

From European elections to French political crisis

An analysis of the 2024 European elections

by Marc-Olivier Padis | August 2024



Executive summary

For the first time since the first direct European elections in 1979, this election had direct political consequences in France. From the start of the election campaign, this election appeared to be a mid-term vote, with a strong sanctioning vote against the French president. In an unexpected move, President Macron announced the dissolution of the National Assembly on the evening of 9 June 2024, giving the result of the European vote an unprecedented national importance.

The French campaign for the European elections saw a record number of electoral lists: 38 in total. Under French electoral rules, however, only lists achieving 5% of the casted votes are elected to the European Parliament (EP). This meant that only seven lists were really in contention. Turnout, at 51.5%, was the highest in 30 years.

The results of the vote were pretty much in line with what opinion poll predicted: National Rally (RN) came out on top in the elections, with gains across all demographic categories. The campaign also saw the emergence of the pro-European left-wing list called “Réveiller l’Europe”, led by outgoing MEP Raphaël Glucksmann, who clearly distanced himself from the radical left-wing France Unbowed (LFI) list. The presidential majority list (“Besoin d’Europe”) performed worse than in the last elections five years ago, foreshadowing its decline in the subsequent legislative elections, in the two rounds on 30 June and 7 July 2024.

National topics dominated the election campaign, with purchasing power, inflation, energy prices and food being the main concerns of voters. Immigration was also a dominant topic, mostly put forward

Figure 1: French political parties, alliances, and affiliations (Source: Politico)



by the far right. The National Rally, which has been the favourite in the opinion polls for several months, did not really present an electoral programme. It merely withdrew the most visible anti-European proposals from its programme, such as leaving the euro, however without publishing an economic programme and while showing opposition to ambitious European policies.

The legislative elections initially prolonged the momentum of the Rassemblement National in the first round; however, a stronger-than-expected “Republican Front” - an alliance of left and green parties - won in the second round on 7 July, rather unexpectedly. The National Assembly emerged more divided than before, with no clear majority and three main political forces. For President Emmanuel Macron, these two elections weakened his position. Without the possibility of standing for re-election in the next presidential elections in 2027 without a majority in the National Assembly, and without a major win in the European Parliament, his influence in Europe is likely to decline until the end of his term.

More broadly, French influence is likely to be very limited within the European Parliament, since the delegations of French Members of Parliament (MEPs) are small in the two main EP groups, the Socialists & Democrats (S&D) and the European People's Party (EPP). In addition, French MEPs are represented in large numbers in groups that contribute little to parliamentary work, the Left group (GUE/NGL) and the new radical right Patriots for Europe group. Without this influence and with stronger radical wings likely to report back on European issues in the domestic context, there is a higher risk for French citizens to misunderstand European issues in the future.

An election dominated by national issues

The European election campaign in France was dominated by the domestic political context, which weighed heavily on the campaign. The vote appeared to be a mid-term judgement on French President Emmanuel Macron, two years after his re-election as President. The government reshuffle in January 2024, with the departure of Elisabeth Borne and the arrival of Gabriel Attal as prime minister, was intended to boost the presidential majority's campaign for the European elections.

The far-right National Rally (RN) amplified this effective nationalisation of the European election by announcing well in advance that it would call for a dissolution of Parliament after the vote in anticipation of a resounding win for the far-right. The far-left party France Unbowed, for its part, played the same national tune, announcing that it regarded the

vote as "the first round of the presidential election". Finally, in a highly unusual move by Macron, the actual result led to the dissolution of the National Assembly, which largely overshadowed the outcome of the vote itself. The European election in France therefore was predominantly national, both in the campaign and in the result.

The nationalisation of the issues at stake was also reflected in voter preferences, with 45% voting on domestic policy issues (43% in 2019) and 55% on European issues. Unsurprisingly, this focus on domestic political issues was as much as 73% for voters of Jordan Bardella, the RN's lead candidate. One in three (29%) voted to reject Emmanuel Macron "above all else". This number leapt to 68% for RN voters.¹

Figure 2: EP Election Voting intentions in France (29 May 2024, Data by Euronews)

