

Macron is correct: even at the heart of Europe the EU has a serious image problem



*Emmanuel Macron's words on Sunday morning regarding the result of a hypothetical 'Frexit' referendum shouldn't come as a surprise, writes **Joseph Downing (CNRS Aix-Marseille Université)**. Whilst located at the heart of Europe, France has a serious Euroscepticism problem. This, however, does not mean that it is actually heading for a 'Frexit', he cautions.*

Britain has often been framed as the Eurosceptic outsider, a somewhat provincial island nation nostalgic for empire, and juxtaposed with an otherwise Europhile continent standing shoulder to shoulder in ever closer integration. Nowhere is this trope of the stereotype Europhile nation so repeated, as it is with France. Not only is France presented as a lynchpin of the Franco-German alliance and as one of the central pillars of the contemporary European project, but as historically central to the very idea of Europe, founded on notions of individual freedoms, democracy and liberty.

That is why Emmanuel Macron surprised many Sunday morning when he said that if France had a 'Frexit' referendum, it would have had the same result as Brexit, with [French votes wanting to leave the EU](#). How could France's centrist leader, so vital in France's renewed interest in foreign policy both near and far, possibly suggest that the country would vote for 'Frexit'? This should not be such a big surprise, however, because looking into the polls on Euroscepticism in France and the recent brutal election campaign demonstrate that France has a serious Euroscepticism problem. In France, a country traditionally protective of its generous social welfare and solid worker's rights, the European project has a serious image problem.

Macrons remarks were certainly not a surprise for me. Having spent a lot of time in France in the past decade conducting [research on marginalised communities](#), to hear that France is deeply Eurosceptic was somewhat old news. During this research, I have come across deep-rooted mistrust towards many aspects of the European project from both those on the left and right of French politics. I was even congratulated profusely by passers-by when I was living and working in the southern city of Marseille the day after the Brexit result was announced.



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Examining the most recent polls by [Pew research](#) showed that France was the second most Eurosceptic country in the EU, beaten only by austerity-ravaged Greece that has been brought to its knees by European enforced austerity. In fact, in the poll France was even ranked as more Eurosceptic than the UK, having 61% of the population having unfavourable views of the EU compared with only 48% for the soon-to-be-gone UK. While this poll data is new, these sentiments are not, which was evidenced by the constant reference to the need to at least reform France's EU membership terms throughout the last election.

Marine Le Pen, the far-right leader of the National Front who lost to Macron in the final poll by a landslide, was the most vocal critic of the EU, promising France a 'Frexit' referendum on membership if she won. She did not win, however, but this sentiment was echoed across the political spectrum. The far left leader, Jean Luc Melanchon ran on a Eurosceptic platform which promised not to leave the block, but to run a policy of '[unilateral disobedience](#)' as a means to renegotiate the terms of EU treaties. In Marseille, where I live, Melanchon was extremely popular and in this respect, his EU policies summed up the kinds of views I hear most often expressed in anti-EU circles. These are that the EU is not concerned with improving people's social welfare and worker rights, but are rather interested in impoverishing workers and pushing neo-liberal economic agendas on European countries that have traditionally had good welfare protection. In particular, Greece is frequently referenced as evidence that the EU puts the welfare of those that have, over those that have not.

Those from France's large ethnic minority communities, however, see the EU as important in tackling the domestic discrimination and social problems they face that the French state does little about. At the same time, even in business circles, it was repeated to me that the bureaucratic inefficiencies experienced in France were only multiplied by EU membership and the last thing that a country as bureaucratic as France needed was another set of civil servants, this time far away in Brussels, to contend with.

While these criticisms have become common currency in a wide range of political circles across the channel this does not mean that France is heading for a 'Frexit', however. What this does demonstrate is that even at the centre of the European project, 'Europe' has a serious image problem. Brexit demonstrates that politically it matters less how accurate people's perceptions of European governance actually are, but more that they have overwhelmingly negative perceptions in the first place. Thus, the EU needs to articulate its message in far more accessible ways, and needs to be bolder in blowing the trumpet of its many achievements. This is the kind of EU that Macron wants France to take a leading role in, and only time will tell if he can convince those that so vividly expressed their Euroscepticism to me in France's oldest city.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSE Brexit, nor of the London School of Economics.

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