



COMMENTARY

The 2019 European Elections: A Trial to Macron's Leadership

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THE 2019 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS: A TRIAL TO MACRON'S LEADERSHIP

Introduction

Between the 23rd and the 26th of May, the European Union will have one of the most important elections in its history. In a time of political instability and strong nationalist movements, parties are desperate to align the path Europe will take with its ideological beliefs. More than ever, a single vote can make the difference.

In the middle of the confusion, one of the main confrontations will happen in France. President Emmanuel Macron, a pivotal but weakened European hope, will face Marine Le Pen, the leader of the National Rally and one of the most visible faces of European populism, for the first time since her defeat in the 2017 Presidential Elections.

The upcoming elections will represent for its citizens more of a discussion of domestic issues and less of a decision regarding the future policies of Europe. Individuals are prepared to either support Macron or present him with their disdain. In the midst of absolute turbulence due to the months of protests throughout France and international clashes, Macron faces an exceptionally critical moment.

Background

Back in 2017, when President Emmanuel Macron was elected, the European Union was thrilled with the appearance of a new and strong pro-European figure. With an unshakable stance when it came to European cooperation, he became the beloved face of the faction. While Macron still represents a crucial figure in the path towards the goal, his leadership has been suffering undeniable blows.

Starting in November of 2018, hundreds of thousands of deeply unsatisfied French citizens began taking the issue into the streets, protesting against the government. The said protests, denominated the Yellow Vests Movement, appeared following the approval of an increase of carbon taxes¹, a part of Macron's government effort to increase sustainability. France was left in a state of absolute turmoil.

Thousands of injuries and arrests and various civilian deaths², together with high economic costs assessed in billions of euros³, arising from massive public destruction and impossibility of conducting business, left France shaking and created a profound political scandal for the government.

Moreover, international conflicts have undermined Macron's authority in the European scene. An enfeebled Angela Merkel, following the upsetting result of the 2017 German Elections⁴, maintained her place as the German Chancellor but without possessing the same space for manoeuvre as before.

Although still powerful, the French-German axis was therefore unable to serve Macron as he was hoping for in the process of reforming the European Union. Additionally, the French President has continuously faced strong opposition from rising European populist leaders from countries such as Italy and Hungary, both regarding European policies and domestic issues. It is safe to say that Macron is facing far more obstacles than expected. All of those accumulated issues will impose a challenge for him in the upcoming elections.

¹ <https://www.vox.com/2018/12/3/18123906/france-protest-macron-paris-riots-yellow-vest-arc>

² <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/12/22/europe/france-yellow-vest-protest-intl/index.html>

³ <https://www.thenational.ae/business/economy/damage-to-french-economy-mounts-as-yellow-vest-protests-continue-1.806900>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2017/sep/24/german-elections-2017-latest-results-live-merkel-bundestag-afd>

International Conflicts

Ideological clashes with leaders from other European countries, such as Poland⁵ and Hungary⁶ have put the French President on the spot. Viktor Orbán, for example, Hungary's Prime Minister, has expressed contempt towards Macron when stating his intentions of promoting his anti-migration views inside the European People's Party⁷, the largest bloc in the parliament and to which Orbán's party belongs. Nonetheless, it is the relations with Italy that have been particularly volatile.

Disputes over topics such as the French involvement in Libya, a former Italian colony with large reserves of oil and gas, migration policies and the European Union budget have created a rift between the two countries⁸. However, an especially critical moment in this relation was reached when Luigi Di Maio, Italy's Deputy Prime Minister and leader of the anti-establishment Five Star Movement party, met with representatives from the Yellow Vests Movement earlier in February⁹. Due to its working-class roots, they would constitute a conspicuous ally for Di Maio. Nevertheless, the French government was very displeased.

This resulted in somewhat of a diplomatic crisis between the two countries, as the French government recalled its ambassador to Italy from Rome a few days later, the first time since 1940, when Italy declared war on France¹⁰. The French Ministry for Foreign Affairs even went to state that the meeting was an unacceptable offense, violating the respect owed between democratically elected governments¹¹. Although the said ambassador, Christian Masset, has since then returned to Rome¹², the situation left its marks.

It is true these populist leaders are partially using the French situation as a mere tool to influence domestic issues, especially due to the growing proximity of the European Elections. Nonetheless, the consequences cannot be underestimated.

It undoubtedly contributes to the deterioration of Macron's image, as it destabilizes his reputation across Europe. Moreover, it may end up affecting the views of French voters, as they might perceive their President as unsuitable for dealing with international disputes.

