



# FRANCE'S AUTOCRITIQUE OF ITS "RUSSIA FIRST, UKRAINE SECOND" POLICY

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Marie Mendras for Zentrum Liberale Moderne,  
November 2022

What did we get wrong? This is a daunting question for the governments of France, Germany and several other European countries. When the Ukrainians are liberated from Russian occupation and start reconstructing their country and their lives, it will be high time for us to engage in a serious overhaul of our conception and practice of security-keeping on our continent. We will need to define a common strategy toward a defeated state and a despondent society in the Federation of Russia. Only with a thorough analysis of wrong assessments and failed policies shall we be able to build a strong, comprehensive security system in Europe and beyond.

## Self-serving delusions at the expense of European security

In Germany, as Ulrich Speck underlines in his paper, the illusion was to "modernize" Russia. In France, the illusion was to build a new "security architecture" with Russia that would counterbalance American power and prop up our political leadership in Europe. Both ambitions were out of reach and dangerously misconceived because they presupposed that Vladimir Putin was eager to meet them.

The posture was ambivalent and contradictory: to carry out an exhausting dialogue of attrition with Putin and defend our economic interests and energy imports, while at the same time imposing more sanctions against Russian top economic actors. This combination led to a blatant failure in smart deterrence. Worse, we exacerbated Putin's obsessions and contradictions. The Russian leader assumed that Europe was weak and subjugated to US ambitions, yet a devilish enemy that directly threatened his own power and "sphere of privileged interest".

We exacerbated the man's paranoia, as he misread most of our messages as manipulation, or weakness of purpose. For instance, in 2019-20, when the French President was urging the Russian leader to talk to his Ukrainian counterpart and come to some compromise in Donbas, he reinforced Putin's belief that Paris was ready to see Ukraine stay under Moscow's partial occupation and control. The Macron-Putin meeting at Fort de Brégançon in late August 2019 was followed by the unsuccessful Normandy Format summit in Paris over the Minsk agreement on 9 December. In March-April 2021, Putin set up a big war scare with 100,000 men and heavy weapons deployed at the border with Ukraine.<sup>1</sup>

Emmanuel Macron was never candid about Vladimir Putin's eagerness to fight on foreign soil. He holds a big grudge against the Wagner mercenaries in francophone Africa, notably Mali, where they have pushed out the French anti-terrorist Barkhane mission. In an interview on 19 November 2022 in Tunisia, Emmanuel Macron denounced a "predatory project" that combined disinformation and armed disruption: "A number of powers, who want to spread their influence in Africa, are doing this to hurt France, hurt its language, sow doubts, but above all pursue certain interests." France's influence in Africa has diminished in recent decades.

Nevertheless, the French President wanted to convince Putin not to wage a full war against Ukraine. Before and after the Russian aggression of 24 February 2022, he invested much of his time and authority in lengthy dialogues of the deaf with his Russian counterpart. Even after the horrific crimes in Bucha and elsewhere, the destruction of hospitals and residential buildings, he was hoping to maintain a line of communication with the Kremlin and would not set up a date to visit Kyiv.

On 10-11 March 2022, Emmanuel Macron convened his European partners at the Versailles Palace. The final declaration did not mention arms deliveries to Ukraine, nor the possibility of granting EU candidate status to Ukraine. Macron proposed a "waiting room" alternative, a European Political Community composed of the 27 plus 14 neighbors, including Turkey.<sup>2</sup> A few weeks later, he reversed his position. In Mid-June, he traveled to Ukraine with the German Chancellor, the Italian Prime Minister and the President of Romania. And on 23 June, a week before the end of the French EU presidency, all 27 countries voted to give candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova. Around the same time, Finland and Sweden confirmed their will to join NATO.

## Emmanuel Macron's path

France's ambivalent position cannot be merely explained by pressure from industrial lobbies, conservative media, or pressing demands from segments of the political spectrum to "go back to normal" (Retour à la normale). As early as March 2022, it was crystal clear that no business as usual would ever be possible with Putin's men, some of them already suspected of war crimes. Most companies had left Russia, all university exchanges had stopped, and most European and North American expatriates had gone home.

