

FRANCE

A new face for the National Front

As the far right gains ground in France, its young members are tasting power. David Rachline, whose father was Jewish, is leader of the pack.

BY NICHOLAS VINOCUR

WINNER: Rachline on the campaign trail in March. He scored the biggest margin in the National Front's nationwide success. **REUTERS/ERIC GAILLARD**

FRANCE NATIONAL FRONT'S NEW FACE

FREJUS, FRANCE, NOVEMBER 5, 2014

Last month, David Rachline, the mayor of the French Riviera town of Frejus, quietly loaned a free room to the town's Jewish community to celebrate Yom Kippur.

In most other towns in France the gesture would have been unremarkable. But Rachline belongs to the far right National Front, a party whose founder, Jean-Marie Le Pen, was convicted of inciting racial hatred in 1996 when he said the gas chambers used to kill Jews in the Holocaust were "merely a detail" of World War Two.

The National Front (or FN, by its French acronym) still campaigns against immigration, same-sex marriages and the euro. But politicians like Rachline are part of a new generation that current leader Marine Le Pen, Jean-Marie's daughter, hopes will win over more mainstream voters.

Past National Front politicians who won office have often messed up and been voted out. If the National Front is to capitalise on the weakness of France's Socialists, Marine Le Pen and her followers know they must prove they can govern.

That's why the 11 FN candidates who were voted in as mayors at the March elections, including Rachline, have been given how-to manuals for executive office and offered round-the-clock advice from experts in party headquarters in Paris. The orders: Apply the rulebook, manage conservatively and, above all, show the FN is fit to rule.

Some FN mayors have slipped already. One near Marseille banned free lunches for poor children while boosting his own salary by 44 percent. Another had an anti-vagrancy decree knocked down by a court as racist. But most have largely stayed out of trouble.

One star is Rachline, whose father was Jewish and who sees himself as "culturally" Catholic. At 26, he is the party's youngest ever mayor, and when elected he booked the biggest winning margin in the party's nationwide success. People in the party say



POLITICAL INSTINCT: Marine Le Pen, here with her father Jean-Marie (left) and Rachline in September, wants to shed the party's reputation for xenophobia. **REUTERS/ERIC GAILLARD**

“For the first time in years, we’ve got someone honest ... who is putting the town’s finances in order.”

Marguerite LeBoeuf

Voter

he was picked for his organisational skills.

He’s already impressing many in Frejus. Shopkeepers like his decision to extend summer opening hours. Others are pleased he increased the police budget. And he has laid on extra shows at the newly renovated Roman arena.

“He’s doing a really impressive job,” said Marguerite LeBoeuf, 74, a pensioner who lives near the beach. “For the first time in years, we’ve got someone honest, approachable, who we can trust, who is putting the town’s finances in order.”

Gabriel Aymard, president of the Jewish community association in Frejus, is more guarded. “For the time being – and I insist, for the time being – I have the best relations

in the world with this mayor,” he said. “He’s a very intelligent man, with whom we have very, very good relations.”

Others are wary. His critics say Rachline has placed party sympathisers in roles that should be apolitical, broken his promises, and shown a vengeful streak.

In his first months, Rachline has made some reversals, particularly in his approach to finance and the town’s Muslim population. Despite campaigning against a new mosque in the town, for months he let conservative Muslims go ahead with building it. Then recently, he found a legal obstacle to the project.

Such subtleties could reflect a new pragmatism at the heart of the National Front’s quest for power. Far right parties across Europe are looking to build on electoral gains they have made in towns and cities that are stuck in a post-crisis slump. Jerome Fourquet, an analyst for pollster IFOP, said that in an effort to impress the leadership, the National Front mayors have made sure “the streets were clean.”



TOWN OF CONTRASTS: Demonstrators face riot policemen in front of Rachline's campaign headquarters in March, a world away from the tourist beaches for which the coast is known. **REUTERS/ERIC GAILLARD**

Rachline himself says he is simply governing better than his centre-right predecessor. "I think my critics would do better to seek inspiration from us, for a change," he said in an interview in his vast town hall office. "We inherited a town deeply in debt and have been able to make the efforts needed to shore up its finances."

Opinion polls now rate Marine Le Pen a strong contender for president in a 2017 vote. And six months after he won Frejus, Rachline's fellow mayors helped elect him to the Senate, the upper house of the national parliament. That made him one of the first FN members to win a place in the baroque Luxembourg Palace on Paris' Left Bank.

Success like this has Stephane Ravier, a party colleague who also won a Senate seat, brimming with confidence: "The only force really progressing in France is the National Front," he said.

