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INFO ROUTINE UKREP BRUSSELS, THE HAGUE, BONN, WASHINGTON  
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## THE FRENCH POLITICAL SCENE

### INTRODUCTION

1. YOU MAY FIND IT USEFUL TO HAVE A BRIEF ROUND-UP OF THE FRENCH POLITICAL SCENE, BEFORE THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL AT THE HAGUE.

### SUMMARY

2. SOME UNFAVOURABLE ECONOMIC TRENDS AND DISCOURAGING OPINION POLLS HAVE PROVOKED DISQUITE ON THE RIGHT. CHIRAC REMAINS FIRM AND REASSURING, BUT THERE IS A DEBATE BETWEEN THOSE WHO WANT THE GOVERNMENT TO PRESS ON ENERGETICALLY AND THOSE WHO WANT IT TO TRIM FOR EVENTUAL ELECTORAL REASONS. COHABITATION CONTINUES TO WORK RELATIVELY SMOOTHLY, ALTHOUGH WITH SOME SKIRMISHING OVER FOREIGN POLICY, NOT LEAST OVER THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL. THE SOCIALISTS ARE HOLDING A CONVENTION TO DISCUSS FUTURE STRATEGY.

### DETAIL

3. THE GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN GOING THROUGH A ROUGH PATCH. POST-ELECTION EUPHORIA HAS WANED AS MINISTERS AND THE NEW MAJORITY HAVE COME TO APPRECIATE THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEMS. RECENT ECONOMIC FORECASTS HAVE SUGGESTED THAT THINGS WILL GET WORSE BEFORE THEY GET BETTER, PARTICULARLY ON UNEMPLOYMENT, WHICH HAS PROMPTED FEARS OF LABOUR UNREST. OPINION POLLS INDICATE THAT CHIRAC HAS LOST GROUND AND THAT OPPOSITION TO THE GOVERNMENT'S POLICIES HAS GROWN, BUT THAT MITTERRAND IS NOW MORE POPULAR THAN SINCE THE EARLY MONTHS OF HIS PRESIDENCY.

4. CHIRAC AND HIS IMMEDIATE ENTOURAGE HAVE BEEN STEADYING THE TROOPS. THEY AFFECT TO BE UNCONCERNED BY THE POLLS: STRESS THAT RESTORING FRANCE'S FORTUNES WILL BE NEITHER QUICK NOR EASY: AND WARNED THAT THE NECESSARY POLICIES WILL NOT ALWAYS PROVE POPULAR. THEY ALSO INSIST THAT THE GOVERNMENT MUST FOLLOW A LONG-TERM STRATEGY IF IT IS TO SUCCEED IN ITS AIMS OF HIGHER GROWTH AND EMPLOYMENT. THEY SOUND TOUGH AND DETERMINED BUT THEIR ARGUMENTS HAVE NOT ENTIRELY MUFFLED THE DEBATE ON THE RIGHT BETWEEN THOSE WHO FAVOUR PRESSING AHEAD ENERGETICALLY WITH THE GOVERNMENT'S PROGRAMME AND THOSE WHO COUNSEL CAUTION WITH AN EYE TO THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS.

5. MEANWHILE COHABITATIONS BETWEEN THE PRESIDENT AND THE PRIME MINISTER HAS CONTINUED TO RUN RELATIVELY SMOOTHLY, ALTHOUGH IN RECENT DAYS CHIRAC SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN TRYING TO EMPHASISE HIS ROLE IN FOREIGN AFFAIRS AT THE EXPENSE OF MITTERRAND. MATIGNON HAS BEEN INSISTING THAT IT WILL BE CHIRAC WHO TAKES THE PRACTICAL DECISION AT THIS WEEK'S EUROPEAN COUNCIL, A VIEW CONTESTED BY THE ELYSEE WHO STRESS MITTERRAND'S ROLE AS THE SUPREME ARCHITECT OF EUROPEAN POLICY. A PRACTICAL ARRANGEMENT WILL PROBABLY BE FOUND AS IT WAS AT THE TOKYO SUMMIT, ALTHOUGH CHIRAC WILL WANT A MORE VISIBLE ROLE THAN HE GOT THEN. MEANWHILE THE RELEASE OF TWO OF THE FRENCH HOSTAGES IN LEBANON IS RATED A SUCCESS FOR THE GOVERNMENT AND MAY WELL INCREASE CHIRAC'S FOREIGN POLICY APPETITE. CONFIDENTIAL

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6. THE SOCIALISTS (PS) HAD DONE WHAT THEY CAN TO PLAY UPON THE STRAINS WITHIN THE MAJORITY, BUT NOT IN THE EXPECTATION OF AN EARLY END TO COHABITATION. NOR WOULD ITS DEMISE NECESSARILY BENEFIT THEM. MITTERRAND'S IMPROVED RATING MAINLY SEEMS TO REFLECT THE FACT THAT BECAUSE HE IS NOT GOVERNING, HE IS NOT HAVING TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR CONTROVERSIAL MEASURES. THERE IS NO EVIDENCE THAT THE LEFT HAS CLOSED THE 10 PERCENT GAP WITH THE RIGHT REVEALED IN THE MARCH ELECTIONS. DOUBTS ABOUT CHIRAC AND HIS POLICIES HAVE NOT SO FAR TRANSLATED INTO ANY OBVIOUS SURGE OF SUPPORT FOR THE PS.

7. AT THE PS NATIONAL CONVENTION NEXT WEEKEND BEHIND THE SCENES INTEREST WILL CENTRE ON WHETHER MITTERRAND WILL FORCE EARLY PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS, AND WHETHER HE WILL RUN AGAIN. NO ONE IS SURE, BUT NONE OF THE PS CONTENDERS FOR THE SUCCESSION IS TAKING ANY CHANCES THEY HAVE BEEN JOCKEYING FOR POSITIONS FOR MONTHS, AND THESE MANOEUVRES WILL CONTINUE AT THE CONVENTION. WITH THE ANIMOSITY BETWEEN ROCARD AND FABIUS GROWING, IT LOOKS AS IF ONLY ANOTHER MITTERRAND CANDIDACY CAN SPARE THE SOCIALISTS A BITTER SUCCESSION STRUGGLE. THAT WOULD BE QUITE A STRONG ARGUMENT, IF HE ACTUALLY NEEDED ANY CONVINCING.

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