

## **Double or Quits: Looking Ahead to the French and Hungarian Elections**

**Article by Edouard Gaudot**

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What does 2022 hold for Europe? If the turbulence and uncertainty of recent times are any indication, we should expect the unexpected. Edouard Gaudot identifies some of the pivotal moments which lie ahead, that could potentially determine the future direction of Europe for a long time to come.

In this narrow opening that separates the transition to a new year counted in solar revolutions in the West from its eastern equivalent counted in lunar revolutions, we take the time, once again, to wish one another the best to come. For the past two years, however, since an untimely virus came to disrupt the course of our lives, our ritualised wishes have rung hollow. At a time when it has become risky to predict anything more than a few weeks away, envisioning the coming year is something of a clairvoyance exercise.

After a brief respite, punctuated by a favourable sequence of elections between 2017 and 2019, which seemed to consolidate the central democratic forces and contain the devastating potential of populism, Europe was finally emerging from a critical decade of consecutive financial, economic, social, and political crises, only to plunge, along with the rest of the world, into a deep health crisis. In this context of regular upheavals, where the structural weaknesses of our societies are laid bare by the virus, the only certainty we can have about 2022 is that it will be marked by uncertainty and require permanent adaptation.

### **An ever more uncertain world**

The first of these uncertainties is evidently health. That of a pandemic whose non-ending is never-ending. Wave after wave, the global outbreak of COVID-19 continues to upend our entire collective organisation and test our nerves. If the initial reflex of population containment to stop the circulation of the virus has generally given way to national vaccination policies, accompanied by increasingly strict control of mobility and social activities, the exit from this tunnel remains dubious in the short term. In addition, the regular appearance of variants, the downward trend in the effectiveness of vaccines, and the maintenance of legal and political obstacles to their distribution to the rest of the world cast doubt on the ability of governments to draw the right lessons from this crisis. The consequences of each potential resurgence of the virus weigh very heavily on economic forecasts, globalised value chains, health systems, the morale of anxious populations, and on the capacity of the systems to hold a course in such a fog.

The second uncertainty is strategic. We do not always see it because it is often the business of diplomats and experts, but the painful increase in the prices of fuel and certain raw materials has a very clear geopolitical dimension. In 2022, it is in an increasingly dangerous and unstable world that Europe must evolve. The new Biden administration in the US is

certainly more courteous than the previous one, but it continues Obama's Pacific focus and Trump's "America First" foreign policy. The pretences of a complicated transatlantic relationship underline the difficulties the EU and its members face to find their place in an environment that is more divisive than ever, as demonstrated by the debacle in Afghanistan and the abandonment of the Franco-Australian military contract in favour of AUKUS (a defence alliance between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States), whose tone recalls the containment policy of the Cold War. The realisation that China presents a competing model and a conquering or even dangerous adversary – from the Pacific Ocean to Africa – rather than an important commercial partner, also questions European equilibria, as seen in the German public debate or Lithuania's exploratory break from the global diplomatic consensus around Taiwan. Moreover, the radicalisation of the Erdoğan regime in Turkey or the hostile actions of the Lukashenko regime, which hijacks airliners or uses migrants as weapons of massive destabilisation, make the EU neighbourhood an area of increasing risk. From gas pressure to troop movements on the Ukrainian border, however, it is above all the assertion of Russia as a revisionist player in the international order that threatens European cohesion and security. More than ever, the dynamics at work in 2022 are forcing Europeans to rethink their relationship to power. The age of innocence is definitely over.

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The effects of the pandemic and the geopolitical situation are felt on a daily basis. Amid inflation and rising energy prices, divisions and political polarisation, exasperation and constraints, the purchasing power and morale of European citizens is volatile. This further reinforces political uncertainty – the third source of apprehension. In the name of terrorism yesterday, of health today, the need for security of our societies, whose threshold of tolerance to risk has tended to drop as their material comfort and average age have increased, means that the requirement of security almost systematically takes precedence over the defence of freedoms. National and European freedom of movement is once again controlled and reconditioned. Civil and political restrictions are further fuelling levels of social exasperation, and angry outbursts regularly erupt, on the streets or at the ballot box. Finally, cultural tension and identity polarisations put national and social cohesion under constant pressure across Europe.

It is in this troubled context that two elections crucial to the future of European cohesion are set to take place. In April, French and Hungarian citizens go to the polls and the results of these two elections could well tip Europe into another dimension. In France, where the first round of the presidential election is looming in less than a hundred days, the mother of all national political battles, the pandemic is crushing the very beginning of an electoral non-campaign. Alone in command of a country that the state of emergency, centralised institutions, and weakening of checks and balances render more monarchical than ever, the French president, who by the end of January had still not formalised his quest for a new mandate, manages the health crisis on an acrobatic tightrope. Between martial discourse, generous economic support, and violent stigmatisation of the "irresponsible" unvaccinated,

whose citizenship he has shamelessly gone so far as to question, he knows that he is staking his re-election on this delicate balance.

