

French Presidential candidates and "Europe": real convergence or optical illusion?

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Concluded by a victory of Emmanuel Macron celebrated on the tune of the Ode to joy, the second round of the 2017 presidential election had pitted him against a supporter of a "Frexit" from the European Union and the euro, on the basis of a particularly clear cleavage. Five years later, the evanescence of this binary divide appears striking, as does the relative convergence of the candidates' positions on European issues, even before the Russian aggression in Ukraine seems to reinforce it even more... Partly linked to the nature of the policies put in place by the European Union (EU) in response to the international crises of recent years (notably the bulk purchase of vaccines and the Recovery Plan against the coronavirus), this convergence of the candidates needs to be analyzed more precisely in the perspective of the April 2022 presidential election and the legislative elections that will follow.

The positioning of the French parties and their candidates is indeed part of a dialectic combining consensus and opposition, which is expressed in particular in Strasbourg and Brussels through the heterogeneous votes expressed by the European deputies elected in France^[1]. Important differences exist between the candidates competing for the votes of the French if one looks at the details of their positions and proposals^[2]. However, it is by putting into historical perspective, in relation to 2017 and to more structural and older controversies, that we will try to evaluate the strength of the cleavages caused by European issues in France, on the basis of deliberately cursory and subjective "campaign impressions" concerning membership in the EU, economic, financial and environmental Europe, as well as Europe as a power. And it is by looking both within and beyond our national borders that we will try to assess the intensity of such cleavages, which sometimes seem minor compared to those that separate the French candidates from many of their counterparts in neighboring countries.

1. NATIONAL EUROPHOBIA AT HALF-MAST: LONG LIVE EU BELONGING "À LA FRANÇAISE"?

Three main observations seem to emerge with regard to the political cleavages caused by France's membership in the EU, which is no longer questioned in principle, but rather in terms of its modalities - at the cost of a shift that reflects the candidates' desire to keep pace with the evolution of public opinion in France.

1.1 Almost all the candidates are attached to France's membership in the EU

Nicolas Dupont-Aignan is the only candidate in the 2022 presidential election who seems to dislike the EU enough to propose leaving it. Like François Asselineau's yesterday, his europhobia will probably not garner much support - as if the "Frexit" had gone "flat".

This relative national unanimity seems to draw lessons from the votes cast since 2017 as well as from the opinion polls that have followed one another since then, all of which make a possible French exit from the EU and the euro zone appear repulsive. The European responses to the pandemic crisis, and more recently to the war in Ukraine, have undoubtedly contributed to this new deal - as has the "counter-publicity" produced by the "Brexit," which appears to be a chaotic process, to say the least, whose short-term benefits are hardly evident.

It is not that the majority of French people, and therefore of the candidates, have become very Europhile: even the President-candidate Emmanuel Macron goes on to repeat that Europe must be "changed" or even "refounded". It is not that many of them have not made a purely tactical retreat to mask a still latent europhobia, the persistence of which should not be underestimated at the level of political staffs. It is rather that they express various shades of Euroscepticism^[3], which can be expressed in particular with regard to the modalities of French membership in the EU, as well as on the economic (see §-2) and diplomatic (see §-3) issues.

[1] To consult the main votes of the MEPs elected in France and in the EU, see <https://www.votewatch.eu/>

[2] For a detailed assessment of the European proposals of the candidates for the 2022 French presidential election, see "Agence EEE, Remettre l'Europe au cœur de la campagne" Europanova, Europartenaires, Jacques Delors Institute, Maison de l'Europe de Paris, Mouvement Européen-France, Confrontations Europe, March 2022

[3] On this topic, see in particular "Un euroscepticisme à la française" Bruno Cautrès, Thierry Chopin, Emmanuel Rivière, Report, Jacques Delors Institute, November 2021

1.2 Dual membership à la carte?

The course of the presidential campaign has shown that France's membership in the EU is so uncomfortable that several candidates disapprove of it on certain points.

On the symbolic level, the controversy caused by the brief presence of a European flag under the Arc de Triomphe on January 1, 2022, made it possible to sketch a fairly clear dividing line: while Emmanuel Macron claimed this presence, other candidates felt that this flag had no place in this sanctuary of national memory (Le Pen, Zemmour, Dupont-Aignan, Mélenchon...), while a 3rd category of candidates (notably Valérie Pécresse) felt that the European flag had a vocation to be hoisted there alongside the French flag, to symbolize our dual belonging to France and the EU, as during official speeches or on the pediment of public buildings.

