Macron a "lame duck", France and the future of the EU. Meanwhile, Putin sneers...

France's runoff legislative election, whose results came out on Sunday, raises some serious questions on France's political landscape, with both European and international ripple effects. Moreover, the outcome of the vote would appear to confirm a number of underlying trends that are resurfacing throughout Europe. First of all, President Emmanuel Macron and his allies failed to secure an absolute majority in parliament and face the prospect of having to seek support - probably among the Gaullist-inspired bloc - to ensure governance and carry out the promised reforms, starting with welfare reforms (raising the minimum retirement age to 65). For the time being, the Republicans party (LR) announced they will continue opposing the Macron government, but their sense of statehood and the lure of staying in power might lead them to back, perhaps with 'external' support, Macron's centrist government. The latter, whose Ensemble coalition won 245 seats (out of 577) - nowhere near an absolute majority in the National Assembly - can only hope for the support of the 64 seats won by the conservative party and its allies (Republicans plus UDI). If not, the prospect of new polls might be on the horizon, given that 48 MPs from smaller parties remain out of the picture. Without a doubt, left-wing alliance leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon and right-wing sovereignist Marine Le Pen emerged victorious from the election (just a few weeks after the re-election of the President of the Republic). The former, at the helm of NUPES (Nouvelle Union Populaire Écologique et Sociale), had said he was prepared to be prime minister, but he was forced to scale back his aspirations, despite having gained 131 parliamentary seats, not including Mélenchon himself, who did not stand as a candidate. Moreover, the success of Le Pen's far-right party Rassemblément National was utterly unexpected, having won 89 seats. The French right-wing party will be represented in parliament in unprecedented numbers, not least because the voting system traditionally punished the far right. Those are the numbers and the seats so far. Nevertheless, these alone don't provide enough information to gain a full grasp of the political situation in France. First of all, it should be noted that voter turnout was less than 50 per cent, reflecting a consolidated trend in Europe: political disconnection, lack of confidence in political leaders and parties, deterioration of the sense of citizenship reflected - albeit not solely - in exercising the right to vote. On the other hand, citizens cast their vote with increasing disengagement, while political or party affiliations apply to a minority of voters, thereby complicating decision-making by the political leaders and their respective groups. After the vote, French media reports highlighted the rise of the parties at the opposite poles of the political spectrum, the far left and the far right. They should now be asking themselves how they can make their specific contribution to politics and thus to the future of the country. Given the fact that both Mélenchon and Le Pen's parties will continue being opposition parties (announced as a "constructive" form of opposition), NUPES and Rassemblément National are literally miles apart, and thus irreconcilable. They could ultimately prove irrelevant, at least as far as the major decisions facing France are concerned, both domestically and with regard to foreign policy (the war in Ukraine, the humanitarian and food crisis, the energy problem, defense and security, the impending economic recession, EU reform after the Conference on the Future of Europe - all items on the agenda of the European Council of June 23 and 24 in Brussels). A number of questions arise regarding the meaning/value of democracy, involving political systems in general we would describe as pertaining to the 'West'. So why are citizens increasingly distant from politics and institutions (which low voter turnout is proof of)? Does voter fickleness have political reasons or, on a broader scale, are there cultural and social reasons? In the case of this French vote, did Macron's tactical flaws prevail or did his opponents' communicative skills? Or is there a tendency to punish government, whoever it may be and whatever its colour, at the ballot box with an attitude that could be described as 'populist'? Will the result of the French legislative election, with a President who risks becoming a 'lame duck', have repercussions on the challenges that lie ahead for the European Union? Indeed, the coming days -

between Paris and Brussels - may provide some insight. In the knowledge, as of now, that Macron's decline and, more generally, that of 'liberal' democracy, brings a sneer to the face of the Tsar in the Kremlin.

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