

EUROPEAN ELECTIONS 2024: POLITICAL DECODING AND ANALYSIS

By Sylvain Kahn,
Ph.D. in Geography, Associate Professor
of History, and Researcher at the Center
for History of Sciences Po. Latest published work:
Europe Facing Ukraine, PUF, 2024



In France in 2019, three lists benefited from an electoral dynamic: the Greens, La République en Marche (LREM), and the RN (National Rally). The increase in participation at that time mainly benefited the three political parties that had an extremely clear vision of what they expected from Europe. In 2019, the RN represented the French version of nationalist and sovereigntist parties, euro-critical or eurosceptic. In the European Parliament, they are divided between two groups, ECR (to which Reconquête recently affiliated) and ID (to which the RN is affiliated). For them, Europe is part of the problem, or even the problem.

In 2019, the Greens and LREM, now known as Renaissance, belonged to the parties and political movements that believe the challenges facing Europeans can be democratically resolved on a European scale. In this family, one mostly finds parties whose societal project is fully and primarily oriented by ecological issues, and those, often fundamentally liberal and democratic, focused on individual emancipation. Ecologists and liberals are most often unequivocally pro-European:

for these types of parties, Europe is part of the solution, or even the solution.

These politically contrasting families have one thing in common: they are very consistent in their European doctrine. In the RN - its only point in common with Renaissance and the Greens - there is no division or internal tensions regarding Europe. The eviction of F. Philippot (RN's former vice-president) from the National Front due to its refusal to give up on "Frexit" and the euro exit, and then, the insignificant score of his list (the Patriots) in 2019, illustrated this.

Conversely, in the right and left traditions inherited from the 20th century, those whose parties have been "in government" and have built the political Europe from the ECSC to the Lisbon Treaty - the Christian Democrats and conservatives on one hand, and the socialists and social democrats on the other - one finds, in each national delegation, pro-Europeans and much less European, or even sovereigntist, currents. Depending on the times, or their situations (in government or in opposition), these ambiguities have been particularly prevalent within the SFIO and the PS. The EPP,

“IN THIS CAMPAIGN, DEBATES AND DIVISIONS FOCUS EVEN LESS ON THE LEGITIMACY AND VALIDITY OF EUROPEAN CONSTRUCTION THAN FIVE YEARS AGO. IT FOCUSES MORE ON THE LEGITIMACY AND RELEVANCE OF SUPRANATIONALITY, AND... ON THE CONTENT OF PUBLIC POLICIES.”

like LR, Forza Italia, the British Tories until Brexit, the CSU..., has been torn for 40 years between “Europeanists” and “sovereignists,” between proponents of more or less supranational Europe. The RPR, which preceded LR as the declared heir of Gaullism, did not join the EPP until 1994.

In 2019, these “government” parties did not attract voters: the electoral trend was towards ideological coherence on Europe; the PS and LR were punished for their lack of clarity on European policy.

Since the end of the Cold War, there have been lines of division in France between parties called pro-European - UMP, PS - and others called anti-European - RPF, FN, PC, FG. In this configuration, these two major families were, before 2017-2019, positioned as Europhiles. Despite their ambiguities, they said: “We must advance Europe because it is a value. We must advance Europe because it strengthens our political achievements and our national community, and it protects us against the damages of globalization and against the war that nationalism leads to.” This

was the story of the “European rescue of the nation-state” (title of Alan Milward’s book), of national objectives and interests achieved and consolidated by Europe. In quite different styles, F. Mitterrand (from 1984 onwards), then J. Chirac (from 1995 onwards), as well as L. Jospin (in 1997), adorned themselves with a European leader’s costume with this type of discourse, in an approach that remained somewhat external to the philosophy of supranational politics. Conversely, there were Eurosceptic and Europhobic parties that said: “No, it’s not at the European level that it’s played out, it’s at the national level, and we must defend it against Europe, because Europe destroys the nation.”

In 2024, the situation in which the campaign takes place is very different for two reasons. Firstly, the EU is engaged alongside Ukraine in resisting Russia’s invasion. Secondly, the response to Covid-19 in 2020 ended the “fifteen-year” crisis opened in 2005; it had the effect of a revival of European construction - similar to those of 1984, 1969, 1955. With the response to these two very worrying and almost simultaneous external shocks - Covid-19, ►

- Russian aggression in Ukraine - European construction is once again seen as a solution in public opinion.

In this campaign, debates and divisions focus even less on the legitimacy and validity of European construction than five years ago. It focuses more on the legitimacy and relevance of supranationality, and even more so on the content of public policies to be implemented at the European level within the framework of the EU. None of the forces involved questions the legitimacy of the recovery plan or European borrowing; but they oppose each other on the primacy of European law and the conditionality of access to funding on respect for the rule of law. None of them calls for the abolition of Frontex, but they differ on its missions. Regarding European construction, Orbán's line, in power since 2010, has imposed itself throughout the European family of radical and extreme right, the RN's program is the prototype of a formerly Eurosceptic extreme right party that is "Orbanized": the EU, despite this supranational Commission that must either be infiltrated or eroded, is a resource to protect each nation against the non-European world and to promote not only the economy but also "illiberalism".

