

# France's 2017 Presidential Election: In Brief

**name redacted**

Analyst in European Affairs

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## Overview

France is scheduled to hold the first round of what is expected to be a two-round presidential election on April 23, 2017. The second round would take place on May 7. The presidential campaign has exposed apparent wide-scale public dissatisfaction both with the presidency of outgoing President François Hollande and, more broadly, with a French political establishment perceived by many as self-entitled and increasingly out of touch with the French electorate. Unprecedented in modern France, the two current front-runners for the presidency represent political parties outside the mainstream.

The leading candidates' calls to uproot a French political system long dominated by one large center-right and one large center-left party appear to be resonating with an electorate that has experienced a decade of economic stagnation and a series of terrorist attacks which claimed the lives of more than 240 people over the past two years. Consequently, many analysts in France and elsewhere maintain that the 2017 election could have far-reaching implications for the French political system, French society, and even the future of the European Union (EU).

France, which is one of Europe's most globally engaged and militarily capable countries, has long been a close ally of the United States, especially in confronting common security challenges such as Islamist terrorism. None of the leading French presidential candidates has explicitly advocated a significant change in France's relations with the United States, but all—with the notable exception of Marine Le Pen of the far-right, nationalist *Front National* (National Front)—have expressed unease about the direction of U.S. policy toward Europe under President Donald Trump.

Despite the potential for disagreements between the next French president and President Trump, most analysts suggest that the U.S.-French relationship could continue to be driven primarily by close cooperation in response to key shared security challenges. Chief among these challenges would be the fight against the Islamic State and other terrorist groups in the Middle East and North Africa.

At the same time, two of the main presidential candidates have advocated major shifts in France's relations with the EU and NATO. Insofar as such shifts might affect France's broader foreign policy outlook, they could have significant implications for U.S.-French relations. From this perspective, Members of Congress who favor continuity in U.S.-French relations could stress the importance of stability in France's relations with the EU and NATO. By contrast, others may view the election as an opportunity to explore a new model for bilateral relations, less connected to NATO and the EU.

## The Election: Possible Outcomes and Main Candidates

President Hollande of the center-left *Parti Socialiste* (Socialist Party) announced in late 2016 that he would not seek a second term, primarily due to his historically poor approval ratings (reportedly at 4% in late 2016<sup>1</sup>). Voter dissatisfaction with Hollande appears to be rooted largely in his failure to restore economic growth and reduce unemployment and in a perceived

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<sup>1</sup> Rick Noak, "The Reason French President Hollande Won't Seek Reelection, in One Chart," *Washington Post*, December 1, 2016.

deterioration of domestic security. Hollande also was unable to reconcile a rift within the Socialist Party between reform-minded proponents of economic liberalization and deregulation and the party's traditional left-wing base. Hollande began his presidency in 2012 by pursuing a leftist economic platform of taxation and subsidized job creation, but he shifted markedly toward the center in the latter half of his term.

Five main candidates are vying for the presidency. If, as expected, none of them win more than 50% of the vote in the first round of voting on April 23, 2017, the top two finishers will compete in a second round runoff election on May 7. In mid-April, opinion polls were forecasting that Le Pen would win the first round election with about 24% of the vote, followed closely by Emmanuel Macron of the upstart centrist *En Marche* ("on the march," or "forward") political movement, with about 23% of the vote.<sup>2</sup> (See text box on the "Main Presidential Candidates and Their Platforms," below, for more on the candidates and their policies.)

Until mid-January 2017, polls predicted that the current third-place candidate, François Fillon of the establishment center-right party, *Les Républicains* (renamed in 2015 from the *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire*), would convincingly beat Le Pen in a second round runoff, but Fillon's campaign has been beset by controversy over payments he made to family members while he was in parliament—as of mid-April 2017, Fillon was polling at about 19%. He is followed closely in the polls by a far-left candidate, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, whose support has risen from about 12% to 18% following a strong debate performance in mid-March.

The candidate representing Hollande's Socialist Party, Benoît Hamon, has had a difficult campaign, seeing his support drop from about 15% in early March to 9% as of early April. Many analysts view Hamon's struggles as an indication of broader challenges facing the Socialist Party, long the dominant political organ of the French left. While past Socialist Party leaders have managed to maintain support from both the centrist and left wings of the party, the party has splintered under Hollande. Key ministers in the Hollande government have endorsed their former colleague Macron over their party's chosen candidate. Mélenchon appears to be gaining support from the left wing of the Socialist Party, from which Hamon received most of his support in the party's primary election.

