

The pandemic factor in the rivalry between E. Macron and M. Le Pen in the Presidential Elections in France in 2022

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Abstract. The ongoing French president E. Macron and the leader of the right-wing leader of the right-wing National Union Party M. Le Pen are the main candidates for the upcoming French presidential election in 2022, especially in the case of a second round of voting. The purpose of this article is to estimate the influence of pandemic factor in the rivalry between the two candidates and a possible turnout of the upcoming election. The article focuses especially on two aspects of the two politicians' rivalry: Macron's controversial actions against the pandemic, which have had a negative impact on his rating and Le Pen's attempts to use the pandemic to broaden her electorate and increase her chances for the election.

To achieve the goals, statistical methods, work with sociological surveys, as well as a comparative analysis of the views of two politicians on specific issues were used. It was concluded that some of E. Macron's decisions to combat the pandemic did have a negative, but not decisive impact on his rating. M. Le Pen, on the contrary, having adapted some of the most important points of her program during the coronavirus period, did not offer qualitatively new ideas to combat the pandemic, and experts continue to determine her as a right-wing populist politician with contradictory statements. It attracts new followers, however, if M. Le Pen enters the second round against E. Macron, the scenario of the 2017 elections is likely to repeat.

Keywords: Emmanuel Macron, Marine Le Pen, National Union Party, "La République En Marche!", popularity rating of Emmanuel Macron, presidential elections, pandemic, right-wing populism

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Introduction

On April 10th, the next presidential elections will be held in France. Article 6 of the French Constitution of 1958 allows the president to serve two consecutive terms¹; however the current president of France E.Macron maintained the suspense up until the date of formation of the final lists, announcing his participation in the elections only on March 3rd 2022². Nevertheless, over the past year, experts had no doubts about the president's nomination for a second term. Often, Macron's indecision was explained as follows: the current president is waiting for a more appropriate moment to officially nominate his candidacy, because the republic has been experiencing the fifth wave of the pandemic since the end of 2021, against which the president's ratings are low³. In this case, the following questions arise: was the policy of the French government really so unsuccessful that it undermined the president's public-approval rating, significantly reducing his chances for a second presidential term? If these claims are substantiated, then who will win the election? Are there other factors, for example, the participation of M.Le Pen in the second round, which can play a more significant role in the potential victory of E.Macron? These issues are being actively discussed today in the expert community of the Fifth Republic.

Certainly, a huge number of events in addition to the pandemic have an impact on the president's rating; among them are: yellow vests protests, which started in November 2018 as a result of rising car fuel prices; a series of murders committed by immigrants in France in the second half of 2020 and the subsequent debates over Islamophobia; a letter from the Generals in the spring of 2021 about the risk of a civil war in the country because of Muslim immigrants, etc. As noted by Yu.I.Rubinsky, Head of the Center for French Studies at the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the socio-economic reforms carried out by E.Macron served mainly the interests of the upper strata of the population, and their implementation fell on the less well-to-do strata of the population, workers and farmers, as a result of which, presidential support by this category of the population also noticeably decreased [12:3]. Also, the elections in France were affected by the special military operation in Ukraine, during which E.Macron assumed the role of a mediator, probably counting, among other things, on the increase of the approval of his candidacy by the French population. However, as mentioned earlier, the number one topic in the French political field until February 2022 was the pandemic, which for a long time had an impact on the pre-election situation. Therefore, in the context of this study, attention will be paid to some of the unsuccessful or ambiguous actions of the French government in the fight

1 Texte intégral de la Constitution du 4 octobre 1958 en vigueur. Conseil Constitutionnel. 2008. Available: <https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/le-bloc-de-constitutionnalite/texte-integral-de-la-constitution-du-4-octobre-1958-en-vigueur>

2 Emmanuel Macron va annoncer ce soir sa candidature dans une lettre aux français. Le Figaro. 2022. Available: <https://www.lefigaro.fr/elections/presidentielles/presidentielle-2022-emmanuel-macron-va-annoncer-ce-soir-sa-candidature-dans-une-lettre-aux-francais-20220303>.

3 Baromètre des indices de popularité – mars 2022. Ifop. 2021. Available: <https://www.ifop.com/publication/les-indices-de-popularite-mars-2022/>.

against coronavirus, which had a negative impact on the support of the current president and became a central issue in the confrontation between E.Macron and M.Le Pen.

Materials and Methods

The source base of this study consists of statistics, sociological surveys, the press and platforms of presidential candidates. Sociological surveys conducted by such centers as the French Institute of Public Opinion (Ifop), the Parisian private research center Odoxa-Backbone Consulting, etc., made it possible to study the dynamics of public opinion on the upcoming elections, to identify the impact of certain actions of E.Macron on his rating, as well as to analyze possible combinations of participants in the second round of the presidential elections in France in 2022. And furthermore, the national government portal publishing official data on the number of cases and people vaccinated was used to study the coronavirus pandemic in France. The French press, in its turn, was used to cover current events, solicit various expert views, as well as to gain access to some electoral platforms and studies. Such French papers as *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, which are distinguished by a high level of authority in French society and abroad, were chosen as news sources. To work with these types of sources, the method of working with sociological surveys and data analysis was used.

Also, comparative analysis was used to study the opinions of E.Macron and M.Le Pen, with the help of which the main distinguishing points in the positions of the two politicians on the pandemic and some other events were identified. Among other things, the principles of historicism and consistency were used to determine the dynamics of historical processes and determine the possibilities for the participation of the leaders of the National Union Party in the second round of the French presidential elections in 2002 and 2017.

