



French Presidential Election 2017: Political Trends and Impact on EU's Prospective Orientation

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Introduction

The French presidential election has entered a crucial phase. The first round of voting will take place on 23 April 2017, if no candidate passes 50 per cent plus one threshold, the second round will be held on 7 May 2017 between two candidates with highest votes secured in the first round. A clear outcome in the first round of vote is highly unlikely. The outcome of this election is not only decisive for France, but also would have potential influence on the European political discourse. France has registered sluggish growth and unemployment remains relatively high, particularly among youth. Terror attacks have created a sense of insecurity among the people. The debate over economic growth, unemployment, security, terrorism, future European integration, immigration, etc has been intense, and diverse political perspectives have been expressed. The National Front's Marine Le Pen is one of the main candidates and polls predictions indicate that she is likely to enter the second round of the election. On the other hand, the Republican candidate, Francois Fillon faces legal challenges and is under investigation for alleged use of public funds related to his wife's job. Till recently he was considered a strong candidate to replace President Francois Hollande in the Elysee Palace, but now it seems that electoral support has been shifting in favour of young independent candidate Emmanuel Macron. The first presidential debate held on 20 March 2017, has reportedly generated a positive popular opinion about him.¹

Political landscape is changing in Europe and far-right orientation seems a growing phenomena. However, the far-right Freedom party could not win the speculated number of seats in the Dutch general elections held in March 2017. Prime Minister Mark Rutte People's Party has emerged as the largest party winning 33 out of 150 seats in the Dutch parliament. The result has been termed as 'relief for the mainstream parties.'² Similarly, recent trends show that support for

the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) has decreased in the country. The party registered its lowest vote share in over a year in the Saarland state election held on 26 March 2017.³

Subsequently, all eyes would now be on the French presidential election and the performance of the National Front. The European Union (EU) and the UK are preparing for formal start of negotiations on Brexit process. The UK Prime Minister Theresa May has triggered Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty on March 29, 2017. Afterward, the European Council has also formally responded and intends to adopt a unified approach. France's role would be critical in shaping post-Brexit European security order and prospective integration. In this broader political and social context, the paper intends to analyze the trends in the presidential election in France. Secondly, it will assess the implications for regional political trends in Europe.

Political Trends in France

The mainstream conservative and socialist parties have dominated the French political landscape for long.⁴ Today, persisting economic and social challenges in the second largest economy of eurozone have caused a shift in electoral base. Austerity and structural reforms have meant a cut in public services. Unemployment is on record high - almost one of four youth is unemployed in the country. Though recent figures show that unemployment has decreased in eurozone - fell to 9.5 per cent, it is still stuck at 10 per cent in France.⁵ Migrant crisis and terror attacks have fuelled social polarization. President Hollande was elected promising fixing the economy, however, he could not deliver the expected economic growth and create employment.⁶ There is erosion of the mainstream political parties' bases. Far-right has enhanced its electoral support, nevertheless, its winning ability is widely under question, especially in the round two. Secondly, the decline in political support of mainstream center-right and center-left political parties, consequently, led to a new phenomenon in the French election. Pro-EU and globalization Mr. Macron has emerged as a leading contender for the presidency and he belongs to no established political parties but a relatively new political figure.

National Front: An analysis of different polls reflects that Marine Le Pen is leading in the first round of voting. Her party has received increased votes in the local and regional elections in recent years. She is active in European politics as well. Marine Le Pen with Geert Wilders was proactive in forming a far-right parties group - Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) in the European Parliament, which may provide her a greater presence at the EU level, with more speaking time, access to powerful committee seats, and extra EU funds.⁷

Marine Le Pen bases her arguments on prevailing socio-political situation and defines her electoral agenda and campaign accordingly. With the outcome of the UK referendum, the National Front is fuelling more anti-EU sentiments and the party has called for a French referendum on EU membership. It was the only major French political party that supported Brexit campaign.⁸ Migration crisis has also caused the rise of far-right movement across the continent. Opposition to immigration is high on Marine Le Pen's agenda. She argued for automatic expulsion of undocumented foreigners and put a cap on legal immigration and stop or severely restrict the family reunification of the asylum seekers and refugees.⁹ The party made the 'Calais

relocation plan a nationwide cause'.¹⁰ After massive terror attacks in Paris in November 2015 and in Nice in July 2016, people expressed concern about the possibility of terrorists coming in form of migrants.¹¹ Le Pen proposed 144 commitments at the Lyon rally held on February 7, 2017, which re-emphasized on the anti-EU and anti-Islam sentiments, including leaving the euro-zone, holding a referendum on EU membership, slapping taxes on imports and on the job contracts of foreigners.¹² She blames euro for French economic troubles – high unemployment rate and slow economic growth rate.¹³

On foreign policy and security front, she advocates rapprochement with Russia. NATO has played central role in defining European security architecture after the World War II. NATO has enhanced its military build-up in Eastern Europe after the Crimean crisis. Marine Le Pen argues about withdrawing from 'NATO's integrated military structures.'¹⁴ Recently, she met Russian President Putin and favoured closer ties with Russia.¹⁵ She does not support European economic sanctions on Russia over the Crimean issue and criticized the measure.

