

“The Brutal Return of History” and the French Presidential Elections: A European Sovereignty Moment

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Many questions have been raised about the upcoming French presidential elections. Will Emmanuel Macron win a second mandate? Will France elect its first woman president? Or will the country turn to the far right? What will happen to the French left? The answers to these questions and the results of the election are far from certain. But one thing is clear, since the invasion of Ukraine the presidential campaign has naturally taken a sharp turn and has pushed the two rounds of voting on April 10 and 24 into the background. How could it be otherwise? On the other hand, for the European development in the aftermath of the Ukrainian war the outcome of the election could prove to be extremely important – as a historical European sovereignty moment.

For the first televised event to bring together the main candidates for the presidential election of 2022, eight of the twelve contenders for the Élysée, including Emmanuel Macron, took turns answering questions. The program was entitled "**France facing the war**" and was mainly devoted to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and its implications, most notably on living standards. It was also Macron's first appearance alongside other candidates and thus an opportunity for all his opponents to criticize him for not confronting them directly until very late in the game. And the game has dramatically changed.

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1 The Country is at War

Until the bitter end, particularly pressing circumstances will have shaped Emmanuel Macron’s presidency. The Russian invasion of Ukraine represents the last ordeal of a five-year period during which Emmanuel Macron had to handle various crises that rocked the nation with the “yellow vests” and the Covid 19 pandemic at the forefront.

1.1 The Pandemic and its Aftermath: The Country is at War – First Episode

Emmanuel Macron is given much credit for his response to the pandemic, especially when it comes to his economic policy of “no matter the cost,” which provided substantial aid to households and companies. His approach is very reminiscent of Mario Draghi’s leadership during the height of the eurozone crisis. Macron’s policies have borne fruit; France is experiencing one of the fastest growths in the eurozone and French GDP reached pre-crisis level last November, faster than the rest of Europe. Growth reached 7% in 2022, the swiftest expansion in 50 years, driven by a sharp rebound in consumer spending and linked to France’s reduced exposure to the supply chain disruptions that have hit Germany, for example.

In retrospect, Macron’s March 16, 2020 “**The Country is at War**” speech will go down in history as the turning point of his first term in office. Despite obstacles (e.g., the controversies surrounding masks, an initially slow and timid vaccination campaign, and the fact that France - the land of Louis Pasteur - was not in the running to find the vaccine against Covid), Emmanuel Macron showed resilience by deciding to leave schools open, to impose compulsory vaccination for nurses and doctors and to implement the “whatever it costs policy” to overcome the economic crisis caused by the pandemic.

1.2 The Russian Invasion of Ukraine: The Country is at War – Episode Two

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, launched on February 24, represents the last ordeal in an already eventful presidency. Emmanuel Macron’s language about the war, like that of many of his counterparts in Europe, has been poignant and clear. Without mincing his words, Macron has called the invasion a “brutal attack” that constitutes an “unprecedented ordeal for many decades” in Europe and marks the “brutal return tragedy in history.” His discourse has also included numerous statements like: “Our Europe has shown unity and determination. It has entered a new era.” Thus, sovereignty, a concept promoted five years prior by Emmanuel Macron, has found a concrete translation, and has quickly moved front and center, becoming the key theme for the presidential elections of April 10 and 24.

Strategic autonomy, European sovereignty are now imperative. The EU commission entitled *A Geopolitical Europe* has been in the making for a while, but it took a war to overcome the reluctance to shift full attention to this concept. Today, Germany is increasing its defense budget and exporting arms. Poland, long hostile to solidarity between EU countries, finds itself on the frontline, hosting refugees and benefiting from European aid. This is undeniably a paradigm shift.

2 Concepts of “Sovereignty”: A Fault Line in the Presidential Election

That the tragedy in Ukraine acts as a damper on the race for the Elysée, is obvious. Moreover, if before the conflict the structuring theme of this presidential campaign was, without a doubt, the question of sovereignty, it is even more so today. Does this focus on sovereignty bode well for the future of Europe? What explains its recurrence in French political discourse and more particularly, in this electoral

campaign? By declaring war on Ukraine, Vladimir Putin has shifted forever the international order and its underpinnings. The war has forced all the candidates who wish to lead France to think about the future differently and along many lines (diplomacy, agriculture, defense, energy, economy). Will the situation validate Emmanuel Macron’s famous Sorbonne speech of 2017, for the construction of European sovereignty?