Results

The study reached the following conclusions. Firstly, the ambivalent actions of E.Macron in the fight against the pandemic affected his rating negatively, but not significantly. Thus, yellow vests movement or the unpopular reforms of the president had a more severe impact on his rating. Secondly, M.Le Pen uses all news opportunities to expand her electorate, and the pandemic is no exception. The leader of the National Union Party does not miss the opportunity to criticize the actions of the executive power in the framework of the crisis management, but M.Le Pen does not offer qualitatively new ideas on this issue. As a result, M.Le Pen expands her electorate, but a significant part of the population still considers her an ultra-right populist politician. Thirdly, systemic traditional French parties, for various reasons, cannot recover from the crisis after the 2017 elections. As a result, today the most likely combination of candidates for the second round

of presidential elections is the Macron – Le Pen duel, in which M. Le Pen has practically no chance of winning. In this case, we will see a repetition of the 2017 elections scenario, in which E. Macron will be elected for a second presidential term.

Ambivalent actions of E. Macron in the fight against the pandemic

In March 2022, the Ifop French Institute of Public Opinion conducted a study and presented the results of Macron's rating dynamics in 2017–2022⁴. The results of this study show that at the beginning of his presidential term, E. Macron enjoyed the support of a fairly large number of the population – 64%, but with the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, the president's rating became 32%. So, it can be seen that during his presidency, E. Macron lost half of the support. It is also interesting to note that since the start of the pandemic in February 2020, the president's rating has fallen by 2%, which seems like a minor change. The pandemic has definitely become a challenge for the leaders of most countries in the world, however, E. Macron has made several controversial actions that could have been avoided and which had a negative impact on his popularity in the short term.

Let us recall the facts of the situation. The first case of coronavirus infection was recorded in France on January 24, 2020⁵. The start of the pandemic coincided with municipal elections at various levels in Paris, held in March 2020. Agnès Buzyn, the Minister of Solidarity and Health, was appointed the head of the electoral lists of the Republic Forward! Party (La République En Marche!), after which she formally left the ministerial position to participate in the elections. This decision drew public criticism for two reasons. Firstly, the population blames E. Macron for this appointment, since it happened due to the decision of the president's party. As a result, at the beginning of the pandemic, France changed the Minister of Health, which is unlikely to have had a positive impact on the decision-making process. Secondly, the first round of elections was held despite the pandemic that had already started. Later, Agnès Buzyn herself expressed regret about participating in these elections, calling them a "masquerade", since, in her opinion, elections should have been postponed⁶. During this period, the number of new infections per day was not so high, but it was growing rapidly. At the same time, the holding of municipal elections in this situation had a negative impact on E. Macron himself, since the voter turnout was low (54% in the second round⁷), and especially among the electorate of the Republic Forward! Party. As noted, a high level of absenteeism can be interpreted as a negative attitude

4 Ibid.

5 Informations Covid-19. Gouvernement.fr. 2021. Available: <https://www.gouvernement.fr/info-coronavirus/carte-et-donnees>.

6 Les regrets d'Agnès Buzyn: « On aurait dû tout arrêter, c'était une mascarade ». Le Monde. 2020. Available: https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2020/03/17/entre-campagne-municipale-et-crise-du-coronavirus-le-chemin-de-croix-d-agnes-buzyn_6033395_823448.html.

7 Abstention aux municipales 2020: qui sont les maires les mieux et les plus mal élus? Le Monde. 2020. Available: https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2020/06/29/abstention-aux-municipales-2020-qui-sont-les-maires-les-mieux-et-les-plus-mal-elus_6044608_4355770.html.

of the population towards holding elections during a pandemic, fear of infection and, consequently, a mistake by the president [7:190].

Later, another series of events provoked fierce criticism of E. Macron. By the end of January 2021, experts from around the world began to actively discuss the possibility of a new wave of the pandemic, larger and more deadly than the previous ones, in connection with the identification of a new strain of coronavirus in the UK. Then French experts and politicians started talking about the need to introduce new restrictive measures that should work to prevent a new wave. The French president, wanting to improve the economic situation, refused to renew the lockdown. However, since the beginning of March 2021, the number of new infections per day began to grow again, reaching a peak of 34 thousand people per day on April 1⁸, so the third wave began in France. On March 25, E. Macron said it was a fair decision to refuse to introduce a lockdown at the end of January, and a few days later he announced the beginning of the third lockdown, after which debates and voting were initiated in the National Assembly, the lower house of the French Parliament.

The move has arguably attracted the most criticism of the president since the yellow vests movement that began in France in 2018 after raising gasoline taxes. Firstly, experts emphasized that the beginning of the third wave caused by the new British strain was predicted for March, and not for February⁹. In their opinion, enhanced restrictive measures in these months would really help to reduce the rate of infection with a new strain, although they would not be able to completely defeat the virus. Secondly, E. Macron is criticized for the fact that he made this decision alone, and only then initiated its discussion in the National Assembly, the results of which actually no longer mattered, since the decision had already been made in the Health Protection Council. Thus, deputies from the Republicans, the Socialist Party and the party Europe – Ecology – the Greens boycotted participation in the voting¹⁰. In the French political field, there appeared comparisons of E. Macron with Louis XIV, the likely author of the phrase “The State is me”, as well as with German Chancellor A. Merkel, who “takes the trouble to discuss with the presidents of the regions for seven hours in order to reach a consensus ... to vote on all decisions in the Bundestag», while the French president acts alone¹¹. Also, according to the French *Le Monde*, the president’s refusal to introduce a third lockdown at the end of January resulted in the death of 14,000 people, the hospitalization of 112,000 people and about 160,000 new infections in the long term¹².

8 Informations Covid-19. Gouvernement.fr. 2021. Available: <https://www.gouvernement.fr/info-coronavirus/carte-et-donnees>.

