

European issues
n°430 18th April 2017

France and its European turmoil Europe in the presidential campaign

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Europe is a thorn in France's side.

The electoral campaign in view of the presidential election has brought together 11 candidates. None of them is happy with the European Union.

Amongst those who have fulfilled the conditions to stand – which are clearly not strict enough – we have four far right candidates, three on the far left, one exotic and kindly Pyrenean shepherd, the representatives of the two biggest government parties on the political chess board and one surprise candidate, who has successfully anticipated the battle between the traditional political parties.

Four of them simply want to leave the Union. All of the others want to reform it more or less. Has it become, as François Hollande stated on 16th April, as he commemorated the battle of the Chemin des Dames, the “scapegoat of our relinquishments?” Or is it simply indicative of a French malaise, a kind of reflection that shows the French an inferior image of their national ambition? Isn't it being used rather as an excuse in the dissatisfied quest for a particular role in the world? Or it is just an easy distraction of the increasing anger over the unexplained turmoil that is ongoing in the sciences, the economy, politics and, therefore, in society?

There is something specific about French politics. This presidential election has highlighted all of its negative aspects. Might the election of a new president show us its positive sides and transform them into a new national dynamic that is more favourable towards Europe?

FRANCE IN QUEST OF ITSELF

The French are capable achieving much, as they are of surprising us with what they throw away. In reality France's entire history has been quite psychotic.

In spite of the political meandering of the last few years, the country's economy remains strong and has some underestimated resources. French inventiveness is known about and acknowledged. From mathematics, a domain in which it is a world leader, to quantum physics and medical technologies,

to IT and communication – French creativeness is of an exceptional level. Fundamental research is not lagging behind and the energy of the start-ups is shining through – and these are even the source of happiness for those abroad, who have the means to purchase and develop them on the industrial and trade markets. France has some wonderful assets, true power, a certain level of education and a passion for culture that always makes it ever more attractive and unique.

But it is on a soul seeking quest. It is not alone in the concert of nations as it searches for clarity in the scientific upheavals that are leading to so much change in the economy and modes of production, in trade, finance and the balances of power in the world. Its citizens are suffering the consequences: for some this means loss of status, for others anxiety about the future, for all, it means greater competition and a harder life, new inequality, sometimes misunderstood opportunities, new practices and inexplicable novelties, because these developments are being explained by no one. The feeling of decline, which is mainly incorrect, but confirmed by unreliable soothsayers, has seeped into French society like deadly poison, finding expression in claims, discontent and even anger.

Because France, like all other nations, has its own points of reference and aspirations which find their queues and their expression in history, and, therefore, these are suffering the present changes full on.

We still speak of the "Grenelle" France, in reference to the settlement of an almost revolutionary crisis in 1968, by a government whose back was to the wall, and which accepted all of the wage claims of a country on strike. The "Grenelle" became mirages transformed into a major meetings to review whole sections of the political, economic and social organisation of society. In recent years we also saw the "Grenelle for the environment", the "Grenelle for the Sea" and requests are flowing in for other "Grenelle" for democracy, taxation etc. Soon there will be a "Grenelle for Europe"! What a strange country this is, in which we look back 50 years for an uncertain solution to calm our present discontent! Wouldn't we do better to look rather more to the future? And do this with more modern arguments and methods?

Similarly the nostalgia for times past encourages the dream of Gaullist grandeur. No one would challenge the successes of the General which helped vanquished France to sit at the table of the victors, reviving its pride, then its prosperity, as it fitted in its own way into European integration that its accomplices rejected. But that was 60 years ago!

And it is doubtful that the same formulae would be appropriate today in a new world. The nostalgia for a proud, pro-active France, present and original in the international arena, is especially an attitude that we would like to see amongst our political leaders. The French are waiting for Statesmen who take their risks according to a vision of their country on the international stage, the strategic anticipation of what the future of France and Europe will be in a changing international context. The lack of vision of the future on the part of the French political class explains in part the real rejection of which it is now the focus. It is the mainspring of truly justified anger and deep disappointment. The French have often functioned like this: they want to be offered an ambitious vision for their country, and even oppose this, but most of the time they need reassurance. The importance of the presidential office in their institutions obliges the holder of it to be exemplary and ambitious. In the French political system it is the president who raises or lowers the debate. He pushes the French towards the top or leads to their stagnation.

