

# Europe's center is not holding



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## OPINION

office is doomed in the long run, and in the short run is a recipe for repeated political crisis and increasing paralysis of government.

Two countries are central to the European Union, the European economy, European defense, and any hope of European strategic autonomy: France and Germany. Within a month of each other, both have seen their governments collapse due to battles over how to reduce their growing budget deficits. In both cases, their fiscal woes have been drastically worsened by a combination of economic stagnation and pressure on welfare budgets with the new costs of rearmament and support for Ukraine.

Two main lessons are to be drawn from the fall of Michel Barnier's government in France.

The first is that talk of Europe massively re-arming itself and substituting for the US as the chief backer of Ukraine while maintaining existing levels of health care and social security is idiocy. The money is simply not there. The second is that the effort by "mainstream" establishments to exclude populist parties from

In both cases, the fiscal crisis has fed into the decay of the mainstream political parties that alternated in power for generations — a phenomenon that is to be seen all over Europe (and in the US, insofar as Trump represents a revolt against the Republican establishment). This decay is being fed by the growing backlash against dictation by the EU and NATO that is occurring across wide swathes of Europe.

In the French presidential elections of 2017 and 2022, Emmanuel Macron defeated the Front National (now the Rassemblement National) of Marine Le Pen by essentially uniting the remnants of all the centrist parties in a grand coalition behind himself. The problem with such grand coalitions of the center, however, is that they leave opposition nowhere to go but the extremes of Right and Left.

In the case of France, economic stagnation and resistance to Macron's free market and austerity measures led in June of this year to a crushing defeat for his bloc in European parliamentary elec-

tions. Macron then called snap French parliamentary elections in the hope that fear of Le Pen and the radical Left would terrify French voters back into support for him. The result however was that Le Pen won a plurality of the vote, and while electoral deals with the Left gave Macron's bloc a plurality of seats, they are heavily outnumbered by deputies on the Right and Left.

Macron then ditched his left-wing allies and stitched up an agreement whereby Le Pen would support a centrist-conservative government under Michel Barnier in return for concessions on immigration policy and other issues. Bizarrely, however, this was combined with continued "lawfare" against the Rassemblement National, with the prosecution of Le Pen for allegedly diverting EU parliamentary funds to support her party's deputies. This is something that looks rather like a technicality or peccadillo, given what we know of the past behavior of EU parliamentarians — but would

mean that, if convicted, she would be barred from running for the presidency in 2027.

This, of course, gave Le Pen every incentive to bring down Barnier's government in the hope that it would bring down Macron with it, and thereby lead to early presidential elections; and when Barnier's austerity budget (pushed through by decree against parliamentary opposition) infuriated the Left, Le Pen seized her chance. Given the string of defeats that Macron has now suffered (and remembering that the far greater de Gaulle resigned in 1969 after a far lesser defeat), it would make sense for Macron to step down. This would most probably lead to a presidency of the Rassemblement National; but then again, this is also probable if presidential elections take place on schedule in 2027. German politics are, in certain respects, tracking those of France but some years behind. Not long ago, one would have said a generation behind, but European political change is clearly speeding up. After the 2021 general elections, the de-



German Chancellor Olaf Scholz (2nd-R), French President Emmanuel Macron (R), US President Joe Biden (2nd-L), and British Prime Minister Keir Starmer gather in Berlin on October 18, 2024.  
LISI NIESNER/REUTERS

cline in support for the Social Democratic party, and the rise of the right-wing populist Alternative fuer Deutschland (AfD) and the left-wing populist Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW) forced the Social Democrats into an uneasy coalition with two deeply ideologically opposed partners, the Liberals (FDP) and the Greens. As Germany's economic position worsened, internal battles over the budget also worsened until the coalition eventually collapsed. Opinion polls indicate that the centrist conservative Christian Democrats will come first in elections due in February, but will be far short of an absolute majority. The result will be a grand coalition with the Social Democrats; but if that also falls short of an absolute majority, and the Liberals fail to pass the five percent threshold to enter the German parliament, then (assuming a continued determination to exclude AfD and BSW), the Greens will have to be included.

Not only will this replicate the internal weaknesses and divisions of the last coalition, but it

will also mean that if Germany's economic woes continue and the coalition parties' popularity slumps, AfD and BSW will be the only place for discontented voters to go. These parties, being newer, are not yet nearly as popular as their French equivalents. AfD still has to go much further in the process initiated by Le Pen in the Front National, of purging its more extreme elements; and, of course, there is the special German historical fear of the radical Right. Nonetheless, there are good reasons to think that the future German trajectory will resemble that of France.

Meanwhile, large parts of the European foreign and security establishments write and talk as if none of this were happening; as if, in fact, these establishments had been permanently appointed to their positions by Louis XIV and Frederick II, and given by those sovereigns an unlimited right to tax and conscript their subjects.

