



France's policies toward the Eastern Partnership countries in context

David Cadier¹

France's strategic attention interest and diplomatic engagement in the Eastern neighborhood have increased significantly during the last decade. Of the two geographical areas covered by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the 'South' remains a greater priority for Paris than the 'East': France has deeper economic, cultural and historical ties with – and is more exposed to security challenges emanating from – North Africa and the Near East than Eastern Europe or the Caucasus. Nevertheless, France has played a central role in two critical moments for EU policies towards the Eastern Neighbourhood: it acted as a peace-broker in the 2008 Russo-Georgian war; and with Germany it is currently co-leading the mediation efforts in Eastern Ukraine.

While France's involvement in the Russo-Georgian war mainly amounted to a punctual exercise in crisis management, the latter is a much more protracted and entangling process. In that sense, Paris's implication was not a given, especially as Ukraine was never prominent on the French foreign policy radar while the regions that are prominent are themselves mired in crisis. Paris nonetheless accepted co-leadership over the Minsk process because it considers a crisis that implicates the EU to be a crisis that implicates France – both in the sense that it feels concerned by the crisis; and that it seeks to shape the EU's response in part to ensure that the decisions taken do not limit its own room for maneuver.

France's ability to do so is contingent on its political power inside the bloc, something that remains substantial in spite of its deepening asymmetry in economic power with Germany. In fact, when it comes to EU Eastern policies, this political power is likely to increase in a context where the UK is leaving and Poland is increasingly isolated. Hence, even though the Eastern

¹ David Cadier - Associate, LSE IDEAS, London School of Economics.

Neighbourhood may not be France's top priority, Paris will have a substantial impact on the overall direction of EU policies toward the region. Thus, it's important for Georgia and other Eastern Partnership countries to gain a better grasp of France's preferences and factor them into their own respective foreign policy strategies.

France's policy priorities regarding the Eastern Neighbourhood coalesce around two main vectors: supporting conflict resolution mechanisms; and supporting political, economic and administrative reforms in the region. The first is mainly pursued at the UN and through France's individual participation in dedicated contact groups. The second – and more important – pillar is pursued through the EU and, in particular, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative. France strongly backs the implementation of respective Association Agreements concluded between the EU and Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova. It also adheres to the so-called 'differentiation principle', namely the possibility for countries who are more advanced in the reform process and who express a stronger desire to deepen ties with the EU to deepen their political association and economic integration with the bloc within the ENP framework. Paris has also a clear position on what it does not want the EaP to become: in this vision, which is rather consensual among French political forces, the EaP should neither be instituted as a pre-accession mechanism nor designed in opposition to Russia in a geopolitical struggle for regional influence.

Contrary to what is often assumed, however, this position does not derive from considerations linked to the EaP countries themselves, or to Russia. Rather, it proceeds above all from France's vision and priorities in the EU. Hence, to unpack this position and analyze France's policies toward the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood, it is necessary to first reflect on several major trends and key priorities in France's foreign and European policies.

Current trends in France's EU and NATO policies

The war in Syria and the recent terrorist attacks on French soil have increased France's security concerns and reinforced its strategic prioritization of the Southern neighborhood. In addressing crises and countering threats from the region, France counts a great deal on NATO and the EU. It has resorted to military interventions alone or in conjunction with its allies several times over the recent years (in Libya, Ivory Coast, Mali, Sahel, Iraq, and Syria). Yet, especially as its military forces are currently mobilized at home to patrol the streets against terrorist threats, the country needs to avoid overstretch. Thus, France wishes to rely on NATO and EU resources and solidarity.

As far as NATO is concerned, this means that Paris wishes for the alliance to focus on power projection capabilities and remain flexible in allocating them – if NATO was to become locked in a permanent territorial defense posture on its Eastern flank, the opposite would probably be

achieved. Similarly, France wishes for the EU to continue to channel resources to consolidating state structures and security apparatuses in the Southern neighbourhood, both through the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and through the ENP, where the 'South' finds itself in competition with the 'East' over budgetary allocations. Overall, a static, protracted conflict between Russia and the EU and NATO over the Eastern Neighborhood would limit France's room for maneuver in these organizations and thus potentially reduce its strategic autonomy.²