THE OUTSIDER

Frejus is a big challenge. It has a relatively low immigrant population but like many towns on France's southern coast, is torn between contrasting identities. The night of his election, Rachline sipped champagne in his campaign office, while riot police stood guard in the town square. On one

side, anti-immigrant supporters sang 'la Marseillaise'; on the other, young men from the town's more immigrant-heavy neighbourhoods chanted, "Fuck the FN."

Once a thriving Roman port, the city lodged between St Tropez and Cannes is the fifth most indebted in France. Pristine Mediterranean beaches and a rich archaeological history draw thousands each summer, swelling the year-round population of 55,000 as much as six-fold. Inland, 1960s housing projects shelter the descendants of refugees from the war of independence in Algeria, a former French colony. Residents of the projects struggle to find jobs and rarely visit the beach.

Rachline's Catholic mother ran a snack bar and his father, who was not observant, sold insurance. Rachline obtained a high school qualification in accounting. He describes himself as agnostic. A former school

official said he remembered him as a quiet boy, one of few white students in a "particularly unruly" class.

He turned to the National Front, then led by Marine Le Pen's father Jean-Marie, at 15. After the death of his own father in 2003, he embraced the party more wholeheartedly, the former school official said.

Rachline first ran for mayor in 2008, but won only 12.5 percent of the vote. Le Pen senior gave the young man a role posting a weekly online video log. The two spent many afternoons together at Paris headquarters and Le Pen's Montretout residence, discussing politics.

"Rachline was fascinated with ... Jean-Marie Le Pen, but his fascination was more political than emotional," said Florian Dufait, a close friend who worked with Rachline at party headquarters.

Rachline says Jean-Marie Le Pen is not anti-Semitic: "If he had any negative feelings whatsoever toward people with Jewish backgrounds, he would have made me feel that," he said. "And yet, he never did, he has always trusted me, and he frequently comes to Frejus to have lunch."

The young politician also cultivated Marine, who took over the party in 2011

45.5%
Share of the March vote won by
Rachline

Source: French national statistics office

Text continues on page 5

National Front victories

FRANCE | 2014 LOCAL ELECTIONS

36,681

towns
in France

595

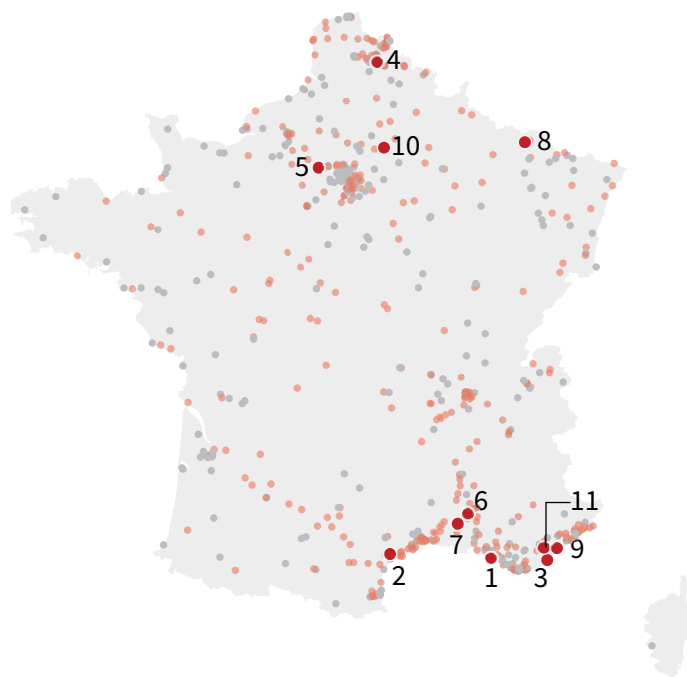
towns where FN candidates
ran in local elections

326

towns where FN candidates
got to second voting round

11

towns where FN candidates
won the elections

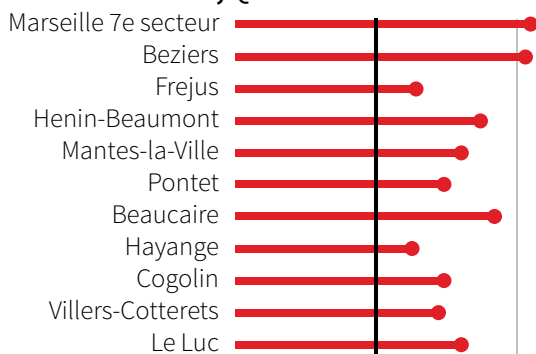


**FN TOWNS
BY POPULATION**
(LARGEST TO SMALLEST)

1. Marseille 7e secteur
2. Beziers*
3. Frejus
4. Henin-Beaumont
5. Mantes-la-Ville
6. Pontet
7. Beaucaire
8. Hayange
9. Cogolin
10. Villers-Cotterets
11. Le Luc

*Beziers mayor is not card-carrying FN member
but was elected with FN support.

