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Election Primer

The 2017 French Presidential
Election: Leading candidates'
positions on NATO, EU Defence,
and Russia

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In an increasingly unstable security environment, and with populism on the rise in Europe, all eyes are on France as it prepares to hold its presidential election on April 23rd, with a run off on May 7th.

Using their own words and programmes, this ELN election primer provides an overview of the main candidates' positions on the two key institutions for European security: NATO and the EU, as well as their views on Russia.

As of March 18th, eleven candidates¹ are officially running, covering a wide political spectrum. The five main candidates² who are consistently topping the polls are:

- **Marine Le Pen**, Front National (FN, far-right) MEP, attorney
- **Emmanuel Macron**, En Marche! (EM!, centrist) Senior civil servant, former investment banker, and former Minister of the Economy
- **François Fillon**, representing the right-wing Les Républicains (LR, centre-right) MP, Former Prime Minister
- **Jean-Luc Mélenchon**, La France Insoumise (FI, far-left) MEP, former Minister of Vocational Education
- **Benoît Hamon**, representing the left-wing of the Socialist Party (PS, centre-left) in alliance with Europe Écologie Les Verts (the Greens, centre-left) MP, former Minister of National Education

Incumbent President Hollande declined to run for re-election due to low approval ratings, and former President Sarkozy and Prime Ministers Juppé and Valls lost their respective

1 Other candidates are Nathalie Arthaud (Lutte Ouvrière), François Asselineau (Union Populaire Républicaine), Jacques Cheminade (Solidarité et Progrès), Nicolas Dupont-Aignan (Debout la France), Jean Lassalle (Résistons!), and Philippe Poutou (Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste).

2 The order of presentation of the candidates is based on the [compounded data from the latest polls](#) and does not reflect the preferences or position of the European Leadership Network or any of its members.

primary elections. As a consequence, **the 2017 presidential election is considered an unpredictable one**, and all the more so because the campaign has been marked by scandals, with the two main right-wing candidates currently under judicial investigation for alleged misuse of parliamentary money.

Traditional party allegiances are likely to be put aside as poll-favourites Le Pen and Macron both claim to move beyond the Left-Right divide – the historical framework of French politics – and reframe the political spectrum with a choice between *globalists* and *nationalists* (as defined by Le Pen) and between *progressives and conservatives* (according to Macron). Whether the political system will adopt such a reframing for the long-term is up for debate. But the election result will be the culmination of political processes which are likely to have a tremendous impact on the future of Europe.

With regards to international relations, **all candidates acknowledge the growing international instability and deterioration of the security environment**. They see the current period as one of strategic transformation and a shifting power balance, with significant consequences for France and Europe. Although the five main candidates agree on the overarching goal – ensuring France’s international position while preserving its strategic independence – in practice the only area of consensus is around France’s nuclear arsenal, which all see as the main guarantee of the country’s autonomy but in need of modernisation. **Transatlantic relations in the era of Trump** have an impact on all issues. Although all candidates indicate the need to engage with the United States, they remain rather vague on details given the impossibility of predicting with certainty the new US Administration’s foreign policy and its impact on European security.

No matter who wins, however, France’s security and defence policy will not be the same, and some candidates would bring revolutionary changes. Although all recognise the need to work with partners, the candidates offer distinct – sometimes opposing – visions for rethinking France’s security and defence partnerships. When it comes to European security, the strongest disagreements concern France’s engagement with NATO, participation in the EU defence project, and relationship with Russia. The involvement of France in collective security structures – either NATO or *Europe de la défense* – is a heavily polarised issue: some candidates suggest deeper cooperation and pooling, others more national and “autonomous” strategies. France’s posture towards Russia has become a major issue in the election and was hotly debated by candidates during the March 20th TV debate with some accusing Russia of violations of international law and others calling for closer Franco-Russian ties. **While security may not be among the main points of the campaign, the winner’s agenda and views will be of great consequence not only for France, but also for the future of Europe and the transatlantic community**.

NATO

Candidates adopt different attitudes towards NATO, but all express a Gaullist will to preserve French strategic autonomy. Although critical of the institution, Hamon, Macron, and Fillon are in favour of France remaining part of the Integrated Military Command Structure and consider NATO a necessary strategic alliance and a pillar of European security. At the two ends of the political spectrum, Le Pen and Mélenchon hold actively anti-NATO postures.