Finally French political life itself has been struck full on by a demanding form of modernity. The situation shows how sensitiveness to exemplarity has become vital in the choice of the electorate. François Fillon has paid the price and Marine Le Pen has not escaped this. The French political codes, as in all other democracies have changed radically. In exchange for a political career that is now almost professional there is a demand for transparency, rigorous behaviour and rules that match those of most other European countries. Long political careers, sometimes lasting over 40 years, of which France is the champion in all categories (F. Mitterrand, Jacques Chirac, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, and also Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande) increasingly seem to be rejected, the habits of a sacrosanct, magnified power seem to be tolerated less and less.

Moreover, the major parties themselves have not survived their internal wrangling, to the point that they have had to organise primaries to decide on the candidates to run for the supreme office. We can see why this exercise is incompatible with the presidential election, which aims to form direct dialogue between

the French and the candidates. The party filters have now caused so much damage since they have not necessarily appointed the best candidates, and it has unsettled the very future of the so-called government parties. In 2012, François Hollande rose up from the base of a Socialist Party whose approved candidate disqualified himself. In 2017 the PS is paying the price of this default choice by choosing “a rebel”, the symbol of the internal opposition to Hollande’s policy. The primary on the right was more like the “Killing Game” in which the favourites mutually eliminated each other, opening the way for an unexpected candidate. There is doubt that the experiment will be repeated and neither the right nor the left seem keen on the idea of organising any more primaries in the future.

The debates that have resulted from this have therefore privileged national issues, relegating international and European issues and programmes to end of the line for a long time, as the issue of identity has been pushed to the fore.

Hence we can say with the French that the debate has become poorer. 73% of them share this view¹ and 81% say they are dissatisfied and disappointed with the electoral campaign².

The responsibility of the political class is enormous in the despair of a time which has opened the way to extremism and simplistic responses of all kinds.

The French are expecting what they call “a great vision”, which we might simply define as being some new ideas, explaining the state of the world and of the country, by proposing a goal for the future. Without this they seem more negative than ever before, echoing those who are advocating national withdrawal, the reintroduction of the borders and re-nationalisation to solve the country’s problems. In this regard they are not really original in view of what is occurring in all democracies across the globe and more particularly in Europe, but it is a true break from past elections. And the electoral campaign has been as unexpected, just like those that led to Brexit and to the election of Donald Trump.

A UNIQUE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Quite rightly this campaign will stand out in history.

Because of the primaries it started several years ago, but in real terms 10 months ago. It was a novelty, even though the candidates had always been obliged in the past to polish and refine their profiles after many years of preparation.

It was upset by “the scandals”, and until recently judicial intervention has been changing its course, since the National Front candidate is to be called to court at the beginning of May to explain the employment of her parliamentary assistants.

Again, because of the primaries, the candidates believed that they had to put forward precise programmes to the extent of pointillism, multiplying the promises being made.

The “décodeurs” of the newspaper, Le Monde, noted 3,200 addressing 80 different themes! It looks more like a government programme, it is even better than a general political speech that any Prime Minister has to give to the National Assembly. This is evidently not what the electorate is expecting if we consider the programme of the candidate in the lead in the pre-electoral polls just one week before the election – Emmanuel Macron, simply issued a thirty-page document and has not given too many details.

The French electorate, 79% of whom say they are interested in the presidential election, grant great importance to the candidates’ personality. His ambition and inspiration counts more than his technical ability. They want to “have a clear vision of the direction they are to take”³ and are ready to support the person who “enlightens” them about a future that is now uncertain. This is when the role and place that France will have in the world become almost compelling in their choice. And of course Europe is part of this.

