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**European
Briefing**

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French politics

- While the left dithers, the right and far right shape the mood

Across the western democracies, the centre of political gravity shifts erratically but inexorably to the right. Britain's Brexit vote caused a tilt to the right in Theresa May's cabinet and has been followed by the election of Donald Trump and a Republican Congress in America. This weekend, Austrians may elect a far-right president, while the centre-left Italian government could fall after this Sunday's constitutional referendum. In France, meanwhile, the centre-right Republican party has now selected the more conservative contender Francois Fillon as its presidential candidate in the 2017 contest that could end as a head-to-head with the far-right Front National's Marine Le Pen. It is a mistake to treat these developments as simply interchangeable. Every country has its own local political dynamics. Mr Fillon, for example, is routinely depicted as an admirer of Margaret Thatcher - a charge that will be trumpeted by opponents between now and April. But his focus on France's Catholic roots puts him in a long tradition of French conservatism which has no real equivalent in Britain. His politics are not the same as those of Mrs May, who is again sharply different from Mr Trump. The new Ukip leader Paul Nuttall, who took over from Nigel Farage yesterday, is not Britain's Ms Le Pen either. Nevertheless, these developments across the western world have significant ingredients in common and reflect an overlapping mood among western voters. These include job insecurity in the face of globalisation, hostility to migration, anger against urban elites, fear of terrorism, and in some cases a more indulgent stance towards Vladimir Putin's Russia. Mr Fillon, moreover, has rocketed into front-runner status to be France's next president without the media seeing him coming - another echo of the collective misreadings that marked both the referendum vote for Brexit and the Trump election win. Mr Fillon's rise sends a particularly resonant further signal. He spent the past three years touring France to listen to rightwing voters' concerns. He then harnessed this experience to a hardline campaign for a strict minimum level of immigration, the restoration of Catholic conservative values, an overhaul of labour laws and a big cut in public sector jobs. The result was that Mr Fillon swept to an overwhelming two-to-one victory over his chief rival, the more moderate Main Juppe, defeating him in 92 of France's 95 departments. Both men are former prime ministers, but it was Mr Juppe, not Mr Fillon, who was seen by voters as campaigning from within an establishment bubble. The loser's promises to "placate and reform" and promising a "happy identity" found few takers in a French nation that has failed to unify convincingly against either economic decline or radical terror. The ability of the centre-right to respond to and shape the world as it is evolving in 2016 contrasts with the inability of the centre-left to make matching responses. This failure is also simultaneously particular to individual countries and shared across borders. France's left politics provide a textbook example. With occasional exceptions, like Canada and Portugal, the centre-left has struggled to win recent elections on both sides of the Atlantic. France's left suffers from being part of that more general international difficulty to articulate an alternative that catches the popular mood and from being a particularly acute local example of that failure. France's socialists have little time to solve their problems before planned primaries in January. But the signs are not good. Francois Hollande has been neither a radical reformer nor a leftwing traditionalist. He has been indecisive and is increasingly the despair of both wings of his movement. He is now the least popular president since the fifth republic was formed. Polling suggests he will fail to get through the first round of the two-stage presidential election if he runs for a second term. Already, a spread of alternative candidates is emerging, from Jean-Luc Melenchon to the left of the socialists to Emmanuel Macron in the centre. At the weekend, prime minister Manuel Valls hinted at a run too. Mr Hollande may decide, even so, that Mr Fillon's success opens a space in which his own chances may improve. Yet any of them will struggle to unify a majority now. The danger is that the fragmentation and incoherence on the left are too deep. Yet without a credible candidate on the left, French voters will face a baleful choice between the mainstream right and the far right. That's a problem for France above all, but it reflects a much wider failure too.

Germany - Russian hackers disrupt election

The head of Germany's foreign intelligence service has warned that next year's general election could be targeted by Russian hackers intent on spreading misinformation and undermining the democratic process. Bruno Kahl, president of the Bundesnachrichtendienst, said there was evidence that cyber attacks were taking place "that have no purpose other than to elicit political uncertainty" "The perpetrators are interested in delegitimising the democratic process as such, regardless of who that ends up helping," he told the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in his first interview since his appointment five months ago. "We have indications that [the attacks] come from the Russian region. Being able to attribute it to a state agent is technically difficult but there is some evidence that this is at least tolerated or desired by the state." Kahl, who said Russia may have been behind attempts during the US presidential campaign to interfere with the vote, said the suspicion was that a large proportion of attacks were being carried out simply to demonstrate technical prowess. "The traces that are left behind in the Internet create an impression of someone wanting to demonstrate what they are capable of," he said. Kahl joins a range of leading voices in Germany who have expressed concerns over Russian interference, particularly through the spread of fake news stories. Hans-Georg Maassen, president of the domestic BfV intelligence agency, said in an interview that cyberspace had become "a place of hybrid warfare" in which Russia was a key player. "More recently, we see the willingness of Russian intelligence to carry out sabotage," he said. Maassen said Russian secret services had been carrying out attacks on computer systems in Germany which, as far as his agency had been able to ascertain, were "aimed at comprehensive strategic data gathering". Only when people were confronted with the fact the information they were receiving was untrue would "the toxic lies lose their effectiveness", he said. Hackers were said to have been behind attacks on Deutsche Telekom on Sunday and Monday that disabled Internet and phone access for almost a million customers in Germany. The company said the security breach was part of a worldwide attack on routers. Security experts said the hackers may have been Russian but they had no proof. The German chancellor, Angela Merkel, said yesterday she did not know who was responsible for the strike but "such cyber attacks ... are now part of daily life and we must learn to cope with them". "We have to inform people, and express our political convictions clearly," she said, calling on the population "not to allow themselves to be irritated" by rogue operations. "You just have to know that there's such a thing and learn to live with it."