As it stands, most polls predict that Macron, Fillon, or Mélenchon would beat Le Pen in a second-round runoff, with voters from across the political spectrum consolidating support behind Le Pen's opponent in an effort to prevent her from winning. The expected opposition to Le Pen in the second round is rooted in a long-standing public perception of the National Front as a fringe, anti-Semitic, xenophobic party. However, in recent years, the party has sought to transform its image. Consequently, there is wide agreement that this could be one of the most unpredictable elections in recent French history.

Whereas the Socialist Party currently holds the majority in the French parliament, the National Front has only two representatives and *En Marche* has none (the party was formed in 2016, after the last parliamentary elections). Given the possibility that the president may come from *En Marche* or National Front, observers have noted that a parliamentary election scheduled for June 10 and June 17, 2017, could be far more consequential than past parliamentary elections, with significant implications for the next president's ability to govern. The French parliament is relatively weak compared to the presidency, but its approval is nonetheless needed to pass major legislation and the budget. With little-to-no base in the institution on which to build, both the

<sup>2</sup> Poll data in this section taken from the *Financial Times*' regularly updated survey of French opinion polls, accessed on April 11, 2016. "French Election Poll Tracker," *Financial Times*, updated regularly, at <https://ig.ft.com/sites/france-election/polls/>.

National Front and *En Marche* could struggle to win the number of seats necessary to pass legislation and avoid parliamentary gridlock.

### The Main Presidential Candidates and Their Platforms

**Marine Le Pen, *Front National* (National Front).** As France's two main parties have struggled, the French political establishment has expressed alarm at the rise of the nationalist, far-right, anti-immigrant, anti-European Union (EU) *Front National*. In recent years, the National Front has gained in popularity under the leadership of Le Pen, who has worked to distance the party from a reputation for caustic xenophobia and anti-Semitism. Her campaign is predicated on countering what she characterizes as the "two totalitarianisms" of economic globalization and Islamic fundamentalism. She proposes a statist economic policy of "intelligent protectionism" and a crackdown on immigration and Islam's influence in French society. Le Pen has pledged to withdraw France from the EU's common currency, the euro, and to hold a referendum on EU membership within six months of taking office. She says she also would withdraw France from NATO's integrated command structure. Le Pen is openly supportive of Russian President Vladimir Putin and has said Crimea is rightfully Russian territory. Analysts view Le Pen's economic policies as an attempt to draw support from disaffected left-wing voters. She also has advanced proposals to reduce carbon emissions and increase renewable energy use, another apparent effort to broaden her appeal.

**Emmanuel Macron, *En Marche*.** Macron is a 39-year-old former investment banker who had no political experience before Hollande appointed him economy minister in 2014. He was the chief architect of Hollande's efforts to liberalize the labor market and deregulate some sectors of the economy. In August 2016, Macron resigned from government to lead his new centrist political movement, *En Marche* ("on the march," or "forward"). His campaign has focused almost exclusively on his plans to restore economic growth and reduce unemployment. Macron is a strong proponent of free trade and the EU. He has at times blamed France's economic woes on "insiders" who enjoy labor protection and other privileges at the expense of "outsiders," mostly the young and the poor. Macron's youth and lack of political experience have caused many to doubt his staying power, but thus far he has capitalized on the misfortunes of his mainstream rivals.

**Francois Fillon, *Les Républicains*.** Fillon is a veteran conservative politician who was prime minister under former President Nicolas Sarkozy (defeated by Hollande in 2012). He represents the more conservative wing of his party, with strong support among Catholics and other social conservatives. Fillon's victory over Sarkozy and the more centrist Alain Juppé in the party's primary in late 2016 was a surprise. Fillon advocates significant cuts in public spending, including cutting 500,000 civil service jobs. He also has called for an end to economic sanctions on Russia and a more cooperative relationship with Moscow. Fillon was the prohibitive favorite to win the presidency but has struggled to overcome negative fallout from revelations that he paid his wife close to €1 million in public funds as his parliamentary assistant, even though she has publicly acknowledged performing little, if any, work in that capacity. Some analysts question whether Fillon can overcome the negative repercussions of the scandal, especially because he has consistently touted his moral rectitude.

