

Europe in the Macron Era: En Marche Once More?

Written by Susi Dennison

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2017/06/12/europe-in-the-macron-era-en-marche-once-more/>

SUSI DENNISON, JUN 12 2017

The positivity in Paris is palpable at the moment – French people have to admit to a tingle of pride in having elected a President whose first month in office has included dramatic performances on the international stage. From publicly challenging Vladimir Putin on interference of Russian state influenced media in the French elections, to issuing a video criticism of the US decision to pull out of the Paris Climate Accords, Macron has significantly increased French visibility on the world stage. Positive sentiments about the new leader reverberate across Europe, because Macron is overtly pro- European Union (EU). His commitment to the EU was clear in his campaigning, speaking often in front of the EU flag. This strategy was not without risk in a France where support for the EU was diminishing. The Pew Research Centre has tracked the percentage of French people who view the EU positively declining from 69% in 2004 down to 38% in 2016. But Macron won support for a strong France in the EU by offering not an outright endorsement of the EU as it is today, but a vision of its potential as a global actor. In short, he promised EU reform, and he now needs to deliver on this.

Since the Brexit vote in 2016, there is a headwind behind the idea of EU renewal through reform among the 27 member states that will remain once the UK has left. The idea of a flexible union, which delivers on the issues that matter to EU citizens – security, jobs and economic growth – was set out in the EU Council statement on the 60th anniversary of the Rome Treaty in March. Overlapping, issue based groupings of EU member states willing to advance on different areas are being discussed around the capitals of the EU as a way to work around the challenge of decision making at 27, in order to reinvigorate EU efforts, and make its benefits more visible to voters.

The Franco-German relationship is crucial to this EU renewal agenda, and Angela Merkel must have breathed a sigh of relief to have a pro-European head of state back in power at her side in France. She had increasingly carried the burden of EU leadership alone in recent years, as ECFR's Scorecard documents on the foreign policy angle have demonstrated. Undisputed as the EU's two most powerful member states after Brexit, and historically always at the heart of progress in the EU project, Berlin and Paris have slightly different visions on which national challenges and European solutions would be welcome. Germany was at the epicentre of the political storm caused by increased refugee flows into Europe in 2015. It has sought EU solidarity in responding to that crisis. France, in sore need of economic growth, has sought more flexibility within the EU's stability and growth pact. But with serious recent terrorist attacks in Paris, Nice, and Berlin, both member states are in agreement of security as a major priority and this may well be one of the first areas that we see the flexible union agenda advance.

Reinvigorating the EU by allowing member states to move forward on different issues at different speeds is of course intended to be good for the whole EU, allowing it to show its potential to deliver on the issues that matter to European citizens and work around blockages where one or more states do not want to see a supra-national level of intervention. But, outside the Franco-German core, there is another perspective on this approach to developing the European project.

The driving force on the Flexible Europe agenda comes from the founder members, as the Versailles statement, in March 2017 from the heads of state of these governments showed. When Macron and Merkel talk about a Europe of different speeds, they move in the next breath to talk about reform of the Eurozone architecture, or economic co-operation. This leaves smaller, newer and non-Eurozone states a little nervous about what the flexibility agenda is really about. Will they be able to feed their voices into this discussion about how the EU should move forward? Do the

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larger, older EU states understand how difficult it will be for these outside- of- EU- centre states to sell a project at home which sounds like decisions taken in other capitals will be offered to them on a take or leave basis?

This is why Macron's message to Greece on in his first discussions as French president with Alexis Tsipras on the need to find a solution on Greek debt was crucial. This was not only because his reassurance showed a political will to bring genuine flexibility on economic co-operation within the Eurozone, but also because it showed an awareness of how the idea of 'Flexible Europe' appears outside the EU's core. It will be important as the agenda for EU renewal and reform moves forward to find further ways that the Franco-German duo, and the founder member core, can work with other member states to show that the EU remains a collective project with differently valued members.

Europe after Macron's victory may be a place where being pro EU is no longer treated by politicians fighting elections as an inconsequential given, and attendance at EU summits may again be treated as a way of getting things done, rather than a time consuming bad habit. Macron has done a service for other EU leaders in showing that the European project is still one that voters can be convinced is worth defending, and that emulating nativist, anti-European policies is not only way to defeat the populist parties that have been dominating European politics over the last few years. He has demonstrated that they can also be challenged directly with clear arguments about what is wrong with their policies. But having celebrated Macron's vote of confidence in the European project, the EU's other leaders must now also accept the challenge that he has set them: to show the Union can genuinely be the opportunity that he has presented it as, through delivery on the issues that voters care about.

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