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Amid a populist wave, where is Europe heading?

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Is there anyone in charge of Europe? Is anyone with any authority likely to take charge before the end of the year? These are the questions being asked as France's political system implodes with six weeks to go before the first round of its presidential election.

In a normal year, the European Union could cope with a political crisis in France. But this is not a normal year. There is a feeling that the continent is becoming untethered from its moorings just at a time when it most needs to face tough decisions.

In Washington, Donald Trump sees the EU as a hostile trading rival and wants to see the bloc collapse. To the east, Vladimir Putin is seeking to exploit the widening cracks in the European project, already weakened by Britain's vote last year to leave the bloc. To the south, the EU faces the fallout from state failure in Syria and Libya and continuing migration pressure.

In Brussels, EU officials are cowering, fearful of taking any action which would inflame anti-EU sentiment ahead of elections in Holland (next week), France (in April, May and June) and in Germany (in September) when the continent's political anchor, chancellor Angela Merkel, is running for a fourth term.

The immediate cause of this anguish is the failure of both of France's mainstream parties, the Socialists on the left and the Republicans on the centre right, to field a convincing candidate to block the path to power of Marine Le Pen, the candidate of the right-wing, Eurosceptic and anti-Muslim Front National.

The socialists are in disarray after the unpopular president Francois Hollande decided not to run for a second term. On the right the former prime minister, Francois Fillon, who seemed certain to be president just a few weeks ago, has been laid low by the revelation that he employed his wife and sons at taxpayer expense for jobs where they were not qualified or did not have to turn up for.

Mr Fillon had been seen as the man who could keep Ms Le Pen out of the Elysee Palace. With Mr Fillon still in the race but deserted by all but the diehard conservatives, the prospect of Ms Le Pen triumphing has become a dangerous possibility.

The alternative is the untested independent, Emmanuel Macron. As a former Rothschild's banker and economy minister in president Hollande's socialist government, he is a "third way" candidate in the mould of Tony Blair. While he is a fresh face, he is also part of the establishment due to service in the discredited Hollande cabinet; at the age of 39 he is running for the job created by General Charles de Gaulle for himself as father of the nation, while never having been elected to public office. By contrast Ms Le Pen is a consummate political operator.

Whoever wins the two-round presidential election, the outlook is clouded by the prospect in June of elections for the National Assembly, which has to approve the prime minister. If the French electorate votes in June the opposite way it voted in May – a reasonable assumption – then gridlock looms.

This situation, known in France as "cohabitation", has occurred in the past, notably when the socialist Francois Mitterand was president and had to work with the rightist prime minister, Jacques Chirac. But Mitterand was a politician of snakelike cunning, able to present himself as a hero of the liberation while having worked with the collaborationist Vichy government, and emerged on top.

Neither of the possible winners of the presidential race this year has that kind of experience, nor a significant presence in the National Assembly – the Front National has two seats, and Mr Macron does not even have his own party, only a movement called "En Marche!" (Onwards!).

As a former banker he is distrusted by the left and he has angered many on the right by describing France's colonial war to prevent Algerian independence – still a raw nerve after more than half a century – as "barbaric" and a "crime against humanity".

If the Trump model is followed, the French election would go to the politician who could triumph in a contest of identity politics, at a time when there is widespread feeling that someone needs to shake up the country, with its 10 per cent unemployment, and 24 per cent youth unemployment. That person would be Ms Le Pen.

In an article for Vanity Fair, the French philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy accuses the French establishment of losing the will to fight the "irresponsible, xenophobic, and crypto-fascist" Front National candidate. The media, he says, are giving Ms Le Pen an easy ride while hounding Mr Fillon. The French elites are flirting with disaster, like the aristocrats in the last days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

At such times it is normal in Europe to look to Berlin and Chancellor Merkel for leadership. These days she cuts an increasingly lonely figure, as she is attacked by Mr Trump and surrounded by increasingly Eurosceptic neighbours. Last month, the Dutch parliament voted unanimously to order a review of options for withdrawing from the single currency, the euro. If the Dutch are wavering, who will hold the line?

Her victory for a fourth term had seemed a certainty until the left was energised by the entry of Martin Schultz, who looks to give her a hard challenge. A terrorist outrage in Germany, a rise in asylum applications, or an embarrassing data leak from Russian-linked hacktivists – any of these could derail her re-election.

Whoever wins in Germany is likely to struggle to form a stable coalition. The last one took three months – this one is likely to be more complicated and negotiations could drag on until the new year. Europe as we know it will probably survive this year in recognisable form. But no one is betting that will be the case when the next electoral season comes around in four years.