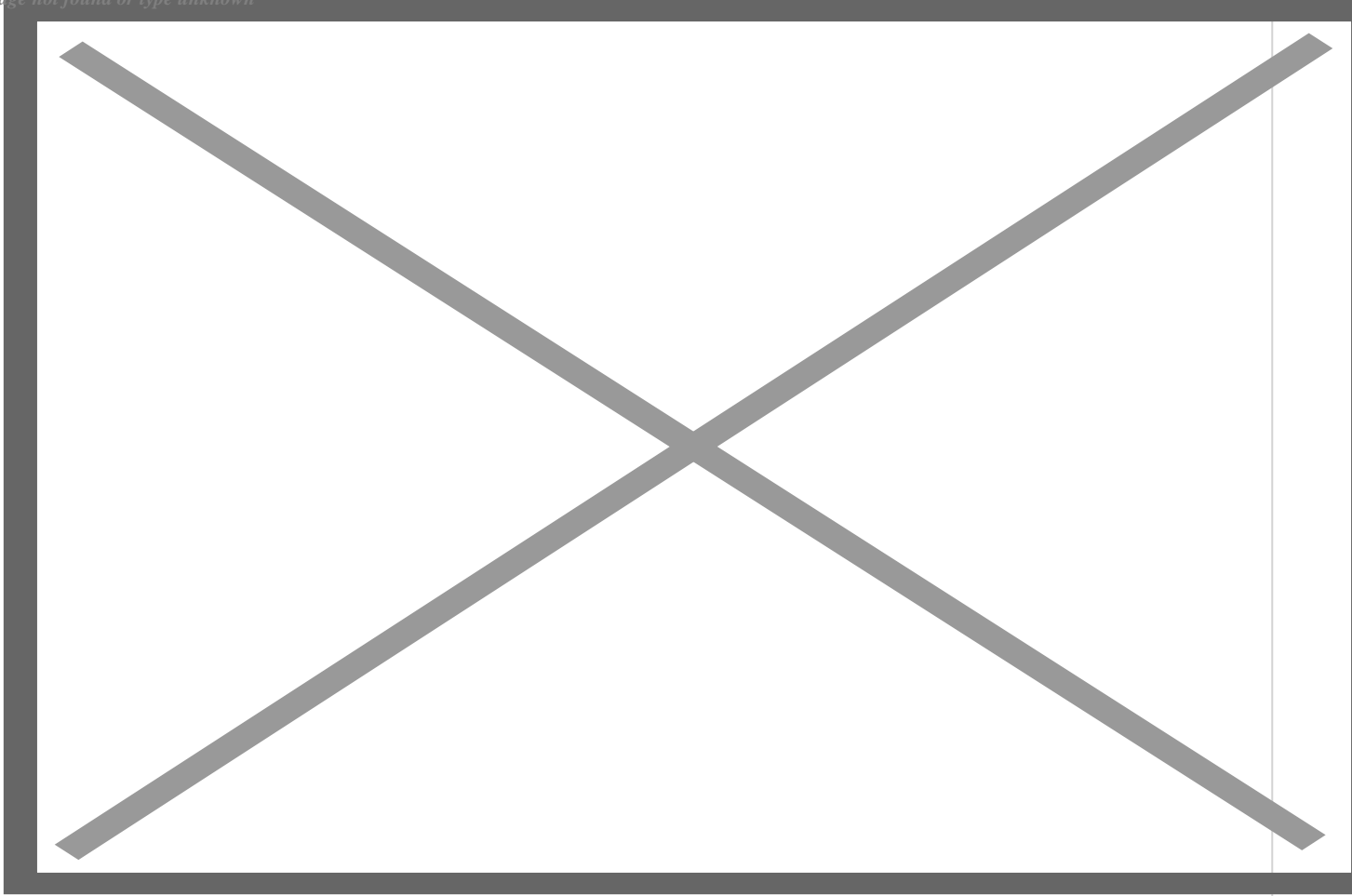


Far-right surge jolts France as elections approach

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From left: Marine Le Pen, Emmanuel Macron and Eric Zemmour [Reuters]

Paris, October 14 (RHC)-- Concerns grow as polls for next year's election show Eric Zemmour and Marine Le Pen with the backing of nearly a third of French voters. With about six months to go, the 2022 presidential election is already a major talking point in France.

Much of the French media is not focused on Macron's chances of becoming the first president to be re-elected since Jacques Chirac in 2002, but rather on the rise of the far right.

In the latest election poll, published on October 6, two far-right figures are predicted secure 32 percent; 17 percent for Eric Zemmour and 15 percent for Marine Le Pen. Macron, individually, is still seen as the favorite, with 24 percent.

On the left, the total predicted vote is at 25 percent, including four parties – the Green Party, Socialist Party, Communist Party, and La France Insoumise (France Unbowed). The recent poll, showing that Le Pen is not Macron's main opponent as she was in the 2017 vote, shocked observers.

Her competitor on the far right, the polemicist Zemmour, has not officially announced his candidacy, but his omnipresence on French TV channels has propelled his popularity. On September 16, Zemmour published *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot* (France hasn't had its last word), which topped the bestseller list on Amazon France, selling about 130,000 copies in the two weeks after release.

The wide dissemination of his ideas, which critics consider as even further right than Le Pen's views, has worried officials across the political spectrum.

Of great concern to many, he believes French citizens with "non-French" first names should change their name and supports the so-called "great replacement" theory – the notion, also held by white supremacists in the United States, that Western populations are being "replaced" by immigrants.

Zemmour has also been accused by seven women of sexual harassment and faced court many times for hate speech considered racist, Islamophobic, sexist or homophobic – but has almost always been acquitted.

According to Aurelien Mondon, a politics professor who researches racism and the far right: "Zemmour is not expecting to become president, what he wants is to kind of move the discourse to the far right ... He wants to win the battle of ideas."

Many compare him with Donald Trump, the former U.S. president, because scandals only seem to make him more popular. He could steal support from Le Pen, who in some ways has toned down her rhetoric. Mondon described Le Pen's election poster as a "desperate attempt to pretend that she's addressing the mainstream."

Le Pen's main challenge in these elections, Mondon said, is that the "whole spectrum has moved to the right, which means that it's very crowded for her now." Le Pen also faces competition against candidates from the traditional right-wing party, Les Républicains (The Republicans), which will elect its candidate in December. Xavier Bertrand is tipped as the favourite, with 13 percent in polls, but Valérie Pécresse and Michel Barnier – the EU's former chief Brexit negotiator – are close competitors.

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