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France and Covid-19 – Between internal challenges and European opportunity

France is one of the countries that has been worst affected by Covid-19 in the European Union, pushing its healthcare system and its economic resilience to the brink. The current crisis rapidly put the government under severe pressure and once again tested French citizens' confidence in the executive. The French approach to this multidimensional crisis, which has had a strong European focus so far, could also be an opportunity for the government to inject fresh impetus into the country's European policy and to help strengthen the European Union as an actor in the current crisis.

Of all European countries, France is currently one of the most affected by Covid-19. As of 8 May, it had recorded 26,380 deaths, thus ranking fourth behind Spain, Italy and the United Kingdom. The intensity with which it has been affected by the pandemic and especially the high death toll have put the government under severe pressure. The debates surrounding structural deficits and potential errors on the part of decision-makers have intensified. However, management of the crisis is acting as a catalyst in France with respect to (re-) defining and affirming political projects, also at the European level. What is the impact of this crisis on the standing of the executive after months of social conflicts? Is it a moment of “reconstruction” or a new fault line? Could the crisis be an opportunity for France to push forward certain key aspects of its European policy and to emerge stronger as a key actor for EU cohesion and the future development of EU integration?

A difficult situation from the outset: French resilience put to the test

Initially, the French government decided not to over-react when cases multiplied during the first half of February because the total number of infections remained low. On 25 February, it was announced that the last French Covid-19 patient had been cured and had left hospital, and the wait-and-see strategy, which was comparable to other European partners at this time, seemed to be working. But then came the “tipping point” of the Mulhouse epidemic. Between 18 and 24 February, an evangelical meeting brought together 2,500 people in circumstances that, combined all potentially dangerous factors, and no attendance lists were kept. Subsequently, the Haut-Rhin department, where Mulhouse is located, turned into a Covid-19 “hotspot”.

The crisis hit the country in a particularly sensitive sector, representing a politically explosive issue for the government. The quality of the healthcare system and equal access to the latter is a political priority in France and the country's healthcare expenditure is, on a par with Germany, the highest in the EU, accounting for 11.2% of its GDP in 2018. Nevertheless, there has been much criticism regarding structural problems in the hospital system over the years, an issue that has greatly preoccupied public opinion. Regarding the specific nature of the pandemic, a number of weaknesses were laid bare, including the low number of intensive care beds in comparison with its German neighbour, a lack of masks, and an apparent inability to produce enough screening tests. These facts, combined with a major

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dependency on active pharmaceutical substances from China and India in particular, have badly shaken the French public.

In economic terms, the resilience of the second-largest economy in the EU is also being challenged. GDP collapsed by 6% in the first quarter of 2020, and by May 2020 more than 8 million French citizens were in short-time work. In March and April 2020, the government developed a major economic contingency plan, which was the second-largest package in Europe after Germany (including 42 billion euros of additional spending and 315 billion euros in guarantees for corporate spending). In the long term, the government is largely counting on the resumption of growth thanks to these measures – which will surely help – but there is also a great deal of uncertainty surrounding future economic developments.

New fault line or a moment of reconstruction? A new stress test for the executive

In terms of measures to restrict public life, the French authorities generally acted within a timescale comparable to that of other European countries. Initially with a regional focus on the Grand Est, the management of the crisis quickly became nationwide. President Emmanuel Macron declared in his second speech to the nation on 16 March that the country was “at war,” called for “national unity” and announced some of the most restrictive lockdown measures in Europe. This situation has had an impact on the relationship between the executive and members of the public, which is thus undergoing a new stress test after months of social movements, due first to the “yellow vests” and then to the pension reform crisis.

In the highly centralised semi-presidential French

political system, President Emmanuel Macron and Prime Minister Édouard Philippe have been on the “front line”. Public statements come mostly from these two figures, which has increased the burden of responsibility on the government even more. Opinionway’s Political Confidence Barometer (CEVIPOF) revealed in mid-April 2020 that only 39% of the French population surveyed approved the government’s handling of the crisis while by way of comparison, 74% of Germans and 69% of the UK public believed that their government has handled the crisis well. Confidence in the executive, which is usually low in France, is slightly higher than prior to the crisis (when it was around 30%). However, the government is still walking a tightrope and its balance is fragile. The political fault lines that already existed before the crisis are far from having disappeared, and Philippe’s “neither right nor left” government is facing increasing criticism from both right- and left-wing opposition. After a short moment of “national unity”, political agreement is wavering day by day, and debates about the consequences for the time after the current crisis are intensifying. In the short term, a cabinet reshuffle after the summer is a likely option. In the long term, however, the real “moment of truth” for the French government will be the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2022.

The executive and, above all, Emmanuel Macron has tried to use the crisis as an opportunity for political reconstruction, a “moment of renewal”. The pension reform, which has been a core project of the government, has been suspended until further notice, and governmental policy is indeed at a crucial turning point. On the agenda are making large-scale investments in the healthcare sector, rebuilding France’s economic independence and rethinking value chains in a global context – starting from medical equipment and, beyond that, stretching to all areas of strategic interests. While this approach could be an opportunity for future strategic developments in France, its prospects depend largely on the government’s credibility in

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its further efforts to deal with the Covid-19 crisis and on France's capacity to overcome the economic recession.

A strong commitment to Europe

References to the EU have played an important role in this moment of national reconstruction. From the beginning of the crisis in March and before some European countries announced that they were closing their borders, Emmanuel Macron drew attention to the political rather than simply medical nature of these measures, calling for a "nationalist discourse" to be avoided and the need to only "take such measures when they are 'relevant' and 'Europe-wide'". Macron also expressed his wish for greater strategic autonomy for "our Europe", European unity and solidarity, as well as the desire for greater coherence between national and European recovery plans.

With regard to concrete political positions, France initially defended the "coronabonds" debt-pooling project called for by Italy. Paris subsequently agreed to change its position after having successfully negotiated a compromise with Berlin ahead of the Eurogroup meeting on 9 April, including the activation of the European Solidarity Mechanism without any conditions other than investments in healthcare. France also actively supported a European recovery model based on four pillars, notably the European Recovery Fund, which is a key issue of the actual French strategy for Europe. France's call for greater economic and financial solidarity across Europe is not surprising and it corresponds with the political paradigm that has already been followed in the past. However, in this case, France has played a key role at a very delicate time for EU cohesion, by acting as a mediator between largely traumatised (both physically and economically) "southern" countries and "northern" countries that have generally been less affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Moreover, France's commitment to greater European economic and medical sovereignty could appear all the more relevant in this crisis since many member states have revealed their extreme external dependency in areas that are a matter of life and death. Many European countries have experienced supply disruptions, and solidarity between individual member states has shown its limits. On these issues, EU member states are at a turning point on whether they decide to take up this challenge together or alone.

Renewal in a fragile context

France has not enjoyed the best track record so far in terms of the serious course of the pandemic and the number of deaths it has endured. The crisis is far from over, especially in its political and socio-economic dimensions. The position of the executive remains fragile, and debates about deficits in the management of the crisis could intensify. However, it is certainly possible that the situation will improve over time: the number of infections has decreased, medical equipment has been enhanced and the lockdown measures are being carefully eased. If the government manages to gain the trust of the public in its project of renewal and it avoids social destabilisation, it could increase its popularity again – this is, however, not yet given. With regard to Europe, France has played a key role as a mediator at this sensitive time. The Franco-German initiative for a European recovery from 18 May 2020, combining elements of financial solidarity and sovereignty, confirmed that the crisis could be an opportunity for the French government to push forward key aspects of its European policy. However, the final toll for France will depend, to a large extent, on its ability to address its internal challenges.

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