9 Covid: Emmanuel Macron sur la défensive pour justifier sa gestion de la crise. *LesEchos*. 2021. Available: <https://www.lesechos.fr/politique-societe/emmanuel-macron-president/covid-emmanuel-macron-sur-la-defensive-pour-justifier-sa-gestion-de-la-crise-1301842>.

10 Covid-19: le nouveau confinement annoncé par Emmanuel Macron critiqué par l’opposition. *Le Monde*. 2021. Available: https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2021/04/01/covid-19-les-nouvelles-mesures-annoncees-par-emmanuel-macron-debattues-au-parlement_6075189_823448.html.

11 Ibid.

12 Le lourd coût humain d’un troisième confinement tardif en France. *Le Monde*. 2021. Available: https://www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2021/06/18/le-lourd-cout-humain-d-un-troisieme-confinement-tardif-en-france_6084619_3244.html.

In the light of this situation, it is necessary to pay attention to the bodies and structures that make decisions in the field of combating coronavirus in France. This system is built centrally and vertically: the main role is assigned to the Health Protection Council (under the Defense Council), responsible to the president, prime minister and the Council of Ministers¹³. The Health Protection Council is criticized by French politicians, since the composition of the body is determined only by the decision of the President, therefore, it does not include either the opposition or members of most parties represented in the parliament. Also, due to the fact that this body was established under the Defense Council, the details of the meetings and the principle of decision-making are subject to state secrets, as a result of which the population does not know whether the president takes into account the opinion of experts or whether he acts alone. However, within the framework of crisis management, the Health Protection Council makes quick decisions, since it can be convened not as a whole but by the decision of E. Macron in the shortest possible time.

Since mid-August, the number of new infections detected per day had been rapidly falling to a minimum of 4 thousand people on October 8, 2021, but by the beginning of November this figure more than doubled and reached 10 thousand people per day, after which French experts started talking about the beginning of the fifth wave of the pandemic in France¹⁴. Subsequently, the fifth wave with a new strain of coronavirus became the largest in terms of the number of new infections per day of all the past waves¹⁵, therefore, it is noted that it is the pandemic factor that forces E. Macron to postpone the official announcement of participation in the 2022 presidential elections. The problem is that by November 2021, about 74% of the population had already been fully vaccinated in France¹⁶, and strict restrictive measures were in place, but the epidemiological situation was deteriorating. In this case, it seems that there is still a possibility of introducing a fourth lockdown or tightening quarantine measures that could lead to restrictions on the activities of public institutions, and hence to economic losses. Both measures will certainly lead to a decrease in the president's popular-approval rating, which will be an undesirable consequence for him, since less than six months are left before the elections. As a result, E. Macron is probably not announcing his participation in the elections, waiting for changes in the epidemiological situation to make a further decision to combat the pandemic.

Thus, it can be seen that some of the actions of E. Macron in the fight against coronavirus have a negative impact on his popular-approval rating. The beginning of the pandemic and the related municipal elections in Paris lowered Macron's rating by 2 points (from 34% in January 2019 to 32% in March 2021), and the third lockdown in the spring of 2021 - by 4 points (from 41% in March to 37% in April)¹⁷. The latest drop in the

13 Le Conseil de défense sanitaire, cette instance de décision qui crisse jusque dans la majorité. LCI, 2021. Available: <https://www.lci.fr/politique/covid-19-coronavirus-pandemie-le-conseil-de-defense-sanitaire-cette-instance-de-decision-qui-crisse-jusque-dans-la-majorite-2177322.html>.

14 Informations Covid-19. Gouvernement.fr. 2021. Available: <https://www.gouvernement.fr/info-coronavirus/carte-et-donnees>.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Baromètre des indices de popularité – mars 2022. Ifop. 2021. Available: <https://www.ifop.com/publication/les-indices-de-popularite-mars-2022/>.

presidential rating can be supplemented by the results of public opinion from February 2020, conducted by the private research center Odoxa-Backbone Consulting, located in Paris: 60% of the population distrust the government's actions to combat coronavirus; 71% do not believe that the government is making the right decisions at the right time; 73% do not believe that the government is telling them the truth; 81% do not think the government knows what to do¹⁸. For comparison: in the results of a study from the same center from May to September 2021, when the third lockdown was lifted while maintaining restrictive measures, the share of French people who consider Macron's actions positive increased from 36 to 48%¹⁹. Consequently, the decision not to introduce a third lockdown in January-February 2020 did significantly lower the president's popular support rating, and also affected the public's trust in the government.

Thus, the coronavirus pandemic, without any doubt, had a negative impact on the president's rating, keeping it at an average level of 38% for a year and a half. At the same time, paying attention to the rating of E. Macron for the entire presidential mandate, one can see that in May 2017 he was supported by 62-64% of the population, after which his rating fell sharply in August 2017 to 40%, and in November 2018, it hit an all-time low of 23%²⁰. On the whole, the first drop is noteworthy, since the rating of French presidents often grows in the first months of presidency, which happened with N. Sarkozy and even with F. Hollande. Experts explain the current situation by the end of the "honeymoon", as well as a number of decisions by E. Macron that are contradictory in the eyes of the French population: as part of the program to reduce public spending, the indexation of salaries of civil servants was frozen, the process of receiving payments during sick leave was made more difficult, and the defense budget was reduced subsequently leading to resignation of the Minister of Defense, General Pierre de Villiers, who enjoyed enormous support from the army; at the same time, a magnificent reception was held for V. Putin in Paris²¹.

