



**Eastern Europe
Studies Centre**
Established in 2006

Q3 2022

An Overview of Developments and Processes in the EU and European countries

Political current affairs in France
after the elections to the
National Assembly



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The elections to the National Assembly in June were the most important event in French domestic politics in the third quarter of the year. The parties supporting Emmanuel Macron failed to win the absolute majority necessary for the stable work of the executive authority. Meanwhile, the creation of a coalition with the opposition forces is unlikely in the short term due to the extreme ideological polarization of the parties.

Summary

- This overview highlights the key events in French politics in the summer and fall of 2022 that are shaping the state's agenda and perspectives and will continue to shape them in the near future.
- The elections to the National Assembly in June were the most important event in French domestic politics in the third quarter of the year. The parties supporting Emmanuel Macron failed to win the absolute majority necessary for the stable work of the executive authority. Meanwhile, the creation of a coalition with the opposition forces is unlikely in the short term due to the extreme ideological polarization of the parties.
- The start of Macron's second term as president and the entry into office of the new government led by Élisabeth Borne in July should be seen in the context of the results of parliamentary election that were unsuccessful for Macron. Macron, who was re-elected for a second presidential term in the April of 2022, does not have the necessary support to his governance program from the National Assembly, so he is forced to adjust his governing ambitions. The president has been given a mandate to govern but the government has limited possibilities to implement his program.
- The approval of the budget and the blueprint of the Macron-backed pension reform will be the decisions that will require the most effort of the executive authority in the near future. A failure could provoke a government crisis and, in a critical situation, even early elections.
- Due to the lack of stable support in the parliament, further paralysis of the government's work, growth in public expenditure and increase in social unrest are likely at the end of the year and at the beginning of 2023.
- Macron's weakness in domestic politics will only have an indirect influence on his activity in foreign policy, where his further initiatives in the field of European Union reforms, the issue of support for warring Ukraine and the deepening of cooperation between France and the United States can be expected.

Introduction

The elections to the French National Assembly were held on June 12 and 19, 2022. Their results structure the political life of France in the short and medium term, as no other significant elections are scheduled for the next 1.5 years. The current arrangement of political forces allows presenting assessments about the state's political development and challenges.

Pro-Macron forces won a relative majority in the parliament, but they are 44 seats short of the absolute majority needed to allow the government to work smoothly. The probability of attracting so many MPs from the opposition is low, and the likelihood of a coalition with opposition parties in the short term is even lower. The National Assembly is a money-allocating institution, without whose approval even the presidential institution that dominates the French political system can do little. The composition of the National Assembly¹² that does not create a sufficient ruling majority means limited opportunities for the government not only to implement the reforms pushed by the president, but also to perform basic functions such as approving the budget.

Borne's new government, formed in July, is made up of technocrats and has no bright leaders to overshadow Macron. The government has become actually dependent on the unsustainable support from opposition forces in the parliament; therefore, so far it is delaying as much as possible the decisions that require parliamentary approval.

The start of president Macron's second term is noticeably less ambitious and smooth than his first term. There is clearly a much lower level of the president's activity in domestic politics than after winning the election in 2017.

Fragmentation in the parliament and paralysis of the government strengthen an already ominous set of factors that increase the probability of social unrest. High political polarization in society (witnessed by the successful performance of far-right and far-left forces in the elections) and aggravating economic challenges (higher cost of energy resources, decrease in people's purchasing power) make it possible to predict the strengthening of social resistance to the executive authority in the short term (more frequent demonstrations, protests, and sabotage of government work are possible). Commitment to unpopular social reforms declared by Macron is just one more ingredient in the gunpowder cocktail of social tensions.

National Assembly

Non-absolute majority. Macron's newly renamed *Renaissance* (REN) party and its allies won a majority in the National Assembly, but not an absolute one: 245 out of 577 seats. The French political system, which is oriented to a strong executive authority, has no experience or culture of forming post-electoral coalitions in the parliament. In the Fifth Republic of France, there are isolated instances of minority governments. These reasons made it possible to predict the dysfunction of the work of the new parliament and the stagnation of the legislative process after the elections. Although initial public analyzes generally called the situation "ungovernable"³, the worst-case scenario has not yet materialized. During the summer months, Borne's government survived a vote of no confidence in the parliament and managed to approve a package of anti-inflationary measures. However, one-time gains in the parliament can hardly be sustainable. The Republican Party (64 seats), which achieved a modest result in the parliamentary elections, supported the government's package of anti-inflationary measures in parliament but does not intend to support the government's social reforms and is unlikely to support the budget draft. Post-election talks by Macron and his allies (such as Édouard Philippe) about building "a grand coalition"⁴ by attracting part of the moderate opposition has not yielded results. REN's aspiration to attract ideologically close Republicans to the coalition does not seem realistic, at least at the moment.