According to **Le Pen**, NATO is an [outdated US tool](#) whose *raison d'être*, the USSR, no longer exists. She is in favour of leaving the [NATO Integrated Military Command Structure](#) – and possibly NATO altogether depending on how it [changes under the Trump presidency](#). The FN candidate contends that France should not participate in [wars that are not its own](#). Each French [external operation](#) should be re-evaluated with anti-terrorism as a priority, thus maintaining, for example, the French military presence in the Sahel to support African countries. Le Pen also regrets that some NATO member states today use the Alliance [against Russia](#).

Macron affirms that NATO is [useful to Europe's security](#), mostly in the East, and that President Trump created confusion by treating membership in NATO as a [transaction](#) rather than as being part of a strategic community. For Macron, it is not in France's interest to leave the [Integrated Military Command Structure](#). Instead, France needs to strengthen its strategic alliances, including NATO, which are a *sine qua non* for a strong and independent defence policy. However, the EM! candidate also insists on the fact that NATO is too bureaucratic and too costly to run. In his programme, he argues that France should not support any [further enlargement](#) of the Alliance except for the Balkans, Sweden, or Finland (hence closing the door to [Georgia and Ukraine](#)). Insisting on NATO's nature as a defensive alliance, Macron contends that its [out-of-area interventions](#) should be limited to situations where French interests are directly at stake.

In the direct line of De Gaulle, **Fillon** is suspicious of [Americans pursuing their interests](#) through NATO and has never been a strong supporter of the Alliance. He claims that US policy influence in NATO [is the cause of](#) – and not the solution to – “Islamic totalitarianism”, and that NATO is thus not a protection from such a threat. However, the LR candidate notes that NATO is [a necessary alliance](#) and deems it essential for Europeans to work together inside it. Yet Fillon remarks that the [uncertainties of the Trump presidency](#) make it impossible to take for granted either US foreign policy or NATO's ability to defend the security of Europe.

Mélenchon wishes to [leave NATO altogether](#) – the Integrated Military Command Structure immediately and the Alliance itself step-by-step. The Alliance is, to him, the symbol of France's loss of independence and [submission to imperialist US policies](#). According to

him, NATO is an anachronistic institution that has been looking for a [new calling](#) since the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in 1991 and for that reason has extended its geographic reach, thus multiplying the factors for potential conflicts in Europe. The FI candidate claims that those who think that the West and NATO share common values and interests only see the rest of the world in terms of threats. They lead France into [unreasonable tensions](#) with BRICS countries with whom France should instead partner. Furthermore, Mélenchon rejects France's participation in any permanent military alliance and argues instead for a [stronger role for the UN](#).

Hamon argues that NATO, just like the EU, is a pillar of European security. He is against France leaving the [Integrated Military Command Structure](#). The Socialist candidate sees the Alliance as an [operational tool](#) that has proved itself useful in conflicts such as the Balkans and Afghanistan, while noting that it is dominated by the US. For Hamon, the current US strategic retreat is an opportunity for Europeans to live up to their own security needs and to assert the [European dimension of NATO](#), leading it in a direction more suitable to European interests.

EU Security and Defence

While Mélenchon and Le Pen oppose the Europe de la défense project, the three other candidates assert the necessity for Europe to build a common defence and call for a deeper pooling of capabilities, more operational cooperation, stronger EU solidarity, and a fairer division of costs. Macron, Fillon, and Hamon contend that current uncertainty in US policy is a strong incentive for Europeans to take responsibility for their own collective defence.

Le Pen is opposed to all visions of EU on the grounds of protecting France's strategic and operational independence. More widely, she calls for a [Brexit-type referendum](#) on France leaving the EU. She categorically opposes the idea of an EU army but supports [command structures](#) to facilitate military cooperation in the field between sovereign European nations – which she considers to be sufficient European defence cooperation. Le Pen argues that Europe will be better protected if each nation takes responsibility for its [own defence](#) using the means at its disposal. Her objective for France is [full autonomy](#) in terms of military capabilities, to achieve which she aims to spend 2% of GDP on defence by 2018 and [3% by 2022](#). The FN candidate is in favour of adding a [2% minimum spending rule](#) for defence to the French Constitution.