**Jean-Luc Mélenchon, *France Insoumise* (FI, *Rebellious France*, or *Unsubmissive France*).** Mélenchon is a former member of the left wing of the Socialist Party who broke from the party in 2008 to found the Left Party. He founded the FI movement in early 2016 and says he is running in 2017 "outside the frame of political parties." Mélenchon's platform focuses on wealth redistribution and an end to fiscal austerity. He advocates a 100% tax on all revenue that is 20 times greater than the median income, a reduction in the workweek from 35 hours to 32 hours, and a drastic increase in public spending. Similar to Le Pen, Mélenchon is critical of free trade and has called for a renegotiation of France's relations with the EU to end constraints on government spending.

**Benoît Hamon, *Socialist Party*.** Hamon, a staunch member of the Socialist Party's left wing, was the surprise victor of the party's January primary election. Hamon resigned as education minister in the Hollande government after only four months, in protest of what he viewed as Hollande's rightward shift. He calls for a universal basic monthly income of about €750 (about \$800) for all French residents, introduction of a 32-hour workweek, a tax on robots, and legalization of marijuana.

**Source:** Anne-Sylvaine Chassany, "Emmanuel Macron's Rise Electrifies French Election Race," *Financial Times*, January 18, 2017.

**Notes:** Marine Le Pen is the daughter of National Front founder and long-time party leader Jean-Marie Le Pen, who has in the past been convicted of anti-Semitic crimes. The elder Le Pen sent shock waves through the French political establishment during the 2002 presidential election when he beat the Socialist Party candidate in the first round of voting before losing in the final runoff election. Marine Le Pen and the National Front formally expelled the elder Le Pen from the party in 2015, after a string of anti-Semitic comments.

## Key Campaign Issues

In addition to addressing public fatigue with, or even disapproval of, the French political establishment, the election campaign has focused on several key issues. Chief among these issues is the economy and plans to restore economic growth and reduce unemployment. Much of the debate on the economy has centered on Le Pen's, Mélenchon's, and Hamon's criticisms of economic liberalism and globalization.

A second key issue, which has been less contentious, is counterterrorism. The top candidates all advocate maintaining counterterrorism policies that grant law enforcement and intelligence agencies robust authorities to detain and monitor terrorist suspects. However, the campaign has also brought to the fore more contentious debates about the role of Muslims and Islam in French society.

Finally, France's role in Europe and as a member of the EU has been debated. Two of the top four candidates, including Le Pen, have advocated a drastic renegotiation, or even break, with the 28-member bloc.

## The Economy

Perhaps the key policy concern for French voters is the state of the country's economy. Although the French economy remains strong—it is the world's fifth-largest economy and the second-largest economy in the Eurozone, after Germany—it has yet to fully recover from the global economic downturn of 2008-2009. Analysts underscore that France's current economic troubles did not originate with Hollande; the economy has averaged below 1% growth since 2008.<sup>3</sup> Unemployment is just under 10% and close to 26% for those under the age of 25.

Le Pen's and Mélenchon's popularity appears to reflect growing concerns among French voters about perceived economic and social injustices resulting from a globalized economy, market liberalization, and free trade. Both candidates advocate statist economic policies that they say are intended to address the negative effects of globalization. Each candidate has called for curbs on free-trade agreements and foreign ownership of companies in France and for increased state intervention to support the economy and create jobs.

On the other side, Macron and Fillon defend economic liberalism and free markets as essential for boosting economic growth, though Macron in particular has stressed the need to ensure that economic benefits are shared by all. To varying degrees, they each argue for structural reforms that would increase labor market flexibility and deregulate markets. Both candidates argue that the government must reduce public spending, which, at about 57% of gross domestic product (GDP), is the highest in the Eurozone. The proposed economic policies of Le Pen and Mélenchon, by contrast, suggest that fiscal consolidation would not be a priority for them, though the effects of their policies on growth and unemployment are subject to much debate and uncertainty, especially since those policies potentially could potentially break EU rules on fiscal policy.<sup>4</sup>

Should either Fillon or Macron win the presidency, the victor likely would have to contend with strong public opposition to spending cuts and economic reforms. As Hollande embarked on a

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<sup>3</sup> After GDP growth of 2% in 2011, the economy grew by 0.2% of GDP in 2013, 0.7% of GDP in 2013, 0.2% of GDP in 2014, and 1.2% of GDP in 2015 and 2016. The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Country Report: France*, March 2017.

