The new Europhiles

Who loves EU, baby

BERLIN

Among young, well-educated urbanites, nationalism is provoking a backlash

"AU NOM *de l'amitié*" ("In the name of friendship"), proclaimed banners at the weekly Pulse of Europe demonstration in a Berlin square, a week before France's presidential election. Edith Piaf songs burbled from giant speakers. Amid a sea of blue-and-yellow European Union flags, the 1,500 marchers gushed about the European project. "I love Europe, it's my home," said Oli. "I want my children and grandchildren to experience, study and travel in Europe," added Sabine, who was attending her fifth Pulse of Europe event. Then they all belted out the "Ode to Joy", the EU's official anthem.

There is nothing novel about support for the EU. In most European countries the political mainstream backs the union and spouts nice words about continental collaboration. But lately something different has been going on: a surge, in certain quarters, of emotional, flag-waving, integrationist Europhilia. The Pulse of Europe, which started in Frankfurt in November and now holds regular rallies in some 120 cities across the continent, is one manifestation. Another is the success of a number of emphatically pro-European political outfits, the most striking example being Emmanuel Macron's victory in France.

Such political groups fall into three categories. The first consists of Mr Macron and Alexander van der Bellen, the former Green leader who became Austria's president in January. Both triumphed in two-round electoral systems in which the mainstream centre-right and centre-left candidates were knocked out, leaving a nationalist (Marine Le Pen in France, Norbert Hofer in Austria) to face a pro-European liberal. Neither Mr Macron nor Mr Van der Bellen won an unambiguous mandate; many of their voters simply opposed the far-right alternative. But both are part of "a steadily building trend of election victories for the idea of Europe", says Josef Lentsch, a political scientist in Vienna.

Second, in parliamentary systems pro-European parties have been making gains. At the Dutch election in March the two big winners were the liberal-federalist D66 party and GreenLeft, which rose from 8% to 12% and 2% to 9% respectively. "Being overtly pro-EU is no longer something to be ashamed of," says Michiel van Hulten of the London School of Economics.

Finland's most emphatically pro-EU party, the Green League, rose from its usual score of around 8% to 12% in local elections last month. In Sweden, the liberal Centre Party, which has recently sharpened its anti-nationalist identity, is polling near 12%, double its result in the last election. In Britain the Liberal Democrats have enjoyed a modest revival as anti-Brexiteers, moving into double digits in polls. Both Poland and Spain have spawned new parties that wear their pro-Europeanism on their sleeve: Nowoczesna, which soared last year before being consumed by scandal; and Ciudadanos, which has hit new poll highs of 17% in recent weeks.

The EUth of today

Third are extra-parliamentary campaign groups. Apart from Pulse of Europe, other movements have brought flag-waving pro-Europeans into the streets: in protests against the forced closure of the Central European University in Hungary; in rallies against the Eurosceptic government in Poland; and in the anti-Brexit movement in Britain.

Who is gravitating to this sort of politics? Supporters are often young, urban and well educated—the political wing of the "Erasmus generation" of cross-border European students. In Austria, for example, 58% of those aged under 29 backed Mr Van der Bellen. But Mr Macron's vote was evenly spread across age groups, and the Pulse of Europe crowds are similarly multi-generational. Ciudadanos voters are more likely to have degrees than supporters of any other Spanish party. In the Dutch election, if only university polling stations had counted, D66 and GreenLeft would have had a majority.

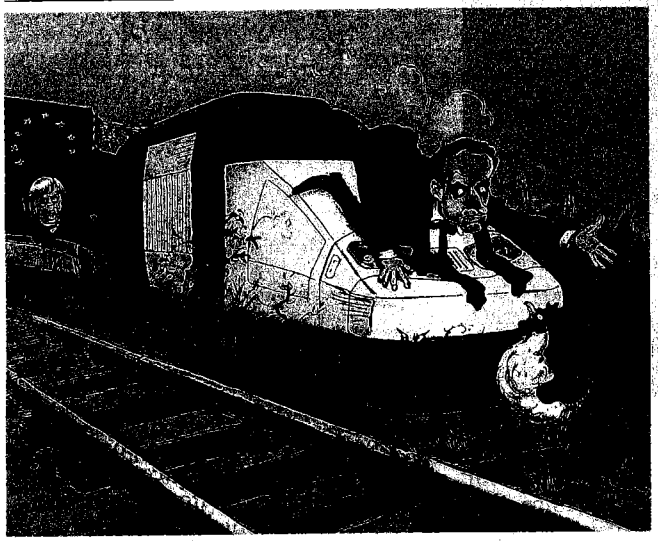
The new Europhilia is partly a backlash against the wave of nationalism evinced in the Brexit vote and Donald Trump's victory in America. There is also anger at mainstream parties who adopt nationalist and populist positions. In Sweden the Centre Party has pointedly attacked the centre-right Moderates for flirting with the far right. Mr Macron has attacked his own former party, the Socialists, for caving in to nationalist proposals to revoke the French citizenship of dual citizens convicted of terrorism. Jesse Klaver of GreenLeft urges fellow politicians: "Be pro-European...You can stop populism."

Asked about their success, Guillaume Liegey, one of the early brains behind Mr Macron's campaign, and Martin Radjaby, Mr Van der Bellen's campaign manager, offer similar recipes: sophisticated targeting of voters, door-to-door campaigning and a progressive sort of patriotism. Indeed, the Europhiles have learned some lessons from their populist nemeses. Like Ms Le Pen and Mr Hofer, they have adopted techniques from their counterparts in other countries, and ratcheted up pressure on mainstream parties to back their positions.

