THE strong showing by Marine Le Pen's National Front (FN) in local elections on March 23rd has stunned France. The FN won its first significant mayoralty since 1995, and is likely to take several more in the second round on March 30th (see page 44). Ms Le Pen has proclaimed the end of France's cosy political duopoly. The FN may now come top in May's European elections. And it is no longer absurd to see Ms Le Pen emulating the achievement in April 2002 of her father, Jean-Marie, by getting into the second round of the 2017 presidential election.

This is not a one-off success: Ms Le Pen's strength has been growing for some time. She took a bigger share of the vote in the first round of the 2012 presidential election than her father did ten years earlier. Since she replaced him as FN leader in 2011, she has done much to detoxify the party's brand: the anti-Semitism, for instance, has mostly gone. A segment of the electorate is taken with Ms Le Pen's frankness and throaty charm. For such voters, many of them working-class, the FN is often the first party of choice. She strikes a chord with her attacks on politicians from the mainstream parties as an out-of-touch, metropolitan elite with no notion of how to reverse their country's economic, political and cultural decline.

This is dangerous, because Ms Le Pen's answers to the problem are a lot worse than the mainstream's. For all the polish that she has applied to the FN's image, the party offers only a nasty and negative set of policies suffused with xenophobic, anti-Muslim and illiberal instincts. Ms Le Pen wants to stop immigration, control imports, leave the euro and wreck the European Union. It would be a catastrophe, and not just for France, if she were to achieve her goal of ousting the centre-right UMP party as the main political opposition to President Francois Hollande's Socialist Party.

Success in the mayoral elections may be one of the most effective barriers to Ms Le Pen's advance. When it last ran towns of any size, in the 1990s, the FN proved so incompetent and rancorous that it almost split apart. But the main parties also need to address the root causes of its rise.

That means first of all fixing the economy. The main reasons for the morosite of which the French complain and for Mr Hollande's impressive unpopularity (19% of voters think he is doing well) are a flagging economy and painfully high unemployment. Growth in the euro zone is picking up, but France lags behind because it has not followed Germany and others in reforming labour and product markets, trimming welfare and pension benefits and cutting taxes and public spending. Mr Hollande has promised change but done pretty much nothing. France's government spends 57% of the country's GDP against Germany's 45% and America's 39%.

Next, politicians must respond to the voters' concerns over immigration, Islam and culture wars. That does not mean aping either Ms Le Pen's rhetoric or her policies. Rather, it means improving the integration of minorities, tightening the rules for migrants' welfare benefits and enforcing France's strict secular laws more firmly--by, for instance, resisting pressure to segregate boys and girls during gym classes.

Ms Le Pen is also benefiting from the weakness of the UMP, which has been engaged in a messy leadership fight ever since Nicolas Sarkozy lost the presidency to Mr Hollande in 2012, and is also engulfed in financial scandal. It must find a new, more convincing champion. And it would have been wise to follow the Socialists' decision to withdraw poorly placed candidates to rally anti-FN voters behind a single candidate.

Lessons for Europe, too

Ms Le Pen's rise should serve as a warning not just in Paris but also in Brussels and elsewhere. Populist parties, mostly but not solely on the far right, are on the march across Europe, from the UK Independence Party in Britain to the Finns Party in Finland, and from Geert Wilders's PVV in the Netherlands to Alexis Tsipras's Syriza in Greece. Mr Wilders has stumbled after some overtly racist chants against Moroccans, but most of these parties are likely to do well in the European elections. Voters are disenchanted not just with euro-induced austerity but also with a European Union that seems to get more remote and less accountable even as it becomes more intrusive. If Europe's leaders cannot reconnect with their citizens, Ms Le Pen's success will be just the start.