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## **Macron's great gamble**

Devoid of a serious challenger for the moment, Emmanuel Macron dominates the polls while peaking at a small quarter of voting intentions with no real prospect of progress. Doubly risky, his bet on an all-consuming polarisation between the progressive, rational, civic, European, and responsible centre, in deep rupture with all forms of extremism and radicalism, ensures him both legitimacy and cohesion among his supporters. Beyond this, however, he is reduced to hoping that the deterrent of the radical bogeymen will be enough to guarantee him victory against any opponent emerging from this competition of oppositions.

This is far from certain. The first risk lies in the radicalisation of his adversaries, a dynamic that serves his story as a new herald of order and progress. But were he to suddenly unravel, his defeat would open the way to power for those nostalgic of the dark orders. For instance, the eruption into the electoral race of the candidacy of Eric Zemmour, a far-right polemicist campaigning exclusively and aggressively on the decline of France, the preservation of national identity, and the violent rejection of future and past immigration, has had two major consequences. The first is to have made these themes more central than ever, thus forcing the other competitors to play on this toxic ground – which further weakens the left-wing and Green candidates. On the right, the radicalisation of the Les Républicains (LR) candidate, Valérie Pécresse, also illustrates these deleterious effects. But if by chance she manages to aggregate the modest base of moderate right-wing conservatives who have remained faithful to the party with the purely reactionary fringes revived by Zemmour, she could benefit from the second effect of the candidacy of the latter on the electoral field. Indeed, thanks to the success, at least in polling terms, of this new candidacy within the radical right, the threshold of the entry ticket for the second round of the election has dropped considerably to around 14-17 per cent, scores around which gravitate both the former finalist Marine Le Pen, and the two other competitors. The uncertainty is therefore real.

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This is the great risk of Emmanuel Macron's wager. The polarisation and mounting hysteria around the debate fomented by this divisive president make any potential victory of an alternative extremely dangerous by the asymmetrical mobilisation that it could arouse. Dangerous for public freedoms, which were already seriously abused under his mandate, for environmental policies and the ecological transition timidly undertaken during a very ambivalent five-year term on these subjects, and finally for the balance of French society, growing inequalities, and social rights, amid taxation benefiting the richest and increased precariousness of the unemployed.

The second risk is borne by the role of France in the world in general and in Europe in particular. Taking advantage of the fact that the rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU falls to France for the first half of 2022, the central position of the president is also accompanied by a virtual monopoly of Europe, illustrated to the point of caricature by the debate following his speech in the European Parliament where the French speakers resorted to national one-upmanship. As the first candidate to have seriously articulated his national ambition with the European dimension, and won, Macron is an embarrassment for political forces such as ecologists who defend European integration and assert a form of continental federalism.

There uncertainties give way to ambivalence. Because the victory of the outgoing president would obviously signal the continuation of a dangerous policy for French social cohesion, whose crisis feeds the movements of anger and despair in the country. But it would undoubtedly provide a decisive impetus to the reform dynamic that has finally opened up in the wake of the European revival and the replacement in Berlin of the cautious Angela Merkel by a coalition that displays its commitment and ambitions. On the other hand, a defeat at the hands of competitors radicalised in their hostility to European integration, to the Community institutions and, often, to the German partner would completely break the European engine. Should we resolve to support Macron in the name of progress in building Europe, despite everything? This is one of the hard choices that some will make, which already cements part of its progressive bourgeois electorate where centre-right and centre-left meet.

## **A crowded field of contenders on the Left**

In what may be the only certainty of such a depressing situation to the Left: the probability of the defeat of Macron coming from its ranks is close to zero. It remains vaguely limited for the moment to the candidate most ambivalent on these subjects and the least favourable to Europe: Jean-Luc Mélenchon, for whom it is the last presidential race before retirement – another certainty. Having reached the end of a political and personal evolution to embrace in an original, popular, and convincing way the issues of political ecology, the candidate of the radical left can still hope that tactical voting will make us forget his worrying indulgence towards the authoritarian regimes of China or Russia in international affairs. But his ability to repeat the surge of 2017 seems all the more doubtful as his five-year term of opposition has weakened more than strengthened his presidential stature and the vitality of his movement. The others are lame competitors for now.

In other words, on this part of the chessboard, the field of ruin is complete. Confined to a

comparable, although more modest, perimeter to the other blocs (around 25 per cent), no less than six candidates are vying for the dubious privilege of coming first among the losers.

