

Vincent Martigny of the University of Nice and Sciences-Po in Paris spoke at an AEJ zoom session on 28 February 2022.

This account of the meeting is by David Buchan, an AEJ UK member and former Financial Times correspondent in Paris, Brussels and Washington DC

In his analysis of the forthcoming French presidential election – of which the first round is on April 10 and the second April 24 - Vincent Martigny began by explaining that so far there had been almost no campaign. It had been ‘washed away by the war’ in Ukraine. The Ukraine crisis will change a lot of things. It will put Emmanuel Macron’s “regalian” or presidential leadership at the forefront of the campaign. And he will press the point that to deal with this crisis he has the experience that his competitors lack, and he will be right.

Macron’s European policy has been very forceful in the last few years. He claims to be “anti-Bojo” [Boris Johnson] in many ways, to be a great defender of the European Union, and a supporter of the EU’s latest evolution to actually provide weapons to Ukraine. He is also someone who claims to have a special relationship with leaders from both the US and Russia; in this he is following his predecessors claiming that France was somewhere in the middle between the US and Russia.

This hope of having a private relationship with both the US and Russia has been a complete failure in the last 4 years. But the French don’t blame him for this; they give him credit for trying diplomacy and also remember foreign policy is not really an electoral issue, even in the current case of a war in Europe. The war will change the fortunes of Macron’s rivals, but not his. The French appreciate Macron being an active leader on the European stage, promoting French power and influence. In contrast to the UK, Euro-scepticism has not really taken hold; Europe is seen as a good place for France to display its power. Moreover, the departure of the UK from the EU has probably increased the space for French influence in Europe. However, even now Macron would probably not support any accelerated membership bid by Ukraine, because this would bring an escalation of the conflict with Russia, and most French would not back any direct military intervention in Ukraine.

Macron was inspired by the foreign policy activism of Nicolas Sarkozy when he held the EU presidency at the time of the Georgia crisis of 2008. Macron wants to show the same strong leadership, even though Sarkozy was to the right of Macron’s centrism and is of a different style. On Ukraine, Macron certainly believed there was a role for discussion with Putin, and that this would be an advantage for him in the French presidential election to show that he had some authority on the world stage.

Macron still has until Friday [March 4] to declare his candidacy. He has wanted to stay ‘presidential’ until the last moment. Also modelling himself on Francois Mitterrand in 1988, who waited until the last minute to announce his bid for re-election. Macron’s aim is to ensure a short and sharp election campaign, and to press home his advantage in the opinion polls where he has been ahead in every poll in the last year.

So there is every chance Macron will win. This would be something quite unprecedented – the first leader to be re-elected since Jacques Chirac in 2002, and just possibly the first president since 1965 to be re-elected without having to co-habit with a prime minister and a parliamentary majority of a different political party. This was the case of Mitterrand in 1988 co-habiting with Jacques Chirac as prime minister, and Chirac in 2002 co-habiting with Lionel Jospin as prime minister. So Macron might be the first president since De Gaulle in 1965 to be elected in the ‘normal’ institutional arrangements of the 5th Republic. This depends on how Macron’s party, La Republique En Marche,

fares in the June parliamentary election, but it is a bit of an empty shell, and the Republicans are probably better placed to win a parliamentary majority. There is also a tactical reason to delay announcing a candidacy. TV time devoted to a declared candidate has to be fairly balanced with time for other declared candidates, whereas Macron's TV coverage is not counted in this balance while his re-election bid remains undeclared.

Ukraine will probably kill the campaign. For a simple reason. Macron's three main opponents – Marine Le Pen, Eric Zemmour, both from the extreme right, and Jean-Luc Mélenchon, hard line left-winger. They have all supported Putin for years. Very hard for these candidates to appear legitimate when French public opinion is 99% against the war that President Putin has launched. What these pro-Russia candidates are saying now is not freedom for Ukraine, but peace at any cost and that France should be neutral. This is likely to cause their poll ratings to drop. This is also going to be tough for Valerie Pécresse, candidate for the Republicans, equivalent of the UK's Conservative party. She is not pro-Putin, though she is a fluent Russian speaker and knows Russia well. Her real problem is her predecessor Francois Fillon, a pro-Putin former prime minister under Nicolas Sarkozy and a former Republican presidential candidate. Until the war broke out, Fillon worked for Rosneft, the Russian oil major. Pécresse has been criticised for not distancing herself more from Fillon.

So far it has been one of the duller campaigns in recent years. With 45 days to go to the 1st round, the polls are more or less stable – with Macron at 24-25%, Le Pen 17-18 % Le Pen, Zemmour 13-15%, Pécresse 11-13%. The left is way behind, and very divided between 5 candidates. So Macron is surrounded by political dwarfs, but 24% is not much. Compare this with Sarkozy's 31% in the 1st round in 2007, Hollande's 27% in 2012, and Macron got 22% in 2017. But the French system makes it possible to reach the 2nd round with a small score; Chirac never went above 20% in the 1st round of a presidential election. The left and right are completely in pieces, with only Macron in the centre, as in 2017. The French political spectrum has shifted to the right in recent years, so there could be a chance for a strong right wing candidate. In theory, this could be Pécresse, but she is a poor public speaker, finds it hard to distinguish her ideas from those of Macron, and has to deal with her own party's tough right wing.

Immigration and national identity have been made campaign issues by the right, especially by Eric Zemmour with his *grand remplacement* claim that Muslims are "invading" France. He is exploiting the fact that multi-culturalism has become a dirty word in French politics, with the French still fantasising that France is not a country of immigration, although in fact it has been for the past 200 years. The *gilets jaunes* are still a force to be reckoned with, their spirits revived by the anti-vax movement and the recent surge in energy prices. But in the elections most will probably abstain; if they do vote it will be for the extremes of right and left. In reality, Macron's public promises to protect hospitals after the Covid pandemic whatever it costs have re-centred his image from one of favouring the rich back to being a man of the centre -- even a proponent of a big state role and high public spending. Macron is politically flexible, says Vincent Martigny --a man "without ideological vertebrae", not hide-bound to old ideas but at core a free-market liberal, at least in French terms.

The possible failure of one or several candidates -- more likely Zemmour than Le Pen -- to get enough endorsements to run in the election would anger some, and more generally re-open the debate about the institutions of the 5th Republic which the speaker described as "not fit for purpose". The system was built for General de Gaulle, and has some undemocratic features. That is very obvious with Macron, around whom all revolves: one man takes all the space. Remember, a French president has more unchecked power than any western politician, even a US president.

A saving grace of French system is that as a candidate if you do something stupid in the 1st round, you have two weeks to re-think it in the 2nd round; this is the main difference with the Brexit vote in the UK or a US election. Who will face Macron in the 2nd round? Four possibles – Péresse, Le Pen, Zemmour, or Mélenchon. All are polling at 15-18%, it all depends on the turn-out and on the Ukraine crisis, but probably it will be Le Pen.

What is fascinating is not the outcome of the election – Macron will probably be re-elected. The exciting thing will be the consequences of the defeat of all the other candidates in a re-casting of French politics. The defeat of Péresse will seriously damage the Republicans, as will the defeat of Le Pen for her Rassemblement National. The re-composition of the French right that began with the candidacy of Zemmour will continue, as will the re-composition even of Macron supporters. Once Macron is re-elected to a second and final term, his succession battle will start. And there are the parliamentary elections in June. So please don't stop watching the French news after April 24!