Presidential and legislative elections may explain in part Emmanuel Macron's wavering attitude. On 17 April, he was reelected in a runoff against Marine Le Pen. But a week earlier, 55 per cent had given their vote to a "Putin-friendly" candidate. On 16 June, a new National Assembly was elected. The "presidential majority", composed of several parties, failed to secure a majority of seats.

In mid-October 2022 Emmanuel Macron was asked in a TV interview whether he would continue to reach out to Vladimir Putin. He replied that the time will come to "sit around a table" and negotiate with Russia - on Ukraine's watch. But this was a contradiction in terms, as President Zelenskyy had clearly stated his position: peace talks will start with a new Russian government, when the whole of Ukraine is liberated and war reparations are on the table.

2. The first summit meeting of the European Political Community was held in Prague on 6 October, 2022. Forty-four countries attended, including Turkey. By then, the political significance of this community of states was diminished, as the EU had granted Ukraine and Moldova candidate status in June.
3. M. Mendras, « Voter avec la tête à l'endroit », Desk Russie Newsletter, 15 April 2022, <https://desk-russie.eu/2022/04/15/voter-avec-la-tete-a-lendroit.html>

A week earlier in Prague, the French president had spoken more positively about the European allies' total support to Ukraine until the aggressor is defeated. This is telling about the different message to a domestic audience, which the Elysée - rightly or wrongly - believes is eager for an end to the war, even if Ukraine remains partly occupied.

Macron still clings to this “yes, but” posture, similar to Olaf Scholz’s attitude. In September-November 2022, the official message from Paris and Berlin was in a nutshell: “Yes, Ukraine must win the war and regain its territorial integrity, but Russia should not be humiliated. Yes, Europeans must support Ukraine, but we cannot weaken “national defense” by sending too many of our weapons.” Yet, both governments have increased arms deliveries that the Ukrainian military badly needs to fight back and protect its population and infrastructure. The emergency of war should take precedence over ambiguous political narratives, which continue to permeate domestic politics and media coverage.

Why trust an authoritarian, corrupt, leader who has long demonstrated his propensity to go to war for no reason, as his country has never been threatened by Chechens, Georgians, Ukrainians, or NATO?

“Of course, we do not trust Putin”, the Elysée Palace would respond privately to journalists and experts. But Emmanuel Macron remained confident that he could convince the autocrat to make a deal. He was not fully alerted to Vladimir Putin’s incapacity to listen, negotiate, or think rationally. It took a good six months before the French government started to speak of “Putin’s criminal war”, rather than “Russia’s aggression”. This was the long-awaited step toward acknowledging the leader’s illegitimacy, rogue methods, and criminal aims. On 30 November 2022, The French National Assembly voted a historic resolution that sets France’s position very clearly, condemns Russia’s crime of aggression and calls for full support to Ukraine. On the same day, the French Government confirmed its engagement to implement the European Commission’s decision to create a Special Tribunal to judge Russia’s crimes of aggression.

Why such a late awakening to Putin’s brutal methods and unhidden obsession to annihilate Ukraine? There had been many signs of unrealistic propositions wrapped up in a revengeful discourse coming from the Kremlin. The political and military escalation during the year 2021 culminated in the aggressive “treaties” delivered by the Kremlin to the US and NATO in December 2021, that called for immediate demilitarization of Eastern European member states, and a commitment by Ukraine to never join NATO. By that time, the US had warned its European allies that Russia was actively preparing for war.

Encouraged by the French and German lenient attitudes, Putin was led to believe that he could fool them around because of their irrepressible desire to come to some agreement with him. And he repeated his lie to whomever would listen: “Russia will not invade Ukraine”. A good number of French decision-makers wanted to believe that Ukraine belonged to the Russian world, culture, space, language, and “historical post-imperial sphere”. It was convenient for us Europeans not to care for the security and well-being of Ukrainians, Belarussians, Armenians, Georgians. Not to get involved directly was the motto. It would appease the Kremlin men, who would stop fearing our influence in their former republics.