2.1 Setting the Stage

Although prevalent, visions of sovereignty vary significantly from one candidate to the other. The so called “sovereignists” include Marine Le Pen who wants to exempt France from European and international treaties and Éric Zemmour who plans to leave the European Court of Human Rights. Le Pen’s vision is perfectly summarized in her following explanation: “State sovereignty is to nations what freedom is to the individual.”

Concerns over sovereignty, largely precede the current situation in Europe, the electoral debates and the pandemic. In his famous speech delivered at the Sorbonne in February 2017, Emmanuel Macron condemned a “retreat from sovereignty” and called for the refoundation of a “sovereign, united and democratic Europe.” At the time, Macron had already identified several key factors for European sovereignty that he continues to defend: a capacity for autonomous military action, control over borders, a partnership with Africa, an ecological transition including food security, and the buildup of economic, industrial and monetary power.

Valérie Pécresse, seems to be toeing the line between the visions of Le Pen and Zemmour and that of Macron. In her view, when it comes to the economic matters, “we must bring European and local preferences into play.” The theme of sovereignty is not limited to the right and far-right of the political spectrum. It is one broached by all major presidential candidates, even on the left. Indeed, Yannick Jadot, the green party candidate who advocates for Europe to take the lead on climate, has also joined the debate. He plans to “engage in the reconquest of our food, health, energy, digital, industrial, and therefore democratic sovereignty”.

2.2 A Cross Cutting-theme in all the Campaign Proposals: Regaining Control versus European Strategic Autonomy

Yannick Jadot, a member of the European Parliament, is the standard bearer of the **EELV Party (Europe Ecologie Les verts)**, the green and pro-Europe party. Jadot sets 2040 as the target year for European climate neutrality. This is 10 years ahead of what is proposed today. Jadot also wants Europe to sign an environmental treaty to give “the environment, health and biodiversity a superior legal standing.” This treaty will also recognize ecocide as a crime and make it possible to penalize transnational corporations that destroy the environment.

Beyond environmental policy, Jadot also plans to introduce national and European laws to dismantle GAFAM (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, Microsoft). The goal of such laws is to regain continental, if not national, sovereignty over data protection and the broader management of the digital ecosystem to avoid concentrations among the current tech giants. Moreover, there are plans to create global internet cables and relocate data storage as close as possible to the source of data production. When it comes to foreign policy, Jadot is in favor of nuclear disarmament on a European scale. He deems nuclear weapons “a danger to world peace and life on earth.” Jadot also intends to refuse free trade

agreements and the dumping of subsidized agricultural production which, in his view, “destroys the most vulnerable farmers.” On immigration, the MEP will return to the Dublin III regulation because he believes that it is critical to “stop abandoning migrants who cross the Mediterranean or the continents.”

Jean Luc Mélenchon, a member of the National Assembly, is the candidate for the **France Insoumise Party**, which is on the far left of the political program. His candidacy is perhaps the only one that proposes major changes to the French political system. Indeed, Mélenchon advocates for a “concerted break with the current treaties in order to negotiate new ones, compatible with climate and social emergencies,” submitted to the French referendum. In the line of fire are the recovery of budgetary sovereignty undermined, according to him, by the stability and growth pact and the 3% rule; the modification of the statutes of the ECB; the establishment of ecological protectionism and the right for States to come to the aid of companies, or to create public monopolies in strategic sectors. Such a proposal would come into direct opposition with the rules for competition on European territory. Mélenchon also intends to exit NATO, and he wants opt-outs to be negotiated with the Member States.

Eric Zemmour, leader of the new **Reconquest Party**, is a controversial writer and political commentator turned politician, who has been described by journalists as the French Trump. He has written several books about the decline of French identity, notably *The French Suicide* (2014) and *La France n’a pas dit son dernier mot* (2021). He criticizes the European Union, which “is not a Nation”, of wanting to impose “Western progressivism” on countries like Hungary and Poland. He argues that the Union must instead become a “Europe of the Nations,” with a preponderant place for the Member States and their sovereignty, to the detriment of the “chimeras” represented in his eyes by “the Europe of power” and “social Europe.” Zemmour has also promised significant financial means for the construction of a wall:

“The countries that have built a wall like Hungary, they are the ones who defend European civilization, you know that there is currently a debate in Europe about whether to build walls at the entrance of the European external borders. There are many countries that are in favor of it such as Poland, Greece, etc... (but) Swedish European Commissioner Johansson refuses, saying that it is not up to Europe to build walls (...) I am in favor of it.” *Éric Zemmour in a February interview on BMF TV.*

Emmanuel Macron, The President of the French Republic and founder of the insurgent political party **La République en Marche** reiterated the positions he has held since his election in 2017 and his Sorbonne address - namely that of a pro-European who poses as a leader of the pro-Europeans against the “nationalists” and “populists”. He notably mentioned the Charter of Fundamental Rights, which he wishes to “update” and to make “more explicit,” especially when it comes to the protection of the environment and the right to abortion.

