

FRANCE

Hate campaign over asylum seekers' hostel drives French mayor out of town

Tuesday 16 May 2023 (Date first published: 12 May 2023).

The mayor of a small town in north-west France announced his resignation this week following a vicious, months-long hate campaign whipped up by the far-right over the creation of a hostel for asylum seekers in a residential area close to a school. Yannick Morez, who is to move out of the town he has lived in for 32 years, said his decision was prompted by an arson attack on his home and the disinterest of the authorities to the successive threats made against him. The resignation caused a political storm this week, over both the apparent lack of support and protection given to the mayor, and the rising tensions and climate of violence in French political life.

The mayor of the small town of Saint-Brevin-les-Pins in north-west France this week handed in his resignation, accusing national and local authorities of failing to support and protect him after he became the target of a vicious hate campaign whipped up by the far-right over the creation of a hostel for asylum seekers in a residential area close to a school, and which culminated in an arson attack on his home.

"I took this decision for personal reasons, notably following the criminal fire perpetrated against my home and the lack of support from the state, and after a long reflection with my family," wrote Yannick Morez, an independent rightwing mayor unaffiliated to a political party, announcing his resignation on the town hall's Facebook page.

Morez, 62, who is also a GP and who has lived in Saint-Brevin-les-Pins for 32 years, serving as its mayor for the past six of those, has announced that he is closing down his medical practice next month and will move with his family away from the town of around 14,000 inhabitants, which lies on the estuary of the Loire river.

He said he had previously alerted both the police and a government minister to the hate campaign against him but that had prompted no adequate attention. His resignation caused a political storm this week, both over the apparent lack of interest on the part of the authorities towards Morez's plight, and the rising tensions and climate of violence in French political life. On Wednesday evening, socialist Member of Parliament (MP) Jérôme Guedj gave a rousing speech in the National Assembly in tribute to the mayor, which ended in a standing ovation for Morez, who was not present, by all MPs – including those of President Emmanuel Macron's Renaissance party – except those of the far-right Rassemblement National (the renamed Front National).

Meanwhile, the legal affairs committee of the Senate announced on Thursday that it had invited Morez to a hearing next week to give his account of the events and the lack of support from the authorities he has complained of. "There is no question, not for a single moment, that what he has

suffered will not be followed up, nor that we will not make an absolute priority of it,” said the committee’s president, Senator François-Noël Buffet.

In an interview this week with regional daily [Ouest-France](#), Morez said his resignation was “a difficult decision taken together as a family, entirely related to the attack we suffered”. He was referring to the firebomb attack on his home on the night of March 21st, when flames destroyed part of the façade and the interior of the house, and completely gutted his two cars parked outside. Morez and his wife were inside when the attack occurred. “Neither my wife nor my three children want me to continue after what happened,” he added. “During the fire, we [*narrowly*] escaped dying. It was a real heavy blow.”

Yannick Morez, mayor of Saint-Brevin-les-Pins, pictured on March 22nd in front of his damaged home and burnt-out cars following an arson attack. © Photo Ouest France / PhotoPQR via MaxPPP

The hostel for asylum seekers, a CADA (for “centre d’accueil pour demandeurs d’asile”, of which several hundred are located across France and which provide administrative and healthcare assistance), opened at the behest of central government in 2016 on a site owned by electricity network company ERDF. It was one of many to where migrants who had been living in the so-called “jungle” camp in the port of Calais were sent after the squalid site [was demolished](#) that same year.

The hostel shelters around 60 asylum seekers. “At the moment, most of them are from Romania, Lithuania, Ukraine, and Brazil,” said Philippe Croze, the president of a local association helping the hostel’s inhabitants, in [an interview](#) with the magazine *Politis* published in February. He said many work at the major shipyards in Saint-Nazaire, which lies opposite to Saint-Brevin-les-Pins across the Loire estuary. “They live their lives and trouble absolutely no-one.”

In 2021, after ERDF announced it intended to sell the site housing the CADA, the town hall decided to transfer the centre to disused holiday camp buildings owned by the municipality. When construction work on the new hostel began last September, a small local group was created in opposition to the move, citing its closeness to a primary school.

“Migrants will have a view onto the playground of the school all through the day, and it’s a problem for the safety of inhabitants and our children,” one man told local public broadcaster [France Bleu](#) during a public protest, the third of its kind, in February. The group’s calls for demonstrations against the project had become the focus of support by the far-right, notably the Rassemblement National and its rival Reconquête, which actively joined in the protests.