The dissonance concerning French membership in the EU was also expressed on a more normative level, notably around the debate on the primacy of Community law over national law - as if a "legal Frexit" à la carte had replaced a more global "political Frexit". Eric Zemmour appears to be the most radical in this respect, since he wishes to assert the primacy of French law over Community law (which would then no longer be common to the Member States...) and to free France from the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights. Jean-Luc Mélenchon wants France to apply only the European standards that suit it and to set aside the application of others, particularly in social and ecological matters, while Fabien Roussel calls for national economic choices to be defined without depending on European directives, within the framework of a "Europe of nations that cooperate with each other". Marine Le Pen wishes to organize a referendum on immigration to give a popular and legal basis to her refusal to apply European rules contrary to "zero immigration" (family reunification, right of asylum...), while allowing her to assert the primacy of French constitutional law over European law^[4]. Valérie Pécresse also questions the primacy of European law on issues related to immigration control, while wishing that France regains its "legal sovereignty". In total, only Anne Hidalgo, Yannick Jadot and Emmanuel Macron do not question the principle of the primacy of European law over national law, even though they may be critical of one or another EU norm or policy.

1.3 What political and institutional Union?

Finally, it seems that the candidates in the presidential election do not have the same conception of the political nature of the Union to which France belongs.

Yannick Jadot is one of the few candidates to display a "federalist" commitment^[5], based on an increased role for the European Parliament (which Anne Hidalgo also supports), including the appointment of the President and members of the European Commission, who he believes should be chosen from among MEPs. He is also in favor of moving to qualified majority voting in the Council of Ministers, as is Anne Hidalgo, whereas most of the other candidates do not want this. The possibility of electing a small proportion of MEPs on transnational lists is supported by only a few candidates (including Yannick Jadot and Emmanuel Macron).

[4] On this issue, see Marc-Olivier Padis, XY, Terra Nova, April 2022

[5] See for example the interview given by Yannick Jadot to *Investir* in February 2022: <https://investir.lesechos.fr/actionnaires/interview/la-guerre-nous-montre-combien-nous-avons-besoin-d-europe-2006918.php>

All in all, most of the candidates for the French presidential elections distance themselves from the federal vision assumed by the new coalition in power in Germany^[6], for whom the necessary deepening of European construction presupposes accentuating the federal dimension of the EU by strengthening the role of the European Parliament and abolishing unanimity in Council votes.

2. ECONOMIC, FINANCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL EUROPE: AN INTERVENTIONISM THAT CAN NOW UNITE?

The international crises that have affected our continent and our country since 2017 and the responses to them by the EU also seem to have contributed to the weakening of partisan divisions on European economic issues. Opened by the adoption of a "Green Deal" with the objective of transforming Europe into the first carbon-neutral continent by 2050, the 2019-2024 legislature has taken on an even more interventionist dimension in the face of the crisis caused by the coronavirus, and then by the consequences of the war in Ukraine - which also contributes to the relative convergence of the positions of the candidates in this spring's presidential election.

2.1 An economic and monetary union that is definitely more French

Respecting the commitment to limit the French deficit to 3 per cent of GDP was a clear dividing line in 2017, between candidates eager to show their commitment to rigorous management of public finances (notably Emmanuel Macron and François Fillon) and other candidates more or less strongly denouncing a regressive "dogma" without a solid economic foundation. This situation contrasts sharply with that of the spring 2022 election, which is taking place at a time when the "whatever it takes" approach is still being applied and in the midst of the "suspension" of the Stability and Growth Pact - whose scheduled end in 2022 could be postponed in order to allow states to better deal with the consequences of the war in Ukraine. In this context, it is noteworthy that Emmanuel Macron, who presents himself as the most European candidate, no longer envisages a return to a public deficit below 3% before 2027 at best, whereas his 2017 program aimed for a balanced budget in 2022 - thus consecrating a national financial drift and a political convergence symbolizing the "southernization" of France on this register. Only Valérie Pécresse seems to stand out for her willingness to return to a more sustainable management of France's deficits and debt - a timid echo of the warnings issued by non-partisan institutions such as the Cour des Comptes and the Banque de France.

