



PISM

POLSKI INSTYTUT SPRAW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH
THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

No. 59/2024, 6 SEPTEMBER 2024 © PISM

SPOTLIGHT

Barnier Appointed France's New Prime Minister

Amanda Dziubińska

More than eight weeks following snap parliamentary elections, President Emmanuel Macron appointed Michel Barnier as prime minister on 5 September. Barnier is a politician from the centre-right Republican party, which is only the fifth-strongest political force in the National Assembly. Barnier is considered a skilled politician who can engage in dialogue and compromise, and with his extensive experience working in EU institutions he will be able to maintain France's strong position in the EU. The new prime minister's main challenge will be to garner broad and sustained political support for the government in the sharply divided National Assembly.

What determined Macron's choice?

After the leftist New Popular Front (NFP) bloc won the [National Assembly elections](#) and two weeks of negotiations, the left proposed Lucie Castets, finance director at Paris City Hall and a social activist, as a joint candidate for the office of prime minister. However, the NFP failed to win an absolute majority of seats in the chamber, risking a quick overthrow of the leftist government by the opposition. President Macron, whose sole authority is to appoint the prime minister, first delayed his choice by arguing France's hosting of the summer Olympics, then refused to appoint Castets and began extensive political consultations in search of a politician who would enjoy cross-party support. For Macron, an important criterion may also have been the political profile of a prime ministerial candidate who would calm financial markets' concerns about the state of the French economy and public spending, as well as worldview proximity with a potential head of government who would not reverse the president's flagship reforms, namely [raising the retirement age](#) or [changing immigration laws](#). Barnier's candidacy is likely to have the support of the right and centre. It has not been opposed by Marine Le Pen, whose political party has 126 deputies and, as the largest party in the Assembly, could have a decisive influence in votes on possible motions of no confidence in the government.

What are Barnier's political experience and views?

Barnier has extensive experience in national and European politics. He served as minister of the environment (1993-1995) in the Édouard Balladur government, and then as minister delegate for European affairs (1995-1997) in the Alain Juppé government. From 1999 to 2004, he was the EU commissioner for regional policy. He returned to government as minister of foreign affairs (2004-2005) in the government of Jean-Pierre Raffarin, and then as minister of agriculture and fisheries (2007-2009) in the government of François Fillon. After being elected to the European Parliament in 2009, he resigned from his seat a year later and took on the role of EC vice president and EU commissioner for the internal market and services, which he held until 2014. In 2015, he was appointed special adviser to the EC on defence and security policy. Barnier then became chief Brexit negotiator in 2016. Ahead of the 2022 presidential election, he wanted to run for the Republicans, but the party fielded another candidate. At the time, he was an advocate of stricter immigration policies, for example, on family reunification, the introduction of annual visa quotas, stricter conditions for granting social assistance to immigrants, and simplified deportation procedures. Barnier also advocated tax cuts for companies producing in France, more support for strategic sectors, an emphasis on nuclear energy and the decarbonization of the economy, increased defence

PISM SPOTLIGHT

spending, support for an EU carbon border tax, and an increase in the retirement age to 65.

What will be Barnier's next steps and challenges for the new government?

The prime minister is not required to seek a vote of confidence in the Assembly. Therefore, he does not have to form a coalition with an absolute majority in the chamber. There is no specific timeline for the formation of a new government. Barnier will attempt to resolve the political deadlock and establish a governing majority, resembling a coalition similar to the German model, encompassing a wide range of political ideologies including centre-left, centre, and centre-right politicians. The far-right National Rally (RN) has announced that it will not help form the new government. However, given the left-wing parties' unwillingness to work with Barnier, the RN's backing of the new prime minister will be crucial for his survival. This could entail making political concessions to the far-right, such as budget spending planning for the upcoming year or

tightening migration policy, which would bolster the RN's political position. The NFP criticized Macron's decision as going against voters' intentions and announced a vote against the Barnier government. The leader of the far-left is calling for a mass protest against the president's actions. Some politicians, including Assembly Speaker Yaël Braun-Pivet, asked the president to call an extraordinary session of parliament before the regular session set for 1 October, stressing the urgency of numerous issues to be resolved, including the state of public finances (France was placed under the excessive deficit procedure by the EC in June this year) and the adoption of the budget for next year, but also legislation on security policy, purchasing power, public health, or housing. The deepening social and economic crisis in New Caledonia also requires urgent action. A government without an absolute majority in the Assembly, relying on the support of the RN, will not ensure the stability of the political situation in France and will run the risk of the opposition passing a motion of censure. Barnier will be forced to seek *ad hoc* support for individual bills, which will limit the scope of feasible reforms in domestic politics.