But even after the arson attack on the mayor’s home, the street protests continued, the last one held by Reconquête on April 30th.

In an [interview](#) in April with “Envoyé spécial”, a flagship current affairs programme on public TV channel France 2, Morez recounted how he had begun receiving “foul leaflets” through his letterbox, which he said were intended to intimidate him. He alerted the local gendarmerie police station to these, but he said nothing was done. “Freedom of expression, that’s what I was told.”

On the night of March 21st his home was firebombed. “We came close to a dramatic event, the mayor’s grandchildren could have been there on the night of the fire, they usually sleep in that room,” a neighbour of Morez told Mediapart, referring to where the flames had destroyed a window and entered the house.

In the April interview with “Envoyé spécial”, Morez explained that immediately after the attack he telephoned French government spokesman and junior minister for relations with Parliament, Olivier

Véran. "I spoke with Olivier Véran on the very night of the fire, I told him about everything we had endured. Nothing has followed since. I am not under protection," he said, adding: "The state imposes centres for asylum seekers on mayors and local politicians, but then it's for the mayor to sort things out."

Amid the storm over Morez's accusations that he been abandoned to his fate by the authorities, Emmanuel Macron [took to Twitter](#) on Thursday with the message: "The attacks against Yannick Morez, mayor of Saint-Brevin-les-Pins, are shameful", adding: "I again declare my solidarity, and that of the Nation" towards the mayor and his family. Prime Minister Élisabeth Borne, speaking on Thursday during a visit to France's Indian Ocean island of La Réunion, said she was "very shocked" at the events, and denounced "the rise in our country of extremism", which she said came from "both sides" of the political spectrum.

Also on Thursday, prompted by Morez's accusations that he had been abandoned by the authorities, a press conference was called by the prefect - the state's administrative representative - of the Loire-Atlantique *département* (county) in which Saint-Brevin-les-Pins lies. "The support of the state was constant," Fabrice Rigoulet-Roze told the assembled journalists. "Specific protection measures were taken following a number of intimidations."

The executive still hopes that Morez can be convinced not to quit. Both the prime minister's office and the interior ministry have instructed the prefect not to reply to the mayor's letter of resignation, which was addressed to him as required by protocol. Meanwhile, Borne's office has invited Morez to a meeting early next week. "Obviously I will wait for that meeting before finalising the process of his request to resign," Rigoulet-Roze said at his press conference.

While French daily *Le Parisien* has revealed that Macron sent Morez an email on April 3rd in which he said he was aware of the "heavy duress which you are facing up to", adding his "sincere support", the sudden attention given to the mayor's case this contrasts with what has otherwise hitherto been inertia. According to one minister, speaking on condition of anonymity, the plight of Morez "passed a bit under the radar".

Until now, the last verbal exchange between the mayor and Paris was his conversation with government spokesman and junior minister Olivier Véran on the night of the arson attack, when, said Morez, he was assured by Véran of the government's support.

The following day, the mayor sent Véran a letter calling once again for action from the authorities, as revealed by regional daily [Ouest-France](#). In Véran's written reply, seen by Mediapart, Véran reassured him of the government's support and stated that he had alerted interior minister Gérald Darmanin, whose responsibilities include both security and the functioning of local authorities.

Mediapart understands that the matter had been discussed by advisers of both Véran and Darmanin, although there was no subsequent visit to show support for Morez, nor even a phone call. Whereas Darmanin is usually keen to comment events, from the case of the car accident involving French comedian Pierre Palmade to the death of a cat run over by a train, concerning those involving the far-right in Saint-Brevin-les-Pins the interior minister simply re-tweeted Macron's Twitter post on Thursday, adding no comment of his own about the resignation of the mayor.

Contacted for comment, both Darmanin's office and that of his junior minister for local authorities, Dominique Faure, told Mediapart it should refer instead to the "declarations" of the prefect.

NEJMA BRAHIM AND ILYES RAMDANI

P.S.

- MEDIAPART. MAY 12, 2023:
<https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/france/120523/hate-campaign-over-asylum-seekers-hostel-drives-french-mayor-out-town>
- This article is based on original reports in French, which can be found [here](#) and [here](#).
- *This abridged English version, with some added reporting, by Graham Tearse.*