
VESTS & VOTES: HOW PROTESTS HIT MACRON'S EP PROSPECTS

- 20.12.2018

EU Observer (19 December 2018)

Since 17 November, France's 'Yellow Vest' protesters have spontaneously, unorganised and without leadership, caused a social, political and democratic crisis.

"We meet at the roundabout to talk together and take decisions about spontaneous actions. The last couple of days we have filtered the traffic at the entrance to the shipyard", explains Laurent, a Yellow Vest-wearing protester from Saint-Nazaire, who did not want to give his last name. Actions take place daily all over France, and five successive Saturdays have been marked by countrywide demonstrations.

How the popular movement will continue in the coming weeks is uncertain.

What is sure is that there will be a 'before' and an 'after' the Yellow Vest movement in France, and it will most likely be an important agenda-setter in the upcoming European Parliament elections on 26 May 2019, when 79 French MEPs are to be elected.

New campaign issues

"Because the Yellow Vests have targeted president Macron personally, there is a risk that the elections for the European parliament, to a much greater extent than before, will turn into a referendum for or against Macron," explained Sebastien Maillard, director at the think-tank the Jacques Delors Institute, to EUobserver.

Immigration will continue to be an important election campaign issue in France. This is a key campaigning priority for Marine Le Pen and her party Rassemblement National (RN), formerly the Front National.

Le Pen is close to Hungary's Viktor Orbán on the anti-immigration 'nationalist' side, in opposition to the 'progressives' in Macron's camp.

This divide may also play into the hands of the French president, who may well seek to use it to consolidate his own base.

But the Yellow Vests' revolt will certainly bring up new campaign issues, which would probably not have had such importance before.

Questions around a 'social Europe', redistribution, the fight against inequality, purchasing power and how you make the green revolution social will be key discussion points in the election campaign, says Maillard.

France's traditional ruling parties out

The new political sequence of events triggered by the Yellow Vests seems to confirm pre-existing tendencies in the polls.

RN is polling at 24 percent of the vote, six points ahead of Emmanuel Macron's La Republique En Marche (LRM) and MODEM list, in the latest IFOP poll carried out on 7-10 December 2018.

The idea of a large pro-European list uniting the centrist political parties and the LRM finally died last weekend when the Union of Democrats and Independents (UDI) party decided to run on their own.

Meanwhile, France's traditional ruling parties are all some way behind, forced to fight the European parliament elections at a time when they have still to solve their internal crises following Macron's victory in May 2017.

Les Republicains, the French conservatives, divided on which European direction to take – pro Europe or 'sovereigntist' - would obtain only 11 percent of the vote.

The Socialist Party (PS) try to avoid a split into several lists, each of which would get between 3.5 and 4.5 percent of the vote. La France Insoumise (Unsubmissive France), Jean Luc Melenchon's far-left party, would get nine percent.

If the Yellow Vests launch their own electoral list, they would take votes from the populist parties on both sides on the political spectrum, according to current tendencies.

Another consequence of the Yellow Vest protests could be an even lower turnout, since one of the movement's strong demands is direct democracy, which stands in direct opposition to rule by elected representatives.

At the 2014 European Parliament elections, French turnout was around 43 percent - the average for the EU-28 as a whole.

Macron politically weakened

LRM has already stepped away from its ambition to set up pan-European electoral lists, but still wants to create alliances in the future European pParliament.

The ambition is to break up the European People's Party (EPP) and the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) in order to create a large centre-bloc of MEPs.

Discussions have been taking place with the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe group (ALDE).

However, Macron is politically weakened by the Yellow Vests, which in turn raises doubts about his capacity to create new European alliances.

Indeed, there is even the question now of whether he will succeed in creating an appropriate platform inside the ALDE-group, the only option left, estimates Maillard.

An important election

Macron's pro-European political programme was one of the key characteristics of his successful French presidential election campaign in May 2017, building bridges between the left and right in French politics.

The European elections of 2019 are decisive for the development of Macron's LRM movement and the realisation of his political project for France and Europe.

The president and his party colleagues seem to know this. LRM has undertaken a door-to-door campaign on Europe in France, and Macron has launched an EU-wide citizens' hearing on the future of Europe.

This work will provide the building blocks for the LRM electoral strategy, due to be finalised by the end of January when they expect to present their 79 French MEP candidates.

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