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Macron One Year After: A Political Big Bang for France and EU?

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Quite symbolically, this discussion convenes precisely one year after Macron's election, on 7 May 2017, which Professor Lazar describes as a real political 'big bang' in France. He suggests that Macron's election to the presidency along with the success of his movement, *La République en Marche!* in the national assembly, arguably constitute two political events among the most surprising and perhaps the most important of the 60 year-history of the fifth Republic. In his talk, professor Lazar analyses this political 'big bang' by considering Macron's leadership, which he argues, paradoxically embodies elements of continuity and change vis-a-vis historical French leadership and traditions.

A fundamental characteristic of Macron's political perspective was his belief that the French historical cleavage between left and right was over. In seeking to appeal to voters from both sides, he strategically composed his political agenda with both, leftist and rightist policies. Moreover, he believed that the dominance of traditional political parties had come to an end. National polls indicated that French citizens expected novelty and innovation spearheaded by a strong leader. Macron recognized and seized the opportunity by creating his movement, *La République en Marche!* Perceived as a young, ambitious, and charismatic leader, as well as an anti-system challenger, he proved to be the ideal candidate.

Macron undeniably seeks to lead France in a new direction. During his presidential campaign, he rejected the traditional French political pessimism, announcing that he wanted to diffuse a spirit of optimism in the country. He ran a classical campaign, underpinned by door-to-door, grassroots mobilization activities on the platform of European integration – a novelty in France. Indeed, he announced that the only future for France was inside Europe, but that the European Union had to be reformed. Before Macron's political 'big bang', traditional parties had been for years in a period of crisis, experiencing declining popularity and fragmentation. The May 2017 presidential elections confirmed the new status of the *Front National* and *La France Insoumise* as real contenders. Another novelty was Macron's personification of *La République en Marche!* which is

merely a 'personal party' meaning that it is fully dependent on and inseparable from Macron's person.

Concurrently with these fundamental shifts, Macron displays essential elements of continuity with French political traditions. For instance, he seeks to reform France in a top down, authoritative manner. Speaking directly to citizens, he bypasses organizations of interests, which he views merely as conservative movements, emulating Charles de Gaulle, who in 1958 sought to reform and modernize France in a similar fashion. Also in line with this historical tradition is the importance which Macron attributes to the state, and particularly to elite civil servants.

In conclusion, Professor Lazar explains that Macron's one-year post election popularity in France remains higher than that of his immediate predecessors. According to French polls, Macron is generally perceived as a decisive and strong leader who follows through on his commitments. He is also seen as modern and thought to promote a good image of France internationally. His critics however point to his arrogance and overly authoritative and non-consultative leadership style. Perhaps the most salient criticism is that he only represents specific segment of the French society – the wealthy class while the lower middle class and popular categories don't support him: for them he is the "President of the rich people".

In the years to come, Macron will have to make a decisive decision. With the end of the left-right cleavage, Macron seeks to strategically maintain his movement as a centrist party. However, polls indicate that French citizens continue to perceive meaningful differences between the left and the right. Eventually, Macron will have to choose, or risk losing support among voters from both sides. At the moment, there is no real contending opposition, thus leaving a large margin of maneuver for Macron to take risks through his presidential functions as well as through the national assembly given his movement's success. However, he will personally bear the responsibility for any failures. And there is yet a big risk of failure of his European project of reform. Given the nature of his movement as a 'personal' one, French citizens will place the blame entirely on him, not the movement.