

Emmanuel Macron

A NEW HOPE FOR EUROPE?



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Emmanuel Macron’s victory in both presidential and parliamentary elections in France this year was a big surprise as he won on a clear pro-EU platform and defied the dominant sentiments of populism and Euroscepticism that have been on the rise across the continent in the past decade. For many supporters of the Union, Macron is giving back energy to the weakened project and has been “a new hope in Europe” with his plans to reform both France and the EU. Are they right?

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On 23 April 2017 a political earthquake hit France as it turned out that neither of the mainstream's political parties' candidate made it to the second round of the presidential elections. The young pro-EU and reform minded centrist Emmanuel Macron took everyone by surprise as he ended up on top in the first round. People across France were watching debates between Macron who was stressing the importance of European integration and Marine Le Pen, in whose opinion France should leave the EU. On 7 May 2017, he subsequently beat her by 66.1% to 33.9%.

The path to victory

Just a half year prior to his victory, as Emmanuel Macron announced his candidacy on 16 November 2016, many assumed he would not stand a chance.¹ First of all, he did not have the backing of any of the mainstream parties such as the Socialists, Repub-

licans or even the centrist MoDem. All he had was his movement “*En Marche*” (meaning: on the move) which he created a half year earlier on 6 April 2016 while he was still finance minister.² In his attempts to portray himself as a reformist and anti-establishment's representative, his background in banking where he made millions at the Rothschild Bank did not promise much good either. Furthermore, he had served as a finance minister under the most unpopular President in France's history: Francois Hollande.

However, a number of factors over time turned the odds in his favour. The first one was that he left Hollande's government in time to not be as associated with it anymore. The second was that with his new optimistic, reformist, centrist and pro-EU platform he managed to draw and give a voice to many of the silent majority to his new movement, while most other political parties seemed to move away from the centre

¹ *Le Monde*. 2016. Emmanuel Macron (enfin) candidat à l'élection présidentielle. http://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2017/article/2016/11/16/emmanuel-macron-candidat-a-l-election-presidentielle_5031923_4854003.html

² *Le Monde*. 2016. Emmanuel Macron lance un « mouvement politique nouveau » baptisé « En marche ! » http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2016/04/06/emmanuel-macron-lance-un-mouvement-politique-nouveau-baptise-en-marche_4897274_823448.html

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to the outer flanks. A third factor was the outcomes of the Republican and Socialist parties' primaries. While the Socialists elected left-wing hardliner Benoit Hamon instead of the centre-left former Prime Minister Manuel Valls, the Republicans unexpectedly choose for the staunch Gaullist Francois Fillon instead of the more moderate centre-right Alain Juppe. These two victories left a vacuum in the centre to the benefit of Emmanuel Macron.

Despite this, Emmanuel Macron still had a long road of catching up to do as he was in 3rd place in the polls for quite some time. He was helped by scandals that emerged on Francois Fillon, that reportedly provided fake jobs to his wife and later on his children, dubbed as "Penelopgate"³. The outrage left to a serious decline of support. Furthermore, Emmanuel Macron made a master move with the alliance he struck with Francois Bayrou from the centrist MoDem party.⁴ Knowing that he did not

stand a chance, the latter decided to withdraw from the race and back Emmanuel Macron instead, in exchange for political influence and a cabinet post.⁵ These developments brought Macron to the top 2 of the polls, while managing to surpass the nationalist Le Pen later on.

Political earthquake

The result of this all was the described earthquake, as Francois Fillon ended 3rd, behind Le Pen and Macron. The Socialists' candidate only managed to get over 6% of the vote, making the disaster for the political party complete following the worst approval rates in modern history that Francois Hollande had, and for which he decided not to run for a second term – also unprecedented. The victory for Macron was confirmed in the second round in which he beat Le Pen

³ *L'Express*. 2017. Penelopegate: le résumé de l'affaire qui empoisonne François Fillon en 9 actes. http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/politique/elections/penelopegate-le-resume-de-l-affaire-qui-empoisonne-francois-fillon_1874281.html

⁴ *Le Monde*. 2017. Présidentielle : Bayrou et Macron, une alliance sous conditions.

http://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2017/article/2017/02/22/presidentielle-fin-du-suspense-autour-de-la-candidature-de-francois-bayrou_5083592_4854003.html

⁵ Ironically, Francois Bayrou had to step down just a month after he was appointed Justice Minister due to a scandal over him and his political party for having fictitious jobs paid with European Parliament funds

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by a 2/1 margin, despite the false start he had.⁶

However, the steamroll victory of Macron nor the embarrassment for the mainstream parties did not end there. It was in the campaign for the Parliamentary Elections that Macron and his renamed party “*La République en Marche*” (The Republic on the Move) showed to be true tacticians by appointing both centrist, centre-left, centre-right and independent outsiders as members of the newly formed mixed government led by Prime Minister Édouard Philippe, a former Republican, that appealed to the wider spectrum of voters as the political party gained further support in the polls.