For many years French political life has pushed Europe out of national, self-centred debates. But in their collective memory the French remember presidents because of some striking international events, which were involved the European Union more or less related: de Gaulle and his diplomacy, as he entered on more than one occasion into conflict with Europe, which did not fall in line with his work towards national reconstruction, Pompidou and the UK’s entry into the Union, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing and the best

1. Survey by Sciences-Po CEVIPOF – IPSOS wave 12 bis April 2017

2. Survey by Harris-Fondation for Political Innovation published in Le Figaro on 15th and 16th April 2017.

3. Survey CEVIPOF as previously quoted.

moments of the Franco-German couple, endorsed and supported by François Mitterrand, Jacques Chirac and his so "European" opposition to the second war in Iraq, Nicolas Sarkozy, in 2008 with his presidency of the Union during the financial crisis, and, already, the Russian issue and its invasion of Georgia.

This time the electoral campaign has simply addressed Europe via extreme clichés, technical considerations that are not really related to it (a parliament, or a budget for the euro area), in all, just hypotheses, never as a substantial part of the national policies of France - and never as one of France's major commitments that strengthen and therefore engage it. Europe is discussed between the French; but in fact we just discuss France! For the French the ideal Europe would be French and built for France! By forgetting the issues that comprise the new balance of power in a world of continent-States and the consequences of this on the national stage, this is, at best irresponsible, and at worst, infantile.

The extremists say we must leave Europe and the euro to recover our supposedly lost sovereignty. What would France do alone in the world financial jungle? This argument is largely outdated and the French do not adhere to this stale simplistic argument. According to those interviewed, 72% want to keep the euro, the interest of which they have evidently understood⁴. Regarding the main issues of concern, they also believe that they have to be addressed within a European context i.e. with our neighbours and allies: 65% regarding defence, 60% foreign policy, and 56% security⁵.

Hence, how should we analyse the systematically negative attitude that emerges each time we address European issues? How should we interpret the French disaffection for Europe? A reality? A fad? A stance? The instinct of survival of a political class that is not really in touch with the world and which understands little about Europe?

There seem to be several reasons to explain this. Firstly, no mention is made of Europe in the speeches delivered by our political leaders. Today Europe is no longer a subject in itself, but every public issue that

has to be dealt with by our leaders bears a European aspect, which is systematically obscured. Specialists in the matter are the British, whose government, led by David Cameron dearly paid the price on 23rd June 2016, as it tried to convince the population that it had to remain in a Union that it "did not like" and of which it tried never to speak. Hence, we only speak of Europe when we have to implement restrictive European regulations, in addition to our national rules, which incidentally are accepted and even put forward by the French government. It is never mentioned, when major world issues or the undeniable successes that we owe it, are under discussion. Our German neighbours, for their part, constantly speak of European issues and evidently as soon as there is a meeting between European leaders. The German parliament checks, challenges and comments their decisions. France for its part has remained in a time when Europe was growing with the tacit agreement of the people, since it provided stability, prosperity and success. It is disappointed that it can no longer "dream of Europe", whilst there was no room to dream of a regional organisation with its legal, diplomatic, and even bureaucratic stumbling blocks. It has to be driven, guided - we have to convince our partners, and this means pedagogy every single day, but which is never undertaken. France is not the only one in this situation, but its place in Europe has always been at the forefront and its problem is therefore all the more serious. Since Robert Schuman, the initiator of the project, every president has been involved more or less - they have provided it with their proposals (but not all of them) and have been able to explain to the French what they wanted for the continent. This has not been the case since the introduction of the euro and the French have turned away from it in the main, since no one talks about Europe!

Then, undeniably the changes that occurred in Europe have changed the way the Union is perceived. To say the least the French no longer recognise "their Europe". It has become established, has grown heavier, become diversified and speaks English! But according to the law and eleven treaties, it is the champion of legalism - could it be otherwise, since it is a question of agreements between sovereign nations? - and the law has sometimes become an end

4. Survey for Le Figaro IFOP

Robert Schuman Foundation,

le Figaro 24th March 2017

Eurobarometer ; Spring 2015

5. Idem

in itself for its administration, due to a lack of political dynamism, notably on the part of the Member States. This lack of "politics" has been used as an excuse in support of the recurrent criticism of Europe's "democratic deficit". If this does exist it is largely due to the indifference of the French institutions vis-à-vis events in Strasbourg and Brussels.

