

## Blog

French elections amidst the French Presidency – a reflection of the impact of the French Presidential campaign

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Since January 1, France presides over the Council of the European Union. However, this presidency is taking place in a particular context of the French Presidential elections, which Emmanuel Macron just won. Although Macron claimed a clear victory, it was not as decisive as the past election. While Macron's re-election at a glance enables another term of continuation of the existing French agenda in the Union, the tightening of the gap between the far-right and Macron will have to be acknowledged politically in the years to come and might affect the EU.

For now, the aftermath of the French elections will potentially impact the French presidency to the European Council. How will the agenda of the Council of the European Union be reshaped in light of the French elections? A Council Presidency only occurs once every 13 years will; French ministers be as engaged as expected in European issues to take advantage of this rare opportunity, or will it be squandered in the post-election politicking?

The French presidential election spilled over into European debates, notably when Emmanuel Macron visited the European Parliament. In addition, French ministers will be engaged in their country's legislative campaign in the coming weeks, which will cause scheduling problems at the European level since the majority of meetings between ministers will take place outside the French election months. In the French Constitution, the President does not have the right to speak in front of the Parliament, so the French opponents never get to debate and challenge him directly. But Mr. Macron went to the European Parliament in January to begin the French EU presidency, and his French opponents seized this opportunity to assert their position in the French Presidential campaign, strongly criticizing the president's record on the floor of the Parliament. In this sense, we can quote Yannick Jadot, the Green candidate, who, on this occasion, accused the French President of being "the president of climate inaction". Jordan Bardella, the right-hand man of Marine Le Pen, told President Macron: "You have behaved like a liquidator at the head of the French state". Obviously, these statements had little to do with the European debate, which is proof that the presidential campaign is spilling over into the French Presidency of the EU. The French constitutional and political context have therefore compromised the European debate that is traditionally at the heart of an EU Presidency.

The Presidency of the European Union rests primarily with the ministers. However, some of these ministers will be involved in the French legislative campaign that will take place right *after* the presidential election. Moreover, all the French ministers have been concentrating to various degrees on the presidential campaign. With these two campaigns, the risk that European affairs will be sidelined is substantial; Macron's strong involvement in the war in Ukraine could further indicate an attempt to shore up what would otherwise be a (more) glaring shortcoming.

Thus, during April and May, the European debates have been and will be limited due to these campaigns. This is evidenced by the figures for informal meetings between EU ministers and the Council of the European Union meetings. In January there will be 11 meetings, in February



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17, in March 19, in June 14, but in April and May, only 6 and 5 meetings respectively. With these figures, it is easy to understand that the European calendar of ministers has been prepared with the French election period in mind. According to Yann Wernert, for the Jacques Delors Institute, "because of the French elections, President Macron only has three months to lay the groundwork and move the European project forward (...) The elections will therefore stimulate the Council presidency and encourage rapid results, and at the same time limit its scope and effective duration."

Let's now consider the French priorities in economic and strategic terms for the European Union. We will see that here too, the priorities reflect a "Macronist" vision of the European Union, in opposition to his rival Marine Le Pen.

The French Presidency wants to reform the European Union on the economic scale. It calls for a new European growth model, reconciling economic development and climate ambition. In that sense, we can quote the carbon tax at the EU's borders (the CBAM), one of the priorities of the French Presidency, supported by the French Minister of the Economy. An agreement in principle by the leaders on this project was endorsed on 15 March. To finish, the French government wants to support innovation and growth of European digital players while defining rules for the digital world. Indeed, Paris will also be keen to push forward the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act (DMA), two parts of a European framework for the regulation of large digital platforms. While Marine Le Pen seeks to turn France in on itself, Emmanuel Macron wants to defend ecology and economic development through the European Union.

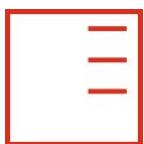
From a strategic and military point of view, France also had priorities, as it wanted to move towards a more sovereign Europe. In this respect, the EU's strategic compass, unveiled in March, is an important step. This document is part of the French strategy to strengthen Europe from a military and security point of view. During these 6 months, France has therefore emphasized strategic independence of the Union. This point of view will undoubtedly be encouraged by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has fundamentally changed the political agenda of the French Presidency. Emmanuel Macron has therefore put some of his European ambitions aside to conduct negotiations with Russia. The Versailles summit, with the European heads of state and government, was originally dedicated to other topics, but the invasion of Ukraine was ultimately the only topic that mattered. They discussed energy (in)dependence and economic sanctions towards Russia. France thus asserted itself as one of the spearheads of the European response through this summit.

The elections, despite maintaining the status quo for Macron, will be decisive for the future of France and Europe; Macron is weakened internally despite a convincing victory, the issue of far-right surging remains unaddressed. France has a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, it has nuclear weapons and it is present in the strategic Indo-Pacific region. The European Union therefore has a reliance on this country as a viable European partner. If Macron



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does not succeed in strengthening the internal cohesion in France, it will remain a question of ‘when’ and not ‘if’ the far-right manages to acquire substantial influence, which has dire European ramifications. As of now, there will only be a short time left of the French presidency of the European Union, making it all the more imperative that Macron generates new momentum and a clear vision for the years to come – both at national and European level.



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