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Oh, what a lucky man

Socialist Raphaël Glucksmann is shaking up the French political landscape — challenging Macron's candidate in the EU elections

When was the last time we heard this? 'Phenomenal' and 'unbelievable' — words used to describe the current meteoric high the French Socialists' front-runner is experiencing in the EU election campaign. Raphaël Glucksmann is the big surprise in the campaign. An outsider who is giving the once mighty *Parti Socialiste* (PS), which brutally plunged into oblivion under François Hollande in 2017, reasons to look forward to better days again.

What's happened? Members of French President Emanuel Macron's camp are also racking their brains. Week after week, Glucksmann is closing in on the candidate of the president's camp, MEP Valérie Hayer, in the polls. Like two communicating vessels — one's gains are the other's losses.

While pollsters were still rating Glucksmann at between nine and 10 per cent in February, Hayer was believed to safely score upwards of roughly 20 per cent. Having landed at just below 17 per cent in late February, an interactive Harris survey put her at a mere 15 per cent in early May. Meanwhile, Glucksmann's popularity with the voters is rising steadily, and at 14.5 per cent, he is now almost neck and neck with Hayer.

A new chance for Social Democracy?

The European elections could indeed set the course for the disunited French left. Deputy Director General of the Ipsos market research institute, Brice Teinturier, is certain that 'things are happening in the left'. The good opinion poll outcomes for the PS-PP list – which unites the Socialist Party and Glucksmann's own *Place Publique* (PP) – have shown that 'awareness of Social Democracy has not vanished', the pollster maintains.

In the PS, one views the fact that winning back lost voters has really

worked as an almost incredible stroke of luck. On one side, these are voters alienated by the left-wing tribune Jean-Luc Mélenchon and his ultra-radicalisation. On the other side, there are those outraged by Macron's right-wing drift. The efficient campaign run by Glucksmann – who, by the way, is not a PS member – is currently above all undermining Mélenchon's claim to leadership within the short-lived left-wing alliance, the *Nouvelle Union populaire écologique et sociale* (NUPES). In this alliance, the PS had even been relegated to third place behind Mélenchon's left-wing *La France insoumise* (LFI) and the Greens. And now this turnaround. LFI, originally put at around 10 per cent, has since plummeted and is now at just above seven per cent. The Greens, *Europe Ecologie-Les Verts* (EELV), have stagnated at less than six per cent.

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For the left, a battle is going to start on the day after the elections over the interpretation of the results. The critics of PS party leader Olivier Faure will probably celebrate the resurrection of the Social Democratic left and see themselves confirmed in regarding NUPES as toxic for the PS. Others will try to create a rehash of NUPES under PS leadership. LFI defiantly claims that the European elections will not have any influence on the reorganisation of the left and that Mélenchon is going to regain his leadership in the polls as the year 2027 and the next presidential elections approach.

For the French, the European Parliament elections are the first national elections since 2022, when Macron was re-elected, and the last before 2027. So it comes as no surprise that the European election campaign, unlike in other countries such as neighbouring Germany, had already picked up speed since Macron's government reshuffle in mid-January. Quite a few parties, including the left-wing populist LFI, are relentlessly declaring the European elections to be a national referendum. And they are not even wrong in doing so.

Macron in trouble

However, the intensifying race for the centre-ground in Paris almost lets one forget that the real drama is taking place elsewhere: the unassailable lead of the far right *Rassemblement National* (RN) over the two centre parties. According to YouGov, the list headed by 28-year-old front-runner Jordan Bardella could score up to 33 per cent. RN sees at least 30 per cent as certain.

This increases the pressure on the rather unknown Hayer immensely. 'The degree of authority Macron will still be able to benefit from in the future depends on the election results', says Jérôme Fourquet of the French opinion poll institute IFOP. If Hayer comes out better than assumed, Macron will be able to hope to stay in charge for a while longer. Especially within his own party. However, should Glucksmann catch up with or even overtake Hayer, 'everyone will understand that this would spell the end of Macron', Fourquet maintains. In accordance with the Constitution, Macron is no longer allowed to run for office in 2027 after two terms anyway.

What is certain is that nobody in Macron's election campaign team had reckoned with outsider Glucksmann. Now, with a fiasco looming on 9 June, panic is spreading. The president is throwing himself into the election campaign. In a new rehash of his great Sorbonne Europe speeches, he talks about common defence, strengthening the EU against China or the US and about Ukraine. He is giving interviews and making appearances. But the approval rates are dropping. According to opinion polls, French voters are more concerned about migration to Europe (42 per cent), climate change (36 per cent) and the future of agriculture (35 per cent).

'Progressives versus Nationalists'

Macron appears to have given up his front-runner Hayer. Now, his young prime minister is to run the race. Just a few days ahead of the elections, on 23 May, in the eagerly discussed TV debate between *Renaissance* and RN, Gabriel Attal and Bardella faced one another. Meanwhile, Marine Le Pen is jibing with relish that, since the beginning of the campaign, the Macron camp has been 'struggling not to turn these elections into a referendum in favour of or against Emmanuel Macron'.

If Macron's last-minute strategy fails, he also threatens to face headwind in his own party. Supporters of the left wing, who are gathered around the chair of the Law Commission in the National Assembly, Sacha Houlié, will see the setback as a punishment for Macron's leaning to the right. With the cabinet reshuffle and the appointment of Attal as prime minister, the president had opted for a right-wing populist course. With an outcome of around 15 per cent, the left wing would have arguments to oppose any possible coalition with the Republicans, with their right-wing tendencies.

The European elections are stirring up France and

But they are exactly who Macron has his eye on to rally a maximum of support in the final election campaign in 2027. The 'Progressives

casting a glaring light on its political landscape.

versus Nationalists' duel between *Renaissance* and its allies and Le Pen's party. But if one believes the gloomy prediction, this duel could already be decided the night before 10 June.

If the far right celebrate an outcome twice as good as Macron's, the narrative of Le Pen's relentless ascendance will be sealed. Step by step, she is entering the Elysée Palace. Already, her presence in France's day-to-day politics cannot be argued away. At 30 per cent approval, *Rassemblement National* would be quasi 'trivialised' and become a majority party — with far-reaching consequences for the French Parliament's ability to act.

The European elections, which last time lured a mere 50 per cent of the electorate to the ballot box, follow dynamics of their own. Euphoric Socialists might well ask France's Greens just how little being successful in the European elections has to do with appreciation at national level. In 2009, at more than 16 per cent, their *Europe Ecologie-Les Verts* list scored a historic breakthrough and surprisingly asserted itself as the country's third-strongest political group. Three years later, its candidate for the presidential elections in 2012, Eva Joly, attained barely more than two per cent. Currently, no-one expects that the far right could also be facing this threat — here, approval rates are stable.

At any rate, the European elections are stirring up France and casting a glaring light on its political landscape — a landscape that has seen fundamental changes since 2017, with an almost complete implosion of the major parties and the extreme margins simultaneously gaining strength. One thing is certain: France has anything but left its phase of deep instability.



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