Table. Composition of the 16th National Assembly

Political forces	Number of mandates
Ensemble! – a union of centrist parties supporting Macron	245
<i>Nouvelle Union populaire écologique et sociale</i> (NUPES) – a far-left alliance	131
<i>Rassemblement National</i> (RN) – Marine le Pen's far-right party	89
<i>Les Républicains</i> (LR) – a center-right party	64
<i>Divers gauche</i> (DVG) – a non-partisan left-wing bloc	22
<i>Divers droite</i> (DVD) – a non-partisan right-wing bloc	10
<i>Régionalistes</i> – a block of regional parties	10
Others	6
Total	577

Left-wing opposition. The far-left alliance (NUPES) performed successfully in the parliamentary election and became the main opposition party in the National Assembly (131 mandates). Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of the alliance, established himself as a leader among the left forces. However, during the summer months, NUPES was divided and mired in internal intrigue. On July 11, NUPES organized a vote of no confidence in the newly appointed Borne's government but it failed. With this move, Mélenchon reinforced his image as the main opposition leader. However, the problem of internal fragmentation within the far-left emerged⁵ as it failed to mobilize even its own parliamentarians for the vote of no confidence. Mélenchon again and again had to cool down scandals that arose due to the inappropriate behavior of his party members and allies. In July, pre-trial investigation into allegations of sexual harassment was instituted in respect of Éric Coquerel, a close ally of Mélenchon. In September, two NUPES members resigned: Adrien Quatennens and Green Party member Julien Bayou, both for violence against women. Internal scandals signal that it will remain difficult for Mélenchon to control his motley alliance and effectively sabotage the work of the government and the president. The internal scandals undermining the left are partly explained by structural factors: the lack of political experience and a populist election campaign (with declaration of the existential struggle of the people against the ruling elite but without a clear vision of governance).

Moderate right-wing opposition. After record poor results in the last elections The traditional center-right Republicans (LR) are mired in a crisis of political identity, the signs of which began to emerge as early as in 2017. Having secured only 64 seats in the parliament (a historically low result for the successors of Charles De Gaulle's party), the Republicans are looking for a new leader. The party's ideological direction and relations with Macron and with Borne's government should become clear after the elections of the new party president in December 2022. If Eric Ciotti, the most popular candidate at the moment, is elected, it will mean the turn of LR towards the far-right electorate and the desire to compete for the voters of Marine Le Pen and Eric Zemmour. Ideological proximity on economic issues makes the Republicans necessary partners for Macron's party in the parliament. However, it is unrealistic to expect stable support from the Republicans namely because of their current weakness and the search for new leaders. Before the election of the new party president, LR's support to the proposals and projects of Borne's government is probable less and less.

Far-right opposition. The far-right National Rally (RN), which performed successfully in the parliamentary elections, has the potential to strengthen its influence. Having won 89 seats in the National Assembly, a record for the far-right, the RN will be in a much more favorable position in the short to medium term than before thanks to increased media visibility and state funding for the party. Marine Le Pen, the party's longtime leader, has said she intends to focus on her work in the parliamentary group and preparations for the 2027 presidential election instead of leading the party. The election of a new formal leader of the RN is scheduled for November 5. There are two realistic contenders to become the new leader of the RN: Jordan Bardella (the acting president of the RN) and Louis Aliot (the RN-delegated mayor of the city of Perpignan)⁶. The new leader does not pose any real competition to Marine Le Pen, so she will retain influence in the party. The formal withdrawal of Marine le Pen from the direct leadership of the party could only pose a conditional challenge for maintaining the unity of the party (in recent years, some RN members left for other far-right parties) and for aiming to further normalize its image, moving away from the image of a far-right, populist movement. The war in Ukraine remains an awkward topic for the image of Marine Le Pen's party, as opponents keep reminding her of her financial debts (EUR 6 million) to a Kremlin-linked Russian bank and various speeches praising the Russian ruler. The RN has so far failed to generate a common position of party members on the war in Ukraine, and the only general consensus is on opposition to sanctions against Russia and to the supply of weapons to Ukraine⁷. However, the issue of the war in Ukraine is more acute not to RN voters, but to their opponents, so it should not affect the popularity of Marine Le Pen or her allies.