The second drop, in November 2018, was due to yellow vests movement. The yellow vests protests began in 2018 after a diesel tax hike, but quickly turned into a massive movement with its own list of demands in most areas of human life. In the context of its influence on E. Macron's rating, it is important to note that, firstly, the yellow vests undoubtedly hit the president's popularity - since then, both in the expert community and among the population, there have been statements that E. Macron is a president only for the rich, who pays little attention to the poor, as well as to the agricultural sector.

18 Covid-19: la gestion de la crise par l'exécutif ne convainc toujours pas les Français. Le Figaro, 2021. Available: <https://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/le-scan/covid-19-la-gestion-de-la-crise-par-emmanuel-macron-ne-convainc-toujours-pas-les-francais-20210204>.

19 Crise sanitaire: le bilan d'Emmanuel Macron continue d'être revu à la hausse. Odoxa. 2021. Available: <http://www.odoxa.fr/sondage/crise-sanitaire-le-bilan-demmanuel-macron-continue-detre-revu-a-la-hausse/>.

20 Baromètre des indices de popularité – mars 2022. Ifop. 2021. Available: <https://www.ifop.com/publication/les-indices-de-popularite-mars-2022/>.

21 Macron: les raisons d'une chute de popularité quasi-inédite sous la ve. BFMTV. 2021. Available: https://www.bfmtv.com/politique/gouvernement/macron-les-raisons-d-une-chute-de-popularite-quasi-inedite-sous-la-ve_AV-201708040015.html.

Yu. Rubinsky notes that such an opinion about E. Macron has developed because of his economic reforms in general and in particular because of the abolition of the tax on great fortunes, the restriction of trade union rights, and the tightening of conditions for unemployment insurance [11:40]. The pandemic also became an obstacle to the implementation of all economic reforms planned by the president, as a result of which the controversial reforms of E. Macron also became inconsistent, which definitely had a negative impact on the level of public confidence in the president [13:473]. Secondly, despite quarantine measures, the movement slowed down, but did not stop – the last demonstrations of the yellow vests took place in France in October 2021²². The pandemic has also become an obstacle to economic reforms initiated by E. Macron. Therefore, we can conclude that in comparison with a number of decisions by E. Macron made in 2017, as well as with the yellow vests movement, the coronavirus pandemic did not have such a significant impact on the president's popular-approval rating, lowering it by several points on average. At the same time, Doctor of Political Sciences N. Yu. Lapina notes the opportunities for the president to use the pandemic to strengthen his position in the event of a successful recovery of the country in the post-pandemic period, since France has already overtaken the OECD countries in terms of the amount of financial resources as a percentage of GNP currently spent on helping the population [6:19]. However, it seems too early to talk about the end of the pandemic and the revival of France, so this belief remains only an assumption.

The rivalry between E. Macron and M. Le Pen in the pandemic

As of March 2022, according to the Ifop French Institute of Public Opinion, Macron's popular support rating is as follows: 9% 'completely satisfied', 33% 'rather satisfied', 28% 'rather dissatisfied', 28% "completely dissatisfied"²³. In the light of the upcoming elections, it is important to note that despite the pandemic and the controversial actions of the government, E. Macron has long been leading the list of candidates for whom the French would prefer to vote in the first round. Throughout 2021, sociological polls revealed the following most popular candidates for the second round: E. Macron, M. Le Pen, E. Zemmour, X. Bertrand, V. Péresse²⁴. At the same time, according to most experts, the duel between E. Macron and M. Le Pen is the most likely scenario for the second round of elections, in which, practically in spite of everything, the current President of France will become the winner. Such a hypothesis is of a particular interest, since in this case, for the third time

²² Saint-Avoid: les Gilets jaunes mobilisés ce week-end. Radio Mélodie. 2021. Available: <https://www.radiomelodie.com/a/16032-saint-avoid-les-gilets-jaunes-mobilises-ce-week-end>.

²³ Baromètre des indices de popularité – mars 2022. Ifop. 2021. Available: <https://www.ifop.com/publication/les-indices-de-popularite-mars-2022/>.

²⁴ Présidentielle 2022: Éric Zemmour en baisse, selon un sondage. Le Point. 2021. Available: https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/presidentielle-2022-eric-zemmour-en-baisse-selon-un-sondage-11-11-2021-2451631_20.php.

in the history of France, the leader of the National Union Party (called the National Front until 2018) is likely to lose the elections in the second round. This theory seems to require some clarification.

The National Front political party was founded in 1972 by French politician Jean-Marie Le Pen. For the first time, the leader of this party, then called the National Front, entered the second round of the presidential elections in 2002, then Jean-Marie Le Pen opposed Jacques Chirac, who was running for a second term. At the beginning of the elections, J.Chirac was supported by about 55% of the population, and by that time there were speculations about his involvement in corruption frauds, that is why experts assumed that in the second round he could only count on 48% of the vote²⁵. The results of the first round of elections were unexpected: J.Chirac took first place, with 19.8% of the vote, and Jean-Marie Le Pen sensationally took second place, overtaking the socialist Lionel Jospin by only 0.7%, with 16.8% of the vote²⁶. These results led to resonant consequences: at that time, the National Front was an obvious ultra-right party frightening with its radical suggestions, so almost all political movements and the media began to agitate the population for J. Chirac, offering to vote "for a thief, but not a fascist." So, the incumbent president, being not the most attractive candidate for the French, won and was elected for a second term. Probably, J.Chirac would not have won the elections if he had faced L.Jospin in the second round. The events of April 21, 2002 demonstrated for the first time that right-wing and ultra-right ideas were impressively popular in French society, after which a dangerous growth of these ideas was predicted, which could one day lead the National Union Party candidate for the presidency.

