



By: *Ferry Biedermann*

European parliament elections put pressure on the EU's Franco-German engine



The elections for the European Parliament taking place 6-9 June offer an opportunity for gauging the political direction in the years ahead in member states.

As off-cycle elections in most cases, meaning that national parliaments or leaders are not at stake, the vote can magnify dissatisfaction with ruling coalitions or parties, as in Germany and France, or show their popularity, as in Italy and the Netherlands.

While the result cannot be directly projected onto the national political scenes, it can foreshadow larger trends. Research in several European countries has shown that the electorate votes mostly on national issues, not on pan-European programmes.

Trends in France and Germany, the famed Franco-German engine, could in the long term be more of a predictor of the EU's course than the overall balance in the European parliament.

This is especially true of key issues such as support for Ukraine, immigration, EU-expansion and climate. The different political rhythms in both countries make a realignment on some of these issues a possibility over the next couple of years.

Germany is facing the prospect of a relatively imminent change of direction with chancellor Olaf Scholz up for federal elections in October next year. His coalition is **far**ing badly in the opinion polls, both nationally and for the European parliament.

France

In France, president Emmanuel Macron still has until 2027, but his scheduled departure is already shaking up the political scene. In fact, Macron and his allies have railed against the 'bullshit' two-term limit for French presidents.

Macron has a couple more years to bolster the centrist movement that he configured around himself in 2016. The European elections are the last national polls before the 2027 elections

and, if the **surveys** are correct, the picture for Macron looks grim.

His Renaissance party, formerly La Republique en Marche, risks being relegated to third place. It is definitely set to be further eclipsed by a surge in support for Marine Le Pen's far-right, anti-immigrant and Eurosceptic National Rally, RN.

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Even the hitherto apparently moribund Socialist Party, PS, appears to have been reinvigorated and could give Renaissance a run for its money.

The French president has shown that he will not be easily diverted from his chosen path by disappointing election results. Yet, Le Pen's dramatic surge would loom over the reshaping of the French political scene that is taking place in anticipation of his exit.

Possibly more than Le Pen, though, the PS reclaiming support from Renaissance could foreshadow the eventual collapse of that party once its centre of gravity, Macron, is no longer there.

Germany

By comparison, Germany is facing two relatively more subtle processes that are, however, set to have a more imminent impact. A disastrous outcome for the ruling 'traffic light' coalition, especially for the Greens and the liberal FDP, could further weaken the cohesion of Scholz's government in the run-up to the 2025 elections.

The pro-business FDP in particular has been an odd match with Scholz's Social Democrats and the Greens. A very poor showing could spur it to press even harder for more concessions from its partners on things such

as reining in spending on Germany's energy transition and social benefits.

The other development to watch is the anticipated increase in the support for the far-right. The anti-immigrant and also Eurosceptic AfD is still polling well, despite, or maybe because of, a series of controversies.

It might end up the second largest party in the European parliament elections, ahead of all coalition parties but well behind the mainstream conservative opposition CDU/CSU.

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The AfD is unlikely, for now, to be able to vie for a place in national government. But in upcoming state elections later this year in Thuringia in the east of the country, it could end up so big that forming a coalition without it becomes even more fraught than last time around. Its influence is most felt, however, in pushing the CDU/CSU to the right, especially on migration.

The European elections also offer a preview of a new interesting phenomenon on the German political scene, the impact of which is also expected to be felt later this year in Thuringia.

The new self-described 'left-wing conservative' BSW list headed by former Die Linke politician Sarah Wagenknecht is left-wing on the economy while also anti-immigrant and critical of aid for Ukraine. It draws most of its support from voters for Die Linke but also aims to appeal to AfD followers.

European issues

In terms of Franco-German coordination on larger European issues, the European elections will indicate future change rather have an immediate impact.

If the trend of CDU/CSU gaining support continues, the next German chancellor could be less cautious on Ukraine and more willing to provide weapons systems such as the Taurus missile, than Scholz.



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This more proactive approach would chime better in tone with Macron, even though the French have not supplied Ukraine with much weaponry.

The next French presidential election is still far off. Chances are that a new centrist or centre-left alignment will emerge to prevent Le Pen from becoming president.

But if she does win, questions will arise over her and her party's past support for Vladimir Putin. The RN has recently distanced itself from Russia.

However, during the European Parliament elections it reacted furiously when new allegations of Russian interference in French politics surfaced. Support for Ukraine and EU-expansion could both be undermined if the RN ever gains power.

On migration, the EU is already taking a tougher approach with the recently signed Pact on Migration and Asylum. If the trends of the European parliament elections are projected into the next five years, both the parliament itself and the Franco-German axis can be expected to further toughen that

approach.

The real question is how far that can be extended without major damage to human rights provisions and a re-imposition of intra-EU border controls that could undermine the workings of the internal market itself. Neither France's RN nor Germany's AfD would be deterred by either consideration.