Beyond its cyclical dimension, this relative convergence of the presidential candidates seems to accompany the evolution of the management of economic and monetary union towards the traditional French theses: in addition to the ultra-flexible application of the Stability Pact, one can also point to the hyper-activism of the ECB, the adoption of financial rescue plans during the eurozone crisis, and then that of the "Next Generation EU" recovery plan in the face of the pandemic crisis, innovations that were acclaimed in our country and contested in many others, notably in Germany and the Nordic countries.

^[6] For a synthetic and commented version of the German coalition agreement, see François Hublet and Pierre Menerat, "Doctrine of the new German era", *Le Grand Continent*, November 2022
<https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2021/11/25/doctrine-de-la-nouvelle-ere-allemande/>

It is only on the repayment of the Recovery Plan that the French candidates still seem to oppose each other, with Jean-Luc Mélenchon and the far-right candidates criticizing the fact that France will have to repay much more than it receives at this stage, while Emmanuel Macron and other candidates prefer to focus on the creation of new common resources called to repay the loan taken out by the EU.

By becoming more Keynesian, the European monetary policy-fiscal policy mix has also become more French, so that the cleavages between candidates and parties have to be redeployed on issues that are more secondary in the eyes of the voters, such as the nature of the ECB's mandate or the cancellation of the claims that it holds against heavily indebted states. Divisions also persist with regard to the structural reforms proposed for France, particularly in the areas of pensions and the labor market, for which the EU is presented as a promoter, or even a prescriber, by sovereignist candidates on both the right and the left - even though it only has the power to recommend, not to command.

2.2 An EU liberal software now more industrial?

The pandemic crisis first led to a reminder of the European objective of "free and undistorted competition" and that it was therefore not possible to hinder the free circulation of medical products and devices within the European market - after the French authorities had been tempted to ban their export to Italy in the spring of 2020... In a second phase, the coronavirus has above all led the member states to join forces for the group purchase of vaccines, which has allowed each of them to have access to them and to receive a number of doses proportional to their population. If some of the candidates have sometimes invoked the use of the Russian vaccine (notably Jean-Luc Mélenchon), none of them has been able to rely on the unavailable French vaccine, so that the European solidarity at work in the field of health has finally been supported, more or less willingly.

Because it has highlighted national and European dependencies in the pharmaceutical and economic fields, the pandemic crisis has also led to a reinforcement of the need for an industrial approach traditionally favored by all French parties and candidates. It has in fact led to the strengthening of EU support for "Industrial Alliances" or "Important Projects of Common European Interest", which are authorized to disregard full compliance with European competition rules in all sectors deemed strategic by Europeans and in which their "domestic" market shares appear to be too small (for example, for semiconductors, electric batteries, hydrogen, etc.). The war in Ukraine has also highlighted our economic dependence of all kinds on Russia, and should reinforce the industrial mobilization of Europeans[7]. It should reduce criticism of an overly liberal Europe and thus bring the positions of the presidential candidates closer together - even though the EU authorities and those of the other member states do not share France's enthusiasm for "reindustrialization" and relocation, the intensity of which is a reflection of the de-industrialization that has affected our country to a far greater extent than its neighbors[8].

[7] The informal Versailles Summit of March 10 and 11, 2022 adopted a declaration setting the objective of reducing European dependence on defense industries, energy and a number of economic segments (food, minerals, technology, etc.) - see the text of the "Versailles Declaration": <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/11/the-versailles-declaration-10-11-03-2022/>

[8] On these industrial and commercial issues, see Yves Bertoncini, "Relocating in France with Europe," Fondapol, 2020 <https://www.fondapol.org/etude/relocaliser-en-france-avec-leurope/>

2.3 An opening up of trade now tempered?

It is also with regard to the EU's trade policy that the convergence of the presidential candidates in the spring of 2022 is evident: almost none of them declare themselves in favor of new liberalization agreements between the EU and its global partners, or venture to approve the ratification of the trade agreement concluded between the Europeans and Mercosur or the Investment agreement concluded with China, Emmanuel Macron included. If the agreement with China is part of a broader political context (marked by the non-respect of human rights in that country), this hexagonal reticence brings together candidates for whom the opening of European trade seems to be perceived more as a problem than as an opportunity, just when France has posted a record trade deficit in 2021, which contrasts with the surpluses recorded by most other member states^[9].

It is therefore mainly on the watchwords and measures for regulating globalization and international economic exchanges that the presidential candidates are seeking to distinguish themselves - and *de facto* distinguish themselves from many of their European counterparts. The creation of a "border carbon tax" thus appears to be an emblematic measure supported by all 12 candidates, even though it is the subject of intense debate in the European Parliament and among the member states^[10]. The same is true of a number of recent doctrinal shifts in the European institutions, aimed in particular at encouraging the filtering of foreign direct investment in Europe, at combating unfair competition from non-European companies benefiting from massive state aid, or at better ensuring the effective application of trade agreements already signed.