However, 15 years later, the situation repeated itself, in 2017 Marine Le Pen, the current leader of the National Union Party, took second place in the first round of the presidential election, with 21% of the vote, and E.Macron took first place with 24% of the vote²⁷. In contrast to the 2002 elections, the entry of National Union Party's leader into the second round was not a surprise, and public opinion polls showed this very outcome²⁸. At the same time, the forecast about the rise of the popularity of this party turned out to be wrong, since E.Macron won the elections in 2017 (66% of the vote against 33% of the vote for M.Le Pen²⁹). However, public opinion polls conducted after the election revealed an interesting picture. Firstly, more than a third of the population voted for E.Macron so that M.Le Pen would not win: 43% voted for the "Le Pen opposition", 33% for the updates that E.Macron proposes, only 16% for his program and 8% for his personality [15]. As it turned

25 Sondages: la cote de popularité de Jacques Chirac est en baisse. Le Monde. 2021. Available: https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/2001/07/12/sondages-la-cote-de-popularite-de-jacques-chirac-est-en-baisse_4203508_1819218.html.

26 Décision n° 2002-109 PDR du 24 avril 2002. Conseil Constitutionnel. 2002. Available: <https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/decision/2002/2002109PDR.html>.

27 Décision n° 2017-169 PDR du 26 avril 2017. Conseil Constitutionnel, 2017. Available: <https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/decision/2017/2017169PDR.html>.

28 Présidentielle 2017: les sondages ont vu plutôt juste. Le Monde. 2017. Available: https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2017/04/26/presidentielle-les-sondages-ont-vu-plutot-juste_5117718_4355770.html.

29 Décision n° 2017-171 PDR du 10 mai 2017. Conseil Constitutionnel. 2017. Available: <https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/decision/2017/2017171PDR.html>.

out, this result is attributable not only to the fact that M. Le Pen is committed to right-wing or ultra-right ideas, but also due to her failure in the debate with E. Macron, which took place between two rounds of elections on May 3, 2017. Experts note that during the debate, the leader of the National Union Party sharply criticized her opponent, while getting confused in the facts, while the leader of Republic Forward! Party behaved confidently. Also, M. Le Pen often could not defend her position, especially on those issues where her opinion changed recently (for example, on abandoning the euro or the cancellation of pension reform). As a result, it can be noted that after the debate, M. Le Pen in the eyes of the French people was definitely not the candidate who should lead the country [15]. Secondly, the 2017 presidential election is remarkable for two statistical indicators in the history of the Fifth Republic: 11.5% of those who voted spoiled the ballot or left it blank (the highest number in any presidential election), and another 25% abstained from voting (the second-highest number for the same period) [15]. Thus, 36% of the population did not make their choice, and 11.5% of them made it clear that they did not want to see either M. Le Pen or E. Macron as president.

As for the upcoming elections in 2022, in the context of the political situation in France during the period of E. Macron's presidency as a whole, A. Chikhachev notes an interesting feature: most of the traditional parties and political forces faced a crisis and a number of internal problems after the 2017 elections, as a result of which they were never able to regain their lost positions [14:84].

Thus, the Gaullists were affected by the departure of N. Sarkozy from the political scene; and the socialists are still experiencing the distrust of the population after the presidency of F. Hollande, as well as a colossal lack of financial resources for the development of their party. As for another traditional French party, the Republicans, as stated, the party's affairs have become much more complicated due to the corruption scandal around F. Fillon [4:81]. As a result, only X. Bertrand remained among the popular Republicans, but he ran for election as a non-partisan candidate due to disagreements within the party and returned to the party after a while.

A. Chikhachev also believes that during the pandemic in France, the gap between the poor and the rich widened, but not a single political party (except for the National Union Party) was able to present updated and popular ideas amid the increased protest moods of the society [14:85]. At the same time, today this party has 6 deputy mandates out of 577 in the lower house of the French parliament³⁰, and 20-25 thousand people are members of the party³¹. Thus, it can be seen that the National Union Party has a rather modest number of followers and, consequently, a small number of seats in parliament. Therefore, since 2018, after the last presidential election, the National Union Party has been implementing a series of reforms to expand its electorate, aiming to become a universal party to attract voters from different social strata with different political views. Now, for example, the

³⁰ Députés non-inscrits. Assemblée Nationale. 2021. Available: <https://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/15/les-groupes-politiques/deputes-non-inscrits>.

³¹ Le Rassemblement national à la recherche des militants perdus. l'Opinion. 2021. Available: <https://www.lopinion.fr/politique/le-rassemblement-national-a-la-recherche-des-militants-perdus>.

National Union Party is moving away from acute Euroscepticism and calls to leave the euro area (but retains criticism of the EU as a whole), still stands on firm positions in relation to immigrants, but in addition to these points, the party proposes projects to protect the rights of citizens, fight inequality, protect the environment, etc.³²

Apparently that is why opinion polls have shown an increase in M.Le Pen's popularity over a long period. At the same time, many researchers come to the conclusion that the reforms of the National Union Party are a façade, they change the rhetoric of the party without fundamentally changing the essence of the political program, which has now become more disguised [5:484]. So, A.S.Badaeva, PhD in Political Science, points out that the reforms did not change the right-wing essence of the party, but it became more attractive to the population, but not to the establishment and political institutions in general [3:28–82]. The same conclusion is true for M.Le Pen herself, a group of experts in the field of philology from MGIMO conducted a study of the transformation of the discourse of the National Union Party, according to which M.Le Pen is described as a “typical populist politician” who uses the “opacity technique”, allowing different interpretations of her statements [10:93].

At the same time, in the last year, M.Le Pen's position has become more complicated when the ultra-right publicist E.Zemmour whose statements sometimes shock France enters the French political scene, as a result of which the most radical followers of the National Union Party move to the side of E.Zemmour. Head of the Center for Ethnopolitical Studies of the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences P.V.Oskolkov notes that this situation is forcing M.Le Pen to expand her electorate, including outside France, by strengthening support from other ultra-right European parties [9:75].

