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Emmanuel Macron's Russian policy:

STAGES AND ROOTS OF A NEW APPROACH

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LibMod Policy Paper

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This paper

is part of series of policy briefs initiated by the Center for Liberal Modernity in 2023. The series intends to offer a careful analysis of the policies actually implemented in order to end Russia's war against Ukraine. Can key Western countries (in particular Poland, France, Great Britain, Germany and the US) agree on a common approach? What is their common denominator, what are the dividing lines and how can the latter be overcome? What should be the West's strategic objectives regarding the Ukraine war, including its repercussions for Russia and future relations with Moscow?

INTRODUCTION

France's position towards Russia has been ambivalent for decades, based in part on myths, projections and unrealistic ambitions.

Historically, France and Russia have mainly seen each other as potential allies in their respective rivalries on the European continent and elsewhere in the world.¹ At the heart of these rivalries, from the second half of the twentieth century onwards, was the real or supposed position and influence of the United States. This explains both the persistence of this desire for rapprochement and the limits of this relationship, which is much more fantasized than actually experienced, making the Franco-Russian relationship intrinsically fragile. Three major stumbling blocks have conditioned the poor prospects for Franco-Russian relations, without ever hindering dialogue: firstly, the question of values and principles; secondly, the different relationship with the United States; thirdly, the divergence of views and approaches between France and Germany on the nature of the rapprochement to be achieved between Europe and Russia. The Franco-Russian relationship gradually went through "banalization" under the presidencies of Nicolas Sarkozy and, above all, François Hollande.² Dialogue was not rejected, and France's historic position on refusing Ukraine membership of NATO and the EU remained unchanged, but intentions were no longer the same, moving from a posture of "listening" and even empathy under Jacques Chirac to a pragmatic stance for European security.³

While Emmanuel Macron has sought to continue his predecessor's policy of dialogue and firmness (by prolonging sanctions, ruling out any new arms contracts and voicing scathing criticism of Moscow⁴), he has also advocated, like B. Obama in 2009, a policy of reset with Russia; a dual approach embodied by the meeting with Vladimir Putin, at Versailles, in 2017, and the Trianon Dialogue⁵. E. Macron's efforts have been largely futile, symbolic and unilateral. The French president underestimated the fragility and poor structural prospects of the Franco-Russian relationship, the experience of his predecessors, and Russia's political and strategic intentions and culture.⁶ This policy of rapprochement, and even inclusion, was highly counterproductive for his European project, which lies at the heart of his ambitions. France's claim to be a "balancing power" and "mediator", and its desire to anchor itself in the "Gaullo-Mitterrandian" tradition, have proved contradictory to Macron's European ambitions (notably European strategic autonomy), which, oscillating between a "sovereignist programme" and a "liberal programme", have forged an "uncertain idea" of Europe.⁷ The French President's approach proved sterile and deleterious in the Russian case, firstly by demonstrating the disunity and fragility of the European Union, and secondly by raising false hopes in the Kremlin.⁸ Founded on stubborn and traditional illusions in France about Russia – which also combines a Russo-centric reading of the history of Eastern Europe and the idea that culture could overcome political disagreements⁹ –, bolstered by the advice of official and unofficial figures with poor understanding of Post-Soviet Russia (Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, Jean-Pierre Chevènement, Hubert Védrine...)¹⁰, Emmanuel Macron's Russian policy gradually proved unfruitful by 2021-2022 and isolated France in Europe. By 2022-2023, however, the French President had undergone a profound transformation. The aim of this work is to outline the main stages and roots of this change in approach.

FROM ILLUSIONS TO FAILURES: EMMANUEL MACRON'S RUSSIA POLICY, 2017-2022

Emmanuel Macron has made three major mistakes in his relationship with Russia, mistakes from which he will only gradually depart, even after February 24.