UNEMPLOYMENT, Q2 2014

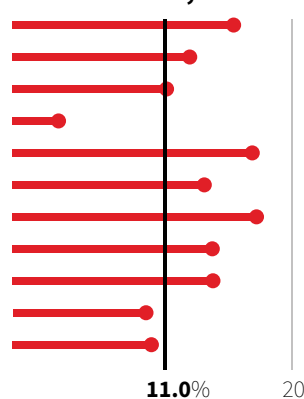


NATIONAL AVERAGES

10.2%

20

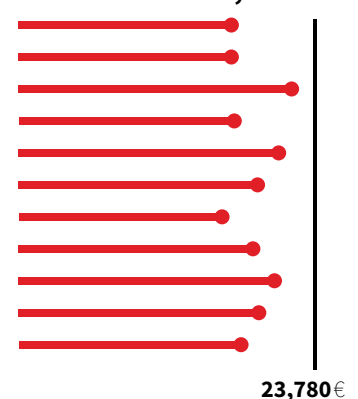
IMMIGRATION, 2010



11.0%

20

ANNUAL INCOME, 2010



23,780€

Immigration rates indicate proportions of foreign-born in a given town.

Source: INSEE

M. Ulmanu/Reuters Graphics

FRANCE NATIONAL FRONT'S NEW FACE

and has praised Rachline for his “political instinct, his calm and his efficiency.”

She wanted to shed the FN's reputation for xenophobia; Rachline used this change to convince other ambitious young conservatives to join. Among their generation was Julien Rochedy, 26, currently head of the youth wing.

“Rachline had figured out right away what was going on and surrounded himself with people who would represent the new, modernised image of the party,” said Rochedy.

Still, when Rachline ran for mayor again this year, he would show up alone at Saturday markets to shake hands with the residents, many of them elderly.

Frejus had been run by the centre-right for 35 years: Rachline pledged to fix the town's finances. The incumbent mayor, Elie Brun, was widely blamed for Frejus' heavy debt load and convicted in January for unlawful conflict of interest for his part in the award of a beach restaurant concession to the husband of his ex-wife. Brun said the charge was politically motivated and appealed, but the ruling was upheld.

Rachline also promised support for social projects. “He said that he would support the social centres, that he would not reduce funding and that he would help us to get more if he could,” said Sandrine Montagard, head of an after-school refuge for children.

And he said he'd hold a referendum on the new mosque, already under construction in a mainly immigrant neighbourhood called La Gabelle. Rachline's website depicted it as an ominous black silhouette of dome and minarets dominating the beach front. A caption in mock Arabic script said, “Frejus mosque ... yes or no?”

Unexpectedly, he placed first with 45.55 percent of the vote. A few weeks later, when he arrived at his first council meeting, the crowd erupted into applause. “The audience was totally won over,” said Isabelle Quignon, a teacher and campaigner for the Ligue des Droits de l'Homme, a human rights group.



SOCIAL CENTRES: Above, the al Fath mosque under construction in La Gabelle housing project.

Below, Sandrine Montagard, head of an after-school refuge for children, which has had its municipal funding withdrawn. **REUTERS/ERIC GAILLARD**



“At last they had their man. You could feel a certain rebellious atmosphere in the air.”

DELIVERY MAN





















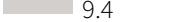

The month after he took over, Rachline hired La Patrouille de l'Evenement, an events

company founded by FN sympathisers, to organise concerts, parties, football match screenings and bull fights in the renovated Roman arena. In May, he removed an EU flag from the town hall's façade.