2.4 A "European Green Deal" supported with varying degrees of enthusiasm

Finally, it is on the environmental register that the overall perception of the EU seems to have evolved in France compared to spring 2017, especially since the implementation of the "Green Deal for Europe" is the 1st priority of the 2019-2024 legislature, with ambitious objectives of climate neutrality of the continent by 2050 and of biodiversity protection. None of the candidates questioned these objectives in principle, so that their nuances and even their opposition crystallized rather on the pace and scope of the ecological transition to be promoted.

Anne Hidalgo, Emmanuel Macron and Valérie Pécresse advocate an acceleration of efforts in order to apply the intermediate European objective of -55% of CO₂ emissions by 2030, while Yannick Jadot proposes to aim for -65%, while declaring himself in favor of ending the sale of thermal cars as early as 2030 - an issue on which Jean-Luc Mélenchon, Anne Hidalgo and Fabien Roussel do not express themselves very explicitly. Because he is the outgoing President, Emmanuel Macron is criticized on the left for his lack of results in environmental matters, with the symbolic highlighting of the recent judicial condemnations of the French authorities for "climate inaction".

[9] France's trade deficit has deteriorated to 87 billion euros in 2021, while Germany's and Italy's trade surpluses are respectively 173.3 and 50.4 billion euros.

[10] The creation of a "border carbon adjustment mechanism" was the subject of a first political agreement at the EU Council of Ministers in March 2022.

It is more at the sectoral level that the divisions between candidates seem to remain strong, for example on energy or food. In the first area, the recent "financial taxonomy" adopted by the EU to "green" private investments has highlighted the divide between candidates who support nuclear energy (including Emmanuel Macron, Marine Le Pen, Valérie Pécresse, Fabien Roussel and Eric Zemmour) and those who favor the development of renewable energies and other energies (biomass, hydrogen, etc.) - this divide being above all national insofar as the definition of the "energy mix" is the responsibility of the EU Member States. The same cannot be said for the common agricultural policy and European standards for agri-food products, on which the candidates in favor of adopting more restrictive measures for farmers (notably Yannick Jadot and Anne Hidalgo) and those for whom it is appropriate to favor a more limited ecological transition in this sector, including with regard to the consequences of the war in Ukraine, are opposed.

3. "EUROPE POWER": A HEXAGONAL "MANTRA" THAT IS NOT ENTIRELY CONSENSUAL

France's traditional objective, the quest for a more powerful Europe at the international level, also seems to have made some progress since 2017, and even more so since the Russian military aggression in Ukraine^[11], whose shadow hangs over this presidential campaign. This evolution of the EU seems less likely to relativize in a clear and lasting way the cleavages that the European geopolitical challenges can raise among the candidates and the political forces that support them.

3.1 Towards a powerful Europe, with or without NATO?

At the same time as it has relegated the other debates of the presidential campaign to the background, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has given rise to a facade of unanimity in opposition to Vladimir Putin and support for the Ukrainian people. No candidate seems to oppose in principle the solidarity granted to Ukrainian victims and asylum seekers (see §-3.2), nor the sanctions imposed on Moscow. It is only on the modalities of these sanctions that differences appear, some candidates (including Yannick Jadot) being for example in favor of a total embargo on Russian hydrocarbon exports; it is the same for the actions of solidarity with Ukraine, which some candidates would like to extend to the establishment of a no-fly zone, on the model used during the war in former Yugoslavia.

This relative and punctual convergence does not erase the cleavages relative to relations with Russia and the United States, the two great countries in relation to which European construction was launched. Although they are now trying to downplay it, far-right candidates have long displayed a closeness to Putin's Russia, no doubt based on their common defense of a presumed white and Christian European identity. Candidates of the radical left continue to display a more or less explicit anti-Americanism, which has simultaneously led them to a form of complacency towards Russia (notably Jean-Luc Mélenchon).

[11] On this issue, see Sylvain Kahn, L'Europe à l'épreuve de la guerre, Terra Nova, March 2022
<https://tnova.fr/democratie/international-defense/europe-a-lepreuve-de-la-guerre/>

These two types of candidates have in common that they want France to leave NATO, either totally or from its integrated command (like Marine Le Pen, and Fabien Roussel) - which separates them from the more central candidates (Yannick Jadot, Anne Hidalgo, Emmanuel Macron and Valérie Pécresse) - Eric Zemmour even opposing frontally any European defense.