Arne Schönbohm, president of the Federal Office for Information Security and known as Germany's "cyber sheriff", said the Deutsche Telekom attacks showed "to what extent cyber attacks can affect every citizen. We need to get used to the idea that in future attacks - comparable and far worse - will increasingly take place". In 2015, an attack on the Internet in the German parliament was blamed on Russian hackers by German intelligence. Russian officials have strenuously denied the accusations. Germany faces a heated election campaign next year, largely due to the pressure on Merkel over her liberal refugee policy, along with the rise of the rightwing populist party *Alternative für Deutschland*. Merkel has also warned that populists and social media platforms spreading propaganda were in danger of causing unprecedented damage to democracy. Speaking to the Bundestag, she said: "Today we have fake sites, bots, trolls - things that regenerate themselves, reinforcing opinions with algorithms, and we must learn how to deal with them."

German Unions - Thumbs down to digitalisation

The latest union survey of working life in Germany suggests a slight improvement overall. But it also finds that digitalisation has produced a range of negative effects. German union confederation the DGB has surveyed job quality since 2007 publishing an annual "good work index". It uses a detailed questionnaire covering 11 areas — ranging from the culture of the organisation to working time and income. Answers are given a value and used to calculate an overall index number. This year's score, based on 9,737 responses, is 63 out of 100. This is slightly up on 2015 when it was 62, and a significant improvement on the score of 58 in 2007, the first year of the index. This year's survey also asked about the impact of digitalisation.

It found that 82% of employees had seen their work affected by digitalisation, with the main impact coming through electronic communications, such as e-mail or smartphones. Almost half (46%) reported that their workload was greater as a result of digitalisation and, although a similar proportion (45%) said that it was unchanged, fewer than one in ten (9%) said their workload had lessened. More than half (56%) said that they were now more likely to be dealing with several things at the same time. And almost half (46%) said that monitoring of their work had increased. Although there were some positive results, with more respondents saying their work-life balance had improved rather than deteriorated, the overall results were concerning. Commenting on the report, DGB head Reiner Hoffmann, said: "Digitalisation needs rules so that technology serves people and not people technology."

BREXIT - EUROPEAN WORKS COUNCIL REPS

New figures from the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) suggest that the UK's decision to leave the EU may have less impact on European works councils (EWCs) than some have feared. There are 1,113 EWCs and similar bodies, covering most of Europe's larger companies, which allow workers' representatives from across Europe to meet regularly. Although they are not normally involved in negotiations, EWCs have EWC reps information and consultation rights. The ETUI figures, drawn from its EWC database, show that the vast majority of EWCs (78%) cover companies that have some UK activities, and that 10% of the companies with EWCs have their headquarters in the UK. The ETUI estimates that there are probably around 1,900 EWC reps from the UK. The position of these reps remains completely unchanged until the UK has withdrawn from the EU.

After that, their position will depend on the terms of the individual EWC agreements. The research, based on what happened before the UK was covered by the EWC directive in 1999, suggests that companies will wish to keep their existing structures after Brexit. It finds that half (51%) of UK-headquartered EWCs were set up pre-1999. In other words, they included UK staff in almost all cases, even though they were not obliged to do so at the time.

Holland - MPs pave way for partial ban on burqa and niqab

Dutch MPs have approved a limited ban in "face-covering clothing", including Islamic veils and robes such as the burqa and niqab. The legislation, backed by the 150-seat lower house, must be approved by the upper house of parliament before it is signed into law. Studies suggest that only a few hundred women in the Netherlands wear niqabs or full-face burqas, but successive governments have attempted to ban the garments, following the example of countries such as France and Belgium. The Dutch proposal, described by the government as "religion-neutral", does not go as far as a complete ban. It applies on public transport and in education and health institutions and government buildings. In a debate, the interior minister, Ronald Plasterk, said that in a free country people should be allowed to appear in public with their faces covered but that in government buildings, schools and hospitals people needed to be able to look each other in the face. The far-right politician Geert Wilders told AP the limited ban was "a step in the right direction" and said he would push for a full burqa ban. The maximum fine for breaching the ban, which also covers balaclavas and full-face helmets, is just over €400 (£340).