

Nothing to Fear but Fear Itself? France Case Study

- New research from the Jacques Delors Institute (France), as part of a Demos (UK) cross-European project, reveals France is gripped by a sense of fear, anger and precariousness.
- A large majority of citizens believe a major terrorist attack, another financial crisis, or the election of a far-right government, are likely to occur in the near future, and these multiple threats are amplifying negative feelings towards both national and EU governments.
- There are split narratives about the Front National; while an overall majority of the French see the party as 'racist' and 'authoritarian', significant minorities also regard it and its leader Marine Le Pen as 'realists' and 'strong'.
- Almost half of French citizens expect that the upcoming 2017 Presidential Elections will be dominated by tactical negative voting - in which they will need to vote to prevent another candidate winning.

This new research conducted by the Jacques Delors Institute (France) for a cross-European project on fear and populism in Europe led by Demos (UK) shows that French citizens are suffering from a critical level of economic, social and political insecurity.

This 'French malaise' has entrenched a sense of pessimism about the country's future, with:

- 80% believing a major terrorist attack is likely to happen in the next six months;
- 70% believing a major financial crisis is likely in the next two years;
- 53% thinking France's fortunes will further reduce in the coming 12 months;
- Over half believing a far-right leader will come to power.

The research also demonstrates that France is experiencing a social and cultural crisis, with French citizens much more likely than Germans, Spaniards, Poles, Swedes or the British to express negative opinions on issues such as globalisation and ethnic diversity. Of the six countries studied as part of this project, France holds the most negative view of globalisation, with 50% believing a more interconnected world has had a negative impact on France, compared with 39% who see the effect as positive. These results were unique to France: in no other country studied did negative opinions outweigh positive ones.

This malaise should be nuanced when looking at the overall mind-set in France since the end of the *Trente Glorieuses*. It is well-known that French political temperament has systematically been eroded by a certain declinist attitude or 'french-bashing'. The analysis by the Jacques Delors Institute suggests that this should be analysed as the logical consequence for countries with a marked historical self-consciousness. In a new bestseller published in September 2016, with the self-explanatory title *Pathologies Françaises*, Alain Duhamel updates this thesis and explores the idea that it is precisely this historical notion of France that seems to have encapsulated the country in its own past and memory, multiplying the insecurities and the rise of certain political fears.

The survey also demonstrated severe political disillusionment and an acute lack of trust in both French and European political institutions, with 8 in 10 French citizens holding low trust in their own Government at the EU Commission and Parliament. This appears likely to manifest in the upcoming 2017 Presidential Elections, as almost half of French citizens now believe voting choices will be made to “prevent the election of a candidate who would be dangerous for France”, rather than making a positive choice in favour of a candidate with a hopeful message.

The rise of the Front National appears not only to be a reflection of citizens’ fears, but also the expression of their anger towards the political system. French perceptions of Marine Le Pen and her Front National party appear to be complex and mixed: substantial minorities associate the Party with ‘racism (36%), ‘Islamophobia’ (27%) and ‘authoritarianism’ (24%), and yet 24% see it as defined by its ‘realism’. Le Pen is seen as a ‘strong leader’ by 27% of citizens, but overall, the French tend to favour those who are willing to compromise (42%) over those who demonstrate ‘strength’ and ‘imposition’ (26%).

Despite increasingly hostile rhetoric from the Front National, France is still attached to its membership of the European Union, with only 22% of citizens expressing a desire to leave. What’s more, reducing EU integration was not seen as a factor that could be decisive in reducing support for the Front National (see page 22).

The study therefore concludes that the nature of the crisis France is experiencing is specific to its national context, and not reflective of a broader British-style Europhobia, but rather a collapse of political leadership and successive years of poor economic growth manifesting in rising uncertainty about France’s place in a globalised world.

Commenting on the findings, Yves Bertoncini, Director of the Jacques Delors Institute, said:

“On balance, the French perceive globalisation in a positive way for Europe, in a positive way – but less so – for themselves and for their own region, and in a distinctly negative way for France. This curious ‘ranking’ of the winners and losers of globalisation supports the hypothesis that there is a certain defeatism at national level and the fear of a collective decline in status. Is globalisation perceived as incompatible with the nation-state in France?”

Media Contact

Alex Porter, Demos (UK)

Alex.porter@demos.co.uk

Tel. dir. +44 20 7367 4200

Mobile: +44 7969 326 069

Nicolo Conti, Jacques Delors Institute (France)

conti@delorsinstitute.eu

Tel. dir. + 33 1 44 58 97 81

Mobile: +33 6 84 95 39 48

Notes to Editors

Demos is Britain’s leading cross-party think tank: an independent, educational charity, which produces original and innovative research. Visit: demos.co.uk

The Jacques Delors Institute is a leading French think tank, working to understand issues affecting European integration. Visit: delorsinstitute.eu

This project was supported by the Open Societies Foundation.

The full research, methodology and an executive summary are available to download [here](#).

This study was part of a major pan-European research project from the UK-based think tank, Demos, which sought to capture how an emerging culture and politics of fear is gripping the European Union as a whole, and its unique manifestations within member states. The project addressed five levels of impacts: party politics, public policy, social cohesion and integration, media rhetoric, citizens and identity.

Demos undertook extensive pan-European research, as well as conducting specific analysis on the United Kingdom's vote to leave the European Union, and commissioned exclusive new academic research within five other member states to provide a snapshot of the 'flash-points of fear' on the ground in Germany, France, Spain, Poland and Sweden. The project was supported by two high-level workshops in Brussels, bringing together thought leaders from across the European Union, to map local level impacts and devise solutions at EU, national and grassroots levels.