Firstly, he considered Putin to be a pragmatic and reasonable man, capable of compromise and with whom the establishment of a relationship of trust, “man to man”, would enable progress to be made.¹¹ Secondly, he has underestimated the nature, cynicism and radicalism of Russian intentions, which are not so much to gain acceptance and recognition in the West, or to balance the balance of power in Europe, as to satisfy imperialist and hegemonic ambitions.¹² The Kremlin historically sees France as a Trojan horse to extend its influence in the post-Soviet space and in Europe, to disconnect the United States and Europe, and to dislocate the Euro-Atlantic security architecture.¹³ The French president has thus failed to gauge the scale of Russia's anti-French projects, such as those, as early as 2018, to expel France from Africa, notably through Wagner, and to feed the “anti-French discourse”¹⁴ in French-speaking Africa (between 2022 and 2023, France was forced to withdraw its forces from Mali, the Central African Republic, Burkina Faso, Niger and perhaps soon Chad).

Thirdly, E. Macron has linked his project for the “refoundation” of Europe, of a strong Europe and of “European sovereignty”, to the creation of a new security architecture between Europe and Russia¹⁵, and thus to the success of the rapprochement with Russia, in which the central and eastern members of the European Union did not believe and did not associate themselves¹⁶. The latter's refusal to organize a summit with Vladimir Putin at the initiative of Paris and Berlin in the summer of 2021, against a backdrop of tensions with Moscow, was yet another illustration (like the “Normandy format”, which led to the deadlock in the Minsk agreements) of this non-inclusive, incoherent and dangerous policy for the security of the EU and NATO¹⁷. What is more, despite their historical convergence on the principle of rapprochement with Russia, Paris and Berlin had different motivations and approaches. While both France and Germany were opposed to Ukrainian membership of the EU and NATO and tended to ignore the central and eastern members of these organizations, there was no consensus on the nature of rapprochement with Russia.¹⁸ While Emmanuel Macron, who sincerely considers Russia to be European¹⁹, saw it as a way of not pushing Moscow into Beijing's arms, and of increasing Europe's strategic autonomy and security, through a new security architecture, Berlin, driven by a different experience and memory vis-à-vis Russia²⁰, closer to Washington and more attached to NATO than France, was rather skeptical on these points, and favored economic and energy cooperation to “normalize” relations with Russia.²¹ No less contradictory than Paris, successive German governments believed, or preferred to believe, that this economic approach would suffice. Joschka Fischer,

Schröder's Foreign Minister, expressed his incomprehension: "But why don't the Russians talk to us about economics? They only talk to us about geopolitics".²² These differences of opinion, and indeed of objectives, between France and Germany, led Paris to isolate itself in 2019 in a sterile bilateral dialogue with Moscow, suspended after the poisoning of Alexei Navalny in 2020.²³

With nothing substantial to concede to Russia, the French President overestimated his own ability to engage in dialogue with the Kremlin – revealing the limits of the idea of France as a "balancing power" and "mediator". Like Nicolas Sarkozy in his day²⁴, he was confronted with the intrinsic fragility of the Franco-Russian relationship. Thus, although Macron showed himself open to the construction of a new security architecture that would include Russia and achieve Paris's French and European ambitions, he at the same time maintained a policy of sanctions, remained intransigent on the values and principles that should underpin this new "European order" and, above all, was unwilling – and unable, given the positions of the EU's central and eastern members – to give up security partnerships with the USA.²⁵ Clearly unacceptable conditions for Moscow.

Paris understood too late what it publicly admitted on February 21, 2022, when it described Putin's speech as "rigid and paranoid". These lucid words from the Élysée about Vladimir Putin were the – admittedly modest – beginnings of a gradual awakening on the part of the French president, who took a long time to rid himself of stubborn illusions. If, after February 24, 2022, Macron spoke of the "courage to take historic decisions"²⁶ to help the then-invaded Ukraine, so that Russia could "never prevail"²⁷, he seemed equally preoccupied with making peace (he had long believed he could convince Putin to make a deal²⁸) and winning the peace to come with Russia, not to "humiliate"²⁹ Russia, and even to envisage a "European political community"³⁰ (May 2022), in which Ukraine could have a place – which meant ruling out the question of EU candidate status for Kyiv. At first sight, these maneuvers, which have aroused incomprehension and even suspicion among France's European partners, have a simple explanation. As early as February 24, faced with Putin's nuclear threats, the Elysée realized that France and Russia, both nuclear powers, could find themselves drawn into a continental war in Europe, two years after Macron explained, even more clearly than his predecessors, that France's "vital interests" included a "European dimension".³¹ But, as we shall see, this issue alone is not enough to explain Paris's maneuvers. .