Confirming the adage that weakness breeds division, the ghost of the Socialist Party is withering, torn between a rather sovereigntist, backward-looking and productivist former minister who ended up throwing in the towel, an increasingly weak official candidate in Anne Hidalgo, and the untimely, out-of-party and programmatically superficial candidacy of a star of the former Hollande government: Christiane Taubira, the former Minister of Justice and icon of gay marriage, poetic talks, and illusions of union of the Left – and the eventual winner of a so-called “popular” primary initiative, likely to have come too late to be legitimate or effective. To this must be added the inevitable and traditional pair of candidacies of Trotskyist inspiration and the return of the Communist Party. Finally, despite his courageous but somewhat desperate resilience, the environmentalist candidate Yannick Jadot sees his political space being reduced to the point of asphyxiation, both because of the dominant themes of the debate and this multiplication of saviours from the Left, whose main effect is to weary the public and discredit all those who occupy the field. These multiple candidacies are made irreconcilable not so much by ideological nuances, often overplayed for reasons of electoral strategy, but rather by clashes between personalities. As a result, they have consistently failed to produce unifying figures, in a zero-sum game as lame as their ability to produce a rallying narrative.

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## **Taking on Orbán’s scaremongering strategies**

Unity, however, is the lesson, painful and arduous, that the Hungarian opposition ended up learning and putting into practice in an attempt to overthrow Viktor Orbán. In power since 2010, and benefiting from comfortable constitutional majorities, the Hungarian prime minister has not only been able to reorganise all the national electoral and political rules for his own benefit, but also to build a formidable narrative of being a bulwark against foreign interference, where Brussels is a new Moscow, the migrants a new Mongol, and Hungary an eternal victim of betrayal by the great European powers.

A veteran of EU governments since the departure of Angela Merkel, the Hungarian prime minister is seeking a fourth consecutive term this year. Like a double negative of the French president, Orbán has also combined domestic positioning and European stature. Thanks to the humanitarian crisis of 2015, he became the emblematic figure of the European radical right. While Keleti station in the centre of Budapest was transformed into a vast camp for Syrian refugees in exodus, the strongman of Central Europe erected barbed wire at the Hungarian borders, justified police violence against them, and organised a truncated referendum to show Europe that Hungarians do not want migrants, with or without European Commission quotas. Strikingly, in his speeches aimed at the European public in general, and his political family the Christian democrats in particular, he evokes

the fall of Rome to sensationalise the migratory pressure by renaming it *Völkerwanderung* – “migration of peoples”.

His speech of the “true Europeans”, defenders of white and Judeo-Christian civilisation against the barbarian hordes is only the classic, barely transparent veil thrown over a modern racist fantasy cultivated by the reactionary intellectual sphere and its conspiratorial myths: the “great replacement”, or the gradual substitution of the European population of white stock and Christian culture, by peoples of Africa and the Middle East, obscuring their dark colonising designs behind the innocuous faces of refugees fleeing misery. But Orbán’s remarks then enjoyed remarkable success in all the on- and offline pharmacies where the adulterated vapours of identity panic were distilled, between the decline in the birth rate and the economy, the dynamics of Islam, migrations, terrorism, the moral decadence of the West, and so on, all organised of course by the liberal and cosmopolitan elites of globalised financial capitalism.

Despite the temporary failure to form a common group of radical and extreme right-wing elected representatives in the European Parliament following his departure from the centre-right European People’s Party (EPP), Orbán sits, much more so than Polish Deputy Prime Minister Jarosław Kaczyński, at the heart of the European ideological reconfiguration. He is a cultural pivot and a regular facilitator, a cardinal reference for orienting oneself in the new divide between “globalists” and “patriots” that he is trying to impose with his allies. It is therefore no coincidence two French presidential candidates have successively hurried to Budapest seeking to be anointed by the new pope of the European radical right.

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As with Germany last autumn and France this spring, and to an even greater extent than Poland next year, what is at stake in this year’s Hungarian parliamentary elections goes far beyond the national scale. What the opposition is fighting for, finally united beyond its deep differences, is first and foremost the freedoms of all Hungarian citizens. Their rights as individuals, the pluralism of their media, the vitality of their civil society, the very existence of their democracy. It is also a battle for their economic freedoms, their working and living conditions, equality, a fight against the hoarding of wealth and the corruption of a mini-oligarchy organised by the prime minister after the Muscovite model. But through and beyond all this, there is the challenge of bringing down the symbol of evil which, for more than a decade now, has eaten away at the base of the rule of law and the values on which the EU is founded.

The slope is steep. But the lessons of 2014 and 2018 have been learned. Never has the opposition been so organised, responsible, and united. As the movement of the polls indicate, for the first time the game is open enough to project uncertainty over Orbán ‘s re-election. After the return of Bratislava and then Prague to the heart of community values, such a shift would considerably change the European landscape. On the other hand, if the populist right won again in Budapest and above all, if it took Paris, the uncertainties of 2022

would suddenly take an even darker turn. There is still time to formulate our wishes for the year that is beginning. Do we wish for a return of light in the face of the advancing shadows?

Behind Macron and Orbán's double or quits gamble, our European destiny is at stake.

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