

BULLETIN

No. 41 (374) • April 20, 2012 • © PISM

Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief), Katarzyna Staniewska (Executive Editor),
Jarosław Ćwiek-Karpowicz, Beata Górka-Winter, Artur Gradziuk, Beata Wojna

The European Union in Pre-election Political Discourse in France

Dorota Liszczyk

European issues are a subject of controversy in France and there is reluctance to include them in pre-election debates. However, the debt crisis affecting Europe, along with the economic slowdown and accompanying discussions about the future of Europe, means the candidates for president of France cannot remain indifferent to the problems affecting the European Union. The current course of the campaign shows the candidates have chosen a defensive approach to the problem, avoiding the formulation of an ambitious vision for the functioning of the European Union.

According to opinion polls, more than half of the French are in favour of increasing the capacity of national authorities even at the expense of the existing powers of EU institutions. The growing indifference or even scepticism amongst the French to Europe's current state directly influences the election campaign, and none of the candidates for president has declared unequivocal enthusiasm for the EU.

Institutional Matters. Proponents of a "federal Europe" (Eva Joly of the Greens and François Bayrou, a centrist with Democratic Movement) criticise the EU's intergovernmental approach and promote the Community method as well as the strengthening of EU institutions. The Green candidate has indicated the need for a new EU constitution—one that allows Europe to evolve in the direction of a federation, subject to a European referendum. The centrist representative has insisted on a vision of a "decentralized cooperative federalism" and pointed out that this model does not negate the existence of national states and respects their freedom. Bayrou has singled out the need for greater legitimacy and transparency of EU institutions and has proposed making Council debates public and strengthening the powers of the European Parliament (EP). He also has proposed the establishment of an interparliamentary conference composed of representatives of the EP and national parliaments to regularly discuss the basic assumptions and policy choices of the EU. Both of these candidates, as well as Socialist François Hollande, have called for combining the functions of the presidents of the European Council and the European Commission (EC). Bayrou has suggested the "EU President" ought to be chosen by either a popular vote or a parliamentary congress composed of representatives of the EP and national parliaments.

The Socialist candidate has not been paying a lot of attention to the EU in his official election program and has passed over the EU's institutional problems. However, by stressing in his speeches the importance of the European Council and the heads of state or government in the EU's institutional architecture, he appears to be in favour of the intergovernmental approach to EU decision-making. Hollande also is an advocate of strengthening the role of the EP by increasing the accountability of the European Commission and its president to parliament. The intergovernmental method traditionally has been supported by the current president, Nicolas Sarkozy, who also advocates for a varied pace to European integration—one that is faster within eurozone countries and slower throughout the rest of the EU. Sarkozy has called for a revision of the Schengen Agreement and the imposition of sanctions, the suspension of membership or the exclusion of countries not complying with regulations. One element of this reform would be the establishment of a "Schengen policy of government" consisting of heads of state or government who would identify guidelines for the control of the EU's external borders. Representing the extreme left, Jean-Luc Mélenchon does not challenge the EU's *raison d'être*; however, he has requested the adoption

by referendum of a new treaty related to the functioning of the EU. He advocates for the restriction of the EC's powers in favour of the EP and national parliaments, which, in his opinion, should be granted rights for initiatives, co-decision and enhanced control. The radical right candidate, Marine Le Pen, is a supporter of integration based on cooperation on specific projects, but not the transfer of sovereignty to a supranational level. She has said she wants France to exit from the EU and return to the supremacy of national law over EU law.

Economic Problems. Proposals on economic issues appearing in the election campaign focus primarily on the problem of economic growth and the protection of European production. Both Sarkozy, Hollande, and Bayrou are directly in favour of establishing new rules for trade policy based on the principle of reciprocity, which would protect European businesses from unfair competition. The current president also has called for the adoption of a "Buy European Act", under which EU companies would be favoured in tenders organised by EU institutions and national administrations. He has proposed the creation of an investment bank to support small and medium enterprises. Hollande has called for the re-negotiation of the Treaty on the Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union (the so-called "Fiscal Compact"), seeking to complement it with growth issues and to clarify the role of the Court of Justice regarding the transposition by Member States of fiscal rules into national law. Most of the candidates raised the issue of the future functioning of the European Central Bank (ECB). Sarkozy has promised a debate on the role of the ECB in supporting economic growth, and Hollande has a similar point of view. Bayrou, Mélenchon, and Joly have argued openly that the ECB should be able to lend directly to countries. With regard to the EU budget, Sarkozy announced the freezing of the French contribution, and Hollande, in turn, has called for "an ambitious budget" from which "large, promising projects" would be funded. Both Bayrou and Holland have proposed the creation of a European credit rating agency, with the Socialist candidate stating that, moreover, this institution should be public. Furthermore, with respect to the euro area, Sarkozy and Bayrou have presented similar propositions. Sarkozy has proposed the establishment of a parliamentary assembly of the euro area, while Bayrou has called for establishing a parliamentary committee of eurozone representatives of the EP and national parliaments. The dissenting voice in the debate comes from Le Pen, who is demanding a referendum on France withdrawing from the eurozone.

Defence Policy. Security matters—if at all present—are at the margins of the election debates. Hollande has announced the revival of cooperation within the common security and defence policy (CSDP). He has proposed deepening the Franco-British agreement initiated in St. Malo, cooperation with Germany, Belgium, Spain, Italy and Poland, to share the military capabilities of all EU Member States, and for the consolidation of the European technological and industrial base. Also, Bayrou has called for strengthening the *Europe de la défense* and establishing a joint command and planning centre. Sarkozy has enigmatically pointed out the necessity to develop autonomous European defence capabilities.

Conclusions and Recommendations. The presidential election campaign in France has not become an occasion to organise a national debate on the future construction of the EU. Face with sceptical public sentiment towards the Union, the candidates have deliberately avoided formulating an ambitious vision of the functioning of the EU and have focused selectively on problems that can increase support for them amongst the citizenry. The demand to renegotiate the Fiscal Compact put forward by Hollande has dominated European socialist discourse. The lack of ambition in Hollande's European election program is also linked to the fact that there are differences amongst the Socialists on the functioning of the EU. At the same time, President Sarkozy has decided, for electoral purposes, to re-evaluate current European policy and has said it should be more geared to protect French citizens and European business interests.

Given the real possibility for a new president in France, Polish decision-makers should follow the French debate on the EU in order to identify and take into account differences in the candidates' approaches on the European framework. Also the mood of French public opinion towards European matters should be monitored, since it directly influences France's European policy. In case Hollande is the victor, Poland should be more interested in his proposals for the CSDP and should encourage him to clarify them. An exhibition of Polish interest and willingness to strengthen cooperation in this matter is recommended.