Today, against the backdrop of the pandemic, M.Le Pen, of course, never misses the opportunity to increase her popularity, blaming E.Macron, the French government and the presidential party Republic Forward! for all issues related to crisis management. So, as early as in July 2020, the National Union Party published a 168-page book called “The Black Book of Coronavirus. From the fiasco to the abyss” [16], whose task, as stated, is to comprehend the passing period and search for truth and lies in certain actions of the executive branch. The first part of the book is devoted to a general overview of the situation through the prism of criticism from the National Union Party and M.Le Pen herself. For example, the authors of the book believe that E.Macron, describing the beginning of the pandemic with the phrase “We are at war”, sought to create for himself the image of the “Father of the Nation”, thanks to whom France would emerge from the crisis, which implied his sole actions and the growth of his personal popularity and authority [16]. National Union Party, in its turn, insists that such crises require democratic solutions, in which the entire population, and not only the Council for Health Protection headed by E.Macron, will participate [16]. However, as mentioned earlier, one of the advantages of the Council for the Protection of Health is the speed of decision-making, which the French

³² Publications thématiques. Rassemblement National. 2022. Available: <https://rassemblementnational.fr/publications-thematiques/>.

parliament cannot boast of and which is essential in such a critical period. Therefore, the claim of a greater efficiency of parliament is questionable.

The second part of the report, titled "Managing the COVID-19 Pandemic. Chronology of the fiasco" contains a chronology of key events with quotes from the executive branch and various officials on 11 topics that the National Union Party considers the failure of Macron's crisis management. The 11 topics include the holding of the first round of the municipal elections in Paris in March 2020, the party's doubts about the effectiveness of wearing medical masks and the use of certain methods of treating coronavirus, criticism of the holding of a number of public events in the spring of 2020, etc. In the context of municipal elections, it is interesting to add that, as noted by A.S.Badaeva, M.Le Pen was actively holding her pre-electoral campaign in March 2020, and only the day after the elections she began to condemn the refusal to postpone them, and the National Union Party began to distribute leaflets with the text "Coronavirus: the government knew, but did nothing!" [3:99]. In general, this work is based on the main belief of the party and M.Le Pen herself about the epidemiological crisis: "The economic crisis that France has been facing for a long period originates in an unprecedented health crisis, exacerbated by a deep political crisis. The combination of these three crises, first of all, revealed the scope of France's decline" [16].

M.Le Pen also often speaks about some of the specific actions of E.Macron in the framework of the pandemic crisis management. One striking example was the reaction of the leader of the National Union Party to the vaccination campaign, which she called "Macron's Waterloo"³³. In this context, M.Le Pen considers the president's plans for vaccination a failure, since France failed to reach the planned percentage of the vaccinated population by the spring of 2021. It is worth noting that M.Le Pen also opposes compulsory vaccination, but does not offer other options for developing herd immunity, which was considered a key factor essential to stop the pandemic. In addition, France still managed to complete the vaccination plan by October 2021³⁴. Apparently, considering the regular demonstrations against sanitary passes and compulsory vaccination, the position of M.Le Pen actually does some good to her popularity and the expansion of the electorate, since completely different segments of the population with different political views oppose compulsory vaccination.

M.Le Pen also accused the French government of inaction during the start of the pandemic. So, according to her, if she was the president of the republic, she would have distributed a protective mask to each Frenchman on state funds, and not municipal ones. The French government had to purchase or produce more than 60 million masks amid their acute shortage throughout the EU. Another relevant topic for all European right-wing populists, according to P.V.Oskolkov, was the link of the pandemic to the problem of immigration. P.V.Oskolkov, referring to the statement of the British political scientist

³³ Marine Le Pen sur Twitter. Twitter. 2021. Available: https://twitter.com/mlp_officiel/status/1377331394351800321.

³⁴ Informations Covid-19. Gouvernement.fr, 2021. Available: <https://www.gouvernement.fr/info-coronavirus/carte-et-donnees>.

M. Pagliarello ("If before, a migrant was the enemy, now the enemy is a migrant who has coronavirus") highlights the same rhetoric from M. Le Pen [8:2].

A similar position is taken by some other experts who cite the National Union Party's proposal to temporarily lift the moratorium on the forced labor of prisoners for the production of masks [1:25]. In this proposal, the party condemns the government's decision to temporarily clear temporary detention facilities, where there are a lot of immigrants due to the increased threat of coronavirus infection in such institutions. Indeed, as it turned out, the far-right positions of the party regarding immigrants fit perfectly into the pandemic time, which presents new reasons for anti-immigrant statements.

In general, the position and proposals of the National Union Party headed by M. Le Pen are largely based on criticism of decisions already taken, and the party does not propose a specific program of actions against the pandemic that could be adopted now or in the near future to reduce the incidence of coronavirus and revive the country in the post-pandemic era. A similar situation happens with many other political parties in France; this is probably why, according to a poll of January 7, 2022, 57% of the French population responded that none of the presented presidential candidates would have coped with the pandemic better than E. Macron³⁵. It can also be added that M. Le Pen, being in sharp opposition to E. Macron, managed to strengthen her position due to other political events that have been discussed earlier.

So, M. Le Pen openly supported the letter of the generals in the spring of 2021, as it perfectly illustrates the ideas of the National Union Party. Furthermore, Yu. I. Rubinsky notes that the unpopularity of the socio-economic reforms of E. Macron and the growing protest moods amid them led to an increase of the electorate of M. Le Pen owing to the inclusion of a significant part of the «people's» electorate, who previously voted for the communists or socialists [12:3].