Thus, in an article this week for Foreign Affairs, Elie Tenenbaum of the French Institute of Inter-

national Relations in Paris and a colleague declare that in response to Trump's election and in order to block a peace deal disadvantageous to Ukraine and "impose conditions of its own," Europe must "force its way to the negotiating table". A European coalition force of "at least four to five multinational brigades" should be deployed to eastern Ukraine to guarantee against further Russian aggression. European combat air patrols could be deployed "while the war is still underway". And "if Russia remains unyielding, Europe must bear the bulk of the financial assistance to support Ukraine in a protracted conflict."

Where the money and the public support for such a program is to come from is nowhere indicated. I don't know an appropriate and printable French response to these daydreams, but the Kremlin may reply with an old Russian saying: "Oh sure — when crabs learn to whistle."

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# France's political institutions are creaking



President of Rassemblement National parliamentary group Marine Le Pen (c) reacts during the debate prior to the no-confidence votes on prime minister Michel Barnier's administration at the National Assembly in Paris, France, on December 4, 2024.  
ALAIN JOCARD/AFP

Is this the twilight of the Fifth Republic? Founded by General de Gaulle with a custom-made constitution in 1958, it was designed to bring stability after decades of chaotic parliamentary rule, establishing a balance between parliament, on the one hand, and a head of state endowed with wide-ranging powers, on the other. The system became more presidential after a referendum held in 1962 led to the head of

state being elected by universal suffrage rather than by an electoral college. Unfortunately, this carefully crafted arrangement no longer seems to be working.

Jean-Louis Bourlanges, an experienced centrist politician and astute observer of political history who quit parliament last summer, says we are entering a new phase in this institutional balance. For a long time, the presidential and parliamentary

majorities were aligned, allowing left and right to alternate in an orderly manner. The era of so-called cohabitation began in the late 1980s when elections produced opposing majorities for the president and parliament. Presidents François Mitterrand and Jacques Chirac managed the arrangement with some success, governing with prime ministers from opposing parties. Cohabitation worked because



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## OPINION

Marine Le Pen wore black for the vote of no confidence against the French government as if dressed for the funeral of a system that she claims to respect but works tirelessly to undermine. Meanwhile, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of the leftwing La France Insoumise, watched from the visitors' gallery of the National Assembly as members began to cast their votes. Satisfied that his troops had obeyed his instructions, he left before the final tally was made.

Thus did far right and far left join forces to bring down Michel Barnier's centrist government after a little more than three months, plunging France into the unknown. This is a new stage in the crisis opened by last summer's snap legislative elections, which failed to produce a majority. The crisis is now so deep that President Emmanuel Macron had to insist, in a stern televised address on Thursday evening, that he would not resign.

it was driven by mainstream parties — Chirac's centre-right Union pour un Mouvement Populaire and Mitterrand's Socialists — which shared the same vision of the political system. But these two parties collapsed when Macron bulldozed his way onto the political scene and won his first term as president in 2017. Marine Le Pen's far-right Rassemblement National flourished amid the ruins of the mainstream party system. Mélenchon took the radical route.

Macron defeated Le Pen to win a second term in April 2022, but saw his majority shrink and a large number of RN deputies enter parliament after the legislative elections that followed. Bourlanges believes that this is when Macron should have given more leeway to parliament and the prime minister, thereby rebalancing the relationship between the Elysée and the legislative branch of government.

Meanwhile, the demographic and cultural fabric of French society had changed. Issues that barely registered when the Fifth Republic was born — such as immigration, globalisation, and European integration — roiled the political landscape. And across Europe, new movements challenged the liberal democratic consensus.

The result was the tripartite parliament that emerged from this summer's elections, with three roughly equal blocs — left, centre, and far right — and no majority. These blocs, two of which contest the pillars of the existing settlement, hate each other and seem unable to cooperate except to bring down the government. This all points to a dysfunctional system.

This is why forcing Macron to resign would probably not solve anything. Since the constitution does not allow fresh legislative elections to be held before July next year, a new president still

would not have a parliamentary majority to govern with. Here is another flaw in the system: despite grand proclamations that the snap election had seen power shift from the Elysée Palace to the Palais Bourbon where the National Assembly sits, too many leading politicians — from left, right, and centre — are in fact driven by their desire to compete in the next presidential election in 2027. It is already a very crowded field.

For all this, few experts think the time has come to bury the Fifth Republic. The constitution, they argue, offers flexibility. As for Macron, he is gambling that the formidable spirit of unity and cooperation that enabled Notre Dame to rise from the ashes may yet inspire politicians — and make Le Pen's choice of mourning garb look premature.

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