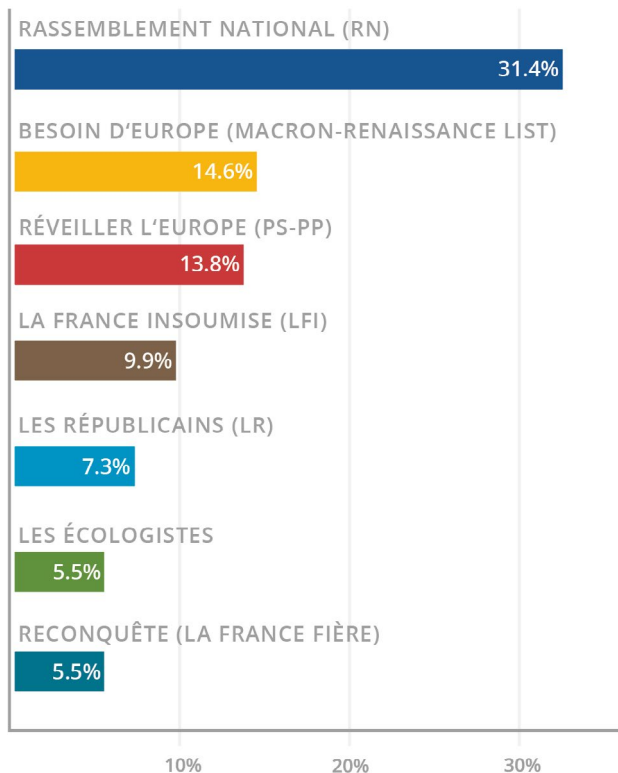
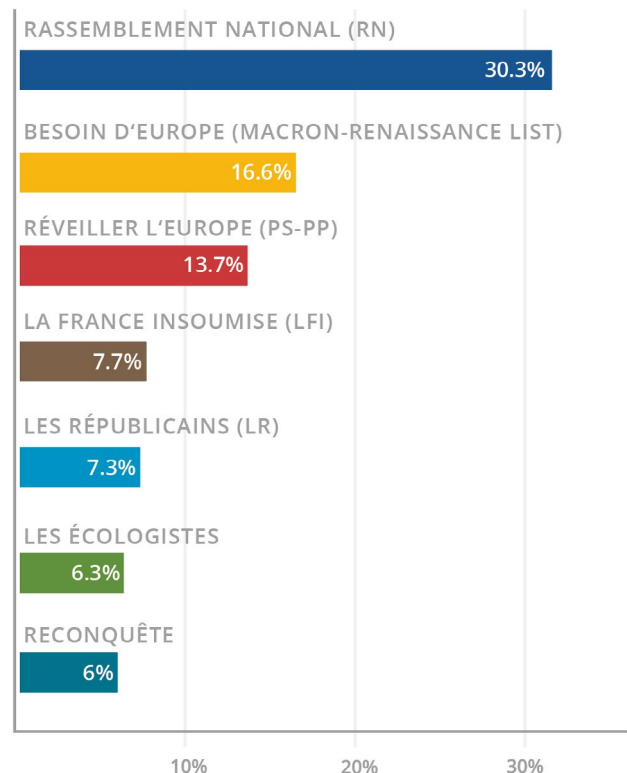


Figure 3: EP Election results in France (10 June 2024, Data by Euronews)



A campaign with few surprises

The general tone of the campaign was set very early on and hardly changed over the weeks before the election date. The far-right list's lead was established since January 2024, with 75% of RN voters firming up their intentions well in advance.² The presidential majority party (Macronist) list "*Besoin d'Europe*" (Need for Europe) started its campaign very late, in March, with a little known lead candidate, Valérie Hayer, who was a Member of the European Parliament (MEP) for the centrist/Liberal Renew Europe group. Only the centre-left list "*Réveiller l'Europe*" (Wake up Europe) with lead candidate Raphaël Glucksmann progressed slightly in the months leading up to the election, although he failed to secure second place, ending up behind RN and Macron's list.

Voting intentions remained very stable. In comparison with polls in March, there was very little change in public opinion over the three months up to the day of voting, apart from a dip in support for Macron's list. Backing for the far-right RN list, often wrongly estimated in polls due to the volatility of its electorate, was fully in line with forecasts this time. This was undoubtedly due to a strong push among its potential electorate to turn out in its favour this time, whereas they often abstain. Indeed, the far-right electorate was if anything super-mobilised in 2024: 60% of Marine Le Pen's voters in the presidential elections of 2022 took part in the European elections (and even 69% of voters of the extremist far-right candidate Éric Zemmour from the new party "Reconquête") compared with just 54% of Emmanuel Macron's voters in 2022.

