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France: Boyish but radical, Jordan Bardella is the protege Marine Le Pen was waiting for

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National Rally's staunchly anti-immigrant 23-year-old is aiming for younger voters - and a seat at the European parliament

The task was simple and at the same time a bit silly: in a recent French TV debate, each of the 12 leading candidates for next month's European parliament elections was asked to bring an object that symbolised [Europe](#) for them. The conservative candidate with the Les Républicains party brought a copy of Homer's Odyssey; the leftist politician Raphaël Glucksmann brought a piece of the Berlin wall.

[Jordan Bardella](#), the lead candidate for Marine Le Pen's rightwing populist National Rally, held up a red kitchen sieve to the camera. He was quite earnest as he did so, and it made for a rather absurd contrast: a young man in a suit, with his boyish face and slicked-back hair making him look not unlike a bank trainee, clutching a kitchen utensil.

Bardella may only be 23, but he has a clear understanding of how political propaganda works. "I didn't have to think for very long: the sieve was perfect," Bardella said two days later. "Just like that sieve, the EU lets a lot through: weapons, migrants and terrorists," he said. "Products that endanger our health. The EU isn't protecting us."

On a recent Saturday morning, Bardella was sitting in his party's local office in an industrial park outside Rennes, in Brittany. There is no sign to indicate the party has an office here - for security reasons, as the local party head insists.

Bardella had spent the previous two days with Le Pen, travelling through small towns and villages that other politicians supposedly ignore. "To the places where those who have been left behind live," he said. [The left behind](#), the forgotten: it's the language of Donald Trump and the Brexiteers. It is the vocabulary of the populist international.

The polls are looking good for Bardella. National Rally, once known as [Front National](#), is just [two percentage points behind](#) the governing party, La République en Marche!, in the polls. [At a recent press conference](#), Bardella went through a list of what he wants to accomplish after the election: to restrict free trade agreements, because they "are killing our farmers"; to reduce the number of migrants, because "we don't need immigration"; and to give the French back "control of their money". Though he is running for the European parliament, Bardella is anti-European to his core.

Once he finished speaking at the press conference, he turned to his companion and said: "So, Marine, now it's your turn." The two make for a polished team. The roles are clearly defined: Le Pen is responsible for the overarching ideology and gravitas. Bardella is there to attract young voters. A recent poll found support for National Rally at 23% among 18- to 24-year-olds.

Like Le Pen, Bardella is radical, no matter how boyish and harmless he may seem. His campaign is focused on the fight against immigration and against the Europe of Macron and Merkel. “The EU border protection agency, Frontex, behaves like a receptionist for migrants,” Bardella said in an interview recently. His role model is Italy’s interior minister, [Matteo Salvini](#), of the rightwing, nationalist League party. His choice of words isn’t particularly novel: they’re the same slogans the party has been using for years. But the face is new.

Le Pen was in desperate need of fresh young faces. The party has been in a state of crisis since its [clear defeat in the 2017 presidential elections](#). When asked why she chose a 23-year-old as the party’s lead candidate, Le Pen says that Bardella may be young, but he knows real life, the worries of many French people and the tough everyday reality of the banlieues around Paris.

Bardella’s background is actually something of a gift to the party. He was born in Seine-Saint-Denis in 1995 to a mother who came to [France](#) as a child of Italian immigrants in the 1960s. She soon split up with Bardella’s father and raised her son as a single mother in social housing, living off the minimum wage. Saint-Denis, where Bardella grew up, is home to a large immigrant population and this has become an integral part of his campaign speeches. “The only forest I knew for a long time was a dreary row of skyscrapers,” he told listeners during his recent campaign tour.

He is, according to the campaign message, a “good” immigrant defending France against the “bad” ones. It’s the perfect narrative for the party.

Speaking in the cramped party office, Bardella said he was confronted by violence early in life – gangs, Islamist fundamentalists and drug dealers. “That was the moment of my politicisation,” he said. “Saint-Denis was decisive in my decision to get involved politically.”

At age 16, following the 2012 presidential elections, he officially joined the Front National. As a minor, he had to get written permission to do so from his mother, who had never been a member of a political party herself. But she let him do it – and in 2015, at the age of 20, he ran a successful campaign to become a member of the regional council for Île-de-France, which includes Paris. A short time later, Le Pen brought him on board her team for the 2017 presidential campaign.

When asked about his age, Bardella produces a sentence that sounds well-rehearsed: “Napoleon’s age was also held against him. He said you grow up fast on the battlefield. And that’s true.” He may be young, Bardella said, but in contrast to Macron’s candidate Nathalie Loiseau, he has already faced voters and won an election. Loiseau is one of his favourite targets. He describes her as a technocrat who has no clue about the concerns of French people.

Two years ago, his movement was still isolated on the European stage, Bardella tells me, but the ideology has since spread and is even part of the governments of [Austria](#) and Italy. Such power is currently out of reach in France, but if everything goes according to plan, Bardella could at least get as far as Brussels.

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