Republicans: Once predicted to be a leading candidate in the presidential race, Republican candidate François Fillon is facing allegations. He allegedly paid his wife, Penelope Fillon salaries between 1998 and 2002 for no work. It was alleged that there is little evidence to support that his wife did any work, which can justify the payments. Such allegations of paying two of his five children for work as parliamentary assistants were also levelled against him.¹⁶ Fillon has been put under the formal investigation. He has denied all charges and accused President Hollande of maligning his image, such an allegation is hurting his 'clean image', consequently, support for his candidature has relatively declined.¹⁷ Currently, he stands third in the opinion poll predictions.

Former Prime Minister, François Fillon is considered to be socially 'conservative'¹⁸. He has a pro-EU opinion and argued for strengthening the EU. His foreign policy orientation tends towards friendship with Russia. He believes Russia can 'once again become a great partner.'¹⁹ He criticized Macron for his inexperience in handling the issues of national security.²⁰ He believes that jihadis have distorted the Islamic text, Muslims should denounce them. Radical extremism is against the values of France, and it should not be allowed to enter the country. On economic matters he advocates pro-business reforms, such as tax cuts and a less rigid labour market, plus cuts to the welfare state and the civil service.²¹

Socialist Party: The Socialist Party, which is another mainstream political force in the country, has so far not been fared well in the presidential race. President Hollande is from the Socialist Party but he is not seeking a second term. Ex-education minister, Benoit Hamon won primary to represent the socialist candidature in the election. Inclined towards left, his main agenda includes universal basic income. He is for stronger European defence. However, he criticizes German approach managing euro-zone crisis and austerity policies. Today, the party appears to be divided in this election and some socialist party leaders are supporting candidates from other parties. Former Prime Minister Manuel Valls has thrown his weight behind Emmanuel Macron.²² The opinion polls suggest that Hamon is trailing and he may not even qualify for the second round.

Rise of Emmanuel Macron

As polls prediction point out, Emmanuel Macron has emerged front-runner in the presidential race. He is the youngest contender. He launched *En Marche* party last year. He has severed as an investment banker, and as a Minister of Economy, Industry and Digital Affairs from 2014 to 2016. Macron argues for economic reforms in France and greater employment opportunities. In an interview to Spiegel, he highlighted the problems of rural France and called for support to the country's middle class. He argued for major reforms, including open labor market, improvement in vocational training programmes and the school system.²³ He is not against the migrants coming to France and does not buy anti-Islam rhetoric. He countered Le Pen on her anti-Islam stance and her view on Islamic dressing, as Le Pen considered burkini is an example of the 'rise of radical Islam in the country.'²⁴ He is trying to lure voters who are disillusioned from the mainstream parties.²⁵

In the presidential election, if there is no clear result in the first round, French electorate gets a second chance to vote. French voters often opt to vote strategically in the final round to keep the far-right out of power. Macron's poll strategy to win the election seems based on such tradition of confluence of central-right and centre-left votes in the second round. Mainstream parties can call their supporters to vote in favour of Macron.²⁶ President Hollande categorically stated that his 'ultimate duty' is to prevent a Le Pen presidency.²⁷

Macron's pro-EU and globalist approach is winning friends in Europe. Emmanuel Macron visited Germany and met Chancellor Merkel and Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel. His open support for the France-Germany cooperation is a positive sign for the troubled EU. He said, "The French-German axis is the core of the reactor, both in the eurozone and the EU. It is a prerequisite for any progress." He further added, "Our duty is to rebuild the European dream." Macron believes that multi speed Europe is a solution to the problems facing member states. He argued for 'much deeper integration within the eurozone.'

On the EU reforms, he proposed that a joint finance minister and a permanent head of the Euro Group are needed. A close look at European institutions is also required. He said that the impetus for reforming the EU institutions should come from France and Germany.²⁸ He hailed Chancellor Merkel's policy on migration and economy. This is a clear contrast to Marine Le Pen's policy perspective.²⁹ Le Pen's world view is nationalist and protectionist – France alone can prosper, while Macron provides hope for improving the system and working together with common peace and prosperity of the continent. His globalist approach intends more integration in Europe.³⁰

French Presidential Election and the EU

The EU has outlined major internal and external challenges in the *White Paper on the Future of Europe: Reflections and Scenarios for the EU27 by 2025* issued by the European Commission. The White Paper notes the current status of the economy, demography and foreign and security challenges. It states that the eurozone economy has registered modest growth rate.

