

# Could Popular Protectionist Policies in France Eventually Lead to “Frexit”?

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*The majority of French people say they are in favor of protectionism, according to the [latest OpinionWay poll](#) by Le Printemps de l'Économie and Insee U. In fact, the figure has risen sharply since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and the European Union's weak response to external threats like Turkey. This is a fundamental trend that could lead to a referendum on France's exit from the European Union.*

According to OpinionWay polls, the share of French people in favor of protectionism has gone from 51% in March to 60% in September. The survey confirms the desire for protectionism in France, which has only been reinforced since the pandemic began. The survey shows that 60% of the French people questioned consider globalization as “a threat to France” and 65% believe that “France must protect itself more from the world today,” a level never observed since polling began.

In the event of a major crisis, a country will first and foremost try to protect and supply its own population, even if it comes to the detriment of others. This was seen all across the European Union in the first months of the pandemic when most member states abandoned inter-European solidarity to the detriment of other member states. For example, in March, Germany banned the export of protective medical equipment at a time when France did not have enough.

As popularity for protectionism is increasing in France, according to the OpinionWay survey, support for free trade went down from 46% to 35%. Supporters of free trade try to pass off protectionism as authoritarianism and isolationism. However, during the Trente Glorieuses (The Glorious Thirty), which between 1945-1975 saw unprecedented economic growth and development in France, trade was carried out in a fair framework which limited distorted competition, unlike what happens with free trade.

The polls also show that the tide is turning for 18-24-year old's, “traditionally known to be in favor of opening up to the world,” as Pierre-Pascal Boulanger, president and founder of Printemps, highlighted in the La Tribune article. “The gaps are narrowing sharply since now 44% of very young people are in favor of protectionism against 37% in March.”

Therefore, for all the rhetoric of European sovereignty by French **President Emmanuel Macron**, it means absolutely nothing as sovereignty can only be national. This year alone we saw Italy abandoned by its partners at the peak of the pandemic, while European Union member states still refuse to pass sanctions against Turkey despite its violations of Greek and Cypriot sovereignty, and constant threats of war.

Any European protectionist inclination is directly undermined by national interests. France is

now beginning to prioritize its national interests over that of the European Union, especially with the Minister of the Economy, Bruno Le Maire, suggesting an implementation of a European carbon tax at its borders, something that Paris considers essential but does not please Berlin.

The same thing could be seen concerning the taxation of GAFAM [Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple and Microsoft]. The subject has been on the table for years but Germany is blocking taxes against GAFAM because the U.S. is its major trading partner and Berlin is afraid that Washington will retaliate by taxing imported vehicles which would hurt the German economy.

An Elabe poll released on February 12 showed that 80% of the French people questioned were opposed to a new duel between Macron and opposition leader Marine Le Pen in the 2022 elections. However, recent opinion polls show that the two candidates are indeed neck-to-neck and marginally ahead of other opponents. However, the European question encompasses all political and economic dimensions and must be put at the center of discussions. The European question goes beyond the left-right divide and a referendum on France's exit from the European Union may be at the heart of the political debate. It will blur the ideological divides as people from different political positions would campaign for a "yes" or "no" vote, as we saw with Brexit.

Nigel Farage, leader of the Brexit Party and considered the great architect of the UK's exit from the European Union, has never won the general elections. But he put such pressure to obtain a referendum and succeeded in creating a real debate on the question of sovereignty and protectionism.

The Brexit referendum has shown that it is possible. If a similar debate can get into the French spotlight, strong Frexit sentiment can build off the back of increasing popularity in protectionist policies. The French in 2005 voted against the treaty to establish a European constitution despite all predictions it would be unanimously passed. Although detached from the European Union, the French also withdrew from NATO for several decades, demonstrating there is a high sense of independence and sovereignty in France.

With Brussels unwilling to take a strong position against external threats like Turkey and/or showing a lack of solidarity when the pandemic was spreading across the continent, France's possible exit from the European Union can build momentum and popularity.

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