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## **Marine Le Pen is coming!!**

Next to a hesitant Berlin, Paris has emerged as Europe's de facto foreign policy leader in Europe once Angela Merkel left the political stage. Consequently, French President Emmanuel Macron sees himself as Europe's chief statesman.

Although he is expected to come out on top in the first round of the French presidential elections this Sunday (10 April), the latest polls suggest it could be a close call between him and far-right candidate Marine Le Pen in a potential run-off in two weeks' time.

Foreign policy usually doesn't play a huge role in France's presidential elections. But more and more observers suggest the French leader's strategy of being more of a wartime president than a domestically-oriented candidate in this election campaign has likely backfired, effectively helping Le Pen.

Not to mention that the emergence of far-right Eric Zemmour further helped Le Pen, positioning her as the more modest candidate on the right.

Besides Macron's adventurous goals of pursuing the interests of France in the Middle East and Africa, and dreams of European strategic autonomy, his initiatives have rarely gone beyond glittery statements.

The COVID-19 crisis came at the right moment to validate Macron's plea for a more integrated EU policy. And Russia's war in Ukraine favoured his push for European defence and strategic autonomy, though under a slightly different interpretation.

Macron had been "visionary, but with results that did not match his ambitions", deputy director of the Institute of International and Strategic Relations (IRIS), Jean-Pierre Maulny, listing more missed opportunities than victories for the French president's term.

Over the past few years, Macron has gambled that reaching out to Moscow can make Europe less dependent on the US. His policy of outreach and phone diplomacy with Vladimir Putin, an approach Macron has defended not only in recent weeks but repeatedly over the years since taking office, has raised eyebrows with many across the bloc, but especially in Eastern Europe.

Thinking that Putin will be seduced by this dialogue into a 'reset' is naïve and dangerous, many EU diplomats have said, especially since Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

"Europe was absent in January when the Russians sent their draft treaty to the Americans," Maulny said, adding that "when Macron went to Moscow, he should have gone together with Scholz, not one after the other", thus representing a French rather than European approach.

French officials, meanwhile, argue that Macron's policy is less controversial than portrayed and is more than a mere bilateral exercise.

Though looking at the past few weeks, French newspapers didn't rate kindly Macron's diplomatic efforts to resolve the Ukraine crisis, especially after he was repeatedly cold-shouldered by Putin.

How does that play out domestically?

Macron's effort was a 'diplomatic humiliation', the main headline in Le Monde read the day after the two presidents spoke on the phone for nearly two hours in February. France24, meanwhile, summed up his foreign policy endeavour by calling him an 'impotent negotiator'.

Macron for sure could have done without the public humiliation, since it opened the door to criticism from the right, left, and centre.

In France, there is a tradition of sympathising with Russia. The two far-right leaders have spoken admiringly of Putin's nationalist approach, in Zemmour's case even longing for a "French Putin".

Meanwhile, far-left candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon pleaded for France's "non-alignment" in the Ukrainian standoff, saying: "The Russians must not cross Ukraine's borders, which must be respected, and the Americans must not annex Ukraine into NATO."

But it is also true that the French right, with sympathies for Putin's strongman leadership, has a long history of losing at the Russian roulette. This time around, they seem to have gotten better at spinning the wheel in their favour.

"Iran, Lebanon, Mali, the Australian submarine disaster (...) they were all supposed to boost France. They all turned out to be knives in the back," his right-wing challenger Valérie Pécresse said.

Le Pen, meanwhile, has quietly but efficiently run a classic on-the-ground election campaign in small towns and villages across France, focusing on domestic issues – and performed some U-turns when it comes to foreign policy positions.

Her ultra-pragmatic, vote-seeking approach to foreign matters was best seen just after Russia invaded Ukraine, when she tried to do everything to hide her proximity to Putin and Moscow.

Once her advisors realised that public opinion towards Russia was dropping, they attempted to prevent the circulation of 1.2 million election pamphlets featuring Le Pen shaking hands with Putin.

The eight-page leaflet included a picture of Putin meeting with Le Pen in Moscow in 2017, together with the caption "a woman of conviction", a visual that hasn't aged well.

Although Le Pen ultimately condemned Russia's aggression in Ukraine, she still opposes sanctions against Moscow and rejects an energy ban on Russian oil and gas. Her main argument is the implication such a move could have on French purchasing power, her flagship "priority" in this election.

Nonna Mayer, a specialist in the Front National electorate, told France24: "Ms. Le Pen has turned a disadvantage to her advantage, by making people forget everything else".

Just days before the Russian invasion, Le Pen repeated her pledge to pull France out of NATO's integrated command. Closer to the polls, she backtracked on those calls, arguing that it would be better to wait until the war in Ukraine was over.

"It doesn't make sense, either we withdraw from NATO or we don't," Maulny commented the back-and-forth.

The two election rounds in France will show whether foreign policy ambition pays any dividend at home, or whether Macron would have been better off tailoring his vision and ambition more to the needs and wishes of his electorate.

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