest for 13 years. France weathered Covid better than many other comparable countries, thanks to huge state support for individuals and businesses. His ideas and energy have revived the European Union as a thinking force in global politics, not an immobile, inward-looking bloc.

He can still win the election. But it is going to be a scary two weeks for anyone who cares about the wellbeing of France or Europe.

- *John Lichfield is a journalist based in France since 1997. He is the author of Our Man in Paris*