

SNAPSHOT

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Giving you insight to what is on the EU agenda

EU elections – a view from France

New politics, new parties and campaigning during a national crisis

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The coming European elections will have a peculiar flavour in France as they will be the first electoral test since Emmanuel Macron's election in May 2017. Within this context, political parties have launched their campaigns, revealed their strategies and unveiled their candidates this month. The team at FTI Consulting reviews the election landscape.

President Macron, who wants to capitalize on this election to anchor his party in France, is facing a difficult social climate amidst the yellow jacket movement that broke out last October. While he was about to develop a strong European campaign, this crisis brought domestic affairs to the centre of the debate, making it mandatory for the executive power to focus on social measures.

President Macron's pro-business policy aimed at modernizing France and creating a more business friendly environment (e.g. labour reforms, lower taxation) as pursued so far is under threat from the yellow jacket movement. There is a risk that the May vote will be reduced to mainly, if not almost exclusively, national considerations. Voters might vote according to the national political situation regardless of whether their vote will have an impact at European level. The single national constituency voting system implemented for the first time this year will reinforce the risk of this becoming a vote of confidence or no confidence for Macron's policy.

Getting into the political ring

La République En Marche (LaREM) is currently leading the polls along with the **Rassemblement National**. Founded by Macron, the En Marche party is defining itself as the most pro-European and progressive party in France and is rolling-out its campaign entitled 'Renaissance' with other centrist parties such as **MODEM**, **Les Radicaux**, **AGIR** and **Civil Society**. The main issues covered by the list are the upcoming Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) negotiations and strong European economic cooperation (Macron's wish to create sectoral European champions). European cooperation on

defence and security, as well as climate change issues, is also on the radar.

At a European level, En Marche continues to build relationships with other European parties. Those discussions include, but are not limited to, members of **ALDE** the main centrist, liberal grouping in the European Parliament that includes members such as **Ciudadanos** from Spain and **D66** in the Netherlands.

En Marche representatives are travelling across Europe and meeting with all political parties to exchange views and potentially form one of the largest political alliances during the next mandate. Back in Brussels, the hot topic is whether En Marche will either join **ALDE** or rip it apart by forming a new political group. The result is most likely to be a mix: a slight reshuffle of **ALDE**'s internal structure and a new name for external political communication.

Rassemblement National (RN) is the former Front National of Marine Le Pen, the extreme right party in France. The RN made it very clear during their January meeting and campaign launch: they will try to make the European elections a referendum about President Macron's programme. In addition, the RN will continue to be vocal on the same issues: against immigration, France first and Europe of the nations. While this is a surprise for nobody, the RN recently confirmed that it was no longer pushing for France to leave the eurozone or the Union itself. At European level, it remains to be seen how Marine le Pen will collaborate with other political parties. While she has always been very close to Matteo Salvini, leader of Italy's Eurosceptic Northern League party and now the country's Deputy Prime Minister, how they will collaborate is not clear yet. It remains to be

seen whether the extreme right parties across Europe will manage to create a grouping in the next European Parliament.

Les Républicains (LR) represents the traditional Gaullist conservative electorate in France. It positions itself as a pro-Europe conservative party, with strong views on immigration and security issues. It is pushing for a European Union, lead by Member States, that protects citizens. However; it is currently led by Laurent Wauquiez, a divisive party leader, and Francois Bellamy, an unknown lead candidate. Consequently, the party is expected to lose some seats and the French delegation in the European Parliament's European People's Party, the centre right grouping, might be weakened.

La France Insoumise (LFI), the extreme left and anti-establishment party of the charismatic leader Jean Luc Mélenchon, is also pushing to make this election a referendum about the Government's policies. Its European views are not very clear yet, but the party often criticizes the European Union as the trojan horse of the current globalisation that only benefits the richest citizens. LFI is also strongly pushing to leave the European treaties as they consider them unfair and that they narrow national sovereignty when it comes to economic reforms. LFI is currently facing a difficult situation in France as the voice of its leader isn't getting the profile and traction it got during the 2017 Presidential elections.

The leftist parties are currently struggling and facing challenging times following the 2017 national elections and the political reshuffle generated in France. The old Socialist Party of former President Hollande, the Communist party and Generations were not able to form a coalition and they might be the big losers of these elections. While the Socialist Party decided to join the newly created civil society campaign 'Place Publique' it is not sure that they will get more than a couple of MEPs. The Greens are expected to secure a good number of MEPs thanks to a strong and active campaign about climate change, echoing the growing call from citizens for European governments to take action.

A campaign that must be closely monitored

The weakening of the main traditional parties since Macron's election creates a new deal for the European Parliament at a crucial time for the Union. A struggle between 'progressive' and 'nationalist' forces is predicted, with an historical breakthrough of the latter. While the outcome of the elections can't be foreseen, it is most likely that anti-establishment and nationalist parties will consolidate their positions.

If the governing party En Marche wins the elections, it will provide the government with additional and desperately needed legitimacy to continue to develop its agenda. On the other hand, if the far-right party (le Rassemblement National) wins the elections, giving populist and nationalist parties more than fifty percent of seats, it will be very difficult for the French Government to continue to move forward with the current agenda. This situation could lead to political paralysis in France.

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