At the turning point of 2022-2023, the French posture underwent a gradual change of approach

A NEW APPROACH BASED ON THE BALANCE OF POWER

While Paris continued to try to mediate with the Kremlin, even after the Bucha massacre was uncovered in March 2022, French positioning gradually changed. From the UN speech of September 2022 to the conference in support of Ukraine on February 27, 2024, the French President made a slow transformation, both in words and deeds, to the point of breaking with historic positions: granting Ukraine EU candidate status in June 2022, as well as supporting Ukraine's accession to NATO in June 2023.³²

This gradual change in approach can be explained first and foremost by an awareness of the need, in the face of Russia's objectively radical policy, to adopt a tougher stance in order to influence the balance of power and force Moscow to stop the war. For a long time, the Elysée tried to influence the conflict by wielding the carrot (negotiations, "phone call" diplomacy) and the stick (sanctions against Russia and material support for Ukraine). However, Paris was forced to abandon this fruitless "balanced" approach. Emmanuel Macron seems to have gradually come to understand that only the balance of power with Moscow works. This new approach was adopted very gradually. It was probably in his speech to the UN in September 2022 that he set the first milestones. In it, he showed himself eager to justify his previous efforts for "peace", before and after the invasion³³, and, above all, sought to convince the countries of the "Global South" of the vacuity and immorality of a Russian project devoid of principles and values (E. Macron evoked the return of the "colonies")³⁴. The President also clearly refers to Russia's "globalized" hybrid war beyond Ukraine³⁵, an idea that will become recurrent in his speeches³⁶ and illustrates the presidential awareness of the Kremlin's radicalism and determination.

Nevertheless, in 2022, some illusions seem to persist, balancing out the picture painted by Macron. For example, at the UN, the French President mentions the possibility of negotiations on condition that "Russia accepts them in good faith" (as if Russia had not violated a number of agreements it had promised to respect in "good faith")³⁷. Three months later, in December 2022, Paris spoke of the importance of "security guarantees" for Russia when Moscow returned to the "negotiating table", giving credence to Russian arguments such as "fear of NATO" and "weapons deployments that could threaten Russia" (deployments that Moscow had refused to discuss despite Washington's openness in early 2022)³⁸. These words were hardly overshadowed by a phrase that revealed his change of approach, pronounced on December 31, 2022 and addressed to the Ukrainians: "We will help you to victory".³⁹

In February 2023, sixteen years after Putin's virulently anti-Western speech at the Munich conference, E. Macron gave an even clearer speech than at the UN, in line with this new approach which seeks to expose and delegitimize a failed, unrealistic and immoral Russian policy. He points to four failures: that of the initial Russian military plan; that of the Russian colonial mentality, in Ukraine and around the world (a theme even more exploited than at the UN); that of the prediction of events (consolidation of Ukraine, enlargement of NATO to include Sweden and Finland, increased dependencies, mistrust of other countries); and that of Putin's promise to restore Russia's authority in the world (sacrificed economic development and suspicion of neighbors)⁴⁰. This discrediting of Russian policy, which began at the UN, is something that Macron has since regularly indulged in, as in Bratislava, where he explained that these failures had considerably weakened Russia⁴¹, and in Paris in 2024, where he added to this series sending opponents "to die in the Gulag"⁴². Despite these "setbacks", Russia persists in its "headlong rush"⁴³. In addition to its delegitimizing effect, the recurrence of this theme in Macron's discourse on Russia illustrated a dual awareness: on the one hand,

of the Kremlin's radicality and determination, and on the other, of the need to adapt France's posture in order to influence the conflict, by clearly relying on the balance of power.

President Macron himself acknowledged in Munich that it was no longer time for "dialogue", that his approach to Russia had changed as a result of the radical nature of Russian policy (war, war crimes, destruction of civilian infrastructure, etc.), and that helping Ukraine was the "only way" to "bring Russia back to the discussion table in a way that is acceptable [to Ukraine]" and to "build a lasting peace"⁴⁴. In an interview with the French national press on his return from Munich, he stated that stepping up aid to Ukraine with a view to a counter-offensive would "trigger a return to negotiations"⁴⁵. While he was even more direct than in Munich, saying that he wanted Russia to be "defeated" by Ukraine, he also made it clear that he did not want to "defeat Russia completely, attacking it on its own soil"⁴⁶.