The campaign had therefore little to no influence on pre-set voting intentions. Even the intervention by the president at the Sorbonne University on 25 April 2024 had no positive impact on his candidate's list.³ Similarly, the major TV debate between the prime minister, Gabriel Attal, and the lead RN candidate, Jordan Bardella, on 23 May, left RN support unchanged.

Substantial progress for the far-right

The RN, tipped as the favourite for the election, went out of its way to avoid taking any risks. The lead candidate, Jordan Bardella, did little to present his programme in detail. Despite several announcements, he did not, for example, make any proposals on economic policy. This was no doubt to avoid scrutiny and rebuttal, especially as the party has been trying to appear more credible on the substance for several years. The campaign booklet simply repeated most of its 2019 proposals.

In the past five years, the RN has slightly shifted its position on Europe, acknowledging the French people's attachment to the EU and the euro. However, this shift in no way signifies a fundamental commitment to the European project. On the contrary, the programme promises a 'Frexit' in "bits and pieces" (as the centrist French MP/ex-MEP Jean-Louis Bourlanges put it). Indeed, in its project for a "Europe of Nations", almost all current EU policies are challenged, with the exception of the Erasmus+ exchange programme, cooperation on civil protection, scientific exchanges and industrial cooperation such as on artificial intelligence. Conversely, the Schengen area, Frontex and the single market would only be acceptable to the RN "under new conditions". In addition, the Union's external policy, the energy market, enlargement and any form of common debt are categorically rejected. Bardella also declared towards the end of the campaign that he wanted to reduce France's contribution to the European budget (Multiannual Financial Framework, MFF) by €2 to 3 billion, i.e. a cut of around 10-15% of the overall French contribution.⁴

For the presidential majority, renowned for its pro-European commitment, the aim of this election was to consolidate the (centrist/Liberal) Renew group in the European Parliament and to support Emmanuel Macron's European initiatives. Macron's second Sorbonne speech and Attal's strong involvement in the campaign although he wasn't even a candidate were steps to ensure the campaign's suc-

cess. However, despite Macron's high-profile interventions, the president emerged weakened by the election result.

For the Left, the campaign was very much about domestic politics. La France Insoumise (LFI) intended to put its leader, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, in a dominant position on the left of the political spectrum, in order to establish him as the most credible candidate for the next presidential election in 2027. In contrast, MEP Raphaël Glucksmann, lead candidate for the "Wake up Europe" list, which was supported by the Socialist Party and Public Space (*Place Publique*)⁵, ran a campaign focused on European issues, primarily the geopolitical challenge posed by Russia's war in Ukraine. This led the list to clearly distance itself from LFI's eurosceptic rhetoric and ambivalent positions on Russia, as LFI's campaign leaflet proposed "building peace in Ukraine" without clearly identifying the forces involved or indeed how this might come about. The increased support for this list during the campaign demonstrated that an alternative constellation could be built within the left, especially compared to earlier alliances dominated by LFI, such as the New ecological and social People's Union (NUPES), set up in the National Assembly for the 2022 legislative elections. This pro-European stance attracted left-wing voters who had switched to Macron's Renaissance list in the 2019 European elections. 11% of voters on the Renaissance list in 2019 went to Glucksmann's list this year and he also snatched lots of Green votes (27% of 2019 Green voters), which partly explains their low final score.⁶

Campaign themes: Purchasing power and immigration

Like the virtually unchanged voting intentions, the campaign was not very animated, with a very clear hierarchy of themes set out from the start. France's role in Europe grew slightly as a topic for discussion as the campaign wore on, but domestic politics and everyday issues such as the cost of living clearly overshadowed any European ones.

This is borne out by a comparison of issues important to the French at the start of the campaign with what voters said they had voted on which shows that no party managed to change the order of voter priorities:

The standard of living emerged as a key issue in this campaign for two reasons. First, inflation remains an important challenge, even if it has gone down considerably in France (2.3% in April 2024, compared with almost 7% a year earlier). Inflation is still felt keenly by households, mostly because of food prices. This is also why farmers' protests won backing from the French public at the start of 2024. The farmers' demonstrations ahead of the yearly National Agricultural Fair in February 2024 launched a movement against the EU's Green Deal and the latter gained scant and ineffective support from the presidential majority.⁷ Generally speaking, little was said about the performance of EU institutions during the campaign.

