

French elections and the problem of migration. A forecast for 2022

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Key points:

- Despite the reduction in the influx of non-EU migrants to member states following the 2015 crisis, France is still being targeted as a major migration destination;
- it is currently estimated that the number of irregular migrants in France reaches almost 600,000 people;
- Emmanuel Macron is not afraid to criticise Germany, Italy and Spain for their ineffective migration policies and irresponsibility, i.e. opening and closing borders without an established plan;
- E. Macron's decision to accept at least some Afghans was a critical step towards gaining support from left-wing circles;
- at the end of the French president's five-year term, the key issue will not be health, security or the economy, but the recurring migration question.

Introduction

The French Republic is facing a problem of both internal and external migration, which has been continuously present since the end of the Second World War. There are cultural, social, religious, educational, economic, and security challenges on the state level. France's international engagement, which is closely related to migration, mainly includes military missions, economic cooperation with former colonies, and investments in Africa. Every president of the Fifth Republic has stressed the need to create conditions for the regulated reception of migrants in the country, but to date, none has been able to propose a detailed, long-term, and effective strategy. With nearly six months before the presidential election, Emmanuel Macron will have to present a plan of action in the face of another wave of asylum seekers.

France in figures

Until the mid-1970s, due to the need for labour resulting from the post-war period, immigrants coming to France were predominantly male. After 1974, the interest in labour migration declined in favour of family migration. Since then, there has been a significant increase in female representation within immigration flows, and in 2020, they represent 52% of

immigrants, compared to 45% in 1946 and 44% in 1975. In particular, this trend is visible among immigrants from Africa (the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa). In addition, the qualifications and educational level of the incomers has also increased. In 1975, only 3% of immigrants had a university degree, while in 2020, this figure was up to 30%.

According to the figures for 2020, immigrants represent 12.7% of the population of the French Republic, and more than 1.7 million foreign-born individuals have been granted the status of French citizens by right of blood. Together with the current immigrants in the country (6.8 million), 8.5 million people living in France were born outside of the country.

Despite the reduction in the influx of non-EU nationals into member states, France is still being chosen as the primary destination for migration after the 2015 crisis. **Between 2016 and 2020, on average, 100,000 people per year have sought asylum (a record of 122,000 in 2018).** Despite the high number of interested parties, each year, only 20,000 people were granted refugee status, 20,000 temporary residence permits, and the rest - representing the majority - remained in the country illegally. If apprehended, they were deported, but many settled permanently in ghettos and encampments.

The issue of those without documents proving legal residence in France will pose a significant challenge not only to Mr. Macron's electoral programme but to any politician running for office as president. Currently, it is estimated that the number of illegal migrants in France is nearly 600,000. Moreover, this number will increase since the ongoing pandemic has made travel much more difficult. However, there has been a gradual reduction in controls, for instance, on Belgium's border, where there are more than 150 000 undocumented migrants.

Migrants from Afghanistan

At a conference in August following the withdrawal of US troops, French government spokesman Gabriel Attal announced that France would take in several thousand Afghans as it does every year. He stressed that Paris, led by President Macron, has supported refugees fleeing the war for years and will provide shelter to them again this year. Furthermore, he defended E. Macron, who, after the evacuation of American forces from the Middle East, spoke about the need of establishing an international initiative, distributing migrants in different countries, securing illegal migration routes, and protecting them from criminal groups posing a threat to Europe. These statements provoked an outcry from many left-wing oppositionists

and several human rights associations in France. In addition, the president was criticised on social media and compared to the far-right Marine Le Pen. In response, the Elysée Palace issued a statement announcing the assistance arrangements for people arriving on French territory from Kabul. It remains true that France has recorded the highest number of Afghan refugees accepted in Europe over the past three years, with more than 50,000 currently in the country. As of 2020, 8,886 applications for protection (1st time, as it is possible to apply several times) were made by Afghans.

For E. Macron, the Afghan migration issue will be the biggest challenge in the upcoming election campaign. On the one hand, in order to gain the support of the left-wing electorate, he needs to return to the same tone he kept between 2015 and 2017. At that time, the president maintained that refugees represent a new force for the state (labour, scientific), emphasising their unique qualifications and the fact that welcoming people in need is in line with French traditions. This fits in with his recent statements in which he indicated that France has always been a country of migration, helping others in crises. In this view, his main rival is Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who already has a plan for organising the reception of migrants not only in the country but also throughout the European Union. His position will be strong if he manages to win over the entire left-wing electorate.

