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### **“Frexit”- Should France Consider Leaving the European Union?**

Euroscepticism has been on the rise in Europe for years. In all corners of the continent, political parties have gained traction through uncompromising anti-Europe and anti-integration platforms. France is no exception. In 2017, the Front National succeeded in making it to the last round of elections for the second time in history (Amaro, 2018). The party, led by Marine Le Pen, campaigned to leave the EU and reclaim full French sovereignty (Amaro, 2018). Running on a far more centrist platform, Emmanuel Macron defeated Le Pen with a clear majority. However, the implications of growing anti-EU sentiment should not be ignored. According to a 2019 Ipsos Sopra-Steria poll for French newspaper Le Monde, only 36 percent of French voters trust the European Union (McGuinness, 2019). Pro-EU President Macron has said, if France were put in the same position as the UK, and asked to vote “yes or no” on EU membership, the people likely would have voted to leave (Amaro, 2018). Moreover, there is dissatisfaction in certain regions of France concerning EU policy on immigration and the refugee crisis (Amaro, 2018). Amidst the increasing discontent and skepticism, would France actually benefit from leaving the EU? This paper argues that France should remain in the bloc, because the EU’s positive impacts, both economic and political, far outweigh the consequences of leaving.

France’s economic future is “bound to the EU” (Lequesne, 2015). Former president François Hollande and PM Manuel Valls were pushed to enact structural reforms to economic policy due to the restraints of EU commitments, which amplified French Euroscepticism

(Lequesne, 2015). However, French economic policy is undergoing major reform regardless of EU obligations. Macron has introduced highly controversial economic reforms in an attempt to limit spending and increase the sustainability of the system. French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said, "Nothing will make us retreat from transforming the country...Emmanuel Macron was elected for that" (Horobin, 2019). Independent of the economic effects of reform, a 2019 study by Bertelsmann Stiftung has shown that France has benefitted from the European single market overall. The results show that the single market provides higher welfare, higher productivity and low markups to all members (Mion & Ponattu, 2019). France and Germany have seen especially strong welfare gains in areas where the automotive industry is strong (Mion & Ponattu, 2019). In a table displaying the economic benefits of the single market at country level, France showed a welfare gain of 1,074 euros per capita (Mion & Ponattu, 2019). However, Paris and the eastern regions of France have benefitted more than the western regions (Mion & Ponattu, 2019).

As both one of the founding powers of the EU and one of the largest economies in Europe, France plays a major political role in the institution. Though it is not met without challenges, Macron's agenda enjoys substantial influence within the EU. For instance, he has already had some success in an agreement on a eurozone budget (Horobin, 2019). The implications of Brexit have only increased France's role in the EU. Without the UK, France and Germany will be the EU's most influential powers. In Paris and Berlin, there is strong incentive to "take up the challenge of Brexit and the wider EU 'polycrisis', and to seize the opportunities that come with them in terms of a renewal of their joint influence and leadership on key projects" (Krotz & Schild, 2019). This can already be observed. The two countries are calling for

a conference to bring together the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council, to discuss democratic systems and various policies including the social market economy, indicating that they are seeking ambitious reforms (Maher & Hodson, 2019). The UK's withdrawal actually presents an opportunity for France to "curb the likelihood of German hegemony in the post-Brexit EU" (Krotz & Schild, 2019). As a market-oriented member state, Germany will lose an ally on single market issues without the UK (Krotz & Schild, 2019). This may allow France to better incorporate its dirigiste tendencies and "harmonization agenda" in EU social and economic policy (Krotz & Schild, 2019). In light of this, France "clearly benefits more (from Brexit) than Germany does in terms of its options and potential to shape EU policies in key political economy domains" (Krotz & Schild, 2019). Post-Brexit, France will also be the bloc's only nuclear power. Macron has used his "military clout," to help strengthen his call for a united EU (Adamson, 2020). He is advocating for a more coordinated European defense strategy that would place France's arsenal in a central role (Adamson, 2020). Without the UK, France has an opportunity to project and design its own idea of Europe. Leaving the EU would diminish that opportunity.

Abandoning the EU would present serious challenges for any member state. This can again be understood through the lens of Brexit. The ugly and exhausting three and a half year process "has been so negatively viewed by European voters," that many Eurosceptic parties and nationalist politicians have changed their policies on leaving the institution (Walker, 2019). For instance, Le Pen is now arguing to reform the EU rather than leave it. This is also the case with Italy's Matteo Salvini (Walker, 2019). After Brexit is fully enacted, the UK will likely have to accept EU rules without having a say in what they are, or jeopardize its access to European

markets. Mujtaba Rahman, the head of Europe at Eurasia Group said, “Concluding and ratifying a trade agreement will be very difficult, and the U.K. will ultimately have to make big concessions while getting less access than it has now. That will continue to color people’s perceptions in Europe that exit is a painful process” (Walker, 2019). By leaving the EU, France would be alienating itself from one of the largest and most powerful trade blocs in the world, of which it is geographically at the center of. Beyond that, leaving the EU may negatively impact France militarily. The EU plans to create its own nuclear weapons program in which France’s arsenal would be managed by the EU and put under common European command (Ball, 2019). If France left the EU, it might not only lead to considerable sanctions, but “a sizeable part of the country’s arsenal of nuclear weapons might also be seized by the European Union for use” (Ball, 2019).

Euroscepticism in France may be increasing, but that does not change the fact that remaining in the EU puts the country in a far superior position than leaving would. Economically, the EU is not responsible for French deficits, and the country has actually benefitted from the single market. Its political role in the EU is crucial, and Brexit has only paved the way for France to have more influence in the continent. Leaving the EU would have disastrous effects on trade and lower France’s position on the world stage.

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