Inflation was also an issue due to increasing energy costs as a result of the Russian war against Ukraine. This had an impact on French households during 2022, despite France's highly electrified energy production. Electricity prices were a rather unexpected campaign theme, with the far-right RN proposing to take France out of the European electricity market. This proposal is a reminder of the extent to which the evolution of the RN's discourse on the European Union is deceptive: the RN says it no longer wants

to leave the EU or return to the franc, but contests France's participation in the EU, without being able to argue seriously on the merits of the benefits that leaving the European electricity market would bring, for example.

In second place, immigration was a prevalent topic. It is also the top issue for the far-right. It connects various concerns of French citizens, primarily security and terrorism, which appear in 5th and 6th position in the list of issues of high political salience, along with living standards and jobs.⁸ The European Migration Pact was highlighted by the RN as a threat to security in an only-to-be-expected denunciation of Europe "imposing mass immigration". The decision to place the former Executive Director of Frontex (2015-2022), Fabrice Leggeri, in third position on Bardella's list marked a desire to boost RN expertise on the migration issue. However, he made few appearances during the campaign because of criticism from the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) about his management of Frontex.⁹ As he was placed high on the list, he was nevertheless elected.

It is interesting to note that compared to other European countries in which health did not play a role in the campaigns, e.g., in Italy, Germany or Poland, it was an important one for French voters. This seems to indicate that after the joint European action during Covid-19, voters expect Europe to act as one on the subject, despite the limited scope of EU powers in this policy field.

Support for Ukraine was a subject highlighted by the progressive lead candidate Glucksmann, whose first political involvement was in Georgia after the "Rose Revolution" in 2003. It was also one of the political markers put down by Macron's lead candidate, Valérie Hayer. This issue provided an opportunity to challenge the RN, whose long-standing pro-Russian stance has been slowly corrected since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. While the RN concedes verbal support for Ukraine, Le Pen has raised fears of an open conflict with Russia, especially after Macron's statements on maybe sending French troops to Ukraine.

It was Israel's military action in Gaza in response to the massacres committed by Hamas on 7 October that was at the heart of the LFI campaign. Although the subject strictly speaking does not fall within the remit of the European Parliament, LFI made "imposing peace on Gaza" its distinctive theme, while showing great restraint in relation to Russia ("building peace in Ukraine").

The votes: A political landscape dominated by the rise of the far-right

Unsurprisingly, it was the far-right list led by Bardella that came out as the winner of this election, with 31.37% of the vote (30 seats out of a total of 81 for France). This result is all the more remarkable given that, until now, RN voters have paid little attention to European issues.

It can be explained by two factors. First, a very good mobilisation of the far-right's traditional base. Voters for Le Pen in the presidential election of 2022 voted massively for Bardella's European list – between 86% and 90% according to surveys.¹⁰ The vote was also very strong in the professional categories in which the RN traditionally scores highly: white-collar workers (40%) and blue-collar workers (now up to 54%).

Second, the RN made headway in categories that had been less receptive, such as managers (from 13% to 20% of the vote, or up seven percentage points) and pensioners (up from 22% to 29%). Since Le Pen became leader in 2011, the gender gap has gradually been closed, so that the under-representation of women voters, which has long characterised the RN vote, has now been erased.¹¹ The far-right also made gains among young voters, especially the under-25s (up from 15% to 26%), no doubt thanks to the image of the young lead candidate, Bardella, who is only 28 and to his strong presence on social networks where he has nearly 2m followers on TikTok.¹² However, he

did not score best in this age group (the RN tally is stronger in the 25-65 age group). Generally speaking, Bardella owes his strong showing to the votes of working people. Politically, he took votes from conservative voters (20% of those who voted for the centre-right candidate Valérie Pécresse in the last legislative elections in 2022) and from his far-right rival Zemmour (26% or 43%, depending on the survey).¹³

The RN, whose star is on the rise, is a catch-all party whose electorate no longer differs massively from the French average voter. A geographical comparison of the RN vote for the last three European elections shows that it is gradually spreading, including in areas where it has always been low, such as Brittany and the greater West, as well as the Paris metropolitan area. However, there are still areas where the RN vote is at its strongest: the formerly industrial north of France, the Provence-Côte d'Azur and Languedoc regions, and the Garonne valley.