<sup>4</sup> France's current budget deficit, at about 3.3% of GDP, remains above the 3% threshold mandated by the EU.

series of structural economic reforms during the second half of his presidency, he faced widespread and occasionally violent protests from unions, students, and other powerful interest groups.

## Islamist Terrorism and Muslim Integration

Over the past two years, France has suffered at least 14 terrorist attacks, in which at least 240 people have been killed and more than 600 injured.<sup>5</sup> Although some of these attacks appear to have been “lone wolf” attacks carried out by individuals acting alone but inspired by Islamist propaganda, others were perpetrated by individuals who were trained by and/or received direct support from terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State (also known as ISIS or ISIL).

French governments have long viewed Islamist terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda and, more recently, the Islamic State as the chief security threat facing the country. However, coordinated attacks in Paris in November 2015 that killed 130 people prompted a major escalation in what President Hollande characterizes as a “war” against the Islamic State.<sup>6</sup>

### Three Most Deadly Terrorist Attacks Since 2015

- In January 2015, three terrorists killed 17 people in three related attacks in Paris that targeted the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, police officers, and a kosher supermarket. The perpetrators were all French citizens and had each been under state surveillance at various times prior to the attacks. At least one of the attackers reportedly spent time in Yemen with members of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and another pledged allegiance to the Islamic State.
- On November 13, 2015, coordinated terrorist attacks in Paris left at least 130 people dead and more than 350 injured at six locations throughout the city. The attacks constituted the deadliest-ever terrorist incident on French soil. At least six of the reportedly nine or more perpetrators were French citizens (the other identified attackers were Belgian citizens); most if not all of the attackers reportedly had spent time with the Islamic State in Syria, and at least two previously had been under state surveillance.
- On July 14, 2016, a Tunisian citizen living in France killed 84 people and injured 202 when he drove a 19-ton truck into a crowd during National Day celebrations in Nice. Although the Islamic State claimed the attacker acted on its behalf, the perpetrator reportedly was self-radicalized a relatively short time before the attack and was previously unknown to intelligence authorities.

**Source:** “Paris Attacks: Who Were the Attackers,” BBC News, at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34832512>.

Despite Hollande’s unpopularity, his government’s general approach to terrorism, focused on bolstering law enforcement and intelligence budgets and granting broad authority to detain and monitor suspects, is supported by a significant majority of French voters. Most notably, voters appear to support a government-declared state of emergency that has been in effect since the November 2015 attacks.<sup>7</sup> The state of emergency grants law enforcement officials expanded authorities to search, seize, and detain terrorist suspects indefinitely and without a judicial warrant.

<sup>5</sup> For more on recent Islamist terrorist attacks in Europe, see CRS In Focus IF10561, *Terrorism in Europe*, by (name redacted) and Carmy n A. Chapman; and CRS Insight IN10209, *European Security and Islamist Terrorism*, by (name redacted) and (name redacted).

<sup>6</sup> France in the United States: Embassy of France in Washington, DC, “Speech by the President of the Republic Before a Joint Session of Parliament,” November 16, 2015, <http://ambafrance-us.org/spip.php?article7185>.

<sup>7</sup> Just before the July 14, 2016, terrorist attack in Nice, Hollande signaled that he was planning to lift the state of emergency (which originally was imposed for three months, but has been extended repeatedly). These plans were abandoned after the Nice attack.



Of the top presidential candidates, only Mélenchon has said he would lift the state of emergency, which he contends allows law enforcement to unfairly target innocent citizens. Le Pen has advocated more aggressive counterterrorism and counter-radicalization policies, focused on curbing the influence of Islam in French society and further prohibiting religious practices deemed incompatible with French norms. Although Le Pen's main opponents all have criticized her condemnation of Islam and her calls to curb immigration drastically, these criticisms have not been a centerpiece of their campaigns.

Analysts view the relative lack of robust campaign debate on counterterrorism and the role of Islam in French society as a reflection of broader public fear following the attacks of the past two years. Nonetheless, many advocates for French Muslims, and some counterterrorism analysts, have criticized what they view as a heavy-handed, law enforcement-centric approach to these issues. Among other things, they argue that to prevent radicalization effectively the government must do more to better integrate the estimated 5-6 million Muslims in France (about 8% of the total population) into French society and to reverse the significant socioeconomic disparities between "native" French citizens and those of North African and/or Muslim descent.

