

What will France's role in Europe be over the next five years?

Spain's expectations, by Dídac Gutiérrez-Peris

For once, France's 2017 presidential elections had a strong sense of déjà-vu in Spain. A reminder of the rifts, the changes and the divides which have marked the Spanish political life in the past 10 years, such as the rise of a more radical left beside a worn out socialist party, exhausted by the exercise of power. Many similarities are to be found in the rise of Mélenchon's party and its relationship with the PS with Podemos' ascent and the PSOE.



Another example would be the appearance of a new centrist party which also plays the anti-system card. It's no surprise to see that Ciudadanos claims to belong to the same political trend as Macron's party and that the new French President views the Orange movement as a positive development for Spain. And finally, the conservative right which, despite the many crises it went through, remains present on the political scene. Les Républicains and Partido Popular are both seeing their reputation damaged due to corruption scandals and yet both remain key political elements, with Partido Popular in power in Spain and Les Républicains as the main party of opposition in Parliament in France. There are two main differences between the two countries though. Even though France was the last one to go through such a transition, En Marche's victory was a much more significant disruption of the bipartisan state of play than in Spain. And unlike France, Spain is much more capable to resist to the rise of regressive, authoritarian and nativist forces such as the Front National.

Following this sense of déjà-vu, Spain considers itself as a European incubator of political innovations. It now expects France to adopt a more euro-mediterranean stance. At the European level, synergies could probably be fostered on energy (Arias Cañete, Spanish Commissioner, insists on finalizing the new energy grid, especially over the Pyrenees region) and measures could be taken to better attract foreign direct investments. Spain would also seek France's support on the relocation of the European Medicines Agency's headquarters, which will no longer be located in London after Brexit. Barcelona is often considered as a shortlisted candidate, even though France also put Lille forward for consideration. More thorny issues await, Spain has many expectations regarding Macron's stance on the Catalan case in particular and the European Union more generally.

How Italy perceived the French presidential and parliamentary elections, by Massimiliano Picciani



Italy paid very close attention to the great political change that occurred in France following the presidential and parliamentary elections of May and June 2017. Emmanuel Macron's election and "La République en Marche"'s landslide victory will most probably have a strong impact on the Transalpine country, both regarding the potential evolution of the internal political scene and the European and international order.

Firstly, Macron's rise to power, with his centrist, liberal-democracy movement reminded Italian political observers of a peculiar feeling of *déjà-vu*, mixed with sorrow. A sense of *déjà-vu*, as in 2013, a newly-created movement of "new men and women", the Five Star Movement, managed to make it to the Italian Parliament, propelling elected representatives with little or no political experience. It also reminded them of Matteo Renzi's dazzling ascent at the exact same age as ... Emmanuel Macron. He made it all the way to the top of the Democratic Party and became Prime Minister with a pledge to renew his country's political system and a clearly-defined liberal-democracy political line. But this sense of *déjà-vu* also comes with regret as, nowadays, Matteo Renzi has lost his people's trust, his approval ratings are not what they used to be and he has had no choice but to resign after a majority of Italians voted against the constitutional referendum in December 2016. According to several observers, unlike Emmanuel Macron, Renzi did not have the chance - or, according to others, was not brave enough - to found his own centrist movement and move beyond the traditional left-right divide. He remained a member of the PSE, stuck in the "old" Democratic Party. It was therefore not surprising to see that Matteo Renzi and his supporters rather explicitly backed Emmanuel Macron right from the moment he announced his candidacy.

The second important issue in Italy is to see how Europe is going to evolve with Macron as the new French President. Two months after his elections, it seems that Emmanuel Macron is determined to give a new impetus to its bilateral relations with Germany. Does that mean that Italy will once again be considered as a "second-class partner" or will the three countries manage to find the right balance of power? Macron's victory could also be beneficial to Italy as France's President could be a strong ally to advocate for more investment spendings within the EU. But it could also be a major disappointment and a risk of political isolation, as it has already been the case when France decided to close its borders following the surge of migrants reaching Italian shores.

To conclude, if Emmanuel Macron's victory should in the medium-term create a European liberal-democracy movement (bringing François Bayrou and Francesco Rutelli's "European Democratic Party", created in 2004, back to life), gathering Matteo Renzi and other centrist forces across Italy, it could in the long term upset the balance of political parties in Italy and its strategic alliances in Europe.

The French elections from a German point of view, by Elisabeth Humbert-Dorfmüller



Emmanuel Macron's ascent to power should change France's role in Europe for the next coming years. From a German point of view, France's new President is a promise of change, reforms and a pro-active approach regarding Europe.