Non-parliamentary opposition. Éric Zemmour's far-right *Reconquête* (REC) political movement, which lost the presidential and parliamentary elections, is not withdrawing from the political field and is seeking to regroup⁸. The loyalty of the voters who broke away from Marine le Pen's party and the Republicans as well as the air-time of private media are indicators that allow to expect Zemmour's appearance in the French political space in the medium term. This has the potential to lure away some voters of the RN and the Republicans but is also conducive to Marine Le Pen's goal of normalizing her party by distancing from the far-right label. Zemmour is willingly taking over and in the future is likely to take over the far-right mantle from the National Rally.

The Government

The French government was partially reshuffled after the parliamentary elections, replacing ministers who performed poorly in the elections but retaining most of the former key officials and ministers. In the semi-presidential political system of France, the government implements the president's program. That is why the new prime minister, Borne, is playing the role of the administrator of a technocratic government, leaving president Macron the possibility to remain the unchallenged leader of the centrist forces in the country.

Achievements. In her speech presenting the policy priorities, Borne highlighted the government's focus on restraining growth in prices, reforming pensions and unemployment benefits, managing the climate crisis, and overcoming fragmentation in the parliament⁹. The achievements of Borne's government during the first months in office include a relative halt in the rise in energy prices, ensuring economic stability, controlling inflation growth (inflation recorded in France at below 6% is among the lowest in Europe), and approved benefits for socially vulnerable groups¹⁰. These achievements became possible after gathering sufficient support from members of the opposition parties for the anti-inflation package in July. The government withstood a vote of no confidence in the parliament, which was organized by NUPES on July 11, soon after the government had just started working.

Budget challenge. The draft budget of the state for 2023 published on September 26 (it provides for EUR 45 billion to compensate for the increase in energy prices and allowances to the lowest-income groups of society) is likely to encounter principled opposition in the parliament. In the French political discourse, the topic of energy is very closely linked to measures for mitigating climate change. The topic of ecology was particularly strengthened in the summer of 2022, which was the hottest in the 60-year history of observations. Under public pressure to act proactively on climate change, the government will be forced to increase public spending. For example, this may be demanded by the plans to finally nationalize EDF, France's largest electricity company. Macron keeps promising to stabilize the growth of public debt, but this may be very difficult for the government to achieve. Further caps on energy price increases in 2023 promised by Elisabeth Borne¹¹ seems risky in such a political situation because it will again require mobilizing the unsecured

support from opposition parties. It is difficult to expect a quick and smooth approval of the budget in the parliament. A more likely scenario is a large increase in public spending in order to find a compromise with the opposition.

Unpopularity of the pension reform. Macron's election promise to continue the pension reform has recently become no less a challenge for the government than the budget. Initial predictions, which circulated after the parliamentary election, that Macron would scale back the ambition of the pension reform in light of the lack of approval in the parliament¹² did not materialize. In late summer and September, the French president began to communicate his determination to force through this reform, even hinting at the possibility of a dissolution of parliament and of early elections. It is very likely that this reform will be an insurmountable task for the government because of its low popularity. The president's drive to persistently support it only further polarizes the parliament and increases the risk of incapacity of the government.

President

Macron finds himself in an ambiguous position because, despite the fact that he won the presidential election in April, his party failed to win a majority in the parliament in the elections in June. Therefore, the president has the authority to carry out his program but does not have the necessary capacity for this. The situation is paradoxical: Macron's program and ideas gained legitimacy after his clear victory in the presidential election, but the government did not secure the capacity to implement that program and ideas after the unsuccessful parliamentary elections. So, the government's situation is difficult because the president's program must be implemented with very little and unsustainable opportunities available in the parliament.

Image. There were unusually few Macron's public statements on domestic policy over the summer. The president tried to moderate his usually imperious tone when speaking on issues of administration of the state and acknowledged the need to compromise with opposition forces (which was not typical of Macron in his first term). On the initiative of the president, in the summer a standing advisory council for the development of the national dialogue (*Conseil National de la Refondation*) was established,

where representatives of the government, representatives of the opposition, and social partners should discuss relevant governance issues and search for compromises¹³. During the summer months, Macron interfered little with the work of the government, and only broadcasted the government's priorities in his public speeches.

