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FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS 2017: AN OVERVIEW

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On the 23rd April, first round of the elections, French people will vote in order to determine its future President of the Republic. It is not without saying that these elections will be crucial, not only for French territory, but for the European continent and the international community as a whole. These elections come after a big year in politics; one you could say has shaped the foreseeable future. Indeed, 2016 has seen the rise of the populist parties, the Brexit announcement in June and the election of Donald Trump as the head of the United States' government. Europe is now hoping to counteract and waits for a new impetus to come from France a few weeks after Wilders' defeat in Netherlands and the decision from the Dutch community to save interests towards European concerns. France will make the choice between two alternatives: i) following its natural path and keep working towards the creation of a better Europe, or ii) continue the withdrawal phenomenon where the nationalists' interests are the only ones that seem to be prevailing. All eyes are then turned towards the 7th May, date of the second round of the French presidential elections. In the actual context where faith is lost because of the numerous political scandals, French citizens will have to make a determinant choice out of this cacophony, which is greatly symbolizing the

conduct of these elections.

As a student of the Global Governance program (established in Rome in 2013), my interest as a French citizen is to mainly aim and direct this article in bringing a greater insight into foreign devotees of the presidential elections. I hope to provide them with elements of knowledge concerning the candidates, their motivations/programs, but also with some context, mood, and key topics approached in France during this, so called, pressing time. The information will be given with an objective point of view and with the sole purpose of delivering a comprehensive and relevant opinion. It is important to understand these elections' perspectives especially in a period where globalisation is falling at a rapid rate, something we have rarely seen over these past 25 years. By knowing this, we can see that these events will impact our global future as a whole, or at least for the European community.

Let's have a look first at the candidates who are competing against one another. Here is the list of the 11 candidates (in alphabetical order):

- Nathalie ARTHAUD (age 47), spokesperson at "Lutte ouvrière"

Claiming to be the only communist candidate of the election, she defines herself as the candidates of workers, unemployed, exploited, and wants to defend their interests.

<http://www.nathalie-arthaud.info>

- François ASSELINEAU (age 59), President of the "UPR" (Popular Republican Union) party.

He is a euro-sceptical candidate, proposing to leave the European Union and NATO, and prefers French protectionism.

<https://www.upr.fr/programme-elections-presidentielles-france>

- Jacques CHEMINADE (age 75), President of the Solidarity and Progress party.

He rejects the European projects and wants to give back to France its independency, thus by leaving the European Union, NATO, and to abandon the common currency.

<http://www.cheminade2017.fr>

- Nicolas DUPONT-AIGNAN (age 56), President of the “Debout la France!” party.

He left the right traditional party “UMP” in 2007 and found his own own, claiming his belonging to the Gaullists ideas.

<http://www.nda-2017.fr>

- François FILLON (age 63), former Prime Minister and from the party “Les Républicains”

Main politician under Nicolas Sarkozy’s presidency, he is now candidate of the main right party and proposes very conservative reforms, in order to save money from the states and cut the Public debt.

<https://www.fillon2017.fr>

- Benoît HAMON (age 49), former minister of National education, Higher education and Research, Socialist Party.

Described as the “left and green socialist”, he was very critical on the politic led by F. Holland. He wants to reform the structure of the Government to a Sixth Republic.

<https://www.benoithamon2017.fr>

- Jean LASSALLE (age 61), from the party “Résistons!”

Known for his many defensive acts, made to protect citizens of his region and their interests (hunger strikes). He defines himself as a humanist and ecological politician.

<http://jeanlassalle2017.fr>

- Marine LE PEN (age 48), President of the “Front National” party.

She was a former lawyer and already stood in the 2012 presidential elections with 17,90% made in the first-round votes. She has greatly help to erase the aggressive reputation of the party, previously led by her father Jean-Marie Le Pen.

<https://www.marine2017.fr>

- Emmanuel MACRON (age 39), former minister of the Economy, Industry and Digital Affairs, President of the party "En Marche!"