This does not mean that France is ready to tolerate Russia's use of military force to redraw state borders in Europe, however. Paris firmly supports the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Eastern neighborhood countries and condemns the actions by Russia that violate them. France's reaction to the annexation of Crimea in particular has been clear: it has cancelled the delivery of Mistral warships to Russia, suspended its annual bilateral strategic meetings with Moscow and supported the EU sanctions regime. This reaction has been above all prompted by the nature of Russia's actions in Ukraine and by considerations linked to the EU context. The latter has become especially important in shaping France's Russia policy, not least because the political basis for its bilateral relationship with Russia has eroded in recent years.³ Inside the EU, France stands among the member states that believe that – for damage limitation, crisis avoidance and cooperative security purposes⁴ -- it is important for Brussels to keep lines of dialogue with Moscow open and for both sides to avoid unnecessary inflammatory postures.

The EU is not just a context affecting France's policies towards Russia, the Eastern neighborhood and other regions – it is itself a framework and constellation of actors and instruments that is evolutionary, and France, as one of the most powerful member states, is constantly working to shape it in the sense of its vision and interests. Questions pertaining to the extent, means and format of European integration (e.g. institutionalization of the Eurozone, 'multi-speed Europe', democratic deficit, etc.) are at the core of French political debates as they will determine the future course of the country.⁵ In fact, these questions constitute the main lines of polarization between candidates in the upcoming presidential elections.⁶

² David Cadier, '[Russia 2030: potential impact on French policies](#)', *European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)*, July 2016

³ Isabelle Facon, "La relation France-Russie à l'épreuve", *Annuaire Français de Relations Internationales*, Bruylant, Vol. XVI, 2015, pp. 117–131.

⁴ Thomas Frear and Ian Kearns, '[Defusing future crises in the shared neighbourhood: Can a clash between the West and Russia be prevented?](#)', European Leadership Network, March 2017.

⁵ Vivien Pertusot, 'Four Ways to Recapture the Initiative on the EU', in T. Gomart and M. Hecker (eds), *Foreign Policy Challenges for the Next French President*, Institut Français de Relations Internationales (IFRI), April 2017.

⁶ Francois Godement and Manuel Lafont-Rapnouil, 'Présidentielle 2017: le marqueur européen', *Le Monde*, 7 April 2017.

While the European integration project is currently at a crossroads and French presidential candidates promote divergent views in that context, there are nevertheless certain permanent features of France's vision for the EU, even if Paris has pursued them unevenly and, at times, ambiguously. They are manifested in two slogans. Internally, more than simply a common market, the EU is regarded as a political project toward closer integration (*'Europe politique'*). Externally, rather than a mere trade alliance, the EU is conceived as an actor and even as a power in international politics (*'Europe puissance'*). In both dimensions, materialization of this vision requires a strong degree of cohesion and harmonization of member states' positions and policies. This vision and the drive for closer integration have been re-activated following Donald Trump's presidential election victory in the US; Trump signaled not only his intent to withdraw some US support for Europe but also his readiness to attempt to play Europeans off another.

Implications for France's policies toward Eastern Partnership countries

The EU cannot pretend to be a global power if it is not able to significantly contribute to security and stability on its own continent. France's involvement in conflict resolution endeavors in the Eastern neighborhood proceed from this rationale: its mediation of the Russo-Georgian war of August 2008 while it held the EU Council Presidency is especially illustrative in this regard. The mediation also showcased, however, a tendency to perceive the EU as an extension of France, which is actually detrimental to Paris's strategy inside the bloc. Beyond the EU framework, France is also participating in conflict resolution contact groups as a permanent member of the UN Security Council (such as the OSCE Minsk format for Nagorno-Karabakh).

The EU's engagement with EaP partner countries cannot be simply reactive and limited to conflict management, however. The EU must act as a 'structural power' both in the sense of setting up structures for increased cooperation and meaningful interaction with actors in the region and of supporting political and economic reforms in partner countries. This logic is at the heart of the ENP, and France adheres to it. The Hollande government repeatedly voiced its support for implementation of the Association Agreements concluded with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Paris sees these agreements both as a means to consolidate state structures in the region and as beneficial to its own economic interests, notably by facilitating French companies' access to regional markets and by ensuring the protection of intellectual property rights, geographical indications and rules of origin.⁷ This being said, in light of its concern about structural instabilities in the Southern neighborhood, Paris remains wary of seeing the ENP tilt eastward in its budgetary allocations.