The Elections

There is a reason for the inherent national importance of the upcoming confrontation. For these elections, France returned to a single constituency framework¹³. It means that, from now on, the French electorate will vote for the same candidates in the whole territory, contrary to the previous method of dividing the country in areas with different candidates for the elections.

While the population is deciding who will represent them in the European Parliament, the campaign is revolving around domestic issues, with the Yellow Vests Movement certainly having gained a large amount of focus this year. This creates space for the possibility of French voters looking at the elections as an opportunity to condemn the policies their President implemented in the last two

⁵ <https://euobserver.com/justice/143803>

⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-orban-macron/hungary-pm-orban-i-must-fight-french-president-macron-on-immigration-idUSKCN1P41C9>

⁷ <https://www.smh.com.au/world/europe/i-won-t-retreat-macron-takes-on-populists-orban-and-salvini-20180830-p500lm.html>

⁸ <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/02/11/france-recalls-its-ambassador-from-rome>

⁹ <https://www.politico.eu/article/italys-di-maio-meets-with-yellow-jackets/>

¹⁰ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/02/08/france-fuels-worst-spat-italy-since-war-fresh-leprosy-comparison/>

¹¹ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/eu-elections-2019/news/yellow-vests-cause-diplomatic-crisis-between-france-and-italy/>

¹² https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/france-sending-ambassador-back-to-italy-following-spat/2019/02/15/bef42b04-30fc-11e9-8781-763619f12cb4_story.html?utm_term=.f4a4f783edea

¹³ <https://www.thenewfederalist.eu/france-what-electoral-list-for-the-european-elections>

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years. The focus will hence be on what the result means for Macron and not on its implications regarding Europe's future. The French left-wing is particularly worried with the upcoming results, since its reputation has plummeted in the past few years. Concerned with the imminent loss of power in the European Parliament due to the outcome of the elections, there has even been conversations between them about putting up an united front in order to have a noteworthy delegation after them¹⁴. Nonetheless, that appears anything but certain.

A list made up of members of the Yellow Vests Movement was announced in January of this year. By the first day of February, there were already three lists alike¹⁵, a pattern that may continue to unfold. This will surely have consequences for the arrangement of the French presence in the European Parliament, due to the support the movement is receiving in the country. In fact, a recent poll showed that a Yellow Vests list could gather nothing less than 13% of the votes in the elections¹⁶.

But the actual spotlight will be on the dispute between Le Pen and Macron. At this moment, the fight between their parties, the National Rally and La République En Marche! (LREM), respectively, is extremely close. While the first is expected to secure 21 seats, the later is just behind with 20 projected seats on its side¹⁷.

Therefore, an incredibly heated confrontation can be expected between the two sides.

A Rematch of the 2017 Presidential Elections

Due to the political instability in France, the elections will represent an important opportunity for the government's opposition, as citizens can cast their votes as if the occurrence was a referendum for Macron's popularity.

Marine Le Pen, leader of the National Rally and Macron's main adversary, is determined to continue the exhaustive fight she has conducted for the last years in favour of nationalist policies and against French and European liberal forces.

Her criticized performance at the last debate of the 2017 Presidential run, with polls attributing the victory to Macron¹⁸, was appalling for numerous supporters and helped aggravating the feeling of defeat populists incurred with his victory. Two years later, Le Pen, like all other players in this vicious political arena, aims to take with all her strength the opportunity of redemption that the upcoming European Elections present. She even went to state that her goal for the elections was Macron's defeat¹⁹.

Due to her results in the 2014 European Elections, with the party previously known as National Front gathered 25% of the votes²⁰, she is hoping to achieve such an outstanding result for the second time.

At the top of her list is Jordan Bardella²¹, a young man of 23 years-old, son of Italian immigrants. This choice comes as a strategy to gain the support of the young audience and soften her reputation among pro-immigration individuals. For a long time, right-wing politicians had been reluctant to

¹⁴ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/eu-elections-2019/news/french-left-struggles-to-find-unity-for-european-elections/>

¹⁵ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/eu-elections-2019/news/increasing-number-of-yellow-vest-lists-for-european-elections/>

¹⁶ <https://elabe.fr/elections-europeennes-janvier2019/>

¹⁷ <https://www.politico.eu/2019-european-elections/france/>

¹⁸ <https://www.bfmtv.com/politique/debat-presidentiel-emmanuel-macron-juge-le-plus-convaincant-face-a-marine-le-pen-1156571.html>

¹⁹ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/eu-elections-2019/news/frances-le-pen-urges-show-of-nationalist-force-in-european-elections/>

²⁰ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/10855797/Marine-Le-Pen-wins-record-victory-in-French-elections.html>