However, what is the probability that M. Le Pen will reach the second round, or will there be another candidate instead? French law sets out fairly strict requirements for a candidate to be admitted to the first round of elections: a candidate must obtain 500 signatures from officials at various levels, taking into account geographical diversity³⁶. This requirement aims to significantly reduce the number of candidates admitted to the elections. Therefore, out of more than 30 initial candidates, only 12 people were admitted to the elections, according to the final list of candidates published on March 7, 2022 by the French Constitutional Council³⁷. At the moment, all the candidates presented can be roughly divided into the following groups: the right and the left, and among the left, the

³⁵ Les Français et les opposants à Emmanuel Macron dans le cadre de l'élection présidentielle de 2022. Ifop. 2022. Available: <https://www.ifop.com/publication/les-francais-et-les-opposants-a-emmanuel-macron-dans-le-cadre-de-lelection-presidentielle-de-2022/>.

³⁶ Élection présidentielle: les règles pour les parrainages des candidats. Vie publique. 2021. Available: <https://www.vie-publique.fr/eclairage/23872-parrainage-des-candidats-la-presidentielle-les-500-signatures> (Retrieved: 01.11.2021).

³⁷ Présidentielle 2022. Qui sont les candidats déclarés et pressentis. Le Monde. 2022. Available: https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2021/06/02/presidentielle-2022-qui-sont-les-candidats-declares-et-presentis_6082545_4355770.html.

“greens” stand out. For a long time, Xavier Bertan, Valerie Pécresse and Michel Barnier³⁸ were in the lead among the right-wing candidates.

Later, far-right publicist Eric Zemmour joined the race, and the polls began to show different results for the combination of candidates for second-third places in the first round: often M. Le Pen comes in second place, but in some cases there is a razor-thin gap from the third place. So, in the early autumn of 2021, E. Zemmour began to gain popularity, while at the beginning of the year his participation in the elections was not even contemplated. Also in December 2021, V. Pécresse unexpectedly won the Republican primaries, as a result of which her rating skyrocketed, and she began to take second place after E. Macron, overtaking M. Le Pen³⁹. Nevertheless, by mid-January 2022, M. Le Pen was able to regain lost ground and caught up with V. Pécresse. Some French political scientists explain this by the fact that V. Pécresse was able to unite only right-wing forces around her, remaining an unattractive candidate for leftists and centrists, while people with different political views⁴⁰ cast their votes for the leader of the National Union Party. As a result, only V. Pécresse will represent the right-wingers in the elections, while the ultra-rightists will be represented by M. Le Pen, E. Zemmour and N. Dupont-Aignan, who announced his candidacy for president back in September 2020, but today in the first round of elections he would have got only 2% of the French votes⁴¹, so his candidacy may not be an option.

The Greens held their primaries in September 2021, as a result of which Yannick Jadot, a member of the Europe – Ecology – the Greens party⁴², was chosen as the main candidate from this political branch. At the same time, Antoine Waechter, another “green” candidate, decided to participate in the elections, despite the results of the past primaries, as a result of which he was unable to collect the required number of signatures and was not allowed to participate in the elections. Nevertheless, the situation around the rest of the left candidates remained unclear for a long time, the political movement was represented by 9 candidates, and Christiane Taubira won the “People’s Primary”. However, as early as in March, she announced the withdrawal of her candidacy due to the impossibility of collecting 500 signatures⁴³. Then the team of People’s Primary single-handedly, not paying attention

38 Sondage Ifop: Pécresse, Bertrand, Barnier... duels dans l’opinion. Paris Match. 2021. Available: <https://www.parismatch.com/Actu/Politique/Sondage-Ifop-Pecresse-Bertrand-Barnier-duels-dans-l-opinion-1756762>.

39 Valérie Pécresse, première femme investie par la droite pour la présidentielle. Le Monde. 2021. Available: https://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2022/article/2021/12/04/election-presidentielle-2022-valerie-pecresse-premiere-femme-du-parti-les-republicains-candidate-a-l-elysee_6104724_6059010.html.

40 Valérie Pécresse peine à donner un second souffle à sa campagne. L’OBS. 2022. Available: <https://www.nouvelobs.com/election-presidentielle-2022/20220112.OBS53122/valerie-pecresse-peine-a-donner-un-second-souffle-a-sa-campagne.html>.

41 Présidentielle 2022. Ifop. 2022. Available: <https://www.ifop.com/presidentielle-2022/> (Retrieved: 05.04.2022).

42 Présidentielle 2022. Qui sont les candidats déclarés et pressentis. Le Monde. 2022. Available: https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2021/06/02/presidentielle-2022-qui-sont-les-candidats-declares-et-presentis_6082545_4355770.html.

43 Présidentielle: la Primaire populaire «présente ses excuses» à ses «soutiens», après son choix controversé de soutenir Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Franceinfo. 2022. Available: https://www.francetvinfo.fr/elections/presidentielle-la-primaire-populaire-presente-ses-excuses-a-ses-soutiens-apres-son-choix-controverse-de-soutenir-jean-luc-melenchon_5017421.html.

to the will of the voters, announced Jean-Luc Mélenchon, a member of the ultra-left party France Unbowed, as the only candidate from the left-wing. It is interesting to note that the candidacy of J.-L.Mélenchon was just as controversial as M.Le Pen, since both candidates represented radical forces, often characterized as semi-mystical. As a consequence, the decision of the left caused a wave of indignation among voters and, probably, further split this political wing. The left are represented by four more candidates, however, none but J.-L.Mélenchon, can come close to the most popular trio⁴⁴.

