

Explosive-implosive relations: The Twin Rise of Macronism and Nationalism

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The French Left comes out divided and weakened from the European campaign. The socialist party has managed to survive and to maintain itself whereas La France Insoumise has not succeeded in remobilising its electorate, staying far behind its ambitious score. Both parties lag behind the Greens who imposed themselves as the third political force. In the light of the consolidation of La République en Marche and of the Rassemblement National in the political landscape, the Left faces the challenge of political recomposition and the need to reconstruct a strong, social and solidary political alternative to the far-right and neoliberal projects.



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Voter turnout is one of the major surprises of this election. Long predicted to match the levels of 2014 and 2009, it has reached 50.12%. The last time voter turnout hit the 50% bar in French European elections was in 1994 (56.67%). This positive development may have been triggered by Macron's interview given to a young YouTube star, a couple of hours before the official end of the campaign, in which he urged citizens to go to the polls. Moreover, in the last week of the campaign, pre-election polls that were widely relayed by the media identified the lead of the Rassemblement National (RN) over the list of La République En Marche (LREM-MODEM). Regardless of the motivation of voters' mobilisation, these developments have positively impacted the turnout. The European campaign, in contrast, appeared far less promising than the final turnout suggests. In France, at least, it did not seem to have really taken off and to passionate the masses. Europe was rarely a subject of substantive debate but more a scene, a pretext and background for political competition, national struggles and the test of domestic power relations, after the big-bang of the presidential election of 2017 which had inflicted a massive blow on the traditional parties and their political alternation.

Results

Of the 34 competing lists, only six will send MEPs to Strasbourg. The far-right list of the RN has gathered the highest number of votes (23.31%), closely followed by President Macron's party, LREM supported by MODEM (22.41%). These results were expected. The Greens (EELV), which were neck-to-neck with La France Insoumise (LFI) according to voting intentions during the campaign, have surprisingly come out as the third force with an unexpected 13.47% vote share. The conservative party (Les Républicains) has suffered a massive loss, attracting only 8.48% of votes. The Socialist Party (PS), likewise, has scored only 6.19%, confirming its results since 2017. The risk of 'Pasokisation' and the elimination from the EP have been averted, though. The results of both Les Républicains and PS confirm the continuing erosion and implosion of the traditional parties as well as a massive reconfiguration of the French political landscape. On the Left, the relative new formation of La France Insoumise ends up almost on a par with the socialists (6.31%), far behind its ambitious two-digit score. Benoît Hamon's movement, *génération.s*, which constitutes a scission from the PS, has been eliminated, uniting only 3.27% of the vote. Likewise, the French Communist Party (PCF) faces a massive blow (2.49%) and historical defeat. For the first time since 1979, there will be no French communist MEP in Strasbourg.

In numerical terms, RN will have a delegation of 22 MEPs, 21 for LREM, 12 for EELV, 8 for LR, 5 for LFI and 5 for PS. As a whole, French power relations are mirrored in the overall reconfiguration of European political forces in the parliament: first, the decrease of the PPE and S&D which no longer hold an absolute majority; second, the weakening of the radical Left (GUE/GNL group); and third, the mixed rise of the Liberals, Greens and far-right nationalists. However, when comparing the joint force of the French Left in 2014 and in 2019 (Greens, social democrats and radical Left), the Leftist vote remains stable (around 30%).

Macron's gamble: a national semi-defeat and a European victory

Two developments need to be highlighted in order to make sense of the election results. First, the start of the European campaign collided with the end of the 'grand national debate', improvised by the government to respond to the Yellow Vest crisis. On 25 April 2019, Macron announced several measures to end the contestation (including tax cuts, reduction of public spending, facilitation of longer working hours, reindexation of pensions, launch of a Citizens' Convention for the Climate). No strong measure to fight social inequality has been taken. Macron's plans for increasing purchasing power target the income tax which is known for being one of the fairest and most distributive taxes. Major demands articulated by the Yellow Vests, such as the introduction of a citizen's initiative referendum, the relaunch of the solidarity tax on wealth and the recognition of the blank vote, were smashed. While Macron's

methods have changed, the political course remains intact. Yellow Vests' gatherings have shrunk in the course of the last two months but the contestation is still alive. The European election, in turn, shows that the political translation of the Yellow Vests movement has not worked: none of the two autonomous lists have achieved any significant results. Yet, Macron's continuation of the same political course is likely to trigger a revival of the protests in the coming months.

