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Blue, white and dread

The suicidal forces driving France's mainstream political parties into the ground

In two rounds of voting on 23 April and 7 May, French citizens will elect the Elysée Palace's newest resident. The vote could prove decisive for the fate of the European Union, with far-right National Front candidate Marine Le Pen tipped to win the first round and proceed to the run-off ballot. A second round Le Pen win could spell the end of the EU. As President, she would seek to pull France out of the currency union and presumably out of the EU entirely.

Unlike the looming Brexit, the European Union would not survive a 'Frexit'. In the words of former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, "without France, everything is nothing". France is Germany's irreplaceable partner in the project of European unification, which, as evinced by multiple crises affecting the EU during the last decade, is still very much ongoing. France and Germany have together acted as initiators, visionaries and promoters of integration since the launch of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, the signing of the Rome Treaties in 1957 and through the EEC and EC's transformation into today's European Union. It is for this very reason that the much-vaunted Franco-German 'driving force of integration' remains indispensable even in a repeatedly enlarged and substantially deeper EU.

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Even the recent reactions of the EU-27 to the Brexit vote and US President Donald Trump's fiery verbal attacks on the EU hark back to Franco-German initiatives, such as the momentous 6 March decision to establish an EU HQ (or 'Military Planning and Conduct Capability facility') for Europe's civilian and military missions. Another example is the joint push to force through a 'multi-speed' Europe, whereby different EU member states join common projects at times that suit them. François Hollande considers the idea a necessity, "or Europe will implode". The Rome

Declaration of 25 March 2017 refers to the concept in the following terms: "at different paces and intensity". Both these initiatives seek to ensure the sustainability of the EU-27 and bring the 'poly-crisis' to an end.

Marine Le Pen is prepared to destroy all that, and her country is in a rebellious mood. The elitism, selfishness and arrogance of the entire French political class has fuelled political disenchantment. Reforms have been gridlocked for years, and neither Conservative Presidents Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy nor the hapless Socialist incumbent François Hollande have mustered the necessary courage, strength and resolve to usher in change. Consequently, public debt and unemployment have risen over the years and economic growth is sluggish, reaching a mere 0.58% in 2013 and 1.1% in 2016.

Tried and mistrusted

There have been some weak attempts at reform. François Hollande's 'pacte de responsabilité' - offering competitive, job-creating companies €40 billion in tax breaks up to 2017 - has led to economic stability and a slight improvement on the labour market. But the price of this move, announced in early 2014, has been a de-facto split in the Socialist Party with 'rebels' Arnaud Montebourg and Benoît Hamon resigning from the government and the appointment of Emmanuel Macron as Economy Minister, tasked with implementing the pact.

French *malaise* is also grounded in the political system of the Fifth Republic, with its strong presidential role and, above all, years of deep left-right political division. The first-past-the-post voting system used in presidential and parliamentary elections only serves to strengthen the system and keep new political forces at bay. In the most recent parliamentary elections, held in 2012, the Greens received 5.46% of votes cast but did not obtain a single parliamentary seat whilst the National Front chalked up 13.79% of the vote but won only two seats. Over the years, this system has led French political parties into an ever-deepening crisis as French voters believe they no longer represent them.

Against this backdrop, exacerbated by tensions in Europe and profound instability elsewhere, the National Front has steadily gained ground. Le Pen's attempts to 'undemonise' the far-right party since she took over in 2011 have boosted its credibility. By distancing herself from her father's more extremist excesses – holocaust denial and crass anti-Semitism – Marine Le Pen has built substantial support and positioned herself as an anti-establishment politician who speaks '*au nom du peuple*' – her

campaign slogan.

33% of people surveyed in recent polls say they generally agree with National Front policies. Le Pen is set to obtain 24% of the votes and finish second behind Emmanuel Macron (25.5%) in the first round. She will make the presidential run-off.

Suicide note

This gives rise to two main questions: Firstly, what suicidal forces are at work within the 'established' French political parties? The left is sabotaging itself by fielding two rival candidates (Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Hamon) and conservative Republicans are continuing to back the embattled François Fillon, a disastrous move. With a little more common sense and strategic thinking, the established parties could prevent Le Pen from reaching the second round.

Secondly, who can now stop the National Front candidate in the decisive second round? Current polls suggest only the youthful Emmanuel Macron can do so. He says the traditional left-right paradigm is obsolete, but his policies have a distinct social democrat tinge. Polls suggest Macron (63%) will be the clear winner in May's run-off against Le Pen (37%). French voters from the left to centre-right are likely to form a 'Republican front' to ward off the extremist threat, as they did in 2002, handing Chirac 82% of the vote against the Le Pen's father, Jean-Marie. Let's hope that history repeats itself in 2017.

This decisive election may yet have a happy ending. This best case scenario would be further proof that the problem lies primarily with national democracies and not the EU. Unfortunately, people often confuse cause and effect and so the Member States need to recover first before new life can be breathed into the EU.



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