In Bratislava, the French President confirmed his transformation. As in Munich, he stated his belief in the virtues of the balance of power. He stressed his conviction that an "effective" counter-offensive is "indispensable" to have the "possibility" of a "lasting" and "chosen peace", and justified supporting Ukraine "by all means" to achieve this.⁴⁷ To be "credible vis-à-vis Russia" and achieve this objective, he also indirectly referred to the need to increase arms production in Europe.⁴⁸ He added that "solid security guarantees" were needed for Ukraine, that it must be "included" in a "credible security architecture", and asserted that Russia "will pay the geopolitical price" if it "persists in wanting to destabilize Europe".⁴⁹ In a sign of a major shift in the French position, France's support for Ukraine's rapid accession to NATO seems to have been analyzed by Paris as a further means of weighing in the balance of power and putting pressure on Russia.⁵⁰ In August 2023, on the occasion of the Crimean Platform Summit, in a message addressed to Volodymyr Zelensky, he once again spelled out the aim of this new approach: faced with a Russia that had "locked itself into the strategy of violence" and of "fait accompli", France continues to provide assistance in all areas to ensure that "Russia puts an end to the war of aggression" and to enable Ukraine to "prevail".⁵¹

WHY THE NEW APPROACH?

This new approach, gradually adopted by France, outlined at the UN, deepened in Munich and affirmed in Bratislava, is obviously multi-causal. As we have said, it is the fruit of a gradual awareness of the Kremlin's radicalism and determination. This was accompanied by a more lucid presentation (and vision?) of contemporary Russian politics, and of Moscow's true objectives and cynicism. Recall that in 2019, Macron wrongly analyzed the erosion of Russian-Western relations as the fruit of a "series of misunderstandings" in the years 1990-2000, when Europe "did not pursue its own strategy" and gave the impression of being a "Trojan horse of a West whose ultimate goal was to destroy Russia".⁵² As we have seen, until December 2022, the French president continued to propose this reading of a Russian foreign policy largely determined "by external factors".⁵³ These elements of Macron's discourse on Russia, which the President probably believed in part and perhaps still does⁵⁴, were compatible with his policy of rapprochement and inclusion between Europe and Russia, and with the construction of a more sovereign and stronger Europe, less dependent (but not disconnected) from NATO and the United States.

Macron's narrative seemed to change (or adapt) in 2023. In Bratislava, for example, the French President admitted that Russia's attempts to "shake up" and "reshape in its own terms" the "edifice of European security" had been going on for "15 years", from the Munich speech in 2007 to the aggressions in Georgia and Ukraine, and the "creeping vassalization" of Belarus.⁵⁵ He understands that the Russian ultimatum of December 2021 reflected Russia's true objectives, namely the "trusteeship" of "part of Europe"⁵⁶, and that the international order proposed by Moscow is in fact that of its hegemony.⁵⁷ The President also explains that Russia is counting on the West's division, through "this or that election", on "opinion fatigue" to freeze the conflict and start the war again "tomorrow or the day after tomorrow".⁵⁸ This more relevant vision of Russian foreign policy – though still (intentionally?) superficial (underestimating the historical continuities in

Russia's imperialism and anti-Westernism) – proved more compatible with the President's new European strategy (see below).

What's more, Emmanuel Macron seems to have gradually come to realize that he has been lured by Putin, with whom he had long thought a relationship of trust would help. Nevertheless, it would be unfair to accuse the French President of excessive naivety and weakness. As early as 2017, Emmanuel Macron showed that he was aware of the nature of the Russian regime and its hostile actions – he had the dual experience of François Hollande's five-year term and his own presidential election, in which Moscow had interfered.⁵⁹ At Brégançon in 2019, while pursuing his rapprochement with Putin, he did not hesitate to anchor in the bay the Languedoc frigate that had fired missiles in Syria in 2018, after a chemical attack in Damascus.⁶⁰ In 2020, after the attempted poisoning of Alexei Navalny, the French President was aware that Putin was cynically and nonchalantly deceiving him, suggesting that the Russian political opponent had himself ingested the poison.⁶¹ Thus, contrary to what Macron himself claimed in Munich in 2023, it is highly unlikely that he could really have "believed" Putin's lies about the absence of any link between the Kremlin and Wagner – until the war "unveiled" that "ambiguity".⁶² In addition, Paris quickly deployed three nuclear submarines following the invasion of Ukraine (a maneuver unseen in 30 years) and continued its strategic exercises to show Moscow that dialogue would take place "between equal nuclear powers".⁶³

