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French public opinion

Morosity rules

The French are coming to resemble the southern Mediterranean in their views

May 18th 2013 | PARIS | From the print edition

TOGETHER, France and Germany are the founding fathers of the European Union and the euro zone's two biggest economies. But in the past few years, their economic divergence has driven them apart politically. GDP figures for the first quarter showed that France is back in recession—its third—whereas Germany has narrowly avoided one (see [article](http://www.economist.com/news/finance-and-economics/21578074-shrinking-output-may-prompt-european-central-bank-ease-further-recession) (<http://www.economist.com/news/finance-and-economics/21578074-shrinking-output-may-prompt-european-central-bank-ease-further-recession>)). France is running a large trade deficit, Germany a huge surplus. French unemployment, at 10.6%, is at a 14-year high; Germany's is close to a 23-year low.

Not surprisingly, public opinion is now also drifting apart. A survey released by the Pew Research Centre on May 14th found French attitudes on a broad set of issues no longer in tune with those of Germans. In 2007, 68% of Germans and 62% of the French were favourable to the EU. Today the German figure has dropped to 60%, but the French one is in free fall: only 41% are now favourable, less even than in Eurosceptic Britain and ahead only of Greece and the Czech Republic.

Growing disillusion with Europe is not the only point of Franco-German divergence. The French are far more morose than their neighbours across the Rhine. Although 57% of Germans think their country is heading in the right direction, only 19% of the French do. Just 9% of the French believe their economic conditions are good, compared with 75% of Germans. In this respect, France is more aligned with Spain (4%), Italy (3%) and Greece (1%). Fully 80% of the French are anxious about jobs, against only 28% of Germans. As the Pew study concludes, "The French public mood is now looking less like that in Germany and more like that in the southern peripheral nations of Spain, Italy and Greece".

A year after François Hollande's election as France's Socialist president, the Pew report offers little consolation. Only 33% of the French think he is doing a good job handling Europe's economic crisis,

against 74% of Germans who think Chancellor Angela Merkel is. In the same poll in 2012, even Mr Hollande's unpopular predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy, got a higher approval rating (56%) for dealing with the euro crisis. Once again, such *désamour* puts France closer to Italy (25%) and Spain (27%).

Such a shift in public opinion matches broader concerns about France beginning to resemble the euro-zone's rim, not its core. "Is France a peripheral country?" asked Jacob Funk Kirkegaard, of the Washington-based Peterson Institute for International Economics, recently. He notes that low yields on French sovereign bonds suggest that the markets still treat France as more like Germany, but he concludes that "France's inability to reform itself puts Europe at risk." François Fillon, Mr Sarkozy's former prime minister, told *L'Opinion*, a new French daily, this week that "France, which could have swung towards Germany and northern Europe, is instead swinging towards Spain and Italy."

Indeed, Mr Hollande has toyed with a southern euro-zone front as a political scheme to counterbalance Germany, and is under pressure even from some of his ministers to stand up more firmly to Mrs Merkel. Securing an extra two years from the European Commission to cut the French budget deficit to below 3% of GDP is seen in Paris as a triumph of efforts to combat austerity in Europe. But Mr Hollande is aware of the dangers of pursuing a "Club Med" strategy. By following public opinion and aligning itself too closely with Spain and Italy, France could end up, as one Elysée official puts it, merely looking like the "top of the second division".

From the print edition: Europe

