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The Past, Present, and Future of European integration: a French perspective

Az európai integráció múltja, jelene és jövője: francia perspektívából

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Abstract: As one of the founding member states of the European Communities (EC), France has played a major role in the process of European integration since the 1950s. However, French presidents have always treated European integration cautiously, generally supporting forms of supranational integration in areas of socio-economic policy and preferring the intergovernmental mode of governance in areas of defence and foreign policy. In a context marked by the recent weakening of the French influence on European integration (see Assemblée Nationale, 2016), the gradual rise in Euroscepticism since the 2010s (see European Parliament, 2017), as well as the destabilising effect of Brexit (see Zagdoun, 2016), Emmanuel Macron's 2017 election on an openly pro-European program has foreshadowed the possibility for France to reassert its role as a leading actor in Europe. The aim of this article is to make sense of these events in terms of France's relationship with the European integration process from its origins to the present day and to understand France's future role in the evolution of the European Union (EU), while paying particular attention to President Macron's pro-integrationist influence on the EU.

Keywords: France, European Union, strategic autonomy, Emmanuel Macron, Angela Merkel

Összefoglalás: *Az Európai Közösségek egyik alapítójaként Franciaország az 1950-es évek óta mindig is nagy szerepet játszott az európai integráció folyamatában. A francia elnökök ugyanakkor mindig óvatosan közelítettek az európai integráció kérdéséhez, általában a szupranacionális integráció formáit támogatva a társdalmi és gazdaságpolitikában, de a kormányközi megoldásokat keresve a védelem és a külpolitika terén. Az európai integráció nemrégiben bekövetkezett meggyengülésének (lásd Assemblée Nationale, 2016), az euroszkepticizmus felemelkedésének (lásd European Parliament, 2017), valamint a Brexit destabilizáló hatásának (lásd Zagdoum, 2016) kontextusában Emmanuel Macron 2017-es, markánsan Európa-párti választási sikere már előre vetítette annak lehetőségét, hogy Franciaország újra visszaveszi a vezető szerepet Európában. A jelen tanulmány célja, hogy értelmezze Franciaországnak az európai integrációs folyamatban játszott szerepét a kezdetektől napjainkig, kísérletet téve annak megértésére, hogy milyen szerepet játszhat Franciaország az Európai Unió (EU) jövőjében, külön kiemelve Macron elnök integrációpárti befolyását az EU egészére.*

Kulcsszavak: *Franciaország, Európai Unió, önálló stratégia, Emmanuel Macron, Angela Merkel*

Introduction

France has always maintained an ambiguous, if not paradoxical, relationship with the European integration process: it has pioneered decisive European projects (e.g. with the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, the Single European Act in 1986, and the Maastricht Treaty in 1992), but it has also been extremely reluctant to further integrate into the EU when the proposed policies were deemed to be contrary to its primary interests – as illustrated by the non-acceptance of the European Defence Community in 1954, the Empty Chair Crisis in 1965, and the rejection of the European Constitution in 2005 (see Chopin, 2018).

Since the 2010s, France has also lost considerable influence within the EU. Due to the 2004 enlargement having shifted the EU's centre of gravity (see Lequesne & Behal, 2019) and the trauma left by the Lisbon Treaty in 2007, European issues have not been high on the French political agenda in France, and neither the left nor the right have been able to represent and propose an official position on the process of European integration because it still very much divides political parties and constituencies (Ibid.). In a context marked by the weakening of the French influence on European integration, the gradual rise in Euroscepticism since the 2010s, as well as the destabilising effect of Brexit, Emmanuel Macron's 2017 election on an openly pro-European program has foreshadowed the possibility for France to reassert its role as a leading actor in Europe.

The aim of this article is to make sense of these events in relation to France's relationship with the European integration process from its origins to the present day. It seeks to understand France's past, present, and future role in the evolution of the European Union (EU), while paying particular attention to President Macron's pro-European influence on the EU.

The article first examines the history of France's relationship with the European integration process, looking at how it has been utilized as a means of asserting French national interests, while fearing for its *sovereign* interests, as well as examining the historical need for a Franco-German partnership to lead the EU. The article then investigates the impact that President Macron has had on European integration by exploring his EU project, his policies, and his relationship with Chancellor Merkel. Finally, it offers some possible scenarios of what is expected in terms of French EU policy in the foreseeable future regarding the French presidency of the Council of the EU in January 2022 and Merkel's leaving of office in the autumn of 2021.

History of France's relationship with European integration

A paradoxical relationship to the EU

France has played a major role in the process of European integration since its inception in the 1950s (see Lequesne & Behal, 2019). However, European integration has always been treated cautiously by French presidents, who have constantly strived to keep France sovereign and powerful while making the most of its participation in a supranational community (Gomes Ferreira, 2011). At each major stage of the EU's community project, French presidents have had to decide how far they could cede France's sovereignty to the European institutions without encroaching on the country's *primary* interests.

