

Author

POL MORILLAS

Director CIDOB (Barcelona
Centre for International
Affairs)

The European dimension of the 2022 French Presidential election

AVRIL 11TH 2022

With the Covid crisis and the invasion of Ukraine, Europeans face major challenges. They seem able of responding positively if governments share a collective will to act. Emmanuel Macron's commitment to a renewed european ambition is a driving force for the whole continent.

1. DO YOU BELIEVE THAT THE NEXT FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION COULD HAVE A MAJOR IMPACT ON THE EUROPEAN UNION'S FUNCTIONING AND FUTURE?

Emmanuel Macron has been the most vocal leader arguing for the need to move in two simultaneous directions in the EU: strengthening integration while simultaneously reforming its functioning and institutions. Both have gained traction as a consequence of the recent crises, particularly the pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

While several taboos were broken with the response to the pandemic (big fiscal stimulus, common borrowing, joint procurement and distribution of vaccines and steps towards a Health Union), not fewer have come out of the crisis in Ukraine (EU resources for providing armament through the European Peace Facility, increased military spending, accelerating EU enlargement to Ukraine and possible new common borrowing to face the economic consequences of the war). In only two years' time, the EU has moved faster than in the previous decade. All policies adopted include a simultaneous combination of strengthening integration and reforming existing mechanisms.

However, these moves have been made on a reactive and extraordinary manner (many member states insist that the method behind "Next Generation EU" remains a "one shot", unique effort). As a consequence, the next French Presidential election will have long lasting consequences for turning these objectives into more structural political discussions and reforms. In particular, the reform of EU Treaties and institutions, the future of enlargement and the debates on multispeed Europe and differentiated integration have all been absent from recent debates and crisis management, but they will sooner or later come back as key aspects of the future of the EU. A lot will depend on who sits in the Elysée palace.

2. HOW DO YOU PERCEIVE FRANCE'S POSITIONS AND INITIATIVES IN THE FOREIGN POLICY AND DEFENCE FIELDS AND FRANCE'S INTERACTIONS WITH ITS EU NEIGHBOURS SUCH AS SPAIN?

The US has proven to be Europe's indispensable partner for security and defence, and complementarity with NATO has replaced almost-theological discussions on the meaning of strategic autonomy. France, likewise, is and will remain the EU's indispensable actor for strengthening Europe's defence and security policies. France's position is both unique and necessary to advance towards a greater contribution of the EU for the stability of its neighbourhoods and major security crisis, such as the war in Ukraine.

However, France will also need to come to terms with the idea that French ambitions and priorities will not be enough if they are not framed in a broader European context. The next President of the Republic will need to maintain, create and build new alliances within the EU if his/her ambition is to strengthen EU sovereignty and strategic autonomy in all domains, from security and defence to trade, technology or energy.

Previous disagreements on conflicts such as Libya will need to go through a process of further Europeanisation.

And, if Europe's geopolitical awakening after Ukraine is not meant to disappear, France will need to work further with key member states, including southern ones such as Italy or Spain, and jointly build a stronger EU foreign and defence policy.

3. WOULD YOU SAY THAT THE COINCIDENCE BETWEEN THE WAR IN UKRAINE AND THE FRENCH PRESIDENCY OF THE EU COUNCIL WILL LEAD TO CONSTRUCTIVE EUROPEAN INITIATIVES?

The French presidency, the war in Ukraine and the post-pandemic recovery have coincided in a "make it or break it" moment for the EU. If Macron is re-elected (particularly against Eurosceptic candidates), there will be momentum for ambitious EU reforms, initiatives and power projection.

Not only Macron will be accompanied by other pro-European leaders in the EU's main member states, but by a shared understanding that current priorities and institutional frameworks need to be reassessed. There is a shared vision that fiscal rules, the EU's stability and growth pact, migration and asylum policies and EU foreign policy, to name only a few areas, all need to be reformed. The direction of these reforms remains unknown, but the next few years will witness something unimaginable during previous times of mounting Euroscepticism: the combination of strong pro-EU leaderships in many member states and a shared understanding that the EU needs to embark on serious reforms. This is an opportunity not to be missed and, if successful, all member states will need to regain a certain sense of positive-sum dynamics in EU integration, transactional negotiations for common outcomes and flexibility in alliances. A lot of expectations will be placed on France as a key partner for all these objectives.