However, Macron seems to have deluded himself into believing that, thanks to a relationship of trust, he could influence certain positions of Putin, prevent him from starting the war against Ukraine and push him towards peace.⁶⁴ It is probably in this sense that we should understand Volodymyr Zelensky's comment to the French press that Macron had understood that he had been "personally deceived" by Putin.⁶⁵ If the Élysée continued to speak with Putin after February 24, 2022, Macron got tired and entirely stopped with a final conversation on the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant in September 2022,

the month of his speech at the UN.⁶⁶ A former minister speaks of “radicalization by disappointment”.⁶⁷ Russia’s abuse of nuclear rhetoric, as well as the straight and effective response to yet another Russian nuclear threat by Washington, London and Paris through private channels in the autumn of 2022 (conventional retaliation by all three countries in the event of use)⁶⁸, probably helped to convince Macron of the importance of the balance of power in relations with Russia.

While all this certainly played a fundamental role, Emmanuel Macron’s European project, closely linked to the above, was probably a decisive factor. With his positions, his caveats and his conception of France as a “balancing power” and “mediator”, the French President continued to isolate himself in Europe and reinforced the skepticism of the central and eastern members of the European project of Macron⁶⁹, even though European integration is at the heart of his ambitions. He has long hoped and even believed, as we have seen above, that the construction of a sovereign and strong Europe would involve linking Russia to the continent through a new security architecture, more autonomous but not in rupture, and even less a rival to Euro-Atlantic structures. This largely explains the peace efforts before and after the invasion, the caveats and Macron’s “little phrases”, including after February 24 – even though the invasion proved Poland and the Baltic countries right – and until at least December 2022.⁷⁰ This belief took into account neither Russian intentions nor the legitimate fears of the eastern and central members of the EU and NATO. Even today, Emmanuel Macron has probably not given up on a new security architecture that includes Moscow in one way or another⁷¹, but he seems to have gradually understood that the construction of a strong and sovereign Europe must first and foremost go through the members of the EU, and in particular through its central and eastern members, which French policy (including Macron’s) has often neglected in favor of a rapprochement with Moscow. It was in Bratislava in June 2023 that the French President expressed this most bluntly, when he altered Jacques Chirac’s famous address to those countries who in 2003 opposed the Paris-Berlin-Moscow coalition by supporting the war in Iraq: “we have sometimes missed

opportunities to listen. That time is over and today, that voice must be the voice of all of us.”⁷² Symbolically, Macron seemed to have mourned the Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis of 2003, “the last Gaullian moment of French diplomacy”⁷³.

The French President’s gradual shift to a more coherent approach is probably also motivated by the fact that he, from the start, saw this war as an opportunity to consolidate Europe. Macron affirmed in March 2022 in Versailles that this “crisis” shows how European sovereignty “today” is becoming an “imperative”.⁷⁴ He affirmed this again in Strasbourg, welcoming the fact that Europe has pulled itself together in recent years after a long “crisis of meaning”, and recalling the danger of not responding “strongly and quickly” enough to crises (financial, pandemic, war) due to a lack of strategic independence.⁷⁵ In Bratislava, he welcomed the fact that the war had shown the “unity, the ideological clarification of the EU and also its clarity [...] with regard to Ukraine”, and insisted on the creation of a Europe of defense which, alone, will allow it to be “credible over time”.⁷⁶ In Stockholm, in January 2024, Macron asserted even more bluntly: Russia’s aggression, “fortunately”, was “part of the trigger point towards more sovereignty in Europe”.⁷⁷ In a context where NATO’s political legitimacy has been strengthened since 2022, the French President is able to take advantage of the uncertainties linked to the stability of the transatlantic link, affected by possible changes in the leadership of the United States that make the creation of a Europe of defense, NATO’s “European pillar”, “indispensable”⁷⁸.