He denies any belonging to the left or right parties but describes himself as the "*candidat de l'ouverture*". He wishes to convey a message of hope and renewal to cut the ideological differences between left and right sides.

<https://en-marche.fr/emmanuel-macron>

- Jean-Luc MELENCHON (age 65), "Unsubmissive France" (FI) party.

Member of the Socialist party until 2008, he criticized the liberalist drift of the latter and formed his own. He's in favour for a Sixth Republic and wants to separate from what he calls "Brussels' domination".

<http://melenchon.fr>

- Philippe POUTOU (age 51), "New Anticapitalist Party" (NPA).

He fights against capitalism, supporting revolutionary ideas and sharing ideologies of Marxism and Anarchism.

<https://poutou2017.org>

Looking at the development of this year's elections, we find out that these are quite different from the previous ones. It directly comes from the impressively fast appearance of the populist parties. Indeed, from the "classical" confrontation that we usually had in France between the left and right parties (like in 2012 with the Socialist Party of François Hollande and the UMP party of Nicolas Sarkozy), various political parties are today

launched in the competition for the presidency. Their leaders have disparate origins, social backgrounds and ideas when it comes to thinking of strategies that would allow France to recover growth and stability.

Populist parties have taken the lead, at least according to surveys, which at this very precise moment are giving Marine Le Pen in favour of winning the election. The far-left party of Mélenchon is also growing through vote intentions. Both candidates are coming from populist movement and not from traditional parties. They have imposed themselves on the political scene at a moment where traditional parties have been weakened by two presidency periods and public scandals revealed by the press. The right traditional party led by F. Fillon is torn apart because of the allegations of his financial irregularities that are weakening his campaign. The left party isn't doing any better and the disappointing five years of F. Hollande's presidency will be tough to forget for the socialist party. This latter is broken and divided after the creation of the centered party "En Marche!" by E. Macron, which keeps attracting deceased left-wings electors. In case of victory from Macron, the damages for the traditional left and right parties would be tremendous after the many betrayals made in favour of the new centrist party. The strategy of E. Macron is precisely to break the boundaries between ideologies of the left and right sides. He shares ideas in his program coming from both parties and hopes to gain the vote of those deluded by the "out-dated" parties. He is the main opponent against Le Pen by his intention to attract those who have fallen in the populist movement.

Those populist feelings are the reflect of France's illness, characterized by the political disappointments in matter of trust, by the hard economic times and the fragile social cohesion. The "*vivre ensemble*" is being scarcely challenged by judicial affairs ("*Burkini*", "*affaire Théo*", to quote the most recent ones) and the constant climate of fear generated by terrorism is not helping the social cohesion to recover and to take over the fear of the other.

France is then facing what could be its most important change of the 21st century in a tumultuous and delicate society. The trust towards the high institutions is however fading, so is the one towards the media.

Traditional tools of information are challenged by the overuse of social media. At a time where information can be easily received on every smartphones, social media are the easiest way for people to participate in the political debate and to transform the political figures into satirical characters. It represents nevertheless a real danger of propaganda because of fake information circulating on Internet, which are sometimes indirectly controlled by political parties. It constitutes a source of concern after looking back at the way the social media have been used during the Brexit campaign and the Trump election, spreading and relating fake information to create confusion.

In what concerns the topics approached during this year's election, themes are not really differing from what we have been witnessing this past year with the American and Dutch elections. Indeed, economic stability, security, terrorism, immigration, and national identity are the most talked about topics in the media sphere. The populist feelings and the conservatives' parties lead the way to scatter those subjects on public opinion. On the 20th March was being held in Paris the first debate between the candidates of the presidential election. Not all of them were present but only the most famous ones (F. Fillon, B. Hamon, M. Le Pen, E. Macron & J-L Mélenchon) were invited by the French TV channel "TF1". A lack of democracy denounced by the other candidates to the presidential elections and a missed opportunity to have a fair debate.