However, he also exacerbated the creation of a pro-European political group in Germany: even before the presidential election's first round, the Chancellor (Christian-Democrat) supported Emmanuel Macron, as well as her challenger (Social-Democrat), all the while Républiqueen Marche should eventually join a different European mouvement, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE). Consequently, German liberals (FDP) also supported him, even though their clearly neo-liberal economic policy has very little to do with the more « centrist » approach of Edouard Philippe's government. As for the Green Party, they probably could be considered as the most pro-European party in Germany and voiced their satisfaction regarding the elections' results.

Therefore, the whole pro-European political class is rooting for Macron in Germany.

Is it simply because there is a strong wish to see France reform itself? That's probably part of the answer. The three previous terms (Hollande, Sarkozy and Chirac) are perceived by France's neighbor as a period of stagnation and inability to face the 21st century's main issues.

But the actual reason why President Emmanuel Macron is so popular in Germany is mainly due his enthusiasm regarding the European project. Compared to his predecessors, who all had to face euro-sceptic movements within their own political families, the new French President put France's role in Europe at the top of his political agenda. Claiming it is a good start, he will later have to convince and take actions without crashing on the usual divisions on Europe. Germany is ready to give him a hand, without losing sight of its own interests though.

The French elections from a German point of view, by Prof. Dr. Holger Siever (Mayence / FTSK Germersheim University)



The European Union is in dire straits : Brexit, the monetary and financial crisis, the situation in Greece, the migratory crisis, the far-right movements, terrorism, Donald Trump... so many issues that the new President of the French Republic - as well as all the other European heads of States and governments - will have to tackle. The solution, however, does not lie in a single State going his own way or in protectionism but rather in a close cooperation at the European level.

Each of the crises has the potential to tear the European Union apart and can only be resolved together. And it is precisely that element of solidarity that appears to be lacking. The European engine - the Franco-German couple - stalled and must be kick-started at all costs. All major initiatives moving towards a more united Europe were at the initiative of a strong Franco-German partnership, as de Gaulle and Adenauer, Giscard d'Estaing and Schmidt or again Mitterrand and Kohl often demonstrated, sharing the same vision and enthusiasm for Europe.

Therefore, it will be crucial for Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel (and maybe for Martin Schulz from October on?) not only to cooperate to tackle these different issues but more essentially to develop a new shared vision of the future European Union - a two-speed Europe - and implement it together. All hope lies in Emmanuel Macron today, even in Germany. The French President will have to provide visionary leadership in Europe and lead the way out of the crisis. « Europe first! » could be the motto of this new shared vision.

The choice is simple: either Emmanuel Macron manages to rekindle Europeans' enthusiasm (including but not limited to the French) and to convince them to step out of their comfort zone - a federation of Nation-States - and leave their habits and their hard-won social gains behind to leap into a still uncertain but certainly brighter future or France will no longer be relevant on the European scene, and for a much longer period than the next five years.

Finland's view of France's role in Europe, by AtteOksanen

Culturally and historically, Finland has closer ties to Germany than to France. Protestantism, geographic proximity and the geopolitical balancing act vis-a-vis Russia all play role. In contrast, France can appear more foreign. To the Finns, it can seem like France's leading role in Europe is a mere byproduct of the Franco-German partnership.



Finland and France, however, are faced with similar challenges. Both France and Finland have unemployment rates hovering around 9%. Both countries have high taxation, yet also take great pride in their public services and infrastructure. Both countries are members of the Eurozone. And, last but not least, both countries have experienced a rising tide of right-wing populism.

Finland's right-wing populist party the Finns Party (previously known as the True Finns) and France's National Front do not share a common heritage. The Finns Party has its roots in agrarian populism, while the National Front was founded by hardcore neo-fascists and Nazi collaborators. Over the years, however, they've come to share a common disdain for the European Union, Islam and immigration. Both parties have also struggled to reconcile the hateful undertones of their agendas (and the unabashedly extremist views of some of their members) with their respective leaders' aspirations to govern.

In this context, it made sense that the Finnish media would present Emmanuel Macron's victory over Marine Le Pen mostly as a victory of liberal values over right-wing populism. Some in Finland may even see a parallel between Le Pen's clear defeat in the second round of the presidential election and the recent schism between the "extremist" and "moderate" wings of the Finns Party, both events perhaps highlighting the limits of populist politics. However, in the coming months, the focus may shift to the actual content of Macron's policies on common issues such as unemployment, government debt and Eurozone governance.