All in all, we can say that voting for the RN has become more commonplace, since it is no longer seen as shameful. This is due to the party's long normalisation course in recent years ("*dédiabolisation*" or de-demonising), which has helped bring it in from the cold. However, it is still not completely credible on substance, as demonstrated by the lead candidate's great caution about his programme.

The presidential majority list "Need for Europe" was the big loser on 9 June, with just 14.6% of the vote after winning 22.4% in 2019. It was clearly outgunned by the RN and was unable to mobilise its supporters, in an election that ostensibly should have mattered greatly to its pro-European electorate. Only one in two Macron voters in the first round of the 2022 presidential election chose to vote for lead candidate Hayer's list. Compared with the European election of 2019, Macron's party Renaissance lost serious ground among employees, blue-collar workers and the unemployed, and even more so among managers (from 29% to 15%) and young people (from 17% to 7%).¹⁴ Macron's list only really scored well with pensioners and the most privileged categories.

The party appears to be too dependent on the president and suffers from the rejectionist vote directed at Macron's policies. In addition, the president has been criticised for his top-down use of power, as illustrated by the surprise decision to dissolve the National Assembly. This followed an opaque deliberation process of which even his own prime minister, Attal, was only informed at the last moment. This practice can be explained, beyond personal dispositions of Macron, by the president's desire to retain the power of initiative and to make full use of his constitutional prerogatives. The personalisation of power, typical of the French Fifth Republic, ended up backfiring on the president's party and turned the vote in these European elections into an 'anti-Macron' ballot.

The leftist alliance between the Socialist Party (PS) and Public Space saw the biggest increase since the last European election in 2019, rising from 6% to almost 14%. However, the flat results among blue-collar workers (7% in both 2019 and 2024), as well as among young people aged 18-25 (5% in both elections) illustrate the limits of this progress. Lead candidate Glucksmann's list is the one that brings together voters from across the left: 25% of Mélenchon's electorate, 35% of Yannick Jadot's, 30% of Fabien Roussel's and 15% of Macron's.¹⁵ On election night, Glucksmann announced that he wanted to play a role at national level, contributing to building a "new political space". His aim is to challenge Mélenchon's hold on NUPES so dominant in the 2022 legislative elections. Glucksmann also wanted to forge a new progressive and pro-European offer on the left. But the sudden dissolution of the National Assembly immediately closed the political space he could occupy insofar as his movement, Public Space, is not sufficiently well-established in France to present candidates for the legislative elections.

The Republicans party (LR) won 7.25% of the votes, but will only send a small delegation to the European Parliament as part of the European People's Party (EPP). This party was unable to attract new voters compared to 2019 when it secured eight seats with 8.48% of the votes. It did not benefit from any significant transfer of votes from the other parties. Worse

still, it did not even manage to retain its electorate, a fifth of whom voted for the RN. The party scores well only in a small number of categories, such as among the upper class of pensioners (11%) and the over-70s (12%).¹⁶

The Greens were in danger of failing to reach the 5% threshold. With 5.5% of the votes, they saved just five of their seats, a sharp drop on 2019 (13.5%). The Greens' message has been weakened by rising prices, particularly for energy, as well as attacks from both the farming community (against the Green Deal) and the far-right (rallying against "punitive ecology"). Their lead candidate, Marie Toussaint, was unfamiliar to the French public and found herself in stark competition with other left candidates, in particular Manon Aubry (LFI) and Glucksmann, who had also included environmental themes in their programme.

The LFI was up slightly to almost 10% (+3 points compared with 2019). The profile of its electorate is very marked both in terms of age and geography. LFI is the only party with a very unbalanced geographical spread. It only scores significantly in a few electoral strongholds limited to the region of Paris ("*Ile de France*") and a few metropolitan areas (Lyon, Montpellier, Toulouse, Lille). For example, it came first in the 19^e and 20^e *arrondissements* of the capital, as well as in the *banlieues* (suburbs) of Paris, Seine-Saint-Denis and Val-de-Marne. It also scored well among 18-24 year-olds (23%). This age group's voting appears to be polarised between two extremes, with very low scores (5-6%) for the traditional or governing parties. LFI's campaign had very little to do with European issues, focusing its messaging on the situation in Gaza in a particularly divisive way. This issue seems to have been an important determinant of the vote among young voters: 22% of 18-24 year-olds cite it as an important issue, compared with 6% of voters overall.¹⁷