In the context of the pre-election situation, it is important to note how the current French president reacted to the events in Ukraine and how this affected his rating. E.Macron has taken a fairly active position since the beginning of March this year, trying to become a mediator between the parties to the conflict, the French president frequently made telephone calls to the leaders of various states on this matter, and especially to V.Putin and V.Zelensky. In the case of the upcoming elections, attention is drawn to the fact that during these negotiations the personal photographer of the leader of the French Republic is invited, and then pictures are circulated in the media, where E.Macron is extremely annoyed and agitated about everything that is happening.

As a result, one might get the impression that the purpose of these actions is to increase the rating in the run-up to the elections. Indeed, by mid-March, more than 31% of the population was going to vote for E.Macron in the first round, and these figures are comparable only with the pre-pandemic period⁴⁵. M.Le Pen, in her turn, on the contrary, lost more than 10 points⁴⁶, which can be explained by the cooperation of the National Union Party with the United Russia and the calls of M.Le Pen's party to normalize relations with Russia, which were characteristic of her party over a long period. Later, information appeared that M.Le Pen ordered the local branches of her party to destroy all copies of the previously distributed election brochure, on one of the pages of which there was a photograph of the leader of the National Union Party and the President of Russia V.Putin, however, M.Le Pen refuted this information⁴⁷.

Nevertheless, the impact of the Ukrainian events turned out to be short-lived, both for E.Macron and M.Le Pen. E. Macron lost points received as a result of his series of telephone conversations. This can probably be explained by the fact that the French population began to feel the effect of the sanctions against Russia, which lead to higher fuel prices, which were already a painful topic for French society after the yellow vests movement. As a result, the most popular scenario for the second round of the presidential elections at the beginning of April 2022 is still the Macron-Le Pen standoff, since, according

44 Sondage sur la présidentielle 2022: 1er tour, 2e tour... Le Pen peut battre Macron. Linternaute. 2022. Available: <https://www.linternaute.com/actualite/politique/2575740-sondages-sur-la-presidentielle-2022-1er-tour-2e-tour-dernier-sondage-et-compilation-des-enquetes-05-04/>.

45 Sondage présidentielle 2022: notre baromètre quotidien. Le Parisien. 2022. Available: <https://www.leparisien.fr/elections/presidentielle/sondage-presidentielle-2022-decouvrez-notre-barometre-quotidien-24-03-2022-NRS4DWMSJ5CIFI3VTXIZ7SXZKU.php>.

46 Ibid

47 French far-right leader Marine Le Pen forced to defend Putin links. The Guardian. 2022. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/02/french-far-right-leader-marine-le-pen-forced-to-defend-putin-links>.

to public opinion surveys of April 5, 2022, in the first round 26.5% will vote for the current president, 23% will vote for M.Le Pen, the third place will be taken by Jean-Luc Mélenchon with 17% of the vote, and É.Zemmour shares fourth place with V.Pécresse – 9.5% of the vote each⁴⁸.

In general, it can be noted that E.Macron and M.Le Pen are leading in such polls throughout the year, with a constant change in candidates for the other places. Therefore, it is likely that whatever happens and whatever ideas the National Union Party suggest, in the second round of the presidential elections in 2022 we will see a repetition of the duel between M.Le Pen and E.Macron in 2017. You can also notice another important point, after E. Macron, two candidates from radical parties are in the lead, which has never happened before and which may pose a certain threat. This fact can be explained by the events that took place during the presidency of E.Macron: the rise of fuel prices in 2018 and subsequent quarantine restrictions hit agricultural and industrial workers, as well as the less well-off population; amid this, ambiguous reforms took place, because of which the current president began to be considered the “president for the rich”; then the sanctions against Russia once again led to an increase in fuel prices, in which these categories of the population blame the president; as a result, not only far-right, but also far-left ideas are gaining popularity in French society.

Conclusions

Thus, having analyzed the impact of actions against the coronavirus pandemic on the rating of E.Macron, as well as on the basis of the analysis of the Macron and Le Pen standoff, the following conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, some decisions of the president, and in particular the refusal to introduce a third lockdown at the end of January 2021, did have a negative impact on his support and the degree of public confidence in the entire government. Macron, nevertheless, announced his participation in the presidential elections, but did it rather late; the reasons were related to the beginning of the fifth wave of the spread of coronavirus infection, which is several times larger than the previous ones, and to the desire of the current president to additionally attract attention and choose the “right moment”. Secondly, in comparison with the yellow vests movement and the events of August 2017, the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on Macron’s rating was not so significant. M.Le Pen, in her turn, does not miss the opportunity to profit politically from the president’s mistakes: she regularly sharply criticizes his actions, opposes compulsory vaccination and supports protests on this basis, without, however, offering qualitatively new options for combating the pandemic and the country’s recovery from the crisis. Thirdly, the factors already mentioned and the subsequent actions of the president in this area are unlikely to play a key role in the presidential elections, given that M.Le Pen and E.Macron are likely to get into the second round. In this case, the victory of E.Macron

will be largely due to his confrontation with M.Le Pen. Although, according to opinion polls, the right-wing leader has practically no chance of getting a presidential mandate, since if not E.Macron, but other candidates from the top five most popular candidates enter the second round, there is a high probability of repeating the scenario of 2002 and 2017. Consequently, today E.Macron has the highest probability of winning and being re-elected for a second presidential term, despite a number of controversial decisions he made during the pandemic. At the same time, for M.Le Pen, the pandemic has become the topic, thanks to which she was able to expand her electorate by including various sectors of society. However, just criticizing the president during the pandemic is still not enough for the leader of the National Union Party to have a good chance of winning the presidential election. E.Macron, in his turn, continues to make attempts to use the military situation in Ukraine to increase his ratings, but so far the positive result is of a short-term nature, and his gap with M.Le Pen has narrowed again.

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