They had the chance to discuss about their programs for France's future and to confront their ideologies.

The strong left-wing influences of Mélenchon and Hamon come into opposition to the liberalism of Macron, the conservatism of Fillon and the strict protectionism of Le Pen.

Recovery plans by massive investments for the left without considering the public debt, colossal cuts in public services' spending for the right in order to save money from the State, and finally a total re-organisation of the national territory proposed by Marine Le Pen, who wants to exit from the European Union.

To summarize the general feeling emerging from the public opinion, fear is what defines the most the voting intentions. Fear of being deluded once

more by a traditionalist leader; fear of losing his trust; fear of voting for the application of utopian projects (as considered in majority by the public opinion regarding the creative, but doubtful, proposal of Hamon to replace the social security into a universal basic income). These idealistic proposals of Hamon are then confronting the liberal and conservative ideologies of Macron and Fillon. The program of the latter is judged by people of his side as being the most realistic according to the economic situation of France. It is anyway a real confrontation of different ideologies and of methods in regards to way France has to deal with its problems.

The issue of the elections will surely bring some answers to what French people are ready to achieve and towards which goals it wants to trace its path. It is nevertheless relevant to note that some topics are completely forgotten by the majority of the debates. For instance the consideration in what regards cultural issues are very low. It could be even harmful for the richness of our culture present in a country such as France and according to its precious heritage. Education is also rare in the political debate, as is the issue of disability management, which is totally forgotten.

There is one last point I would like to highlight and that is clearly symbolic of a confrontation of ideologies influencing the political debate this year. France's elections will not only be important on a national point of view, but will rather send a strong message to the international community. Where will France stand in the middle of the Brexit and Trump events? What will be the role of France as an actor in globalization? To what extents could it change the populist movements' phenomenon? Will it stop that phenomenon or allow it to pursue?

Focusing on the general context and the constant debate in the public sphere about rising boundaries and closing France's frontiers from the connecting world, we denote a sort of paradox among people's concerns. Indeed, French people historically take into consideration the capacity of a political leader to lead inside and outside its borders. The tendency is more than ever confirmed this year. When some are hoping for a President leading the way towards a more unified, social, participative and democratic Europe, others are willing to find in the traits of a French leader the strength to go against the European Union. Their motivation is

to gain independency from it and therefore to have a charismatic-enough leader who would derogate with the power of Brussels. Politicians like Nicolas Dupont-Aignan are claiming to defend Charles De Gaulle's will and restore its authority inside the European Union; others like Marine Le Pen are simply proposing to leave it. In anyway the globalizing world is still a source of preoccupation for French citizens, so are its threats and opportunities.

The decision that will be taken by the urns will have a strong impact on the EU, and everyone in Brussels is following the competition with great interest and anxiety. Each possibility of victory, between left wing or right wing parties will have consequences on the union's future. What worries the most is the lack of certainty concerning the upcoming path that could follow France in a context already fragile because of the Brexit. We don't have yet the elements to know if France will follow the way of protectionism (like United Kingdom and Unites States of America with the election of Donald Trump) or on the contrary will renew its trust into the European project so did Netherlands a few weeks ago after the Dutch elections. The consequences of France's withdrawal towards the already weakened Europe would be destructive and could cause the collapse of the Union.

Besides this fight among France's politicians to control the future path of France inside the EU, there is one candidate that seems to be strongly awaited in Brussels. Indeed, the liberalist project of Emmanuel Macron has attracted inside the Union and his intentions to reduce the French public debt, stabilize the economy and create close links among member states is considered by Brussels as a chance to revive a positive dynamic in a dying Europe. Macron is however far from convincing everyone in France and a lot are doubting of his trust, mainly because of the lobbying pressuring around him to finance his new party "En Marche!".

We are only at a few days from the first round of the elections, and will follow closely the evolution of the political campaign, which might still offer a lot surprises.