Its share in global GDP has been relatively declining. Unemployment has been at one of the highest levels, and austerity orientated approach has led to cut in public services. Political instability at European periphery has caused unprecedented migrant crisis. The tension with Russia has not further escalated but still persists. The biggest challenge it faces today is Brexit. Greater uncertainty is involved in post-Brexit arrangement with the EU. A strong member of the EU has started separation after more than four decades of membership. Every section of European as well as British societies is concerned about uncertain outcome of the negotiations, though both the EU and the UK are taking policy steps to reduce uncertainty among the concerned people and business groups. The President of European Commission has presented five scenarios for future of the EU: ‘carrying on’, ‘nothing but the single market’, ‘those who want more do more’, ‘doing less more efficiently’ and ‘doing much more together’.³¹ These scenarios reflect prospective orientation of the EU. Some members are keen to move towards greater integration and reinvigorate the European project of integration. Others are cautious.

Table 1: Five Scenarios for the EU

Carrying On	Strengthening single market, gradual improvement in functioning of the euro area, enhanced cooperation on security issues, speaking with one voice on foreign affairs
Nothing but the Single Market	Single market for goods and capital, however, free movement of people will not be fully assured, limited cooperation in euro area, no single asylum policy, bilateral focus on foreign policy
Those Who Want More, Do More	Current status continues in the EU27, member states can enhance cooperation in taxation and social standards, as well as deepen cooperation in the fields of justice and security
Doing Less, More Efficiently	Enforcement should be strengthened on common minimum areas, consolidating the euro but less intervention in employment and social policy, one voice on foreign policy and European defence union
Doing Much More Together	Harmonization of standards and enforcement for strengthening single market, economic, financial and fiscal union, cooperation on border management, asylum and counter terrorism

Source: White Paper on the Future of Europe: Reflections and Scenarios for the EU27 by 2025, Annex 2, p. 29.

On the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, EU27 countries declared ‘Europe is our common future’. The document signed in Rome on 25 March 2017 sets a new course for the EU, laying out the principle of a multi-speed bloc wherein some countries move ahead on stronger integration while others may not participate on certain issues. Explaining the principle of multi-speed Europe, German Chancellor Angela Merkel stated that they will head in the same direction, however, she notes that there are things that are nonnegotiable.³² Internal market, freedom of

expression, press and religion are among the nonnegotiable issues. It is pertinent to note that there were differences between Poland and the EU over freedom of press and appointment of judges in the constitutional court. The EU expressed concerns over the PiS government legislation on the appointment of judges and greater control over state media.³³ Along with Germany, France is also supporting the idea. France is a key pillar of European integration and its political orientation would be crucial in shaping the European order. The next French president may face the challenges of revival of the crisis-torn EU, refugee and migrant crisis, security, and eurozone's troubles, etc.

The two front runners have difference of opinion on European integration and European dream. A 'nationalist' approach is one of the major poll planks of Marine Le Pen and it would be difficult for European leaders to pursue reforms and take collective decision on these issues with Le Pen. Though inflow of migrants has considerably declined in last one year, but immigration issue is still high on the far-right agenda. Considering her political views, she may adopt protectionist and more nationalist stances on policy matters.

Political opinion of Macron is more favorable to the EU. Macron has amply indicated that he would work with Germany in tandem to reform and further strengthening the EU. Unlike Le Pen, he is of the opinion that the euro will sustain. As discussed above, he wants reforms in the EU institutions. Although there is no consensus among the EU27 member states as the core countries want to move ahead. Some of Central European countries, namely Poland, are not approving the principle of multi-speed Europe.

Conclusion

European political landscape is changing. Some crucial elections will be held in 2017. After the presidential election, national assembly elections would be held in France. Germany will hold the federal elections in September 2017. Across Europe, mainstream parties' electoral base has declined, and anti-establishment and populist parties have enlarged their support base. There is also no uniform electoral trend in far-right politics. These parties may receive considerable vote share and affect the electoral result, however, their clear winning ability is debatable. Expectedly, they can influence the political discourse, however, their strong nationalist orientation may not find wider political acceptance. Center left and right voters may, for instance, unite to vote against the National Front in the presidential election run-off. In some cases, the far-right parties only take some share of votes from the mainstream parties. The AfD may enter the Bundestag, but the contest will be between CDU and SPD in the upcoming German federal elections. The rise of far-right in Austria has also been witnessed. Despite the defeat, the party has received more than 46 per cent of votes. The Jobbik party of Hungary has shown tendencies to modify its extreme political stands to enlarge social base and attract more right-wing votes.

The Front runner Macron can re-energize the European dream. The principle of 'multi-speed' Europe recognizes strengthening the core values of European integration. Some member states wish to move ahead on further integration and others have doubts. Nevertheless, Germany, France and other key member states have evolved consensus. On the other hand, victory of far-

right Le Pen will add another twist in the populist and anti-EU trends in the continent. Her political views may cause complexities in the Franco-German cooperation – which may have implications for European integration and security order. Therefore, the election of the next president of France is significant for the future of EU.

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Disclaimer: Views expressed are of author and do not reflect the views of the Council.

End Notes

Endnotes

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