Macron asserts that, since President Trump seems to rejoice in the disintegration of the EU and to be taking a step back from the defence of the continent, EU defence needs to move from a declaratory stance to creating a [new strategic and operational reality](#). The EM! candidate, backed by current Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, calls for European strategic autonomy through both the strengthening of bilateral defence agreements – mostly with Germany and the UK – and [sub-formats](#) of defence cooperation for willing and capable member states. His propositions include the creation of a Permanent European Headquarters (coordinating with NATO and national command posts), the formation of a European Security Council, and the establishment of European Defence Funds to finance common programmes and joint military Research & Development. He also argues for activation of the [EU Battlegroups](#). To finance these new institutions, the EM! candidate wants [2% of French GDP](#) to be spent on defence by 2025, as well as the emission of [defence bonds](#), and the institution of subsidised [European defence investment funds](#) for those member state investments necessary to common security. According to Macron, NATO and EU defence cooperation are not mutually exclusive but Europeans need to take care of their own security, meaning that *Europe de la défense* should be [a priority](#).

Similarly, the uncertainty around US foreign policy and NATO is an argument cited by **Fillon** to move forward in building a [European defence alliance](#) in which the costs for [overseas deployment](#) would be shared between member states and included as a subpart of the European budget according to a pay scale. The LR candidate, who is in favour of spending [2% of GDP](#) on defence, stresses that France currently carries the burden of

overseas deployment necessary to EU security, such as in the [Sahel](#). To him, a financial contribution by all member states would show intra-EU solidarity and turn the EU into a [key stakeholder](#) on the international scene. He also insists on maintaining a strong defence partnership with the UK after Brexit, as well as on EU member states favouring EU over US defence industry. During the [March 20th TV debate](#), Fillon declared that he aimed at preserving France's independence while working on complementarity and task-sharing with EU member states.

According to **Mélenchon**, European defence is an illusion: *Europe de la défense* was never intended to exist outside NATO so can never become an [alternative to NATO](#). He rejects the possibility of [rekindling European construction through a common defence policy](#). He also rejects French participation in any European integrated defence system, saying that the EU was made for peace and not war. During the [March 20th TV debate](#) Mélenchon argued that current tensions in Europe come from the fact that borders were not negotiated after the fall of the Soviet empire and need to be discussed today. He thus declared that one of his first actions as president would be to organise a Security Conference in Europe gathering actors "from the Atlantic Ocean to the Ural River". The FI candidate supports an "[independent, national, and popular defence](#)." Concerning the EU, he argues for either a collective [re-negotiation of European treaties](#) or a parliamentary decision and referendum to leave the union. During the TV debate, Mélenchon also claimed that France has no interest in putting its [military arsenal](#) at the disposal of European leaders who push for [conflict with Russia](#).

Hamon considers defence cooperation to be a way to [strengthen the European Union](#). In his programme, he outlines an [integration strategy](#) for European defence which includes reinforcing the European general staffs and bi-national brigades, as well as pooling intelligence within a European Intelligence Agency. Moreover, the Socialist candidate is in favour of excluding the defence budget from the European [deficit budget calculus rules](#) and of spending [3% of GDP](#) on defence by 2022. During the March 20th TV debate, Hamon declared that France – soon to be the only EU state with a full-spectrum military arsenal – must become a [pillar of the European defence project](#). To him, the potential US disengagement from EU security calls for more European initiatives. The Socialist candidate asserts that, although the EU and NATO are the two pillars of European security, Europeans should aim to build a common defence policy within the EU framework rather than [NATO's](#).

Russia

Whereas Macron and Hamon support EU sanctions on Russia, Fillon, Mélenchon, and Le Pen call for closer Franco-Russian ties. For those three candidates, the rapprochement with Russia is seen as a way to counter US influence and to strengthen France's strategic autonomy. Links with Russia have become an issue in the election with the encounter between Le Pen and Putin in Moscow, Macron accusing the Kremlin of destabilising his campaign, and allegations of Fillon having been paid to arrange a meeting between businessmen and Putin.