⁷ Laure Delcour, '[France's view on the Association Agreement with Ukraine](#)', Clingendael : Netherlands Institute of International Relations, March 2016.

More profoundly, it has also advocated for the EU to become more strategic in its approach to the Eastern neighborhood. First, in the face of multiple external and internal crises (Syria, Ukraine, terrorist threat, Brexit, populist wave, etc.), France believes that the EU should focus on concrete and realistic cooperation projects with its Eastern neighbors rather than on diffuse and theoretical promotion of the European model. A second and related point is that Paris insists that EU interests be more clearly defined and communicated, and these interests should, along with its values, constitute the basis of EU policies. The latest official articulation of France's position on the EaP, the 2015 Weimar declaration co-signed with Germany and Poland, insists that the EU should 'respond to the respective needs, ambitions and potential of partner countries while taking into account its own interests'.⁸ Third, France calls on the EU to better factor into the design of its policies the strategic context in which they are to be implemented. As emphasized by Pierre Vimont, a former high-ranking French and EU diplomat, in the case of the EaP 'procedures are put forward, principles are delivered, instruments are developed but all of this provides the feeling of a political and strategic vacuum from which all power dynamics, antagonisms and lines of division between nations have been sucked out'.⁹

In this context, France insists that the EaP should not be designed in opposition to Russia. Being strategic in nature implies that means align with ends, and the EaP is not equipped to be used as a geopolitical instrument. This also leads, however, to Paris rejecting the Kremlin narrative that the prospect of Kyiv signing a DCFTA with Brussels caused the conflict in Ukraine.

Finally, along with several other member states, France is opposed to turning the EaP into a vehicle for EU accession. Paris considers that, beyond those countries to which membership has already been promised (i.e., the Western Balkans), the enlargement dynamic should be paused temporarily as the EU's 'absorption capacity' is reaching its limits.¹⁰ This position mainly proceeds from the vision for the European project set out above: the logic of pursuing enlargement as the preferred foreign policy instrument of EU is criticized on the basis that it 'weakens the project of political union and the internal cohesion that underpins it'.¹¹ In Paris, the perception is that the 2004 and 2007 enlargements not only contributed to paralyzing EU decision-making structures by increasing the number and heterogeneity of member states but also diminished France's own relative power inside the bloc, since the Central European countries have tended to reinforce the influence of Germany.¹²

⁸ Laurent Fabius, Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Grzegorz Schetyna, [Communiqué conjoint des Ministres des Affaires étrangères du Triangle de Weimar](#), Wrocław, 3 April 2015

⁹ Pierre Vimont, [The Strategic Interests of the European Union](#), *Carnegie Europe*, 20 April 2016.

¹⁰ [Elargissement : enjeux et position de la France](#), webpage of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

¹¹ French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *La France et l'Europe dans le monde: livre blanc sur la politique étrangère et européenne de la France 2008-2020*, La Documentation Française, p67.

¹² [Rapport d'information sur l'influence française au sein de l'Union européenne](#), Commission des affaires européennes de l'Assemblée Nationale,, 2 february 2016

More generally, frustrating as it may be for proponents of enlargement and for countries aspiring for membership, the fact is that discussions within the EU are much more about re-forming a smaller integration core inside the bloc ('multi-speed Europe') or about managing Brexit than about expanding its borders.

What's next after the Presidential elections?

The upcoming presidential elections seem bound to oppose, in the final round, two candidates with radically divergent programs: Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen. As it stands, Macron, a pro-European liberal, has the greatest chance of becoming the next French president. His victory would most likely mean continuity in terms of foreign policy and, potentially, greater engagement in European affairs. Notably, he would continue France's current policy toward Russia and support for the EaP, as well as opposition to additional EU enlargement in the near future. Marine Le Pen, a far-right populist, would radically overturn France's foreign and European policies. She stands out as the most pro-Kremlin of the 11 candidates and has announced the intention to organize a Brexit-like referendum to take France out of the EU. As such, her election would likely lead to France greatly disengaging from Eastern Partnership matters.

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