France, for its part, has not shone through in recent times with its European proposals. To the point that some believe that it has not been involved. But France is a country which prefers to imagine the rules collectively, rather than to respect them in the long term. It was the one that invented the 3% budgetary deficit rule that should not be surpassed, and which has constantly challenged it ever since! It no longer even invents any of these rules but wallows in incantatory criticism at a time in which the European Union is the only one in the world that is trying to regulate unbridled globalisation.

Hence, we might provisionally conclude that the French electoral campaign has revealed all of France's European tribulations, put to music, and even instrumentalized by the various candidates.

Some, like Marine Le Pen, and a few outsiders, would like to "throw the baby out with the bath", there are those who want to "reorient" it, even "reinvent" it, who challenge the treaties and want to reform them. In the reforms some see the be-all and end-all of France's European policy. There are those who still advocate "the Europe of nations" in reference to General de Gaulle, as if it has not always been an alliance of sovereign nations. Finally, there are those who accept to be part of the European framework and put forward ideas that lack imagination in terms of reviving it. Only Emmanuel Macron, who has acknowledged the imperfection of some European policies refuses to criticise it and says openly that he supports Europe, conceding, like François Fillon incidentally, that the euro has to be strengthened, likewise its governance and its organisation.

Very few new ideas have been put forward, no explanation of the present situation in the international arena and in the Union. One slogan has been imposed by the populists "Europe is sick". But Europe is its Member States! And what if it were France in fact

that was sick? Many clichés, unchecked assertions, for example regarding posted workers and European regulations, which are the most protective by far in the world – in sum nothing really very real. 114 Socialist MPs, who support Benoit Hamon published a column in *Le Monde* on 13th April which summarises the majority and contradictory opinion of the French political class: "we are for a more social, ecological EU that is oriented towards solidarity. The European Union is not in good shape but only the EU can get us out of the rut!"

Can it really do this and isn't it firstly the duty of the future president to get France out of its lethargy and its contradictions? Is there any hope in reconciling a majority of the French with European integration? This presidential election will, in all events, mark a major turning point in France's European policy. It might be for the worst if the populist trend, seen elsewhere, wins the day. It might also herald a true return of France into Europe.

RECONCILING FRANCE WITH THE EUROPEAN UNION

Two voters in three believe that the European dimension will be "significant" in the way they vote⁶ in the presidential election.

The French have not therefore become anti-European or europhobic. Only a small share of them, in rejection, anger or out of conviction claim themselves to be as such.

However much is expected of Europe and its image has suffered.

It must be both a focus of pride, foster a feeling of belonging, which has not been cultivated for a long time by French political leaders, and also lead to greater effectiveness in terms of settling issues as complex as the security of Europe, migration and economic revival.

The French are clearly expecting Europe to be "more political" and the innovations of the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker should allow this to happen. This will require a new president to take hold of this, to make it a daily issue, to explain in a transparent manner what he intends to decide with his partners in key areas, as well as why and how we often have to come to compromises

⁶. In *Le Monde* 14th and 15th April « Les décodeurs ».

in order to achieve an agreement. If he can force Europe's leaders not to content themselves with the present situation, he will win the support of his fellow citizens. If he addresses the world's major challenges in view of his electorate, he will capture their interest. Explaining economic, financial and therefore diplomatic interdependency, the consequences of hyper-connectivity, the challenge to multilateralism and the inevitable subservience of small powers vis-à-vis their larger neighbours, migration, or the territorialisation of the oceans, the future stakes of power relations between States – these are the issues that deserve to be brought before public opinion⁷.

In fact the point at which European integration finds itself now, the reasons for support on the part of French public opinion are within reach of the elected president. The Union has integrated via rapprochement and the progressive interlinking of national interests. Many of the latter are also shared without this being challenged. But rising to the challenges that affect the Regalian prerogatives of the States can only be achieved via a restricted group of States, who will show the way by setting an example. Hence, as he avoids all debate about "a multi-track Europe" or the "hard core", which quite rightly worries those who do not want to be amongst the "lowest bidders" and who do not want to be excluded from the functioning of the European Union, a pro-active French president can help revive and reform Europe to the greatest benefit of his country. He might draft a new kind of pro-active European integration: via the example. And to do this he would need the support of the French people.