Those who criticize the treatment of Muslims in France tend to argue that many policies adopted in the name of France's secularist values, including restricting the wearing of head scarves and banning the full face veil, may serve to further alienate Muslims who already feel disenfranchised. Some critics also argue that stringent new counterterrorism laws may increase a sense of discrimination and further impede efforts to better integrate French Muslims.<sup>8</sup>

## **Foreign and Defense Policy and Relations with the EU and NATO**

Each of the top candidates asserts that he or she would continue to pursue France's long-standing global foreign policy ambitions and seek to maintain strong diplomatic and military capabilities. However, Le Pen and Mélenchon each have said they would seek to drastically renegotiate France's relations with the EU or seek to leave the bloc altogether, thus calling into question another longtime pillar of French foreign policy. Le Pen and Mélenchon have also said they would withdraw France from NATO integrated military command structure, as was the case before 2009.

### **Relations with the EU**

Le Pen, who has been a Member of the European Parliament since 2004, is an ardent critic of the EU and its common currency, the euro, which she views as infringements on national sovereignty. As noted above, she has said she would drop the euro and would hold a referendum on exiting the EU within six months of taking office unless she was able to drastically renegotiate the terms of French membership. Mélenchon also has said that France should leave the EU unless it can negotiate an end to EU fiscal policies that call for low budget deficits and low levels of public debt. By contrast, throughout the campaign, Macron has offered strong support for the EU and further European integration, which he views as an essential component of French economic strength and global geopolitical influence.

With the United Kingdom's recent decision to leave the EU ("Brexit"), the EU is facing a period of uncertainty about its future shape and character. France is a founding member of the EU and its predecessor institutions, and the country has always been viewed (along with Germany) as a key

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Scott Sayare, "Whatever Happened to France's Famed 'Liberté'?", *New York Times*, March 30, 2017.



driver of the European integration project. An electoral victory for either Le Pen or Mélenchon could put further pressure on the EU as an institution and heighten questions about its future viability. It also could strain France's relations with Germany, creating tension between the two countries long viewed as "Europe's engine."

Some analysts maintain that Le Pen and Mélenchon's staunch opposition to the EU may be out of step with a majority of French voters, who support EU membership. These analysts argue that public support for the EU and its common currency could limit the candidates' ability to carry out their pledges should either be elected. Nonetheless, both candidates appear to have struck a chord with a portion of the electorate that views the EU as a key enabler of broader global economic trends benefitting corporations over individual workers.

## **Relations with NATO**

Le Pen and Mélenchon both have said they would once again withdraw France from NATO's integrated military command structure. Between 1966 and 2009, France was a member of NATO but opted not to participate in the alliance's military decisionmaking structures. In 2009, then-French President Nicolas Sarkozy chose to reintegrate France fully into these structures, arguing, among other things, that France should exert a degree of influence over the strategic direction of the alliance that was proportional to the country's participation in alliance operations. The move was opposed by Le Pen, Mélenchon, and others who argued that full reintegration could limit France's military independence.

## **Defense Policy**

The main presidential candidates have not advocated other significant changes to an ambitious defense policy that has enabled France to remain a pivotal actor in the West's response to common security challenges, particularly in Africa and the Middle East. However, France's next president could face significant budgetary constraints in maintaining France's significant global military footprint.<sup>9</sup> French military commanders reportedly have expressed concern for some time about their ability to sustain the current scope and pace of French military operations without additional resources.<sup>10</sup> In 2016, France's defense budget amounted to about 1.8% of GDP, below NATO's target of 2% of GDP.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, along with the United Kingdom, the French military is widely regarded as Europe's most capable.

## **Relations with Russia**

France has joined fellow EU member states in strongly condemning Russian actions in Ukraine and has supported targeted EU sanctions on Russia's financial, defense, and energy sectors. Along with Germany, Russia, and Ukraine, France is a member of the so-called Normandy Format, which has negotiated two cease-fire agreements—the "Minsk Agreements"—to the conflict in eastern Ukraine since mid-2014. However, many observers assert that Germany has played a

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<sup>9</sup> In addition to 13,000 French soldiers deployed in France to enhance domestic security, more than 5,000 French troops are currently participating in military operations in Africa and the Middle East. This figure includes 3,500 troops undertaking counter-terrorism operations in West Africa's Sahel region and 1,000 troops combatting the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and supporting Iraqi forces.

<sup>10</sup> Nathalie Guibert, "Hollande: More Wars, Fewer Resources," *Le Monde*, November 16, 2014. Accessed via Open Source Center, EUR2014111726072746.