Marine Le Pen, member of the National Assembly and candidate for the far-right **National Rally Party**, has drastically changed her program since 2017, when she faced off against Macron. Back then, she wanted to leave the Eurozone and the European Union. This no longer applies. This time she seeks only to establish the primacy of French law over European law in the Constitution, to restore “permanent checks at national borders” and to exit the European energy market, which she considers to be “total nonsense.” She also plans on pulling out agricultural products from free trade agreements. Her vision of the European project is one which promotes a Europe of nations, where each country only

commits to what it wants – in other words, the antithesis of the current EU. “European sovereignty is only a chimera, denounced for her part Marine Le Pen, on March 8. Umpteenth demonstration with the crisis in Ukraine. Germany opposes the boycott of Russian gas and buys weapons from the United States. New illustration that sovereignty can only be national.

Valérie Pécresse, President of the Ile-De-France nation is the candidate for the center right party, **Les Républicains Party**. In a column published in the newspaper *Le Monde* in early December, Pécresse, detailed her vision for the EU. She proposes an overhaul of the Schengen area agreement "by systematizing the biometric control of all those who wish to enter our territory and by accelerating the recruitment of the 10,000 Frontex border guards." She also wishes to put an end to enlargements of the European Union, with Turkey in the line of sight. Her program also calls for a carbon tax at European borders on imported goods. She will “capitalize” on French assets, namely hydrogen or nuclear energy, which she explains, “must absolutely be recognized as a sustainable economic activity that can benefit from green financing.”

Pécresse also wants the European Union to force online platforms to “cooperate with national judicial authorities” in the fight against false information. On Brexit, she plans to defend the licenses of French fishermen. Finally, the right-wing candidate wants to add to each of her "great ministers" a secretary of state "responsible for going to defend the interests of his ministry in Brussels" and requiring each senior official to take a tour of a European institution. She also proposes lowering France's national contribution to the European budget.

Anne Hidalgo, the current mayor of Paris is the candidate nominated by the **Socialist Party**. She is in favor of a humanist and social Europe. She plans to put an end to the Stability and Growth Pact (PSC), "and its rule of a deficit below 3%." Instead, she favors "a progress pact with rules understandable to all citizens, adapted to the economic situation of each State and encouraging investment." The candidate also wants to strengthen the Union's budget by taxing financial transactions on digital giants, and the entry of goods at borders via a "carbon contribution". Her idea is to use a "fraction of VAT and corporate tax" to lower reliance on national contributions. On migration policy, she wishes to welcome “under every circumstance, asylum seekers, through a balanced distribution throughout the territory and controlled processing times for their applications at each stage.” Her plan will provide immigrants with French lessons for free, so that they can access work quickly and better integrate. She envisions national support for a European migration policy that is “more humane, united and effective,” with a rebalancing of the Dublin agreements. On ecology, Anne Hidalgo wishes to make ecocide a recognized crime.

3 The Momentum goes with Macron: European Sovereignty plus French Leadership

However, many disagreements remain, particularly on the need to propose a new recovery plan in the face of the crisis, or whether or not to continue to use Russian gas. More than 18 months into the Covid-19 pandemic, and with the outbreak of war in Europe, sovereignty remains more than ever the main fault line between candidates, demarcating those that wish to regain control from those who believe that Europe is key for the strategic autonomy of the country. Last week, Eric Zemmour and Marine Le Pen expressed their continued offense with seeing the European flag reappear under the Triumphal Arc in Paris.

Hopefully, the ongoing tragedy in Europe and the disintegration of the international order will remind the French citizenry that in the end the European Union is the new frontier to preserve and nurture, that the European way of life is worth saving. Macron will probably be the candidate who combines a vision of European sovereignty with French leadership most convincing. If we really witnessed the “brutal return of history”, it would be highest time for a European sovereignty moment which has been long on Macron’s agenda. So, it may also become his moment which he has been preparing for.

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