France's relationship with European integration can be dated back to 1950, the year in which Robert Schuman, Foreign Minister of the Fourth Republic, proposed integrating the coal and steel industries of Western Europe (Tekin, 2008). After intense debates within the French political establishment (see Soutou et al., 2001; Bossuat, 2005), Schuman's European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) proposal was finally approved via Assembly ratification in 1951 and was later formalised as the Treaty of Paris. Following the economic success of the ECSC, France's commitment to European integration took one step further when it decided, along with its five Western European partners, to further integrate its economy under the Treaty of Rome in 1957, creating the European Atomic Energy Community (CEEA) and the European Economic Community (EEC), which are today recognized as constituting one of the most important stages in the history of the European integration process (see Tekin, 2008). According to political expert Craig Parsons, "European cooperation [only] took the shape it did in the 1950s […] above all because the French government demanded it" (Parsons, 2002, p. 48). It is indeed important to understand that France strongly advanced the proposed policies because they contributed to the country's international policy priorities at that time, namely to ensuring security against the "German threat" and to regaining its "superpower rank" at the European and international levels, not to mention the preconditions that were imposed on France's European partners so that its overseas markets were protected, particularly in its African colonies (see Bossuat, 2005; Tekin, 2008). Hence, for the French political elites of the time, European integration was above all a means of serving their country's *socio-economic* interests: as long as the process remained in the realm of "low politics," where there could only be very little pooling of sovereignty, although with maximum benefits, France would willingly favour it (Blair & Curtis, 2009, p. 271). For most of them, however, it was clear that there could be no process of transnational integration in the realm of "high politics" (in the fields of defence and foreign policy), which, in their view, was to be left to

the national arena of decision-making (Ibid.). This is essentially what explained the National Assembly's decision to reject the European Defence Treaty (EDC) in August 1954 due to concerns relating to the ceding of national sovereignty over "primary" policy matters and to the weakening of France's military power.

Under President de Gaulle's leadership, France's commitment to European integration followed the same pattern: his vision of integration was mainly structured around the need to construct a small but robust Europe, driven by the interests and actions of its member states (Anceau, 2018). He refused to envisage a political community and instead promoted l'Europe des États, which he viewed as an intergovernmental organisation, the main role of which was to act as a power multiplier for its member states, without any major loss of sovereignty on their part (Ibid.). This is essentially what led France to boycott the process of European integration in the mid-1960s, when the European Commission proposed new policy measures that would further gear towards a supranational mode of governance, with less executive power for national governments (European Parliament, 2018). This period, commonly known as the "Empty Chair Crisis", led to the signing of the Luxembourg Compromise in early 1966, which, above all, provided member states with the opportunity to veto policies that they considered to be at odds with their national interests (Ibid.). This policy agreement marked a more cautious phase in France's commitment to the European integration process from the 1970s to the early 1980s and a recognition that the country could also act as a "binding agent" when it feared for its *primary* interests.

President Pompidou maintained the same ***i**ntergovernmental* approach to European integration: he wanted to keep an important balance between sovereignty in the fields of high politics and further integration in the realm of low politics, which he considered a strategic ground to counter-balance the "American superpower" (Tekin, 2008). Pompidou was aware of the need to further integrate certain areas of economic policy due to the so-called functional spillover effect in Europe; he was therefore in favour of an Economic and Monetary Union, although without any supranational character (Gomes Ferreira, 2011, p. 419). Due to the oil crisis in the 1970s and the resulting economic difficulties in the EEC (i.e. the period of the so-called Eurosclerosis), European issues were not of high priority in France, and the political agenda was mostly dominated by debates on domestic economic policies (Tekin, 2008).

Pompidou's successor, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, was a strong partisan of the European community project: his dream was to construct a liberal, pro-EEC political centre with increased accountability on the part of its institutions (Parsons, 2016). He had a significant impact on the process of European integration: inspiring the move to European Council summits in 1974, being responsible for establishing the election of the European Parliament in 1979, and co-initiating the European Monetary System (EMS) in 1978. However, even under Giscard d'Estaing's presidency, sovereignty concerns remained central to France's commitment to European integration. The French President had to make compromises with the

political establishment, who still shared a Gaullist approach to the EEC, and he was aware of the necessity for member states to retain sovereignty over their national *primary* interests (France Info, 2020). Reflecting on the evolution of the European integration process since the 1990s, he even declared in 2013 that "Europe is not democratic enough, its main activity is to steal sovereignty from its member states" (Ibid.).