<sup>11</sup> NATO, *Defence Expenditures of NATO Countries (2009-2016)*, March 13, 2017.

more active role than France in the negotiations and in shaping broader European policy on Russia and Ukraine.<sup>12</sup>

Some critics of French policy toward Russia have questioned France's commitment to sustaining sanctions against Moscow. In particular, they cite a perceived reluctance to further exacerbate tensions with Russia and harm French and European business interests. Each of the main presidential candidates has at times echoed such sentiments, and each has expressed varying degrees of opposition to further extending EU sanctions on Russia. However, continued concerns about Russian actions in Ukraine and elsewhere and concerns about possible Russian interference in the French election potentially could cause at least some of the candidates to moderate their views (See text box on "Alleged Russian Interference in French Politics and the Presidential Election," below).

### **Alleged Russian Interference in French Politics and the Presidential Election**

In recent months, some French political leaders have grown increasingly concerned about France's vulnerability to possible Russian efforts to influence the presidential election. On February 13, 2017, Emmanuel Macron's campaign publicly accused Russia and its state-owned media of hacking Macron's party's electronic infrastructure and disseminating "fake news" aimed at undermining Macron's candidacy. Previously, the Socialist Party's security chief in parliament, Sebastien Pietrasanta, warned that the presidential campaign is at high risk of being hacked and noted that campaign staff have limited training in how to stop cyberattacks. Analysts posit that of the main candidates, Macron would be least sympathetic toward Moscow, whereas Marine Le Pen would be considered the most pro-Russian. However, each of the main candidates has at various times advocated closer ties with Moscow and even an end to EU sanctions on Russia.

Le Pen and the National Front have received attention both for pro-Russia views and for receiving funding from Russian banks. In 2014, the National Front received a loan of about €11 million (about \$11.5 million) from a Moscow-based lender, First Czech Russian Bank. Also in 2014, a political fund controlled by Marine Le Pen's father and National Front founder Jean-Marie Le Pen received a loan of about €2 million (about \$2.1 million) from a Cypriot fund reportedly controlled by a former KGB agent, Yuri Kudimov. The loans reportedly were used to fund regional election campaigns. The National Front's efforts to secure additional financial support from First Czech failed in 2016, when Russia's Central Bank revoked the lender's license. The National Front reportedly had been seeking to raise at least €20 million (about \$21 million) from the bank to fund its presidential campaign.

National Front leaders have not denied seeking funding from Russian banks. The party's chief financial officer has said that the fact that the party was paying 6% interest on the 2014 loan suggested "it was no special favor." Party head Marine Le Pen has protested that National Front was forced to turn to Russian banks due to French banks' refusal to loan to the party.

Nonetheless, the loans have drawn significant attention, not least due to Marine Le Pen's pro-Russia views. In late March 2017, Le Pen traveled to Moscow to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin. According to a Le Pen aide, the two leaders discussed international affairs and counterterrorism issues. The aide reportedly said that Putin wished Le Pen good luck in the election.

**Sources:** Michael Stothard and Kathrin Hille, "Macron Campaign Accuses Russia of Using Fake News to Disrupt Presidential Race," *Financial Times*, February 13, 2017; Nicholas Vinocur, "France and Risk of Being Next Election Hacking Victim," *Politico.eu*, January 5, 2017; Helene Fouquet, Gregory Viscusi, and Henry Meyer, "Le Pen Struggling to Fund French Race as Russian Bank Fails," *Bloomberg*, December 22, 2016; Suzanne Daley and Maia de la Baume, "French Far Right Gets Helping Hand with Russia," *New York Times*, December 1, 2014; Suzanne Daley and Maia de la Baume, "French Far Right Gets Helping Hand with Russia," *New York Times*, December 1, 2014; "Aide to France's Le Pen Says Putin Wished Her 'Good Luck' with the Election," *Reuters*, March 24, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Anne-Sylvaine Chassany and Stefan Wagstyl, "Ukraine Ceasefire Talks Revive Franco-German Entente," *Financial Times*, March 18, 2015.

## Implications for U.S.-French Relations

France, as one of Europe's most globally engaged and militarily capable countries, has long been an important U.S. ally, though the relationship has not been without tensions. In recent years, U.S. leaders have welcomed French foreign policy and military engagement, especially with respect to counterterrorism operations in Africa's Sahel region and in the fight against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. According to some analysts, U.S.-French cooperation in Africa is closer today than it has ever been.<sup>13</sup> France also has been at the forefront of the international coalition conducting military operations against the Islamic State. About 1,000 French troops currently are participating in the mission, including by carrying out air strikes in both Iraq and Syria.