Pension reform. In Macron's statements during the summer and fall, the pension reform became the *carte-de-visite* of his second term. The implementation of this reform is becoming a kind of matter of honor for Macron. The president rarely gave longer interviews in the third quarter of the year, so his statements and the government's priorities mentioned in them should be taken seriously. In one of his rare public interviews with TF1 television on the occasion of Bastille Day, Macron promised to carry out pension reform despite opposition in the parliament¹⁴. In another speech delivered on August 18, he again promised to pursue reduction of unemployment, pension reform, unemployment benefit reform, and reduction of budget deficit to 3%¹⁵. It is highly doubtful that the opposition in the parliament will support the laws that enable the fulfillment of these promises. An even worse signal for the president is the fact that the pushing of pension reform is publicly opposed even by some of his centrist allies, such as François Bayrou¹⁶. Mass demonstrations against the unpopular pension reform that began in late September are likely to expand into the fall¹⁷. Macron firmly believes that the reform is necessary because he has invested a lot of energy and political capital into it. A large part of the French intellectual elite recognizes the necessity of reform; however, in the current conditions of ideological polarization, it is hardly possible to expect that it will receive approval in the parliament.

Mirage of early elections. There are increased speculations over Macron's repeated threats to dissolve the parliament and call early elections if the reforms (especially the pension reform) fail to receive parliamentary approval¹⁸. Macron's attempt to push through the pension reform can be expected this winter (likely, in January 2023), after the end of the agreed two-month period of government's consultation with social partners. Earlier, the president intended to present the pension reform together with the budget draft but the process was delayed due to resistance from the opposition¹⁹. So, the middle of winter could be the most volatile period for the new government because of parliament fragmentation, street demonstrations and, possibly, even further threats from Macron to call early elections²⁰.

Street protests against the policies of the Macron and Borne' government were not yet common in the summer but are likely to increase as the weather becomes colder and energy costs rise.

Foreign policy. Macron's activities at the beginning of his second term were most clearly visible in foreign policy. In this area, the French president has made certain achievements: the successful completion of the French presidency of the Council of the European Union, agreement on European Union sanctions against Russia, the warming of relations with Australia achieved through diplomatic visits after the controversial AUKUS agreement of last summer. Macron's planned official visit to the United States to meet with President Joe Biden in December also shows the warming of relations between the states. Macron invested a lot of time during the summer in trying to curb the war in Ukraine and to rehabilitate his image in the context of this war (a documentary was created about the efforts to avoid war).²¹ Modest achievements and relatively passive efforts in French internal policy were to some extent offset by activism in foreign policy.

Summary

The results of the elections to the French National Assembly and the political polarization undermining the work of the executive authority are indicative of long-term structural shifts in French society. Voters' attitudes and political behavior are better explained no longer by the traditional left-right ideological divide but rather by three blocks that are not strictly ideologically defined: the far left, the far right, and Macron's centrists. All the three political identities are not ideologically refined but are extremely polarized and centered around charismatic leaders. This makes it especially difficult to find compromises in the parliament. France's political system, which is oriented to a strong executive authority, does not facilitate the formation of parliamentary coalitions either.

The polarization of society and the absence of a clear majority in the parliament are likely to lead to ineffective work of the executive authority in the short term. It is very likely that the government will be forced to increase public spending and public debt seeking to carry out its basic governance tasks (such as adopting the budget). Despite the effective solutions of Borne's government in capping price rises, the stalling of further government proposals in the parliament is likely to add to social discontent.

The most important events that will determine the stability of the French government in the near future will be the adoption of the budget and the implementation of the pension reform. The main threat to the budget draft is that it will not receive the necessary support from the opposition Republicans, which is unlikely until the election of a new leader of this party. The government's stability can be threatened if the budget is not approved or if the process is prolonged and adds to the escalation of social unrest, or if a compromise budget that increases the deficit and is unsustainable is adopted. In turn, the chances that the pension reform will be implemented are slim, and Macron's determination to push it through despite opposition only increases the likelihood of social unrest. A political crisis could arise if the executive authority expands the use of emergency powers, bypassing the incapacitated parliament, while social tensions rise²². The country's largest trade unions are planning mass demonstrations in mid-fall. The incapacity of legislators poses the threat of strengthening existing and new populist movements.

The issues of the budget and the pension reform are fueling speculation about the possibility of early elections in 2023. These speculations were prompted by Macron's statements about such an outcome if the government's work was sabotaged in the parliament. It seems that this is just a rhetorical device to exert pressure on MPs, and this is not the most likely scenario. However, in the worst-case scenario of a paralysis of the government's work, if both the adoption of the budget and the pension reform are sabotaged, Macron may be left with no other option.

Despite the controversy and a possible deadlock in French domestic politics caused by the parliamentary elections, there should be no drastic changes in foreign policy, which is essentially shaped by the president himself.

Endnotes

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