Second, Macron's polarisation of the European election as a choice between the European 'Renaissance' (carried forth by the LREM list) and Eurosceptic nationalism, has helped to mobilise a broader electorate but this has profited to both LREM and RN rather than substantially weakening the far-right. Macron's political strategy proves that the liberal centre is no bulwark against the rise of the far-right which no longer simply rejects Europe but identifies the latter with an instrument for regaining national sovereignty. While the framing of a duel between LREM and RN has been useful to confirm LREM as the second leading national force, this polarisation is dangerous in that it constrains democratic choice and democratic alternatives.

The French Left: A painful process of recomposition

The voting system of the EP election contrasts with other elections held at the national level: it is a direct one-round election, applying the proportional rule (5% threshold). Also, in France, the event is not coupled with the holding of another election. This constellation predisposes parties or lists to run alone for the EP election rather than to build alliances. The strategy of the parties on the Left to compete with each other has proven deceptive for all, except for the Greens, even if they no longer hold the monopoly over the ecological theme. While the reasons of the division are obvious (testing leadership and searching new possibilities to cooperate and restructure the political space effectively), it also sends the signal that Europe and the project of European construction are secondary to national stakes and struggles. This strategy has sacrificed the coherence and the clarity of the Left. It also constitutes a missed opportunity to join forces to work towards the transformation of Europe at a time at which the Left tends to decline across Europe, with few national exceptions. Towards the end of the campaign, leaders of LFI and the PCF started voicing the need to unite the Left in the wake of the European election, with a special view to the forthcoming municipal elections that will be held in 2020. On 20 May 2019, a collective of militants, intellectuals and unionists from across the Left(s), have further published a joint text in the pages of Mediapart, urging the Left to engage its reconstruction and to join forces around common struggles. For the French Communist Party as for *génération.s*, the division of the Left and the decision to run separate lists have proven fatal and even more so for the PCF whose result is below the threshold for receiving campaign reimbursement. After the PCF's crisis of orientation and leadership, the list led by Ian Brossat appeared to rejuvenate the Communist party, firmly anchoring it in a pro-ecologist and pro-immigration discourse. Yet, the results confirm the continuous decline of the PCF. The strategy of the Socialist Party, by contrast, which consisted in allying with *Place Publique* and renouncing to propose the head of the list has been successful in limiting the further descent and disappearance of the party.

Despite a context of social, ecological and democratic demands, the Left has not emerged as the 'natural' partner nor as the federator of contemporary struggles. It has also not succeeded in remobilising its electorate. The Left will have to continue reflect on why social anger and social contestation ends in a vote of liberal and/or far-right parties. The clearest challenge is, however, at the level of political discourse. The French Left has not succeeded in deconstructing the dualistic framing of the cleavage opposing 'progressive Europeans' to the 'nation'. The Left must construct a strong and coherent political alternative that opposes and escapes this binary framing which presents a false and narrow choice to electors. This artificial cleavage annihilates the social urgency, evacuating the need for a proper alternative to neoliberal policies which have precisely brought the existing EU into a deadlock. If the Left fails to reinvent itself, others will fill the space with other political projects that are antithetical to the project social and solidary Europe. If ecology forms the new transversal stake, social Europe has been little debated during the campaign. The voice for a different Europe has been insufficiently audible and palpable in the context of (1) the fragmentation of the political offer of the Left and (2) the denaturation of the European election by the two dominant forces.

Challenges for the European Left

La France Insoumise had hopes to send out the biggest national delegation to the GUE/NGL group and to increase its position. Compared with the results of the Front de Gauche in the European election of 2014, LFI as its young successor nevertheless increases its share of seats in the EP from 4 to 6. The French socialists, for their part, will join the S&D group. In the light of its own score and of the overall European results, it seems unlikely that LFI will push for the creation of a new European political formation within the EP. The movement "Now the people" is likely to remain an alliance within the GUE/NGL group. Given LFI's overt disagreements with Syriza it will be seen how working relations will evolve in the future and how the GUE/NGL group will handle the strategic divergence between those who advocate cooperation and the search for progressive alliances and those who promote a more radical stance of rupture.

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