Even if small Europhile groups do not win elections, they can influence bigger parties. In Poland the Civic Platform (PO) party has moved into space opened up by Nowoczesna, adopting the EU as a symbol of opposition to the government. When Donald Tusk, European Council president and former PO leader, arrived in Warsaw on April 19th he was greeted at the train station by crowds brandishing EU flags. Martin Schulz, the centre-left candidate for German chancellor, has aligned himself with the Pulse of Europe movement. One lesson of Europe's populist wave is that small but emphatic groups can change the agenda. Along with Mr Macron's win, that should give Europhiles hope. ■

Charlemagne | Gathering steam

Can Emmanuel Macron revive the Franco-German engine?



LIKE all the best clichés, the notion that the European Union is driven by a Franco-German "locomotive" is grounded in truth. From the founding of the European Coal and Steel Community to the creation of the euro, almost all the signature projects of post-war Europe have emerged from Paris and Berlin. The compromises forged between two former foes with competing political and economic visions have proved powerful enough to bring much of the rest of the continent along with them. Lately, though, the French part of the engine has run out of steam, and the European train has been idling. Can Emmanuel Macron, the young reformer who won France's presidency wrapped in the EU flag, shunt it back on to the rails?

The grandest of Mr Macron's many ideas involve fixing what he calls the "half-pregnancy" of Europe's single currency. He wants intra-euro-zone transfers and investment, funded from a common budget and administered by fresh institutions like a finance ministry and parliament. But Germany has long looked askance at such *gouvernement économique*. As the two countries' economic performance has diverged, it has become ever harder for French ideas to find an audience in Berlin. In 2012 Mr Macron's newly minted predecessor (and former boss), François Hollande, took his anti-austerity campaign pledge to Angela Merkel and returned to Paris with a flea in his ear. Soon enough he was executing endless U-turns. He leaves office on May 14th with historically low approval ratings, an example of what not to do.

Mr Macron can expect a better hearing on his own visit to Berlin, due later this month. On two ground-softening trips to Germany earlier this year, he promised to tackle problems at home before making demands of his neighbours. "I propose to restore the credibility of France in the eyes of the Germans," he said in March. "We need it because the future of Europe is at stake." His priorities chime with time-worn German gripes: reinvigorating France's hidebound labour market (joblessness stands at 10%, well over twice the German rate) and shrinking its bloated state.

Mr Macron's campaign vows to shake up the more torpid parts of France's economy secured him a mandate to reform. But Germans have seen countless such French plans come and go. For all Mr Macron's fresh-faced appeal, he will have his work cut out in a country that is in a decidedly surly mood. The parliament that emerges after next month's legislative elections may not be eager to help the new president impose his will on France.

It is just as well that Mr Macron will face distractions at home, for Germany is gearing up for its own election in September, and events in France have begun to colour the campaign. Senior figures in Mrs Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU), such as Wolfgang Schäuble, the flinty finance minister, have already dismissed Mr Macron's euro-zone proposals. But their Social Democrat (SPD) coalition partners, backed by parts of the press, like Mr Macron's ideas to boost Europe's (and Germany's) woeful investment rate. A strong SPD showing in September might mean Mr Macron's proposals find friendlier ears in Berlin.

But the hype surrounding Mr Macron's extraordinary campaign has too quickly spilled into grand talk of a reinvention of the euro zone. There is little appetite anywhere in Europe for the treaty changes that a major currency revamp would require. In Berlin it is not only the coming election that stays politicians' hands. Many Germans think their contributions to euro-zone bail-outs over the years have shown plenty of solidarity already. Mr Schäuble's finance ministry bitterly resists anything that smacks of a "transfer union" or debt mutualisation. It will be hard enough for France to win German support on smaller matters, such as completing the EU's banking union. "I'm sceptical about institutional proposals," says Norbert Röttgen, a senior MP for the CDU. "I'd concentrate on practical steps that yield results."

Similar noises emerge from some voices close to Mr Macron. "Our first priority is to be pragmatic," says Sylvie Goulard, a French MEP tipped for a top job when the new president names his government next week. "Can you really explain to an unemployed man that it's time to change the euro-zone structure?" Both Mr Röttgen and Ms Goulard speak of deepening co-operation on security matters; some German officials acknowledge that broadening the conversation to defence might be the only way for them to move, eventually, on economics. Expect also joint proposals on advancing the EU's digital single market, one of Mr Macron's stated priorities for Europe.

All hail Emmangela

A renewed Franco-German partnership would leave Europe better placed to handle future crises. But it would also help relieve Germany of the burden of hegemony. Its officials are weary of explaining that they have no wish to lead alone (suggestions that Donald Trump's election left Mrs Merkel the ruler of the free world elicit universal eye-rolls in Berlin). With Italy flailing, Britain Brexiting and Poland in the grip of illiberal democracy, a restoration of the bond with France would come at an auspicious time for Germany. It would also weaken resistance in other EU countries that have grown resentful of its dominance.

That is good news for Germany—but Mr Macron may in time call Berlin's bluff. Germany has long said it will consent to reform in the euro zone if other countries get their houses in order first. That is precisely what Mr Macron has promised to do. In rejecting the far-right, anti-EU Marine Le Pen in favour of a pro-European dedicated to restoring his country's self-confidence and renewing ties with Germany, French voters could have been following a script written across the Rhine. That leaves Germany with a stake in Mr Macron's success, but also the obligation to give his ideas a hearing. Some of them will be uncomfortable. But if a little German self-examination is the price of Mr Macron's victory, Europe will be all the better for it. ■