Swedish reactions to Macron's landslide win and the future of European cooperation, by Christina Winroth (chairman of PES Stockholm)

"Of course we are happy about Macron", says Swedish Minister for the EU and trade, Social democrat Ann Linde, as I meet her at Almedalen "politics week", held every year in the first week of July on the Swedish island of Gotland. She has come to speak at our PES Stockholm event on the future of the EU in light of the June elections in the UK and France and the upcoming elections in Germany on September 24. "France under Macron will perhaps not be our very *best* friend in the EU, but you have to consider the alternative; Le Pen and the risk of France leaving the EU - which would have destroyed the EU completely. Macron is enthusiastic about the European cooperation and that is just what we need, more positive vibes surrounding the EU."

Post Brexit the 72 British Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), including 20 Labour MEPs in the S&D Group, will be greatly missed as a partner for Sweden as the two countries tend to think alike and have taken almost the same positions within the EU. Now Sweden will have a more difficult task forming alliances and must turn for cooperation to other countries with large populations such as Germany with 96 MEPs and France with 74 MEPs. Also Italy, Spain and Poland have important populations but there is less experience of cooperating with them.

Easiest for Sweden to agree on with the RépubliqueEn Marche (REM) team will be on topics around the labour market, economic growth, migration and security. "We did the same things in the 90s that Macron is now proposing for the French labour market – necessary, but we paid the price for it!, says Linde. We lost 10% of our electorate. But on EU agricultural subsidies and a common defence the Swedish government takes a negative stance. On the environment, youth unemployment and a Social pillar for Europe Germany is historically a closer ally.

One could add that the most troubling is Macron's decision to have his party's MEPs join the liberal group (ALDE) in the European Parliament and not the S&D group, which includes the French PartiSocialiste and the Swedish Social democrats and today is the second largest group with 189 out of 751 MEPs. Here Macron shows his more liberal colours rather than a Swedish style Social democrat. In losing both the 20 UK Labour MEPs and possibly many of the 12 French PartiSocialiste MEPs the parliamentary group will be severely diminished. It is therefore of great importance for the French, German and other progressive parties to run an efficient campaign in the 2019 EU elections. Macron goes too far to the right it should be easy for PartiSocialiste to strike from the left. Then perhaps REM will do a British LibDem and become a smaller - or even non-existent - party after a mandate. Or two. The Swedish Liberal and Centre parties claim Macron to be their man but Social democrats are still hoping that Macron will lead the first real Social democratic government in France.

French elections seen from the UK, by Alexis Lefranc



In recent months, British politics and media space have been overwhelmingly occupied by the consequences of the June 2016 EU membership vote, hastily dubbed “Brexit”. The absence of any coherent planning for EU exit has since triggered a process of intense debate overshadowing most other international news, with the exception of Donald Trump’s antics. In addition, an early June snap election was called in April 2017, the resulting flash campaign taking most available space.

As a result, French elections have received parsimonious coverage. Conservative media have reported on M. Macron’s plans to loosen labour laws, and financial circles seem to be satisfied with his plans for a more open and flexible French economy. Nonetheless, concerns have been voiced over his image management strategy (the idea of a ‘Jupiter-like’ president sounds outlandish in English). There is also a sense of upcoming rivalry, as Paris was quick to openly flaunt its potential to substitute for London should some of the financial industry wish to relocate post-Brexit.

Meanwhile the most talked-about Frenchman north of the Channel is not the new French president, but chief EU negotiator Michel Barnier, whose frustration with Brexit secretary David Davies is now apparent and heavily publicised. There is so much criticism and dissatisfaction being aired in British politics at the moment (from and towards all sides), that a sense of realistic expectations towards EU partners is very limited. Labour are struggling to come up with a coherent Brexit position. The cabinet in charge does not seem to have a negotiating strategy. The Liberal Democrats and the Greens, the only two staunchly pro-remain parties, are marginalised. The Scottish National Party are trying to find a survival position, on a topic that is largely out of their hands. The Irish land border has become a key issue, made all the more sensitive by the return of Unionist hard-right MPs in Westminster, called in by Theresa May to secure a conservative majority.

The assumption is that France will look after its own interests in trying to secure a Brexit deal, but the uncertainty is considerable ahead of a new UK-EU relationships being defined. While Macron has been keen to display signs of apparent strength in his meetings with Ms Putin, Trump and several African or Central European leaders, few in London are impressed by the rhetoric. Indeed, commentators tend now to be waiting for the results of the German elections in order to know what to expect from Europe, rather than poring over the details of M. Macron’s public bravado.

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