4. « Résolution no 39, affirmant le soutien de l'Assemblée nationale à l'Ukraine et condamnant la guerre menée par la Fédération de Russie », voted on 30 November 2022. One deputy from La France insoumise voted against, other deputies from the left-wing party abstained, together with the far-left Rassemblement National.
5. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/ukraine/evenements/article/ukraine-tribunal-special-pour-les-crimes-d-agression-de-la-russie-30-11-22>

Worse, many influential politicians, “experts”, journalists, businessmen, simply dismissed Ukraine and its 45 million inhabitants as a promising country, that could bring much benefit to Europe if it could make its way to full independence, good governance, economic prosperity together with its western neighbors. Political parties from left to right have not yet done a serious autocritique about Putin’s Russia. But positions are moving.

The good news is that public opinion is overwhelmingly in support of Ukraine and welcoming refugees. Macron’s ambivalent discourse until October 2022 did not meet much public understanding, as people were confused about what to expect from Moscow, and what would happen if parts of Ukraine remained permanently under Russian occupation.

## Old habits, new problems

The war against Ukraine has shattered the unstable balance that characterized the French strategy toward Putin’s Russia. In retrospect, it is astonishing that the final wake-up call needed be the full-scale aggression of a large country in Europe, and the systematic destruction of civilian buildings, schools, hospitals and vital infrastructure.

Presidents Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy were “friends of Vladimir” and attended his birthday parties. Their successor François Hollande never shared this inadequate personalization of relations with the Kremlin leader. Yet, he did not initiate a thorough - and much needed - revisiting of the Paris-Moscow relationship. President Macron wanted to believe that Putin was a reasonable man, and that he would go along with a pragmatic policy of dialogue.

For years, the “economy first” posture of France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, and other governments, contrasted with the “security first” position of the British, Balts, Finns and Poles. Among the latter, the consensus was simple: Putin’s dictatorship conducted to war, and war meant more arbitrary rule and exceptional powers for the security services, or siloviki, and for Putin himself. Their strategic understanding and vision proved absolutely right.

From early 2021 to the present, the French President has been struggling with the Russia-Ukraine issue at a time of disaffection from many French to his presidency, and very low popularity of his party. In a 2020 analysis for the Center of Liberal Modernity , I underlined the misconceptions in Paris about the benefits of a close relationship with Moscow, despite the dangerous nature of Putin’s regime. The French political and industrial elites tend to have a soft spot for imperial history, big states, strong leaders, military power, and national “rayonnement”, i.e. the outreach of the French language, culture, mode de vie, and statist traditions. This attitude blurred the understanding of crude realities, and dangers to come. Also, there remains an underlying distrust of the United States’ intentions, and of the American-British liberal conception of “The West”.

Since the 1950s, French presidents have wanted their country to be a central state between East and West, the “balancing actor” between the two superpowers. They had a more positive attitude towards the European community than to NATO and its military structure. Moscow gladly played along the French reservations in the 1960s and 1970s, as it drove a wedge between Atlantic allies. Also, Paris has a lingering problem with its nuclear power status and membership in the UN Security Council Permanent Five. This dominant position nurtures a blindness to France’s real place in Europe and the world -France no longer is a primus inter pares in Europe- and a counter-productive attitude of preserving a status rather than pushing for new thinking and reforms.

Like the other nuclear powers, the French authorities have long evaded an urgent reassessment of the military factor and of nuclear deterrence in national and international security. They are reluctant to reconsider the very matter of security, which today encompasses all domains of human existence and state protection from subversion and cyberattacks, economic and energy blackmails, inequalities and migrations, corruption and transnational criminality, tyrannic and revanchist regimes, mercenaries, and rogue armies. Maybe the Russian fast walk into a militarized dictatorship has encouraged us to cling to outdated models and strategies.

## The shadow of Minsk

Even after the annexation of Crimea and occupation by proxies of Eastern Donbas, the French government did not fully comprehend the rules violation that led to dangerous insecurity in Ukraine and Europe. It took time for French politicians to accept that France had become a medium power which had to cooperate closely with other states in Europe. Russia's interventions in Crimea and Donbas in 2014 forced France to acknowledge Moscow's toxic role in the former Soviet republics. At long last, Paris admitted that the security of Eastern European societies could not be trusted to the Kremlin, and that the EU and NATO had to endorse a major responsibility in supporting democratic, sovereign states in Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. We had neglected the security of the in-between states, vulnerable to Moscow's subversion and military intervention. We lacked a smart analysis of the trajectories of the Baltic States, Poland, and other victims of Soviet brutal domination during and after World War II, countries that joined NATO and the EU in 1999, 2004 and 2007, to the satisfaction of all partners.

