



POPULISM IN FRANCE: TOWARDS NORMALISATION?

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According to the new Coface Political Risk Index published in March 2017, France is the second most populist country in Europe, with a score of 70%, just behind the United Kingdom (73%). The discourse about public order and national identity as well as distrust of multiculturalism are among the main reasons for the French score.

After Donald Trump's election last year, many observers consider France to be the next crucial vote. France's presidential election is seen as a test that will confirm (or not) the theory that Trump's victory would give a boost to anti-immigration rhetoric, xenophobia and populist parties in Europe. Although conditions are different in both countries, the current presidential campaign of Marine Le Pen and her Front National (FN) shows interesting parallels with US right-wing populism: the anti-elite discourse against the candidates of "mainstream political parties", the anti-centralist agitation against Brussels and Washington, respectively, and the rejection of the European Union. Both Trump and Le Pen also blame their respective states for insufficient border control, which is seen as responsible for social dumping, the loss of national identity and terrorism.

Le Pen's programme essentially revolves around these dimensions in order to help France to ensure what the Front National calls the "return of four sovereignties": monetary, legislative, budgetary and territorial. Achieving this implies either renegotiating the conditions under which France belongs to the EU or organising a Frexit referendum to make France "free again", pulling the country out of the eurozone, drastically limiting immigration to the needs of the labour market and reaffirming the republican model and its values through a fight against multiculturalism and radical Islam and by promoting the "national priority", which consists of a series of protectionist measures favouring French goods, companies and individuals.

As France is one of the two main pillars of the EU along with Germany, the outcome of the next presidential election could have greater implications for the European Union, such as the collapse of the euro or another financial crisis. Furthermore, it could resolve the ongoing debate over “open Europe” – the post-Berlin Wall European states open to the world and open to one another – versus “closed Europe” in favour of the latter. At the global level, France’s diplomacy – including counterterrorism efforts in Syria, Iraq and the MENA region (Middle East & North Africa) at large – could be damaged as French diplomats have recently insinuated.

Beyond the case of Marine Le Pen, several indicators tend to show that populism is not only the preserve of the far right in France. Recently, the 2017 presidential candidate of the French Republican party, François Fillon (under formal investigation in a scandal over misuse of public funds), repeatedly accused the government and the judiciary of having staged a plot against him. He thus resorted to a classic tool of populism by playing popular sovereignty against the sovereignty of institutions. His rhetoric on French identity and immigrants is similarly stark and he has shown great openness towards Russia, just like the Front National, which has received funding from Russia and has called for an end to sanctions against the country.

Europe has entered a new phase in which the concept of “populism” is actively claimed by left-wing and right-wing parties, as sociologist Eric Fassin underlines in his book *Populism: the Great Resentment* (2017). In France the Front de Gauche led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon epitomises this trend on the left, in the same vein as Greece’s Syriza, Spain’s Podemos and Italy’s Movimento 5 Stelle.

On the right, populist movements and political parties also pretend to speak on behalf of “the people”, they just play on another register of emotions. While François Fillon and Marine Le Pen essentially allude to fears (migration, borders, terrorism), Jean-Luc Mélenchon insists on the urgent need to get rid of the elites, whom he accuses of concentrating the country’s wealth and monopolising power. He calls for a “controlled revolt” (“Disobedient France” being the motto), rejecting globalisation and European integration. Like Marine Le Pen, Mélenchon also promises to hold a referendum on leaving the EU in the case that he fails to negotiate new conditions with Brussels.

The French political scene seems to be caught between populist views from both sides of the political spectrum. On the one hand, the far-right Front National is poised to get the most votes in the first round of the presidential elections. On the other hand, a plethora of political parties, labour unions and movements such as the Front de Gauche, Workers’ Struggle (Lutte ouvrière), the Revolutionary Communist League, the New Anticapitalist party, Les Indignés or Nuit Debout fail to get behind one single candidate for many reasons (refusal to be instrumentalised

by a political party, internal quarrels, legislative voting method, weak presence in the media, etc.).

In contrast to the disunity on the left, the Front National has focused on winning elections (local and European) to try to secure a victory in the presidential election. However, according to polls Marine Le Pen is unlikely to succeed in the run-offs of the second round of the elections, where she will most likely lose against independent candidate Emanuel Macron or Fillon if he can withstand the headwinds of his scandal. Yet in an indirect way the far-right populist discourse may still bear fruit, as its rhetoric is increasingly present among The Republicans and large segments of the populace.

France is still in a state of emergency, the risk of terrorist attacks remains high and the refugee crisis is still at the centre of the public debate, although it reached a peak in 2015. It is unlikely that populist trends will disappear after the presidential election, though a defeat of Marine Le Pen in the final run-offs is likely. Given the uneven distribution of populist discourses across the political spectrum and the uncertainty about the outcome of the next legislative election, there is a high risk of further political polarisation.