On April 7, 2016, President Hollande issued a joint statement together with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in support of U.S. missile strikes on a Syrian military installation in response to Syrian President Bashar al Asad's alleged use of chemical weapons earlier in the month. France and Germany share the U.S. view that the Asad regime targeted chemical weapons at Syrian civilians.

None of the leading French presidential candidates has explicitly advocated a significant change in France's relations with the United States, but all, with the exception of Le Pen, have expressed unease about the direction of U.S. policy toward Europe under President Trump. Although their concerns differ to some degree, Macron and Fillon both have taken issue with President Trump's criticisms of the EU and with his efforts to drastically curb migration to the United States from certain countries. Macron, in particular, has stressed his belief in the importance of the EU and other multilateral institutions and in upholding international humanitarian law, including with respect to granting asylum to refugees.

Le Pen is the only leading presidential candidate who has enthusiastically welcomed President Trump's election, which she has portrayed as a validation of her nationalist approach. However, some observers note that her support of Trump also could be a political liability given the U.S. President's apparent unpopularity among French voters.<sup>14</sup>

Despite potential disagreements between the next French president and President Trump, most analysts suggest that the U.S.-French relationship would likely continue to be driven by close cooperation in response to key shared security challenges. Chief among these would be the fight against the Islamic State and other Islamic terrorist groups in the Middle East and North Africa.

The United States could view a potential decision by either Le Pen or Mélenchon to withdraw France from NATO's integrated military command structures as an impediment to NATO and to U.S. security interests in Europe. However, most analysts expect that France would maintain a strong military and continue to be an active participant in NATO operations as it was during much of the more than 40 years it spent outside the NATO command structure.

Some observers also have noted that each of the leading presidential candidates, and particularly Le Pen, has at various times advocated improved French and EU ties with Moscow. Depending on the future direction of U.S. policy toward Russia, this issue also could be a point of contention.

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<sup>13</sup> France has sought and received U.S. assistance for its African counterterrorism operations from the United States, including up to \$95 million between 2013 and 2015 in Department of Defense services and materiel provided under the President's "Special Drawdown" authority. The FY2016 National Defense Authorization Act created a new authority enabling such support to continue through FY2018 (P.L. 114-92, Sec. 1207).

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, James McAuley, "Marine Le Pen's Tricky Alliance with Donald Trump," *Washington Post*, April 2, 2017.

However, many analysts note that successive French governments have tended to follow the EU and NATO consensus on policy toward Russia, working especially closely with Germany.

If either Le Pen or Mélenchon were to win the election and succeed in withdrawing from or radically restructuring France's relations with the EU, the decision could have a major impact on U.S.-French and U.S.-European relations more broadly. Most important, such a decision could alter the structure of the EU significantly and ultimately could decrease the bloc's importance to the United States. A diminished EU could prompt a rethinking of more than 70 years of U.S. policy in support of European integration. This rethinking, in turn, could lead to a shift in U.S. policy in Europe, including through prioritizing bilateral relations with individual European countries over relations with the EU. How the Trump Administration would react to such changes is unclear, though President Trump has praised the United Kingdom's decision to leave the EU and at times has expressed a preference to deal with European governments individually as opposed to through the EU. However, Trump and officials in his Administration have on other occasions expressed support for the EU.

Many Members of Congress have expressed support for close U.S.-French cooperation in a range of areas, including defense cooperation to counter terrorist threats. These Members of Congress may have an interest in maintaining continuity in U.S.-French relations, especially with respect to bilateral defense cooperation. Insofar as defense cooperation is bolstered by France's full participation in NATO's command structures, Members of Congress could consider articulating their support of France's role in NATO to the next French president. The same could hold true with respect to France's membership in the EU. More broadly, an election outcome that results in significant changes to France's domestic and global policy outlook could have implications for the way the country manages its relations with the United States. From this perspective, Members of Congress could seek to emphasize the importance of stability in the bilateral relationship. However, those critical of the current state of the U.S.-French relationship could see the election as an opportunity to explore a new model of bilateral relations.

## **Author Contact Information**

(name redacted)  
Analyst in European Affairs  
redacted@crs.loc.gov 7-....

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