Le Pen, whom Russian Foreign Minister [Sergey Lavrov](#) called a “realist” or “anti-globalist,” argues that Russia should be considered a strategic partner. Claiming that a [new world order](#) is on the rise with leaders such as Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump, Le Pen calls for a new [Paris-Washington-Moscow axis](#). For the FN candidate, the 2014 [annexation of Crimea was not illegal](#) since there was a referendum, and she recognises Crimea as part of Russia. She also backs the lifting of the European Union's [economic sanctions](#) imposed on Russia over its role in the Ukraine conflict. Le Pen is in favour of a rapprochement with Russia in [fighting ISIS](#), a topic she discussed with members of Russia's Duma and President Putin on March 24th in Moscow. In spite of her party having admitted taking a 9 million euros (£7.8m) [loan from a Moscow-based bank](#) in 2014, she recently denied the rumours of a Russian financial backing of her campaign from either the Kremlin or any [Russian financial institution](#).

According to **Macron**, Russia's current foreign policy is dangerous and does not respect [international law](#). During the March 20th TV debate, Macron observed that Russia is currently expressing its [dissatisfaction with the European order](#) and uses a [hybrid strategy](#) of military intervention (Crimea, Syria) and information war to influence public opinions. He accuses the Kremlin of [cyber-attacks](#) and of spreading false rumours to sabotage his campaign. The EM! candidate notes that current EU sanctions are necessary and should be maintained as long as the [Minsk agreements](#) are not respected. During the TV debate, Macron asserted that he does not intend to build France's independence through a [rapprochement with Putin](#) but through European initiatives. However, he argues for keeping a strict but open dialogue with Russia and declares that NATO-Russia dialogue should not be abandoned.

Fillon is in favour of rebuilding France's strategic relationship with Russia, which he considers a “[historical ally](#).” The LR candidate aims at working with Russia in protecting [Eastern Christians](#) from persecution and in fighting Islamic terrorism. During the March TV debate, when asked whether Russia could be a reliable ally given the illegal annexation of Crimea, Fillon argued that the [question of borders](#) needs to be considered in the light of both international law and the right of peoples to self-determination. Arguing for the [lifting of EU sanctions](#), he notes that they work against French economic interests. He

also proposes a new [EU-Russia trade agreement](#). The LR candidate was recently hit by [allegations](#) that he was paid £40,000 to arrange a meeting between Vladimir Putin, Lebanese businessman Fouad Makhzoumi, and Patrick Pouyanné, the CEO of Total.

Mélenchon is in favour of [dialogue with Russia](#) and wishes to make the “[Atlanticist orientation](#)” history. Arguing that Russia is the target of NATO’s “provocations”, such as the missile defence system build-up, the FI candidate asserts that it is not in France’s interest to participate in either EU or NATO provocations but that it should instead [rethink its relations with Russia](#) which is an indispensable partner. During the [March 20th TV debate](#), Mélenchon noted that Europeans should talk with Russia instead of inciting conflict. On the issue of Crimea, he argued that it is important to respect international law but that the case of the [Russian-Ukrainian border](#) has to be discussed.

According to **Hamon**, Russia is currently demonstrating both [aggressive imperialism](#) and an [offensive posture](#) towards Europe which should be met with strong response. During the TV debate, the Socialist candidate explicitly condemned the annexation of Crimea as a [violation of international law](#) and denounced the unilateralism and [brutality of Putin’s Russia](#). He also asserted that Europeans cannot ignore what the Russian strategy and goals are in Syria as well as on the Eastern border of the European Union.

About the Author

Alice Billon-Galland is as a Researcher at the European Leadership Network (ELN).

Alice's current research focuses on French foreign and defence policies, as well as the likely impact of the upcoming presidential election on European defence cooperation. Together with Denitsa and Julia, Alice participates in the European Defence research programme, conducting research on NATO burden-sharing and following developments in the European Union Common Security and Defence Policy [CSDP].

Alice is a member of the Young Professionals' National Association of the French Institute of Advanced Studies in National Defence [ANAJ IHEDN]. English reviewer at the Institute's Editorial Office, she is also a contributor to the Europe committee and a member of the London delegation.

Before joining the ELN in January 2017, Alice completed a Master's Degree in Public Policy at University College London, focusing on European affairs and defence policy. Her dissertation analysed French EU defence policy in the context of the invocation of article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union after the November 2015 Paris attacks.

Prior to this, she studied at the École Normale Supérieure de Lyon as normalienne, achieving a first-class Research Master's in English Studies and completing the Agrégation of English language examination. Alice also held a visiting scholar position at Northwestern University in the United States.

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