

Barnier Government I: What Changes for Europe?

Victor Warhem



Although the French government is clearly very precarious, with profiles that border on compatibility, there is every reason to believe that it will try to pull out all the stops to defend a French vision in Europe, which it believes is essential to the continent's future. In the context of the strategic discussions underway as the new Commission is being drawn up, the French government hopes to ensure that its views on:

- ▶ Nuclear energy, for which the new Energy Minister Agnès Pannier-Runacher – who has already won battles in this area in the past – is expected to take action. Among other things, her mission will be to secure funding for a new generation of reactors in the 14 European countries that have decided to deepen their relationship with the atom through one or more Major Joint European Interest Projects, or PIIECs, the aim of which is to subsidise breakthrough innovation in an industry that is strategic for Europe.
- ▶ Innovation, at the heart of the action of the probable French Commissioner Stéphane Séjourné. In particular, France could seek to put back on the table its idea, present in Emmanuel Macron's two Sorbonne speeches, of a European agency for disruptive innovation, whereas Commissioner Zaharieva's mission statement for innovation only mentions a reform of the European Innovation Council.
- ▶ Extensive industrial policies, including the promotion of PIIECs for all strategic sectors, and a well-endowed European Competitiveness Fund, probably backed by Eurobonds.
- ▶ On defence, with Benjamin Haddad, Minister Delegate for European Affairs, who is likely to push for greater support for Ukraine; but also with Sébastien Lecornu, who could try to "Frenchify" the European Defence Union currently being designed by Lithuanian Commissioner Kubilius by, for example, defending a new series of joint loans to strengthen European defence industrial production.
- ▶ Security and migration to better meet the expectations of the French in this area.

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1 Introduction: the establishment of precarious government stability in France

After a wait of two and a half months, France had a new government on Saturday 21 September. As the cep predicted in its [cepAdhoc Network](#) published following the legislative elections of 30 June and 7 July 2024, it is indeed a coalition of sorts - a first in the history of the Fifth Republic - that has resulted from the negotiations led by Michel Barnier, Prime Minister appointed at the beginning of September by Emmanuel Macron.¹ Moreover, as cep wrote in a [cepAdhoc](#) in 2022, after the legislative elections at the time, it is therefore more precisely a coalition of the right and centre that is supposed to guarantee France's political stability in the period ahead, insofar as it is the majority group in the Assembly with over 200 MPs, ahead of the New Popular Front, and the far right. It should be noted that this coalition is being launched without a formal coalition contract.

1.1 A government with sometimes contradictory tendencies²

The "Barnier I" government, which President Macron wanted to be a "rallying government", in reality has only one centre-left figure, Didier Migaud, President of the Court of Auditors, who only seems to have embarked on the adventure to secure a place on the Constitutional Council - responsible for verifying the constitutionality of the law - a posteriori. Nevertheless, his status as number 2 in the government, behind Barnier, bears witness to the openness of a government that is otherwise characterised by an entirely right-wing shift in the balance of government forces. Bruno Retailleau, a former right-hand man of François Fillon's, who is considered to be very conservative on social and economic issues, has become Minister of the Interior. Laurence Garnier, a LR member who opposed the 2013 vote on marriage for all under the Hollande government, becomes Secretary of State for Consumer Affairs, after having been considered for the Family portfolio, which would not have failed to cause a scandal from the outset. Most of the ministers from the centre are in fact former LR or UMP members (Sébastien Lecornu, Rachida Dati, Catherine Vautrin, Benjamin Haddad). The left wing of the Macronie party can only boast of getting Ecology (Agnès Pannier-Runacher) and National Education (Anne Genetet).

1.2 A government supported by the far right in the absence of cooperation with a left that is unwilling to compromise³

This shift to the right, which heralds an austerity and anti-immigration trend in the legislative work to come, is essentially due to the configuration of stability that Emmanuel Macron chose - probably forced and coerced - by appointing Michel Barnier. Indeed, it is the far right, the RN and Éric Ciotti's group, that will enable this government to hold on by abstaining on motions of no confidence. Given the anti-far-right Republican front that worked in the second round of legislative elections on 7 July, this configuration was totally unexpected. It seemed more logical to hope that the Socialist Party would break away from the New Popular Front to negotiate a coalition with the right and centre. But the Party Congress held in early September rejected this option, discrediting the scenario in which Bernard Cazeneuve, a centre-left figure, would have become Prime Minister.

¹ Les Echos, [Barnier government: what you need to know](#), 22.09.2024.

² Les Echos, [Sous la pression de Le Pen, Barnier recadre le ministre de l'Economie](#), 24.09.2024.

³ Ibid.

As Gabriel Attal himself maintains, now leader of the Macronist forces in the National Assembly, this government is essentially intended to pass a budget, preserve the "Macronist acquis", and hold out until next summer, when the RN has already announced that it will bring down successive governments, in the hope of a new dissolution that would see them finally come to power.

1.3 A government probably in place to stabilise the country, probably until next summer⁴

France - and Emmanuel Macron with it - is therefore buying itself a period of stability - if Michel Barnier withstands the censure after his general policy speech on 1^{er} October and the budget passes without a hitch. But a period of stability that is in any case precarious.

Between now and the fall of the government, probably next summer, it nevertheless seems that the government wants to use all its influence to steer future European policies, as Michel Barnier's general policy speech attests.

As expected, the general policy speech delivered by the new Prime Minister Michel Barnier, unlike his predecessor Gabriel Attal⁵, made reference to Europe, which must be protected because it is "necessary".⁶ The government therefore intends to be active, in particular to secure new European investment in the ecological transition, defence, innovation and research, and transnational networks.⁷ Barnier also promised that the French ministers would report back to parliamentarians and the public on the progress of European negotiations in the Council.