The French could have fared better as they were not as dependent as Germany on Russian gas. They could have pushed for a strategic overhaul of the EU energy strategy and, beyond gas procurement, a comprehensive revision of European security in the face of an unreliable Russian regime. In 2017 at the Sorbonne, Emmanuel Macron gave an inspiring speech about the future of Europe. Unfortunately, domestic issues took their toll, and the French President gave way to short-term national concerns over common European challenges.

The US attitude toward the Minsk agreement was not helpful, as it created tensions between allies, notably Warsaw, Paris and Berlin. It should not be forgotten that Washington did not wish to be part of the Donbas negotiations in 2014, and that France and Germany represented the OSCE in Minsk.

## The US factor

Successive administrations have not reassured French opinion and ruling circles about American policies. The Trump years were dismal for the Atlantic Alliance, US-EU relations, and other key issues like climate change and anti-terrorism. But already the Obama presidency was not helpful because European allies felt treated like a "second tier". Also, the American approach based on the "prioritization" of problems according to national concerns complicated the framing of Western policies toward Russia, China, Middle Eastern countries. Europeans could not focus on China and leave Russia on the back burner. Nor could they adjust to Washington's at times incoherent involvement and disinvolvement from war-torn countries. In France, and probably more broadly in Europe, there is a sense that the US debacle in Afghanistan in 2021 worsened Moscow's

restlessness to do battle and raised the stakes in Ukraine. One of Vladimir Putin's vulnerabilities is that he has a soft spot for an illusory Washington that would reinstate him as a big statesman at the head of a revamped superpower, on par with the US. Like the French and German governments, US administrations share some responsibility for Putin's hare-brained military plans since the aftermath of the war in Georgia 2008 and his 2015 intervention in Assad's criminal war against the Syrian population.

## A common platform for ending the war and securing Ukraine

This said about national agendas in France, Germany or the US, state policies no longer matter that much. We are beyond national and personal idiosyncrasies. As German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier said after his visit to Kyiv in October: "A sham peace would only increase Putin's hunger". He publicly said what all other European leaders think. Consensus is strong. War is being waged in Europe, and more than fifty countries are supporting the Ukrainians in their resistance against the aggressor, and in their reconstruction effort. Russia's army and her mercenaries will be defeated. The question is when and how the defeat will happen, and what we can do to prepare the end and the afterward of the war.

Our common position must be clearly stated not to repeat the mistakes of the Minsk agreements. We will no longer tolerate a grey zone of insecurity between Russia and us. Ukraine, Moldova, Ukraine, and other in-between countries will not remain in a condition of weak sovereignty that makes them hostage to the Kremlin.

**First**, we trust President Volodymyr Zelensky's strategy and demands. He is a first-class leader and his strategy has proven right.

**Second**, the Russian armed forces must leave the occupied and illegally annexed territories and agree to an unconditional ceasefire.

**Third**, the Ukrainian authorities will accept a negotiation format, and an agenda, including the question of reparations paid by Moscow.

**Fourth**, the Russian authorities will acknowledge their responsibility in starting and waging the war, and will accept independent international investigation into exactions and crimes.

**Fifth**, all efforts will be focused on Ukrainian reconstruction and return of displaced people. The EU will work closely with Kyiv, Moldova and Georgia on their countries' successful accession process, and support Belarussians and Armenians in their fight for their rights to a democratic government. NATO will engage a process of enlargement to Ukraine.

**Sixth**, we Europeans and Transatlantic partners must prepare for a difficult post-war crisis and transition period in the Russian Federation. Europe will only be safe once that all Russians live in a rule-of-law state. We need a concerted policy towards the Russian alternative elites and society, inside and outside of the Federation.



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