These innovations led to what Joseph Schumpeter called creative destruction in economics, although applied in French politics as the “big tent” party replaced the mainstream parties that seemed to have become out of fashion with voters. Those of

the Republicans who had wanted Alain Juppé to win the primaries expressed support for Macron, while some socialists did so as well, including Manuel Valls. The final result was a great aftershock, as Macron’s political party together with MoDem managed to secure a sizeable majority in the Parliament of 350 out of 577, with a divided Republican opposition of which a group supports the government⁷ and a small group of Socialists, apart from the far right and left-wing candidates from Le Pen and Jean-Luc Mélenchon.

Macron’s ambitions

The new President does not lack ambition. Not only does he want to revitalize the stagnant economy of France through labour market reform and budget overhaul, but he also wants to kickstart European integration

⁶ The false start refers to the overenthusiastic celebration Emmanuel Macron had in a fancy restaurant after ending up on top in the first round of the Presidential Elections, as if he had considered his victory in the second round as guaranteed.

⁷ Shortly after the legislative elections, a group of the right-wing Republicans decided to form their own group called “Les Constructifs” (The Constructives). Read more in *Le Monde*. 2017b. Assemblée nationale : la droite consacre son divorce. http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2017/06/21/la-droite-consacre-son-divorce_5148628_823448.html

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with new Eurozone reforms for more solidarity between its members, as well as banking union reform and increased defence cooperation.⁸⁹ For this reason, many sometimes ambiguous nicknames have been attributed to the 39-year-old extravagant new President, such as Napoleon, the Sun King, Jupiter or the more simple the liberal strongman. While these comparisons might be overstated, it is clear Emmanuel Macron is fighting the tides and taking the leading role France once played in Europe serious again with his plans. He has suggested holding conventions across Europe as well, starting in France and Germany, on reforming the EU for which treaty change – a former taboo – is needed, and for which he managed to get some support from the German Chancellor Angela Merkel.^{10 11}

⁸ *BBC*. 2017. Emmanuel Macron: What are the French president's policies? <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39845905>

⁹ *Financial Times*. 2017. Macron's policies on Europe, trade, immigration and defence. <https://www.ft.com/content/37223e92-3319-11e7-bce4-9023f8c0fd2e>

¹⁰ *The Guardian*. 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/03/emmanuel-macron-to-set-out-his-vision-for-french-renaissance>

¹¹ *Euractiv*. 2017. Macron wants EU nations to hold debates on 'refounding Europe'.

Another more ambitious plan is to repeat his electoral success in France on the European level with plans to disrupt the European Parliament Elections of 2019 in the same way, possible creating a new pro-EU political group of parties.¹²

Europe in trouble

Despite his ambitions, Emmanuel Macron has taken over the French presidency as the EU finds itself still in unstable waters, tarnished by former storms. The Union has been in decline for nearly a decade and in continuous crisis mode due to the financial crisis and Euro crisis that have brought about mass unemployment and economic downturn, disrupting many social lives. The migrant crisis also seriously exposed the incapability of the EU as its member states struggle to find a common approach. Not to mention the Ukraine crisis and the crisis of democracy and the rule of law in Hungary

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/macron-wants-eu-nations-to-hold-debates-on-refounding-europe/>

¹² *Euractiv*. 2017. Macron seeks to disrupt European politics ahead of 2019 EU elections <https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/macron-seeks-to-disrupt-european-politics-ahead-of-2019-eu-elections/>

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and Poland as the list of crises has become longer over time.

Divisions between North and South have emerged in one crisis, while divisions between West and East emerged in the others. Many lost their confidence in both the Union and national leaders, while Euroscepticism has been on the rise in the EU, as well as nationalism and populism across the West. This has culminated in the Brexit referendum in the UK as well as the victory of Donald Trump in the US at the other side of the Atlantic.

The best strategy most mainstream parties have played so far has been to co-opt policies of the populist and nationalist far right and taking a harder and non-constructive stance in both the Euro and refugee crisis as well as against the EU in general. In this constrained context, the Brexit initially shook the foundations of the EU, as it prompted speculations which EU countries would follow. On top of that, the election of Donald Trump has led to disengagement of the US from Europe, who had called before to abolish NATO. He also supported popu-

list leaders such as Marine Le Pen in France and claimed Brexit was ‘‘great’’¹³, even encouraging other EU countries to follow.

