

# DIPLO Development Summaries 5

## The French Presidential Election and the Future of the European Union

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*The outcome of the second round of the French Presidential election on 24 April may be a key inflection point for the future of the European Union. Mathew Doidge reflects on the contrasting visions of the two candidates: Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen.*

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On the evening of 7 May 2017, in the courtyard of the Louvre amidst waving Tricolore and the flash of smartphone cameras, Emmanuel Macron, basking in victory over his far-right rival Marine Le Pen, promised “I will do everything to make sure you never have reason again to vote for extremes”. Five years later, in a repeat of 2017, Macron will again face Le Pen in the second round of the French Presidential election, the third time in the last 20 years in which a far-right candidate has made it to this point.

In the run-off on 24 April, Macron will seek to become the first President in 20 years to be re-elected, an outcome that, at this stage, is by no means a foregone conclusion. The 2022 campaign has been the most far-right in modern French history, with Le Pen and Eric Zemmour together garnering more than 30 per cent of the vote in the first round. Even candidates of the traditional right pandered to the interests of the radical right constituency, speaking to issues of immigration and the place of Islam in France and, in the case of [Valérie Pécresse of les Républicains](#), referencing the racist ‘[great replacement theory](#)’ favoured by Zemmour.

Le Pen’s decision to avoid the divisive language utilised in her 2017 campaign, and to focus on cost of living issues, has played well with the French electorate, helping to sanitise the image of herself and her party. Indeed, in [a poll earlier this month Le Pen emerged as the second most popular political figure in France](#). The importance of this cost of living focus cannot be underestimated. [Identified as the most pressing issue by French voters](#), it is also providing a challenge for Macron, who has been labelled a ‘[president of the rich](#)’. Notwithstanding that [disposable income has increased twice as quickly under the Macron presidency as under the previous two incumbents](#), and that [inflation and unemployment figures compare favourably to other industrialised Western states](#), criticisms around the cost of living are biting. Petrol prices are now almost 50 percent higher than the level that triggered the *gilets jaunes* protests in 2018, and Macron’s proposal to increase the retirement age to 65 raises memories of the nearly two months of protests that accompanied his last attempt to do so.

As a consequence, where Macron defeated Le Pen by a margin of 32.2 percent of the vote in 2017, ten days out, polling is far narrower at 53.5 per cent for Macron and 46.5 per cent for Le Pen among those who have expressed a voting preference (compared to 64 per cent and 36 per cent at this point in 2017). [With 19 percent of those who intend to cast a vote not yet expressing a preference between the candidates](#), a Le Pen victory is not inconceivable ([The Economist places it as high as a one-in-five chance – the same as for Trump in 2016](#)).

Beyond the clear implications for the direction that France will take over the next five years, the vote on 24 April will also be a key inflection point for the future of the European Union. The views of Macron and Le Pen on European integration could not contrast more, with the outcome of the vote potentially far more significant for Europe than was the 2016 BREXIT referendum in the United Kingdom.

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### **Macron: A strong, sovereign European Union**

Emmanuel Macron has always been a staunch Europeanist. Support for the European Union was at the heart of his 2017 campaign, [notwithstanding a majority of the French electorate expressing distrust of the EU](#). And this pro-Europeanism remains central to his worldview in 2022, further energised by events in Ukraine. With a vision of a [“Europe that is powerful in the world, fully sovereign, free in its choices and in charge of its own destiny”](#), a Macron Presidency will push for further integration in core areas.

Core to Macron’s approach is the need for strengthening European strategic autonomy in security and defence, an issue on which he was arguably significantly ahead of the curve (alongside Merkel), but to which other European leaders are now moving in the same direction. The fallout from the fall of Kabul in August 2021 and the AUKUS alliance announcement in September 2021 (undermining French Indo-Pacific policy) had already begun to shift European perceptions, with Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announcing that a *Summit on Defence* would be organised in 2022 under the French Presidency of the Council. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has increased this momentum. The apparent shift in attitude of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz toward more European defence integration, and the broad support for the establishment of a common defence and security policy among the domestic publics of EU Member States (with 77 percent of EU citizens in favour), has created a unique (and not necessarily long-lasting) set of circumstances. A Macron victory can therefore be expected to seek to push strongly towards the establishment of some kind of European Defence Union, while leaders of other Member States and domestic publics are amenable.