A TURNING POINT IN THE NEW APPROACH

However, this new approach reached a turning point in January 2024, which became evident in February-March. In Stockholm on January 30, he asserted for the first time in such a determined manner, that it is “impossible to see Russia winning this war” and that Ukraine must be supported “whatever it costs, and at all costs”⁷⁹. For the Ukrainians to be in a “position to negotiate a lasting peace”, he affirmed, it is necessary to accelerate and intensify the effort “in terms of production” and – in the first probable allusion to troops on the ground – “perhaps in terms of nature”.⁸⁰ At the signing of the Franco-Ukrainian bilateral agreement on February 16 in Paris, Macron further toughened his speech. The French President noted a turning point in Moscow’s radicalism, particularly against Europe and France. Russia, he said, had changed its posture, had crossed thresholds. It had “opened a new phase a few months ago, without limits, in which its actions (attacks) in the cyber and information sphere have “multiplied, systematized and intensified”.⁸¹ It is to this new level of aggressive radicalism that Paris is trying to respond in order, as during the change of approach (2022-2023), to try to influence the balance of power: Macron thus calls for a “collective awakening” and, in line with his Stockholm speech, evokes the need to “open a phase of new strategic and operational reflection”.⁸²

At the end of the conference in support of Ukraine on February 27, 2024, the French president, considering Russia’s increased radicalism and the need to do “whatever is necessary for as long as necessary” so that Ukraine can “to negotiate peace under the best conditions and [obtain] the return to its full and complete sovereignty and its territorial integrity”, was

even more explicit⁸³. He asserted that even if no “consensus” exists for an “official”, “assumed” and “endorsed” sending of “ground troops”, “in dynamics, nothing must be excluded” and that “anything is possible, if it is useful to achieve our objective”.⁸⁴ In mid-March 2024, Macron confirmed his vision of the increased radicalism of Russian policy and defended his essential response to keep a balance of power – by explaining that it was the “profound” change in “recent months” which led him to mention ground troops.⁸⁵ He thus evoked an “existential war for our Europe and for France” led by a country and a man, Vladimir Putin, who lies, does not want peace and would not stop at Ukraine.⁸⁶ Bringing peace, he asserts, requires “not being weak”, but being “credible, strong and ready”.⁸⁷

Why did the French President step up pressure and intensify his support for Ukraine? Why did he do that at this precise moment?

As has been said earlier, there have been clear observations of an increase in the Kremlin’s radicalism and determination, including many hostile actions by Russia against Europe and France over several months: cyberattacks, which include attacks against hospitals, disinformation campaigns from networks such as “Portal Kombat”, false information such as that French mercenaries are in Ukraine, or even intimidating military action.⁸⁸ Russia’s domestic radicalism, like the death of Alexei Navalny in February, played into this, too – even if Macron had no illusions about the possibility of a democratic force taking power in Russia.⁸⁹ A threatening tweet from Dimitri Medvedev against Macron before the scheduled President’s visit to Ukraine in February, was analyzed at the Élysée as a death threat.⁹⁰ Likewise, Donald Trump’s statements (also in February), that the U.S. might not protect an attacked NATO member and would even encourage the aggressor, probably played a role.⁹¹

Yet the most important thing is probably not there. The hypothesis of sending ground troops would have already been the subject of a meeting during a defense council, on June 12, 2023 at the Élysée.⁹² As we have seen, this possibility is also already implicitly mentioned in his Stockholm speech. The deterioration of the Ukrainian front seems, in private, to have worried Macron since the end of 2023⁹³, which he expressed very directly in March 2024: “The Ukrainian counter-offensive did not go as expected [...], the situation is difficult on the ground for the Ukrainians.”⁹⁴ He also reportedly told a private meeting in February 2024, that he “will have to” send men to Odesa “in the coming year”.⁹⁵

In Macron’s eyes, the sustainability of the European project seems to be closely linked to the support and even a form of victory for Ukraine. The French President believes that Russia’s “defeat” (he used the same word during an interview with *Le Figaro* after Munich) is “indispensable for security and stability in Europe”⁹⁶ and even for the “credibility” of Europe.⁹⁷

The form of Macron’s statement on an “assumed” sending of “ground troops” is probably clumsy, as is the management of this “moment” subsequently (contradictory declarations on “non-fighting personnel”) by officials in France, and by the President himself. Macron had already experienced similar difficulties in October 2022, when he gave an awkward response about a French reaction to a possible Russian tactical nuclear attack in Ukraine.⁹⁸ Likewise, consultations with other supporters of Ukraine should have been carried out.