Wind of change

Despite all the problems the EU has been going through, recent developments might lead to some light feelings of optimism. These set in already last year, as outright populist victories in Austria and The Netherlands were prevented in December 2016 and March 2017. After having had a nosedive in the past decade, public trust in the EU and the common currency has rebounded as well.^{14 15} The strongest rebound was in France¹⁶, showing that if politicians

¹³ *The Guardian*. 2017. Donald Trump's first UK post-election interview: Brexit a 'great thing'. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/15/trumps-first-uk-post-election-interview-brexit-a-great-thing>

¹⁴ *Pew Research Center*. 2017. Post-Brexit, Europeans More Favorable Toward EU. <http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/06/15/post-brexit-europeans-more-favorable-toward-eu/>

¹⁵ *European Commission*. 2017. Standard Eurobarometer 87 Spring 2017. <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/standard/surveyKy/2142>

¹⁶ *Euractiv*. 2017. Eurobarometer: Europhilia on the rise in France. <http://www.euractiv.com/section/future->

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pursue pro-EU platforms like Macron, they can make the difference.

The high inflows of migrants seem to be somewhat under control following the controversial EU-Turkey deal as well as the closing of the Western Balkans route.¹⁷ Despite the Brexit process that has been initiated, the EU and the Euro zone are actually facing better economic outlooks with much better economic growth rates¹⁸, while the Euro currency has been rising in value again as well. While the United Kingdom has been in constant political turmoil on how to proceed with the Brexit and is currently facing one of the weakest economic outlooks in the West, the EU27 stands more united in negotiations and has a clear agenda on how to proceed with the “divorce”.¹⁹

[eu/news/eurobarometer-europhilia-on-the-rise-in-france/](https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/eurobarometer-europhilia-on-the-rise-in-france/)

¹⁷ *Frontex*. 2017. Risk Analysis for 2017. http://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/Annual_Risk_Analysis_2017.pdf

¹⁸ *Financial Times*. 2017. Eurozone recovery becomes surprise economic story of 2017. <https://www.ft.com/content/8db37b0a-46be-11e7-8519-9f94ee97d996>

¹⁹ *The Guardian*. 2017. UK economy falls to bottom of EU growth league.

Perspectives and challenges

The year 2017 has been crucial for the EU's future and has put an end to the most pessimistic visions for the time being. However, finding common ground on how to set up a better Union will not be easy. The smooth French-German cooperation can help. Angela Merkel has just won her 4th term as chancellor and will be the most experienced European leader for the years to come, despite having been weakened in the last election. While Emmanuel Macron is still learning how to play the European political game, his “freshness” together with Angela Merkel's experience can help them both in building support among the European public and the different member states for the necessary reforms.

Nonetheless, there are serious challenges. Despite the opened window of opportunity created by Macron's victory and the new hope it has offered for Europe, it will be difficult for him to implement changes both in the EU and in France. While he has a

<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/jun/08/uk-economy-falls-to-bottom-of-eu-growth-league>

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majority in the Parliament, the President could more serious opposition from the labour unions, which has made former governments backtrack.²⁰ His popularity has dropped down dramatically as well.

At the same time, the nationalist AfD in Germany recently entered the Parliament, while Chancellor Angela Merkel is struggling to build a coalition with the Greens that have embraced Macron's plans for Europe and the Liberals that have been more critical of these. The outcome remains to be seen. Even if the German-French engine does get fully up and running again in favour of more integration in the EU, there are many member states who see the future of the union differently. Moreover, many populist Eurosceptic parties still enjoy strong support in the EU. Austria just had an election as well in which the transformed conservative ÖVP prevailed. While Austria will have its youngest chancellor ever, Sebastian Kurz's rhetoric was quite radical

to beat the far-right Freedom Party, with whom he wants to make a coalition. Recent elections in the Czech Republic also led to the victory of more Eurosceptic parties. Furthermore, in Italy 1 out of 3 people want to leave the EU²¹ and next year's Parliamentary elections could bring the populist "5 Stars Movement" into power that wants to hold a referendum on the Euro.

One thing is clear: while 2017 has been rather more positive for the EU's future due to the victory of the pro-EU Emmanuel Macron, important challenges of the EU still have to be tackled and the populist surge has not ended. While there has been new hope, Emmanuel Macron cannot produce a miracle. Just as with his victories in France, he will need additional help and a good dose of luck.

²⁰ *The Economist*. 2017. Emmanuel Macron's quest to reform France. <https://www.economist.com/news/europe/21721942-his-presidential-campaign-was-long-shot-his-next-challenge-may-be-even-harder-emmanuel-macrons>

²¹ PewResearchCenter. 2017. Post-Brexit, Europeans More Favorable Toward EU. <http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/06/15/post-brexit-europeans-more-favorable-toward-eu/>

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