On the other hand, the incumbent president - whose first term expires in 2022 - is well aware that **his biggest political rival remains Marine Le Pen and her far-right *Rassemblement National* party, which has built its popularity on a strong anti-immigration stance.** In order to convince the electorate of the right, E. Macron points out that it is above all migrants who have obligations to the state and must respect its values and citizens.

International Affairs

Paris points out that on the issue of asylum and migration, the European Union must reform its policies to make them more effective and coherent. Furthermore, Emmanuel Macron is not afraid to criticise Germany, Italy, and Spain for their ineffective migration policies and irresponsibility - opening and closing borders without an agreed plan. In May this year, he highlighted that most eventually ended up in France of the half a million Syrians and Iraqis who arrived in Germany in 2015 and were not granted refugee status. He also stresses his pro-

Europeanism, while pointing out the significance of international cooperation in the context of changes concerning migration law.

France, under E. Macron has been heavily involved in international military operations, expanding bases in French Guiana, the United Arab Emirates, Mali, and Senegal. **Although the withdrawal of some soldiers from the Barkhane mission has met the expectations of the majority of his voters, the actual result - the proliferation of terrorist groups - means that France has lost control of the Sahel** and suffered a defeat in the region, which could lead to another wave of terrorism on the territory of the Republic in the future.

Faced with the emerging challenges at the intersection of migration and terrorism, the French president has been careful throughout his term not to alienate followers of Islam. Although his actions have not been effective several times, as when he indicated that all mosques in the country should be inspected, he will eventually be able to count on their vote, for instance, in his confrontation with Marine Le Pen. Moreover, his recent talks with Iran and Iraq will be crucial in building a narrative of understanding the Islamic world and seeking understanding with the followers of this religion.

Conclusion

E. Macron's decision to welcome at least some Afghans marked an extremely important step towards gaining support from left-wing circles. Moreover, referring to the intensification of aid to Africa - including support for the economy, in order to alleviate the crisis caused by Covid-19 - he signalled to centre-left voters that he still remembers about them. **At the same time, the president will seek to maintain the support of anti-immigration movements, as he is sure to refer to the security and anti-Covid-19 laws passed during his term, stressing the need for increased controls on those coming into the country.** Therefore, it seems that building a position based on balancing on the edges of views is the only option that E. Macron has. He cannot afford to pursue policies against terrorism, Islam, and migration, as he will not defeat M. Pen in this regard. He will gain the missing percentage points needed for re-election by maintaining at least partial endorsement from pro-asylum supporters.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, hundreds of families from Africa and the Middle East have been unable to join their relatives in France, despite being allowed to do so. Nine NGOs, including the League of Human Rights, Amnesty International France, and ANAFÉ (fr.

Association nationale d'assistance aux frontières pour les étrangers), filed a class-action lawsuit in the Council of State (fr. *Conseil d'Etat*) to question the failure of visas allowing family reunification to be issued. Although this has been going on for two years, E. Macron and his administration still have not resolved these issues. When the family reunification problem resurfaces again in 2022, it will be the last months of his term of office - from January to April - during the winter and the anticipated next wave of Covid-19 cases. This will require the incumbent president to make an important decision - whether to focus on the pandemic or to support migration processes. Considering the upcoming elections, the next move seems obvious, and in the public narrative, **E. Macron will emphasise how crucial it is for him to welcome migrants - thus gaining approval in their eyes, but at the same time pointing to the priority, which is the health of citizens.**

At the end of his five-year term, the pivotal issue will not be health, security, or economics, but the recurring theme of migration. The proposals presented by La République en Marche for the right and the extreme right are not enough for them, and linking the problem of extremism with the migration law is used to expose E. Macron's solution to internal challenges. **So far, the rhetorical engine of his electoral promises has been the exploitation of the distinctions between refugees, who must be taken in under legal obligations, versus economic migrants from Africa and the Middle East.** The French President referred as always to the commitment of the whole of Europe and border protection, in a way shifting the individual responsibility of the state to other EU members. It seems that despite the current influx of people, he will try to maintain such rhetoric until the first round, scheduled for 10 April 2022, which almost certainly will allow him to stay in power.

A second term for Emmanuel Marcon is, therefore, to be expected. After the recent and rather successful meeting with President Andrzej Duda, one can hope that Poland will also engage in foreign policy between Warsaw and Paris. **This is a necessary and wise move in the process of establishing independence from the Americans, who will become less and less involved in Europe, with their focus on China.**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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