²¹ <https://www.touteleurope.eu/actualite/elections-europeennes-qui-sont-les-tetes-de-liste-en-france.html>

join Le Pen due to the poor reputation her party enjoyed, but that is not the case anymore. Thierry Mariani and Jean-Paul Garraud, for example, have left The Republicans to join the National Rally²². She hopes the desertion of members of The Republicans to her party will contribute to a better result. Moreover, after her 2017 defeat, Le Pen reformed her speech. She no longer defends that France should leave the European Union: it needs to be “conquered” and reformed instead²³. With this shift of speech, she is trying to moderate even further her reputation and attract a larger quantity of less extreme voters.

Le Pen was also counting on the commotion surrounding the Yellow Vests Movement to gain votes, but that may not happen. While it is true that the movement has created difficulties for Macron, a list constituted by members of the movement could also steal votes from the hard-right, negatively affecting her result²⁴.

LREM, on the other hand, has yet failed to reveal who will lead the list. Macron does not see the left as a threat due to its vast fragmentation. Instead, in order to ensure its victory and obtain a larger margin over Le Pen, he is trying to take away votes from The Republicans²⁵. For this reason, the list of the LREM is expected to be led by someone more conservative.

His campaign had to contain a more national feeling in order to go against the populist tendency in France. His tour of national debates also serves that purpose, acting as an attempt of getting closer to the French public.

He initiated in January what he calls the “Great National Debate”, something that will continue for two months until March, with the hope of mitigating all the commotion the protests have triggered by recovering control over the narrative²⁶. This constitutes a series of public meetings where citizens can express their concerns regarding economic and social issues. Macron even went to state that he would use the proposals that come out of the sessions in order to improve the French nation²⁷.

Macron aims to have the campaign focusing on the idea of a strong and sovereign Europe that protects²⁸, that way combining the party’s pro-European values with the concerns of the working-class, which has been feeling underrepresented and mistreated by the elite, a sentiment that resulted in the protests ravaging France for the past three months.

But with all the adversaries and challenges Macron is facing, both at a national and international level, will these efforts be enough to stop his competition from achieving a victory while not only securing, but also reviving, his position as the convict leader of the pro-European faction?

A Sea of Alliances

These will arguably be the most important European Elections since the first ones took place in 1979. While mainstream parties will still dominate the scene, populist far-right and far-left parties could obtain 25% of the seats or more²⁹, which may create difficulties in implementing pro-European policies.

²² <https://www.politico.eu/article/marine-le-pen-unveils-far-right-national-rally-candidates-jordan-bardella-for-european-election/>

²³ <https://www.economist.com/europe/2018/10/13/marine-le-pen-is-hoping-to-come-top-in-next-years-euro-election>

²⁴ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/eu-elections-2019/news/frances-yellow-vests-to-run-for-european-elections/>

²⁵ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/eu-elections-2019/news/macrons-lrem-targets-the-far-right-at-european-elections/>

²⁶ <https://www.ft.com/content/e1c1a2ec-304d-11e9-ba00-0251022932c8>

²⁷ <https://www.euronews.com/2019/01/22/macron-s-great-national-debate-what-is-it-and-how-does-it-work-euronews-answers>

²⁸ https://www.challenges.fr/politique/europeennes-les-premiers-noms-de-la-liste-lrem_642654?refresh=1550575020809

²⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2018/nov/20/revealed-one-in-four-europeans-vote-populist>

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It is important to remember that it only takes one third of the members of the parliament to block the approval of a commissioner. Not only that, but it is also enough to stop the rule of law mechanism under Article 7³⁰. Therefore, alliances have a crucial role in setting the trend for the European Union. While Macron is aiming to participate in a liberal alliance in the European Parliament³¹, prominent populist European politicians are simultaneously trying to consolidate an offensive front line.

There are plans to have Macron's LREM enter a partnership with the Pan-European Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE). Even though there are some ideological divergences, as in European fiscal policy³², it would be a very important alliance for Macron, since he would be uniting to what could be the future third-largest party in the Parliament, according to projections³³.

Marine Le Pen, after losing to Macron in the 2017 Presidential Elections, is eager to achieve a triumph over the later on the upcoming European elections. She counts with the support of Matteo Salvini, Italian Minister of the Interior and leader of the League party and is relying on what he represents to improve her results³⁴. Salvini accomplished what Le Pen desires the most: leading a far-right populist party to the government.

Not only that, but Salvini has been extremely open regarding his disdain towards Macron. He even went on to encourage French voters to vote against him in the upcoming elections, showing clear support for Le Pen and triggering the rage of the French government³⁵.

