



By: **Ferry Biedermann**

France's political chaos reflects growing European instability



Europe's political stability received another blow this week when France's Prime Minister, François Bayrou, **announced** a confidence vote for 8 September.

Some of the European Union's major countries have now had unstable or failed governments for a prolonged period, a trend that has accelerated in recent years.

Increased political polarisation, particularly the rise of the far-right and populist parties, fragmentation and the decline of traditional centre-left and centre-right parties appear to undermine the durability of European governments.

The prospects of Bayrou surviving are poor. He has no majority, and almost all of the opposition has said it will vote against him.

The way he has called the vote raises suspicions that this is part of a political manoeuvre coordinated with President Emmanuel Macron, although the endgame is still unclear.

While always a bit restive, France's government instability has been on the increase since Macron's bloc lost its absolute majority in the 2022 parliamentary elections.

His gamble to call new elections in 2024 **made** the situation worse, and he is under pressure to stabilise the system until the end of his term in 2027.

The destabilising effects of migration and Gaza

France is not the only major country in the EU that faces political instability. Germany, where governments usually last longer, saw its coalition collapse last year.

Following elections, a new broad coalition between the centre-right CDU and the centre-left SPD has proved highly fractious.

The new chancellor, CDU leader Friedrich

Merz, is after his first 100 days less **popular** than his very unpopular predecessor, the SPD's Olaf Scholz.

The coalition has clashed internally over judicial appointments, migration, defence, social benefits and more.

It's not just the mainstream and centrist governments that are facing pressure

Spain, too, can be considered politically unstable, with the precariously balanced left-of-centre government of Pedro Sanchez **rocked** by scandal. And in Poland, Donald Tusk's centre-right coalition is **confronted** with a new far-right populist president, Karol Nawrocki, who threatens to obstruct his programme.

It's not just the mainstream and centrist governments that are facing pressure. In the Netherlands, the far-right-dominated government led from the shadows by Geert Wilders **collapsed** before the summer.

He pulled his party out of the coalition when his partners refused to go along with a list of demands on migration that judicial experts deemed at least partly illegal.

To add insult to injury, the caretaker rump-government last week collapsed again when a centre-right party pulled out due to disagreements over confronting Israel's Gaza war.

Thus, the Netherlands illustrates the destabilising effects of two highly contentious and polarising contemporary political issues: migration and Gaza.

The poster boy for short-lived governments

There's only one major EU country that appears to bask in relative stability. Italy, usually the poster boy for short-lived

governments, has been remarkably stable under the right-wing coalition led by Giorgia Meloni and her originally neo-fascist Brothers of Italy party.

Meloni can rely on a more or less homogenous and like-minded coalition. She has also been able to keep high personal approval ratings despite some controversial policy initiatives on migration, the media, gender relations and the rule of law.

Even if he wins the vote, Bayrou still has to get approval for his €44 billion cost-cutting package later in the year

Italy still has the highest debt burden of the major EU economies, but in part thanks to the current patch of stability, its government borrowing costs have **eased** and are now barely higher than France's.

Paris, also faced with one of the EU's highest debt-to-GDP ratios, on the other hand, saw its borrowing costs spike after Bayrou called the confidence vote.

This is particularly ironic, as the French Prime Minister called the vote to get the National Assembly, parliament, to agree to the importance of reducing the national debt. His move seems like an empty gesture that only increases France's financial woes in the short term.

Even if he wins the vote, Bayrou still has to **get** approval for his €44 billion cost-cutting package later in the year. His very short-lived **predecessor**, Michel Barnier, last year fell at that hurdle.

Echoes of the 2018-2020

The vote on 8 September **comes** days ahead of what is expected to be a large-scale popular protest against the budget proposals that has been called for 10 September.

It originated online under the banner *Bloquons tout, block everything*, and has received active political backing from the far-left *La France Insoumise*, or *France Unbowed*, of Jean-Luc Mélenchon as well as the socialists and communists.

But the far-right *Rassemblement National* (RN) of Marine Le Pen has kept its distance.

There appears to be growing support for the protest among trade unions, which could see the day turn into a general strike. The unions are to confer on 1 September.

Bayrou and Macron take into account that a successful protest on 10 September could spark another long-running, politically and economically debilitating series of confrontations

The protest carries echoes of the 2018-2020 *gilets jaunes*, the Yellow Vest movement that at times erupted into violence and disrupted life in France for almost two years. But it appears to have less popular support than the yellow vests had at the outset.

Although it is unclear who is behind the call to action, various organisers have said they will continue with the plan, regardless of the outcome of the confidence vote.

Clearly, both Bayrou and Macron take into account that a successful protest on 10 September could spark another long-running, politically and economically debilitating series of confrontations.

A new-generation leader

One of the main factors figuring in the political machinations on all sides is whether Macron will call new parliamentary elections, as he is allowed to do again since July this year.

He has said he doesn't intend to in the near future and given the price he paid last time, it

could further undermine his authority and efficacy in the almost two years that remain of his last term.



A Bardella-led RN government could well take a leaf from Meloni's success in Italy, despite what will be an uncomfortable cohabitation with Macron

Most political observers and polls indicate that his centrist bloc could face further losses but that the deadlock in parliament could very likely persist. One likely alternative, a decisive victory for Le Pen's RN, might provide a boost for that party's candidate in the 2027 presidential elections.

Marine Le Pen is facing a five-year ban from participating in elections due to a financial impropriety judgement against her. But even if she's eventually blocked from running, her replacement, the young RN president Jordan Bardella, would be a formidable **contender**.

Bardella is a new-generation leader, more in the mould of Meloni than Le Pen or Wilders in the Netherlands. Hopes in centrist French circles, which were voiced prior to last year's elections, that having him as prime minister would make clear that the far-right has no answers to the country's problems, are bound to be misplaced.

Rather than follow the Netherlands' chaotic, short-lived far-right-dominated coalition government, a Bardella-led RN government could well take a leaf from Meloni's success in Italy, despite what will be an uncomfortable cohabitation with Macron.

France's power-sharing periods, where the government and the parliamentary majority

are of a different political persuasion than the president, have been significantly more stable than the gridlock of the past three years.

Were Macron to call new elections and end up with a stable RN-majority government, he could add to the dangerous impression that only the far-right can currently provide the stability that Europe needs. But even if he muddles on, that moment looms in 2027.