He also surrounded himself with friends and family. His councillors, elected with

Growing support for nationalist parties

EUROPE | 2014 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS

COUNTRY	POLITICAL PARTY	% OF NATIONAL VOTE	SEATS	SEAT GAIN/LOSS
UK	UKIP	 27.5	24	 11
Denmark	Danish People's Party	 26.6	4	 2
France	National Front	 24.9%	23	 21
Italy	Five Star Movement	 21.2	17	NEW TO PARLIAMENT
	Northern League	 6.2	4	 -4
Austria	Freedom Party	 19.7	3	 2
Hungary	Jobbik	 14.7	2	0
Lithuania	Order and Justice	 14.3	4	NEW TO PARLIAMENT
Netherlands	Party for Freedom	 13.3	2	0
Finland	Finns Party	 12.9	2	 1
Sweden	Swedish Democrats	 9.7	3	 2
Greece	Golden Dawn	 9.4	4	 3
Poland	Congress of the New Right	 7.2	5	 4

Source: Official results of the 2014 European elections

M. Ulmanu/Reuters Graphics

him, include his mother and four couples sympathetic to the National Front. And while newly elected mayors in France often name independent experts to audit and advise on finances, Rachline chose La Financiere des Territoires (LFT), a company created by an associate.

The firm's founder and CEO, Clement Brieda, is a 26-year-old business school graduate who a National Front source in Paris said had "provided expertise" to the party on several occasions.

LFT's books show that its first investment was a "how-to" guidebook to auditing public accounts.

"For us, there is a clear conflict of interest when you hire a party sympathiser to audit the finances of a town of 50,000 inhabitants," said Quignon, the rights activist. "The audit should be done by an

experienced, independent company and not somebody who is there to justify a party's policies."

Rachline said he and Brieda are not friends. "I didn't know it was forbidden to work with somebody from the Front, but apparently it is," he joked. Brieda did not respond to requests for comment.

Rachline announced at his first meeting that the audit had revealed a 20-million-euro shortfall for the 2014 budget. He had no choice but to ask for "efforts on behalf of all Frejusiens."

Among his first moves were to cut funding for three social centres in the town's poorest areas, including Montagard's, by up to 80 percent.

FOLLOW THE MONEY

Rachline has also shown he can be pragmatic.

During his campaign, he called his predecessor's team "crooks." Even so, when Rachline moved into the town hall, he kept on two of his predecessor's staff, including Brun's former wife. He also obtained bank overdraft facilities worth a total of 8.5 million euros, rolled over outstanding debt for three years, and announced the sale of nearly 10 million euros worth of municipal land.

In June, the council was due to vote on the 2013 books – a chance to reject Brun's financial management. Without support from the FN, the books would not pass. That could have seen Frejus being placed on a form of probation, requiring central government inspectors to dole out credit in 12 monthly instalments rather than one lump sum. Rachline's group voted to adopt the accounts.

The mosque poll was trickier. On a hot



MIXED COMMUNITY: A Sunday market in Frejus, where the immigrant population is smaller than many other towns where the National Front has gained ground. **REUTERS/ERIC GAILLARD**

day in May, a short drive from Frejus town hall, a dozen volunteer builders were hard at work on the “al Fath” mosque, which had already risen two storeys above its foundations in the middle of La Gabelle’s apartment blocks. Workers in traditional Islamic clothing and long beards waved away a reporter.

At the time, Rachline said his promised referendum on the mosque’s construction had been delayed by legal appeals already under way. Before any referendum, “it will be up to the courts to decide” whether building should continue, he said.

In the ensuing months, some far-right blogs said the fact Rachline hadn’t followed through on the referendum showed he was caving in to local Muslims. One social worker said the new mayor wanted to avoid a direct conflict with the Muslim neighbourhood. Riots broke out there in 2009 over the death of a young Muslim

man killed in a road accident while being chased by police.

But in October, Rachline told Reuters a lawyer for the town hall had determined that the mosque’s building permit was “null and void” because construction had started too long after it was issued.

The mosque-builders, who head the Frejus Muslim community, declined to comment.

Rachline has grown increasingly tough on other projects. Montagard, the director of the after-school centre, was one of several social workers who spoke out against his cuts to social spending.

In September, the town hall said it would eliminate all municipal funding to her centre. In a letter that Montagard made public, Rachline accused her of being “publicly hostile” to the town hall and running a “Socialist centre.” He also said he would end the centre’s lease, rename it a

“neighbourhood house,” and hire new staff.

Montagard thinks the mayor’s goal is to cut funding to all centres like hers. “The masks have really fallen off now,” she said. Rachline said his cuts were needed.

A day after his election as Senator, he beamed for cameras in the sunshine of Luxembourg Gardens. “If I was able to enter (the Senate) so young, it’s ... because the National Front gives young people a chance,” he said. “I’m the proof of that.”

Edited by Sara Ledwith

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Nicholas Vinocur

nicholas.vinocur@thomsonreuters.com

Sara Ledwith, Assistant Enterprise Editor

sara.ledwith@thomsonreuters.com

Michael Williams, Global Enterprise Editor

michael.j.williams@thomsonreuters.com