Taking this into consideration, it is safe to say a partnership with ALDE is deeply important for Macron, as the party could be essential in helping him protecting his interests. Moreover, with Le Pen establishing partnerships, it is crucial for Macron to show, not only French citizens but the whole European Union, that he is not alone in his quest. Otherwise, criticisms may arise and reservations about his leadership could appear.

Salvini, in addition to partnering up with Le Pen, has been working on creating a strong opposition with additional far-right fronts. In early January, he travelled to Poland in order to meet members of the ruling Law and Justice party³⁶, which shares analogous Eurosceptical views and will lost its closest allies, the British Conservative Party, due to Brexit. Salvini also had previously stated his belief that an alliance between Italy, Poland and Hungary in the European Union would constitute a tremendous threat to the pro-European French-German axis³⁷.

Di Maio, on the other hand, shares the same goal of destabilizing the European status-quo, aiming to bring together parties that do not identify with neither the extreme right nor the mainstream parties. A few days ago, Di Maio announced the creation of a new group within the European Parliament³⁸. Although the alliance is still three members short of the necessary eight (from different countries) to form a group in the parliament, Di Maio has stated two more parties are on the verge of joining³⁹.

The future structure of the European political scene is at stake. The leader parties of the parliament have historically been pro-European and both Di Maio and Salvini wish to alter this reality in their

³⁰ https://www.ecfr.eu/specials/scorecard/the_2019_European_election

³¹ <https://www.ft.com/content/41697ce4-e40c-11e8-a6e5-792428919cee>

³² <https://www.ft.com/content/3bfad1f6-2311-11e9-b329-c7e6ceb5ffdf>

³³ <https://www.france24.com/en/20190218-eurosceptic-forces-gain-eu-elections-poll>

³⁴ https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2018/10/08/marine-le-pen-en-fait-elle-trop-avec-matteo-salvini_a_23553277/

³⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/23/italian-deputy-pm-matteo-salvini-calls-on-french-voters-not-to-back-macron>

³⁶ <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-eu-poland-italy-salvini/italys-salvini-visits-poland-to-discuss-eurosceptic-alliance-for-eu-elections-idUKKCNI1P3054>

³⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/09/matteo-salvini-says-italy-and-poland-could-build-new-europe>

³⁸ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-02-15/five-star-s-di-maio-gears-up-for-eu-vote-with-new-alliance>

³⁹ <https://www.politico.eu/article/italys-5stars-launch-new-group-in-european-parliament/>

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favour. There are numerous politicians around Europe cheering for them. With still three months separating us from the elections, a fair number of announcements should be expected, both before and after these take place.

The Future

While the upcoming elections will have obvious conspicuous for Europe's future, its aftermath will define more than policy making. The elections have become a ferocious political arena representing an exasperating trial for Macron's leadership. The whole continent will be watching closely, as it will affect the vigour of France's commitment towards a united and fortified European Union.

Macron has been efficient in gravitating his campaign towards the centre in order to disassociate his party from the liberal connotation it has, as liberalism is widely connected to elitism in France. His series of national debates have been highly effective, as he has finally enjoyed a rise in his popularity rates⁴⁰.

European politicians need to update their strategy if they want to stand a chance against the wave of populism and political instability the continent is facing at the moment. Macron is doing that. By giving a voice and a platform to French citizens in the debates, he is incorporating in his strategy the element of success of populism: listening to the people.

That is something long overdue in European politics. Instead of fully embracing his elitist status or fully separating himself from it, he has found a steady middle ground. The subsequent question is whether these debates will result in palpable results as Macron promised. If not, it will be hard to predict the turbulent consequences. Numerous fronts are hoping for the downfall of Macron and what he symbolizes. Marine Le Pen still has a small advantage over him, according to the polls, and is going strong. The protests, although occurring now on a smaller scale, show no sign of stopping. His opponents in Europe will continue delivering provocations and questioning his leadership position.

Nonetheless, nothing is yet lost for Macron. He can still prove he is the politician everyone wanted him to be. He can still oppose the populist tendencies in France and in Europe and come out stronger than before. All of these challenges can turn into opportunities. Furthermore, the way he is dealing with all the turmoil, setting the national debates, proves he understands what is necessary to respect and treat everyone with dignity.

This can either be the start of new trajectory for European politics and the revival of Macron's leadership or an anticipation of his downfall. One way or the other, Europe will have to wait and see.

⁴⁰ <https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-philippe-pick-up-in-popularity-poll-france-president-prime-minister-yellow-jackets/>

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