Did Macron want to break a taboo in relations with Berlin? After all, he had long kept his disagreements with Berlin on Nord Stream 2 quiet⁹⁹, in order not to damage the Franco-German relationship. His harsh criticism of Germany¹⁰⁰, which as of April 2024 still refuses to supply Ukraine with Taurus missiles and opposes any joint European loan – an idea supported by Macron – for the purchase of munitions and weapons for the European defense industry and the Ukraine, might suggest that he wanted to overcome internal differences by making them public. For Berlin has – despite Olaf Scholz’s call for a *Zeitenwende* – long hesitated to implement such a paradigm shift and has refused to take initiatives in support of Ukraine, leaving it to the United States, Great Britain and Eastern Europe to take the lead.¹⁰¹ While the Élysée at first reacted with similarly hesitant and cautious maneuvers, it gradually realized that the future of the European project, the creation of a strong and sovereign Europe, would require massive and determined support for Ukraine.

CONCLUSION

These blunders probably take nothing away from the seriousness of the conviction of the French President, whom some wrongly or too quickly accuse of being versatile, even irrational, or simply cynical for national political reasons. Emmanuel Macron made serious errors of assessment and was, like others before him, a victim of the mirage of rapprochement with Russia, by underestimating, moreover, the fragility and weak structural prospects of the French-Russian relationship. However, he has not only publicly recognized his mistakes, but he has changed – admittedly, very gradually – to better achieve his political objectives, in which the European project holds a central place and from which, moreover, he does not exclude Russia forever. The French President's new approach does not rhyme with a lack of talks between Paris and Moscow, as shown by the recent discussions between the French Minister of the Armed Forces and his Russian counterpart after the terror attack on Crocus City Hall. But their manipulation by the Kremlin and the “baroque and threatening” comments made by the Russians after the discussion have shown their limits.¹⁰² French Foreign Minister Stéphane Séjourné recently acknowledged these limits, in terms that are highly suggestive of Emmanuel Macron's new approach: France has no “interest” in talking with Russian officials; “we need to have an evolution on the military terrain so that relations can be renewed”. “We need to speak the same language as Russia, that of the balance of power”, he asserted a month earlier.¹⁰³

From now on, although fundamental decisions – unthinkable before February 24 2022 – have already been taken by the Élysée and the European Union, Paris must strive to reduce the gap between its real actions and its words, including those on the “war economy”¹⁰⁴, without waiting for Europe to finance the French defense industry. This would make it possible to balance efforts between the allies – Germany will probably have produced 10 to 15 times more 155-mm shells than France in 2024 – to be an emulating force among Ukraine's supporters in Europe and to reassure European partners. This can only strengthen France's credibility, and hence that of its plans for European defense and strategic autonomy, lend credibility to a dissuasive posture that is more active than reactive, increase Ukraine's capabilities of keeping Moscow at bay, and thus contribute to the balance of power by creating real dilemmas for Russia. The latter has never refrained from creating dilemmas for the West; and the next one, if Europe fails to support Ukraine, will perhaps be the “last” and could result in a general war or a dislocation of European and Euro-Atlantic structures. To be faced with such a dilemma would be a defeat for Europe; but the best way to avoid it is for Moscow to believe Europe is ready to resolve it courageously, and this requires massive and lasting support for Ukraine. It seems that this is the belief the French President ended up progressively adhering to.

Endnotes

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This paper is part of our International Expert Network Russia. Its publication was supported by the German Foreign Ministry. The views expressed in the paper are the author's own.

Supported by



Federal Foreign Office

Published May 2024 by

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