President François Mitterrand also played a major role in directing the course of European integration from the 1980s to the 1990s (Troitino et al., 2017). He wanted to build a "social Europe", which is why he led the way for further socio-economic integration of Europe with the Single European Act in 1986 with Commissaire Jacques Delors, the last French president of the Commission, and the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, which resulted in the creation of a full single European market and provisions for the introduction of the single "Euro" currency and a shared European citizenship (European Central Bank, 2021). Mitterrand maintained a Euro-enthusiastic approach to European integration: he argued that "France's future lay in Europe" (Tekin, 2008, p. 140). His approach consisted of enhancing France's leadership role within the EU while orienting the latter towards policies "amenable to the French domestic interests" (Ladrech, 2011, p. 40). However, Mitterrand remained deeply opposed to any further political integration within the Communities, and he wanted the project to remain a predominantly socio-economic enterprise (Gomes Ferreira, 2011). While Mitterrand's presidency marked significant progress in the European integration process (with his pro-Maastricht approach to the EEC paving the way to the creation of the European Union in 1993), it is important to understand that his vision of the European project was not overwhelmingly supported in France. The Maastricht Treaty referendum of 1992, won by only the slightest of margins (51%), revealed important scissions on the future of European integration within the French political establishment, whether on the right or the left. Many politicians were still very concerned that the process was going too fast and too far, and that it would encroach on France's ability to govern independently of the European institutions. In particular, the Maastricht Treaty's provision of a common foreign and security policy aiming at "safeguarding the common values, fundamental interests and independence of the Union" raised fears that the process was evolving into the realm of high politics, to which some of the French political establishment was still deeply opposed (European Central Bank, 2021).

President Chirac maintained Mitterrand's pro-Maastricht vision of the European integration process: he was an intergovernmentalist who accepted the EU at a supranational level to pursue France's national and regional goals (Tekin, 2008). Chirac was aware of the need to further reform the EU to make it more cohesive, transparent, and functional, and he supported further integration with the Constitutional Treaty of 2005 because he believed that this was the only way to ensure that France could benefit from "more stability in an uncertain world" (Ouest France, 2019). Just like his predecessors, he wanted France to assume co-

leadership of the EU with Germany, and to make the latter move forward "in terms of respect for fundamental rights, security and defence policy, and enhanced cooperation," so that it could establish a base of common values through which it could define itself (Lastennet, 2019). Chirac also believed in the so-called *mission civilisatrice* of France towards Europe, which is why he supported the enlargements of the EU in 2004 and 2007 (Ibid.). However, his leadership marked the cataclysm of the French referendum on the Constitutional Treaty of 2005, which revealed that the French people were still very much against any incursion of the process of European integration in the realm of high politics, and that there still could not be any "political Europe". This is essentially why France decided to approve the Lisbon Treaty by Assembly ratification in 2007 instead of a popular vote, as it was feared that the treaty would not have been adopted otherwise.

Under Nicolas Sarkozy, European issues stalled on the national political agenda: despite the Treaty of Lisbon in 2007, the French presidency of the Council of the EU in 2008 (i.e. France's last EU presidency), and the economic crisis of the 2010s, the French political elites started to pay less and less attention to the process of European integration. Under François Hollande's mandate, this phenomenon intensified: the European debt crisis significantly disrupted EU member states (see Parsons, 2016), and France had still not recovered from the trauma left by the Treaty of Lisbon. Neither the right nor the left were able to take a formal united position and propose an official position on the process of European integration at the time because it was still dividing their political parties and constituencies (Ibid.). Hence, they preferred to keep the topic as far as possible from the French public debate and political agenda.

A LONG-STANDING PARTNERSHIP WITH GERMANY

Co-leadership with Germany has been a strong element of the French narrative on European integration. As founding members of the EEC, French and German political leaders have always felt a "special responsibility" to promote and preserve the European integration process among member states (see Krotz & Schramm, 2021). Being the two largest countries of the EEC meant that they had the necessary political, institutional, and material resources to ensure co-leadership of the community: on the one hand, France exerted significant hard power with its permanent seat at the UN Security Council and its nuclear force; on the other hand, West Germany displayed impressive *soft power* with its economic and industrial domination (Lequesne & Behal, 2019). Altogether, these dynamics lent considerable credibility and legitimacy to the European project from both an internal and an external perspective. Even today, the Franco-German partnership is considered by many experts one of the most significant forms of bilateral cooperation within a regional political

organisation (see Krotz & Schramm, 2021), and a recent survey based on more than 800 expert opinions has confirmed that France and Germany are still "the most contacted and most influential" states within the EU (Bussed et al., 2020).