In this case it would be up to him to take the initiative to suggest to his privileged partners that they work together to guarantee the security of Europe, to bring the migratory issue under control and to take full part in the economic growth of Europe, which was already beyond that of the USA in 2016 (1.9% on average against 1.6%), but of which France has not taken advantage (1.1%).

With the UK France has the most comprehensive army in Europe, the only one that is independent and capable of projection, whilst deploying credible

nuclear deterrence and a navy that ranks first in Europe.

It is therefore in a position to open up hitherto unexplored paths of cooperation. Its aircraft carrier for example has campaigned in Syria and Iraq together with Belgian, German and British frigates. Our armies are accustomed to and have a taste for operational cooperation. They can be strengthened and developed providing their costs are better shared and if France itself accepted to provide its army with the power of which it is capable of thanks to an exceptional effort in terms of investment. For example France should initiate the construction of a second aircraft carrier as quickly as possible, whose European mission and use might be demonstrated. The fact that military operations cannot be steered by a committee, the creation of a college or commission is obvious and this should lead Europeans, if they manage to find open contacts, to accept France as a key driver in the military area. If they want to be more independent of the USA, whose national interests are different from ours, and guarantee the long term, credible security of Europe, then France can offer opportunities for development - not to make war, but to be in a position to wage it, i.e. to guarantee peace. This is a real, opportune issue of which the French might legitimately be proud thanks to Europe.

The same applies to immigration. France has not experienced the wave of refugees that is flowing over Central Europe, Greece, Italy and Germany, but it does have a problem in terms of controlling economic migration from the countries of the south. It cannot remain alone behind its borders without risking the pressure of long term migration. Hence, this implies cooperation with the countries in question, of which it can be the initiator. The goal must be the control of flows according to individual requirements and reception capacities. Cooperation with a few other countries would strengthen the work already achieved at European level.

Finally from an economic point of view it is clear that France has first to set free its strengths and assets. It must modernise in its own way and according to its own traditions - work that it has not been brave to

⁷. In this regard we might read the study published under the guidance of Mark Leonard in January 2016: "Connectivity Wars", European Council on Foreign Relations, London. (london@ecfr.eu) Eurobarometer, Spring 2015

undertake and which is now causing it to lag behind in comparison with many of its counterparts. As soon as the new perspectives have been laid down for the liberation of French potential and that they are set for the long term, a new phase of discussion with our counterparts over the euro, its governance, its supervision and its organisation will begin. Much is expected of France, but it should not wait to start its own work that has been lacking over the last few years and which has made the economic crisis and unemployment much worse for it. It is an extremely French issue that can only be settled at home, if we are to take full advantage of the European dimension. The formulae for this are known, are being debated in the campaign, challenged by the candidates and parties. Once the democratic vote has occurred, the French economy can make good the gap that should never have been created with its close neighbours.

These are some examples of French initiatives that can put France back at the centre of Europe and which can be beneficial in its effort to recover. Others might be possible in space, as well as on the seas, where France and Europe offer the small continent, which we are future areas of development.

French ambition must be the focus of true debate in this campaign. They would show just how much they have in common with the concerns of other Europeans, rather than seeking reasons in Europe for the temporary weakness of French results. The European Union is not the reason behind the France's

problems. But France is being hit, like many others, by doubt and legitimate concern that has to be alleviated. This would be the new president's first duty.

Regarding domestic, as well as the European issues, he will have to take on board criticism and challenges. These must not be rejected with disdain, as is often the case. They must be heard and real answers must be given – having been thought through and completed with results and even justified with reform in the functioning of the European Union. A pro-active France has a good chance of being heard and listened to by its partners.

No one doubts then that the French are capable of finding a new European path, which they have never really left but for which they no longer have a view of the horizon. If France is more active in Europe, the French will find reasons to be satisfied and for acceptance. A positive dynamic, this is what is lacking from this astoundingly negative campaign in terms of Europe! It is negative for France and its national interests. Let us hope that it will not continue after this important election of uncertain result.

If the French elect a resolutely European president who makes a commitment, they can win back their reasons to be proud of belonging to Europe. The European Union, the regulatory power of globalisation, will for its part, have a better chance of developing in the right direction. Will France make its return to Europe? That is one of the issues at stake in this election.

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