An election with far-reaching consequences: The dissolution of the National Assembly and the 2024 general elections

The decision by the president to dissolve the National Assembly the night of the European election result overshadowed any analysis of the results in France. Macron's decision is unprecedented in French political life. The power to dissolve the parliament is a presidential prerogative. In the Fifth Republic – France's political system since 1958 – it was most commonly used to bring the result of the presidential election in line with the parliamentary majority (e.g. François Mitterrand after the 1981 vote). Dissolution had never followed a European election before, so this is the first time that a Head of State has interpreted a European election result as a challenge to his power at national level. Indeed, until now, European elections have never led to major political changes in France (reshuffles, etc.). The surprise effect sought by the president was complete.

The president's choice has thrown France into an unfamiliar political situation. The decision was justified retrospectively by the fact that the government would have to face a vote of no confidence in the autumn, at the time of the budget vote. It is also a belated recognition by Macron that governing without an absolute majority is fraught with difficulties. Voters in the 2022 legislative elections did not give the president a working majority, a first under the Fifth Republic.

There were several factors that led to the RN victory in the first round of the legislative elections: first, the radicalisation of the right-wing electorate; second, mistrust of the president and his policies; third, the momentum given to the far-right through its good score in the European elections; fourth, the campaign's brevity; and fifth, the unpreparedness of the presidential majority.

However, the prospect of a far-right prime minister led the other political parties to follow a strategy to block the far-right from reaching power (a so-called "*barrage républicain*" or republican dam). They withdrew their candidates in the second round of the legislative elections in constituencies that had three-way races ("*triangulaires*") under the electoral law which allows for 2,3 or 4 candidates to reach the second round if no candidate has an absolute majority in the first round. This would make it more difficult for the RN candidates to get elected. As a result, the number of three-way races fell from 306 to 89. The high turnout in the second round (67%) and the goodly number of electoral switches from one party to another in the second round standing against a RN candidate (these candidates were part of the so-called republican front and with the better chance of winning (aka tactical voting) ultimately shrank the number of far-right victories. RN still forms the largest group in Parliament, with 143 MEPs compared with 89 in the outgoing National Assembly – a staggering increase of 60%. However, the republican front managed to squeeze them into third place behind the hastily-assembled leftist New Popular Front (NFP - in a conscious echo of the 1930s) and the centrist alliance around Macron's party (Together).

The electoral coalitions which came first and second – the leftist NFP, which includes the LFI, the Communist Party, Greens and the Socialist Party, and the centrist "Ensemble", which includes Renaissance, *Modem* and Horizons, are now under pressure to agree to form a parliamentary coalition capable of supporting a new government – an unprecedented situation in France, where political parties are not used to form governing coalitions as in Germany, Italy and the Netherlands.

Conclusion

The result of the European elections in France heralds a decline in the country's influence within the European Parliament (EP). Two EP groups with larger numbers of French members, Identity and Democracy (ID) that includes the RN (30 seats) - now a constituent part of a new group called Patriots for Europe (PfE) - and the European Left Group (GUE/NGL) that includes LFI (9 seats), will remain outside the legislative majority.

The French component (The Republicans) in the EP's largest group, the EPP, will be particularly small (six seats). The French are also weaker within the Renew group, which was supposed to be the vehicle for maximising Macron's influence inside the EP. Only the growth of the Socialist list (S&D) corresponds to a trend also observed in other countries (such as Italy), as the Glucksmann list won 13 seats, along with the decline of the Greens, such as in Germany, where they also lost a considerable amount of seats.

Overall, the French carry little weight in the major parliamentary groups and retain any influence if at all only in the groups that are not power brokers in the EP. This discrepancy contributes to the weakening of France's position in Europe, which is in turn exacerbated by a weakened President Macron in the European Council and the Council of the EU, given that he is (as of now) deprived of a majority in the French National Assembly. There is also a risk that this weakening of the French position will not be perceived sufficiently by French citizens, who may lose interest in the parliamentary work carried out in Brussels and Strasbourg.

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