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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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09.12.2024

The Spiralling European Political Crisis:

France's Prime Minister Falls And President Under Pressure to Resign

The motion of no confidence, voted through on 4 December 2024, has succeeded—a first in France since 1962. All eyes are now on French President Emmanuel Macron, who faces mounting pressure to resign, but has assured that he will not resign.



The French political crisis is evolving into a dramatic and complex challenge, with significant implications for domestic governance, European stability, and global diplomacy. The public largely blames President Macron for the chaos.

France's turmoil arrives at a precarious moment for the European Union

In his national TV address on the evening of 5 December, Macron sought to shift the blame onto the “far-right” and “far-left,” accusing them of uniting to create turmoil ahead of the next presidential election—or to force an early one. He firmly rejected the idea of broad “cohabitation” as a solution or of bringing forward the presidential election foreseen for 2027.

Here's my analysis connecting the key developments and their potential consequences.

A Crisis Born of Discord

Michel Barnier's short-lived government collapsed in an extraordinary parliamentary alliance between far-right (RN – Marine Le Pen's National Rally) and the left (New Popular Union, including LFI – France Unbowed led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, considered an extreme-left movement). Their common grievance? A rejection of Barnier's austere budget proposal, which sought to rein in France's growing deficit, as well as their initial rejection of Barnier's nomination as Prime Minister by President Macron, who disregarded the election results that were won by the left.

However, Le Pen was the primary architect behind the government's downfall.

While intended to address fiscal concerns, the proposal ignited a populist backlash, culminating in a vote of no confidence. This marked the first successful ousting of a French prime minister by parliamentary motion since 1962, underscoring the depth of political fragmentation in the Fifth Republic.

Ripples Across Europe

France's turmoil arrives at a precarious moment for the European Union. As the bloc's major army and second-largest economy, its instability reverberates across the continent, weakening political cohesion within the EU and exposing vulnerabilities in the Eurozone. The EU was not used to face a political crisis in such dimensions within its core nations.

Compounding the issue, Germany is preoccupied with its own economic and electoral uncertainties, and Donald Trump's imminent return to the U.S. presidency introduces a wildcard into global geopolitics.

The crisis in France underscores broader European challenges, from the rise of populism to mounting fiscal pressures, threatening the EU's ability to maintain a united front in trade negotiations, foreign policy, and economic governance.

The EU has long relied on the leadership of the Franco-German duo. Now, both nations are mired in deep crises—Germany facing a political and economic crossroads, and France grappling with political and fiscal turmoil.

To make matters worse, there is no leader on the horizon like Charles de Gaulle, Willy Brandt, François Mitterrand, Helmut Kohl, or Angela Merkel—figures we were accustomed to relying on in the past to steer their nations out of such crises.

Macron Under Fire

Having Michel Barnier delivered his resignation, President Emmanuel Macron is under intense pressure to act decisively. Barnier now holds the dubious distinction of being the shortest-serving Prime Minister of the Fifth Republic. Naming a new prime minister quickly

is not just a domestic imperative, but also a global one. The reopening of Notre Dame Cathedral this weekend, attended by Trump and other dignitaries, has heightened scrutiny on Macron's leadership.

While Macron could reappoint Barnier as a caretaker to buy time, doing so risks appearing tone-deaf to growing calls for systemic change. Meanwhile, opposition factions and public sentiment increasingly question Macron's ability to lead, raising the spectre of a presidential resignation. Macron's televised address has done little to alter the narrative surrounding his survival—or the prospect of his potential downfall.

The Challenge of Finding a New Prime Minister

Forming a new government in France is proving to be a complex and overwhelming task. The New Popular Front (NFP) Alliance, a coalition of Greens, Socialists, Communists, and the radical left faction, France Unbowed, is the largest group at the French National Assembly.

However, the NFP lacks a sufficient majority to govern outright, forcing them to rely on support from President Macron's MPs to pass legislation.

A potential candidate for prime minister from the NFP, Lucie Castets, was previously rejected by Macron this summer with fears that she would cancel his neoliberal reforms, such as the pension reform. The president's decision stemmed from an apparent inability to secure stable majorities, despite the theoretical possibility of combining the NFP's votes with Macron's MPs to push through key laws. The new stalemate highlights the deep fractures within French politics and raises questions about whether any coalition can provide the stability needed to navigate the current crisis.

The immediate question is whether Macron can restore a semblance of stability by swiftly appointing a credible prime minister. Failure to do so could embolden opposition forces and deepen calls for his resignation. Beyond France, the crisis tests the EU's resilience in managing its internal divisions while confronting external pressures, from a menacing Donald Trump to the rising assertiveness of the Global South.

Opportunistic Moves in Brussels

Amid France's crisis, Brussels may seize the moment to push forward controversial EU initiatives. Chief among them is the Mercosur trade deal, a landmark agreement with Latin American countries that France has staunchly opposed. With French political attention consumed by domestic turmoil, the European Commission might view this as a rare opportunity to sidestep resistance and secure the deal's approval, sparking further controversy within an already fragile EU.

The coming days will be pivotal in determining whether France and the EU can weather this storm—or whether it will escalate into a broader crisis of governance.

Ricardo Martins, December 07, 2024

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