In this landscape, the inflation of agricultural and energy prices has imposed a front line: the Green Pact, stop or continue? Is one adhering to the EU as a model for combating climate change and for a habitable world, or to the EU as a model for growth and for both industrial and post-industrial society (in the sense of Bell and Touraine)? In this debate, the RN is more attractive than LR, since the EPP, to which LR is affiliated, supported the Green Pact until the summer of 2023 and N. Sarkozy initiated "the Grenelle de l'environnement". The "continue" line seems to benefit more the PS and Renaissance than the Greens, because the latter, rightly or wrongly, and unlike German ecologists, are perceived as doctrinaire or radical by a part of the electorate concerned with advancing the fight against climate change and for transition; they are also perceived, rightly or wrongly, if they were in power, as ready to embrace the cause of degrowth and exit from consumer society instead of proposing how to adapt it.

European migration policy is another polarizing topic. Behind this title are opposing representations. On one hand, Islamist fundamentalism perceived as polymorphous or highly localized, expansive, or circumscribed; on the other hand, societal cohesion that would be primarily a social problem and of solidarity, or rather a cultural problem and of community assertion. There are parties for whom the scandal is first constituted by shipwrecks in the Mediterranean and the English Channel and by the "encampment" (Michel Agier) of migrant people; and parties for whom the scandal lies primarily in the departure and arrival of unauthorized migrants, without visas. There are those who consider that respect for the rule of law is first and foremost respect for asylum law procedures and a priori reception, and those who consider that respect for the rule of law is first and foremost respect for decisions rendered by asylum law courts and respect for "obligation to live the french territory".

In this context, in the European Parliament, all French parties except one, Renaissance, chose to vote against all or part of the European Pact on Asylum and Migration, and to make it an electoral argument. A paradox when one knows, in particular, all the work done upstream of this vote within the two major EPP and S&D groups (of the PES).

To the surprise of a certain number of commentators, Ukraine is not very divisive or differentiating. As much as in 2017 and 2019, France had distinguished itself by the structuring cleavage between pro-Russians and admirers of Putin's regime on one side, and on the other, supporters of the Atlantic Alliance and a policy aiming to contain within acceptable limits Russian mafia imperialism. Since February 2022, support for Ukraine and condemnation of Russia has become a consensual policy. A small part of the political forces - LFI, the PCF, and Reconquête - are explicitly against supporting the war effort in Ukraine. On this subject, the RN keeps a low profile, cultivating ambiguity. Its group abstained during the vote on March 12, 2024, in the National Assembly on French support for Ukraine.

In 2024, compared to 2019, E. Macron's and Renaissance's very pro-European posi-

tioning is weakened by the French domestic reforms desired by the President of the Republic: part of his electorate from 2017 and 2022 reproaches him for the pension reform and the immigration law that was passed with the right and the far right. Are they also reproaching him for his changes in stance on, not support for Ukraine, but the place to be given to Putin and Russia in European foreign and defense policy? On these different subjects, R. Glucksmann, for these voters, provides rectitude and anchoring. However, it will be important to closely monitor the program of his list beyond his personal discourse: the PS has had, in the past, sometimes vague or ambiguous positions on European issues.

It is possible that, the closer we get to the vote, the more the dynamics of 2019 are replayed: namely, the choice for one of the lists for whom Europe is clearly and unequivocally the solution, with the idea that it is better to have a good compromise among Europeans to move forward together, rather than the opposite, risking standing still to not compromise supposed grand principles, as seen on the asylum and migration pact. In this hypothesis, the reasons that favored Macron's attraction to a part of the PS electorate in 2017, and then in 2019, could produce similar effects in 2024, but to a lesser extent. From this perspective, V. Hayer's positioning, resolutely running as an incumbent, claiming the mandate and the Commission's record - a record which, objectively, is particularly dense, especially as it de facto includes a revival of European construction - could perhaps be a winning bet. The other parties that could claim this record and these advances refuse to do so, even the Greens, who nevertheless left their mark on the achievements of the past five years. Will this be enough to convince those known as left-wing Macronists and other disappointed with the presidential record? Part of the answer could lie in the potential impact of E. Macron's second Sorbonne speech.

In any case, the strong cumulative attractiveness of the two radical right and extreme right lists is favored by the abandonment of their Eurosceptic discourse and return to the franc, in favor of a sovereigntist posture and taking power within the EU.

The results of the European elections in France will determine the color of the 81 French seats, but the entire 720 seats in Parliament will need to be considered to define the new coalition and dynamics for this term. ■

“In any case,
THE STRONG CUMULATIVE
ATTRACTIVENESS OF
THE TWO RADICAL RIGHT
AND EXTREME RIGHT
LISTS IS FAVORED BY
THE ABANDONMENT
OF THEIR EUROSCEPTIC
DISCOURSE AND RETURN
TO THE FRANC, IN FAVOR
OF A SOVEREIGNTIST
POSTURE AND TAKING
POWER WITHIN THE EU.”