This is also borne out by the appointment of ministers destined to fight in Brussels (Section 2). We can therefore expect French offensives on nuclear energy, innovation, industrial policy, defence and security (Section 3).

2 A government determined to make its influence felt in Brussels

In addition to the appointment of Stéphane Séjourné, which strengthens President Emmanuel Macron - of whom Séjourné is the most loyal lieutenant⁸ - if not strengthens France within the Commission, Prime Minister Michel Barnier, a connoisseur of the Brussels bubble, has decided to directly supervise the new Minister for European Affairs, Benjamin Haddad, himself a supporter of a Europe of power and a fervent defender of the Ukrainian cause.⁹ In addition, the appointment of Agnès Pannier-Runacher to the energy portfolio, which she held until January 2024, indicates that France will be doing its utmost to defend European funding for investment in nuclear energy, in particular through the European industrial policy instruments known as Major Projects of Common European Interest (PIIECs)¹⁰, despite the fact that Executive Vice-President Ribera Rodriguez and Commissioner Jorgensten, both in charge of the energy portfolio, are notoriously anti-nuclear.¹¹

⁴ Le Monde, [Marine Le Pen says she is "convinced" of another dissolution in a few months' time](#), 14.09.2024.

⁵ Vie publique, [General policy speech by Gabriel Attal](#), 30.01.2024.

⁶ Le Monde, [Ce qu'il faut retenir de la déclaration de politique générale du premier ministre](#), 01.10.2024.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Les Echos, ["le vrai commissaire européen, c'est Emmanuel Macron"](#), 17.09.2024.

⁹ Libération, [Benjamin Haddad aux affaires européennes du gouvernement Barnier : un proche de Macron très offensif sur la guerre en Ukraine](#), 22.09.2024.

¹⁰ Les Echos, [Barnier government: what you need to know](#), 22.09.2024.

¹¹ Euractiv, [Nucléaire : ses défenseurs cherchent des signaux positifs chez les commissaires désignés](#), 25.09.2024.

In fact, the appointment of a fundamentally pro-European Barnier I government has been accompanied by a new Commission that seems to leave the French vision of its organisation far behind. Séjourné, who is in charge of industrial strategy and was at the heart of the Draghi and Letta reports that inspired the new Commission's public policy approach, will have no say in European defence policy or energy policy, even though these two areas should be at the heart of future industrial strategy. It is Henna Virkkunen, Vice-President in charge of defence and innovation, who will be responsible for overseeing the portfolio of the Lithuanian Kubilius, tasked with producing in 100 days a roadmap for the establishment of a European Defence Union. And it is indeed Vice-President Theresa Ribera Rodriguez who will be in charge, essentially, of the Clean Industrial Deal. On the other hand, Stéphane Séjourné will have his say on innovation policies, where Virkkunen will also be able to express his views, as well as on the Union of capital markets, economic security and productivity.¹²

This complex organisation, which was also intended to give Ursula von der Leyen a great deal of decision-making power, complicates the efforts to influence the EU that France has often successfully led in recent years.¹³

The importance attached to Europe in the Barnier I government is also understandable, given the desire to restore influence that has clearly been damaged by the country's political weakness.

3 Conclusion: A weakened but combative France

We can therefore expect a great deal of French activity in Brussels over the coming months. Emmanuel Macron, Stéphane Séjourné, Michel Barnier, Benjamin Haddad and Agnès Panier-Runacher could all be active in promoting France's interests in nuclear matters, joint loans to finance future industrial policies, innovation and defence - including, on this last point, Defence Minister Sébastien Lecornu, whom Michel Barnier has asked to be more present in Brussels.

To sum up, in the context of the strategic discussions under way as part of the process of drawing up the new Commission, the French government hopes to ensure that its views on :

- ▶ Nuclear energy, for which the new Energy Minister Agnès Pannier-Runacher - who has already won battles in this area in the past - is expected to take action. Among other things, her mission will be to secure funding for a new generation of reactors in the 14 European countries that have decided to deepen their relationship with the atom through one or more Major Joint European Interest Projects, or PIIECs, the aim of which is to subsidise breakthrough innovation in an industry that is strategic for Europe.
- ▶ Innovation, at the heart of the action of the probable French Commissioner Stéphane Séjourné. In particular, France could seek to put back on the table its idea, present in Emmanuel Macron's two Sorbonne speeches, of a European agency for disruptive innovation, whereas Commissioner Zaharieva's mission statement for innovation only mentions a reform of the European Innovation Council.
- ▶ Extensive industrial policies, including the promotion of PIIECs for all strategic sectors, and a well-endowed European Competitiveness Fund, probably backed by Eurobonds.
- ▶ On defence, with Benjamin Haddad, Minister Delegate for European Affairs, who is likely to push for greater support for Ukraine; but also with Sébastien Lecornu, who could try to

¹² Euractiv, [New Commission: France loses its voice in Europe](#), 19.09.2024.

¹³ Politico, [Who works for whom in the new EU power structure](#), 17.09.2024.

"Frenchify" the European Defence Union currently being designed by Lithuanian Commissioner Kūbius by, for example, defending a new series of joint loans to strengthen European defence industrial production.

- ▶ Security and migration¹⁴ to better meet the expectations of the French in this area.

So, despite the weakness of a precarious French government whose public finances are in a state of disarray, it remains clear-sighted and has not decided to abandon its European vision, which it considers indispensable to the future of the continent.

¹⁴ Politico, [France's new Europe minister will push to tighten migration rules](#), 30.09.2024.

**Author:**

Victor Warhem: warhem@cep.eu

Representative of the European Policy Centre in France

Centre de Politique Européenne PARIS

17 rue Saint Fiacre | 75002, Paris

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