Under a Macron presidency, we are also likely to see a push for greater European cooperation and autonomy in a range of other areas. Energy independence, and cooperation in the technology sector, are obvious ones. But with immigration of particular concern to the French electorate, it is likely that Macron will push for further reform of the Schengen framework removing Europe’s internal borders. Further moves towards strengthening the EU’s external borders (including the establishment of a [“real security police force at the external borders”](#)), and to revise asylum and migration rules will be at the forefront of such efforts.

A victory for Emmanuel Macron will see even more focused French leadership at the European level. With German Chancellor Scholz only having assumed office in December

2021, succeeding Angela Merkel who had dominated the European scene for the previous 16 years, it can be expected that Macron will seek to play something of an elder statesman role in the Franco–German partnership at the heart of Europe. What remains unclear is whether the exigencies of the Ukraine crisis, including the need to reinforce European unity, will alter Macron’s approach to rule of law issues in Poland and Hungary, concerning which he has been a strong voice, warning as recently as January that [“the end of the rule of law is the beginning of authoritarianism”](#).

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## **Le Pen: FREXIT by any other name**

By contrast, a victory for Marine Le Pen would have potentially severe consequences for European unity. Le Pen’s 2017 campaign was launched with a promise to [free France from the three ‘tyrannies’ of globalisation, Islamic fundamentalism, and the European Union](#). She advocated withdrawal from the Eurozone and, should the EU not agree to transform itself into a looser coalition of states and reintroduce internal border controls, from the Union itself. Fast forward to the 2022 campaign, as the consequences of BREXIT have played out in the United Kingdom, and Le Pen has officially abandoned the policies of withdrawal from the euro and FREXIT. This change, however, is more rhetorical than real.

Le Pen’s policies toward the European Union, while eschewing the more radical language of 2017, in essence amount to much the same thing. At the centre of her approach is a fundamental [transformation of the EU into a loose “association of free nations”](#), in contrast to the current structure that she defines as “being built against the peoples”. In this, she is explicitly targeting the role of the European Commission – the embodiment of the principal of supranational cooperation at the European level. While no longer calling for the [abolition of the Commission as she did in 2019](#), she seeks to transform it into little more than a secretariat for the Council, shifting powers definitively back into the hands of the Member States.

Another focus of this transformation is attacking the notion of equal treatment in France, on which the four fundamental freedoms of the EU are built. If elected, she has committed to establishing legal discrimination between foreigners and French nationals by restricting access to social benefits, social housing and healthcare for non-French citizens, and by prioritising the employment of citizens over EU (and other) nationals. She would also prioritise French firms in offering local or national government contracts. National preference, in other words, is at the core of Le Pen’s approach, though it violates the fundamental laws and principles of the European Union.

Additional pledges to unilaterally reduce the French contribution to the Union’s budget by €5 billion per year, to effectively abandon Schengen by reimposing border controls with other Member States, to increase the agricultural subsidies provided to French farmers, and to establish the primacy of French law over that of the EU ([mirroring recent events in Poland](#)) also violate European Union law or regulations. In short, Le Pen’s programme, if followed, would lead to a de facto FREXIT in all but name.

While it would be difficult for Le Pen to achieve these aims at the European level – many of her intended measures are likely to be rejected by domestic or European courts as violations of the treaties on which the EU is built – a Le Pen presidency would still cause major

problems for the practice of cooperation within the existing European framework. It can, for example, be foreseen that the Franco-German ‘engine room of Europe’ will grind to a halt, as Le Pen significantly adjusts the relationship with Berlin. A freezing of major areas of cooperation between the two is to be expected, with an announcement already made that [joint arms cooperation will cease, citing “irreconcilable strategic differences”](#). Instead, Le Pen can be expected to draw closer to other illiberal leaders – notably in Hungary and Poland – and act as a block on cooperation at the European level. Among other things, French support would undermine the Union’s efforts to hold these countries to account for rule of law violations and democratic backsliding. Le Pen is also likely to oppose the creation of further EU Free Trade Agreements, something that will impact New Zealand in particular. In other words, even where Le Pen is unable to pursue her policies for fundamental transformation of the EU, her presence is likely to lead to conflict and paralysis within the Union itself.