

French Presidential Election: How Marine Le Pen and François Fillon are channelling Donald Trump

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The French Presidential candidates are sounding more and more like the President across the pond.

The first round of the French presidency is less than one month away (it takes place on April 23rd). Yet no one can say for sure who will win – or who will reach the run-off. Hard-right leader Marine Le Pen and centrist independent Macron are tied in most polls.

In this unpredictable race, the two right-wing candidates, Le Pen and Conservative François Fillon, are fighting their own duel – not only over the presidency, but also, it seems, to be the best Donald Trump impersonator.

Indeed, both have recently used campaign tactics in the style of the controversial US President, including, but not limited to, repeated claims that other parties (the media, the justice, the government, other candidates) are plotting against them, regular uses of the term “fake news”, a tendency to re-arrange facts to fit their narrative, and a marked interest in communicating and meeting Russian President Vladimir Putin or the Russian authorities.

The press is the enemy and reports “fake news”

Both candidates share with Trump a deep dislike of the press. Marine Le Pen regularly criticises journalists [1] and claims that media reports are biased against her [2] and her campaign. Reporters have been violently thrown out of her meetings [3]. Le Pen’s party, the National Front, has created a platform, called “Alerte Fausses Infos” – literally “Fake news alert” – to offer its own “fact-check” of Le Pen’s media coverage and TV appearances to party members.

François Fillon, too, has blamed the press [4] reporting on his “fake jobs” scandal and called it an “attack”, “never seen before in the French Republic”.

Russia, on the other hand, is not the enemy

It has slightly backfired for the Trump campaign team, but the two French presidential candidates have shown great enthusiasm at the prospect of warming up the country’s relationship with Russia.

“I see no reason that would justify the current hostile attitude of French authorities toward Russia,” Le Pen declared last Friday during a visit in Moscow. “We have always believed that Russia and France need to maintain and develop the ties that have bound us for a long time.”

In the never ending series of scandals that have engulfed François Fillon’s campaign since late

January, a recent one also includes a close relationship with Russia. French newspaper *Le Canard Enchaîné* [5] reported last week that Fillon was paid \$50,000 to organise a meeting in St Petersburg with the Lebanese billionaire Fouad Makhzoumi and Putin, without declaring it (Fillon's lawyer says he repaid it). Here is the official photo, from the Kremlin's website [6]:



François Fillon, centre, with Fouad Makhzoumi (left) and Vladimir Putin (right.) Source: Kremlin.ru

This kind of behaviour has led French centrist politician François Bayrou to accuse Le Pen and Fillon of “swearing allegiance to Putin and Russia” [7].

The establishment is plotting against them

Donald Trump famously insulted an insanely high number of people [8] and institutions on the campaign trail, among them his own party, judges, the FBI, and then incumbent President Barack Obama.

Facing an investigation into “fake” jobs at the European parliament, Marine Le Pen had accused the institution of “*fumus persecutionis*” (persecution for political ends) [9] and is suing the EU's anti-fraud chiefs [10].

While Donald Trump, now President of the United States, recently claimed without presenting any proof that Obama had organised the “wiretapping” of his campaign, François Fillon is certain: François Hollande is plotting to prevent him from winning the Élysée palace.

In a TV interview last week, Fillon accused Hollande of leading a “black room” (an intelligence service collecting diplomatic secrets) against his campaign, citing a recently published book about Hollande's government. Fillon then called it a “state scandal”. The problem? The authors of the book, Didier Hassoux, Christophe Labbé and Olivia Recasens, who, ironically, are journalists for *Le Canard Enchaîné*, deny finding any black room during their investigation into the presidency. “The only person who believes in a black room at the Élysée is François Fillon,” said Hassoux. [11]. Hollande has denounced Fillon's “false allegations”, which he said lacked “dignity”.

Seen the success such behaviour has brought to Donald Trump, it's no wonder why Marine Le Pen and François Fillon are trying to channel his campaign tactics. But while it seems to fit Le Pen's broader “anti-establishment candidate” narrative, Fillon's claims sound more desperate by the day.

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P.S.

* New Statesman. 28 MARCH 2017:

<http://www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/2017/03/how-marine-le-pen-and-fran-ois-fillon-are-chan>

Footnotes

- [1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVPBOYX_g5c
- [2] http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/actualite-medias/article/2017/03/06/bfm-tv-et-rmc-face-aux-critiques-de-marine-le-pen_5089848_3236.html
- [3] http://www.francetvinfo.fr/politique/marine-le-pen/video-un-journaliste-de-quotidien-expulse-sans-menagement-d-une-visite-de-marine-le-pen_2046089.html
- [4] <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/economy/2017/03/if-government-can-back-down-self-employed-taxes-why-not-disability-benefit>
- [5] <http://www.lecanardenchaine.fr/la-une-du-22-mars-2017/>
- [6] <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/49737>
- [7] <http://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/2017/03/26/97001-20170326FILWWW00176-bayrou-fillon-et-le-pen-font-allegeance-a-poutine.php>
- [8] https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/01/28/upshot/donald-trump-twitter-insults.html?_r=1
- [9] <http://www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/2017/03/will-marine-le-pens-fake-jobs-scandal-blow-her-chances-french-presidential-race>
- [10] <http://www.politico.eu/article/marine-le-pen-sues-olaf-giovanni-kessler-and-eps-klaus-welle/>
- [11] If you speak French, the authors are interviewed here, from 16:44:
<https://www.tf1.fr/tmc/quotidien-avec-yann-barthes/videos/quotidien-premiere-partie-24-mars-2017.html>