As for the rest, almost all the candidates in the presidential election of spring 2022 could otherwise take up the French antiphon that "Europe was not created to make a single market" - whereas this perspective was a non-secondary goal for a number of member states - and thus more or less strongly subscribe to the perspective of a more political Europe, except for the candidates of the extreme right.

3.2 What balance between border control and open migration?

While the "refugee crisis" of 2015 divided French political parties and then the candidates in the 2017 presidential election, the influx of asylum seekers caused by the war in Ukraine generated a much broader opening, both among the French and among those who are running for their votes in April 2022. Only Eric Zemmour initially ruled out welcoming refugees fleeing Ukraine, before changing his mind and highlighting their Christian faith and their occasional presence on our territory - something Marine Le Pen had done a little more spontaneously. It is not certain that this circumstantial rapprochement will withstand the arrival of several hundred thousand Ukrainians on our territory, and even less so the concomitant arrival of asylum seekers and migrants from the Middle East and Africa. The fact remains that very few candidates endorse the openness to migration displayed by the contract concluded by the new German coalition, which undoubtedly echoes the economic and identity-related difficulties experienced by France.

On a related note, the pandemic crisis initially aroused an almost unanimous emotional reflex to return to national border controls, before separating those who wanted to maintain them from those who favored closing the borders between the EU and the rest of the world (including Emmanuel Macron). As for the terrorist attacks, they also led to a return to national border controls, which was supported by most of the candidates. During his debate between the two rounds, Emmanuel Macron retorted to Marine Le Pen that "you don't stop terrorists at the borders!": after the attack in a church in Nice, he nevertheless announced the deployment of 2,000 men at the French borders, a measure that was not strongly criticized by the other parties, including to advocate for a strengthening of the European Border Guard Corps.

3.3 EU enlargement: a widely shared refusal?

Ukraine's recent application to join the EU did not arouse any frontal opposition from the presidential candidates, given its emotional and symbolic dimension and the medium-term perspective it opens up. However, it is necessary to read between the lines in order to discern those who would be ready to consider it in a more concrete way, as well as to find candidates who are in favor of new accessions to the EU, notably from the countries of the Western Balkans - the accession of Erdogan's Turkey being now ruled out by all.

On this basis, some of the candidates indicate that any new membership would not be possible without deepening and reforming the EU (e.g. Emmanuel Macron and Valérie Pécresse), while others may combine opposition to deepening and enlargement (e.g. Marine Le Pen, Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Eric Zemmour). It is therefore likely that the nostalgia for a smaller Europe that could look like a France in bigger confirms the low appetite of many candidates for an enlargement of the EU and their predilection for a deepening of the European construction - with the exception of those from the extreme right.

CONCLUSION - EUROPEAN CONVERGENCES OR OPTICAL ILLUSION?

All in all, these "campaign impressions" reveal a fairly clear declaratory convergence of the candidates for the next presidential election on European issues in relation to 2017, and which undoubtedly owes a great deal to the evolution of the geopolitical context of the last few years and months and to the reactions it has provoked at the community level. It is because the EU has become more French, and the French more European, that the "Europe of Brussels" divides the candidates less in the spring of 2022. This convergence does not mean that the divisions have disappeared, but rather that they have been redeployed on apparently more subsidiary themes and issues, subject to a new inventory in the short and medium term...

Looking beyond our borders confirms this impression of convergence, but also suggests that the debates and controversies generated by our country's membership in the EU will continue in the three areas explored above. The EU seems to have the vocation to remain a "Federation of Nation-States", whose federal dimension will remain stinging for our unitary and Jacobin culture; an economic construction based on a fundamentally liberal software, even if it has been updated thanks to successive crises and the hardening of globalization; and finally a geopolitical power whose emergence has the vocation to articulate itself with that of our American ally, notwithstanding our sovereignist and anticapitalist traditions^[12]. The subjective picture drawn above in this very special spring of 2022 is therefore intended to be as enlightened as possible - at the risk of an optical illusion.

[12] On this issue, see Yves Bertoncini, European defense : the need for convergence criteria, including for France <http://yvesbertoncini.eu/en/developpement/european-defense-the-need-for-convergence-criteria-including-for-france/>