According to political scientists Ulrich Krotz and Lucas Schramm, the Franco-German co-leadership of the EU has manifested itself in three main ways during the last 70 years of European integration: by (1) "setting the political agenda, either by submitting their own proposals or by removing competing proposals from the agenda", by (2) "building consensus and brokering compromises between themselves and then between different camps of member states", and by (3) "wielding coalitions of like-minded member states, especially in situations in which large majorities are necessary for an agreement" (Krotz & Schild, 2021, p. 50). These three main types of leadership have been contingent upon the relationships maintained between the individual French and German political leaders, whose propensity to drive European integration forward has clearly varied from one president to another (see Cole, 2010).

During the Gaullist period, France was mainly concerned with the need to secure peace on the Western continent after the two World Wars, as well as reconciling itself with the German people. President de Gaulle was very aware of how vital these pre-conditions for the stability and functioning of the European project were: he wanted to distance West Germany (and other EEC member states) from US protection, and to bring them closer to France so that he could build a European bloc independent from American and Soviet influence. This is why in January 1963 de Gaulle decided to institutionalize France's reconciliation and cooperation with Germany via the *Elysée Treaty* (see Gunkel, 2013). The treaty called for regular consultations on all important questions regarding socio-economic, defence, and foreign-policy related matters, and for the establishment of an inter-ministerial commission to ensure effective collaboration between the two countries (Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangère, 2019). Despite its symbolic impact on the establishment of a Franco-German co-leadership of the EEC, the treaty was not a major success in practice. The German political elites could not agree to vote for the agreement because they did not want to separate themselves from their American protector. The Bundestag therefore decided to empty the treaty of its original substance and add a preamble according to which Germany would still pursue tight cooperation with the US and remain faithful to its commitments to NATO (Gunkel, 2013). This put a temporary end to any harmonious co-leadership of the EEC through which France and Germany would jointly drive European integration forward. Later, in 1965, it is said that de Gaulle even told his closest collaborators that "the Germans had been my greatest hope; they are [now] my greatest disappointment" (Peyrefitte, 1997, p. 303).

De Gaulle's successor, Pompidou, did not have any major impact on the Franco-German partnership. He and German Chancellor Brandt distrusted each other. They had very different policy priorities: while Pompidou sought to facilitate British accession to the EEC, Brandt aimed at establishing his *Ostpolitik* with Eastern Europe (see Cole, 2010).

It was not before the 1970s, with French President Giscard d'Estaing and German Chancellor Schmidt, that the Franco-German partnership began to assume substantial co-leadership of the European integration process, as had been desired by de Gaulle. The centre-right Giscard d'Estaing and social democrat Schmidt had already had the chance to get to know each other when they simultaneously held the post of Minister of Finance in their respective governments; hence they maintained a very cooperative relationship based on mutual trust (Lastannet & Gaillard, 2020). During his tenure as chancellor, Helmut Schmidt even declared regarding the functioning of the European project: "never anything without France" (Ibid.). Together, the two political leaders piloted two major policy projects for European integration: the creation of the European Council in 1974 and the establishment of the EMS in 1978, while also actively promoting the election of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage. It was, in fact, during this period that the European press started to characterize the Franco-German partnership as the "engine of European integration" (Ibid.). After Giscard d'Estaing and Schmidt's co-leadership of the EEC, European integration was further accelerated under President Mitterrand and Chancellor Kohl. The two leaders were very different politically, but they shared a common sense of the European project: they propelled Europe forward with the creation of the single market under the SEA in 1986 and paved the way for economic and monetary union, and they enhanced diplomatic and military collaboration under the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 (Cole, 2010). In a highly symbolic gesture, François Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl also decided to seal the Franco-German partnership by holding hands at Verdun in 1984 during a commemoration of World War I, which clearly marked the reconciliation and cooperation of the two countries while embodying the unity of Europe.

Following the Mitterrand-Kohl co-leadership of the EU, the Franco-German partnership tended to lack significant momentum. President Chirac and Chancellor Schröder did not forge very close ties, and with the integrationist tempo of the SEA and the Maastricht Treaty, the two political leaders preferred to "defend established positions" rather than propose new ideas (see Cole, 2010). The Constitutional Treaty of 2005 was not a Franco-German initiative, and although Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schröder tried to promote European integration through this ambitious treaty, the French "no" seriously hampered Franco-German influence in Europe. Under Nicolas Sarkozy, there were attempts to strengthen the Franco-German partnership, but without much success. During François Hollande's presidency, the Franco-German co-leadership of the EU was pushed into the background, mainly because European issues were not high on the political agenda in France at the time.

EMMANUEL MACRON'S PRESIDENCY: A TURNING POINT FOR EUROPEAN INTEGRATION?

A favourable context for Macron's pro-European project

The context

In a context marked by the weakening of the French influence on European integration, a gradual rise in Euroscepticism in the 2010s, and the destabilising effect of the referendum on Brexit, Emmanuel Macron's election in 2017 on an openly pro-European program foreshadowed the possibility for France to reassert its role as a leading actor in Europe.

Since the Constitutional Treaty of 2005, France had indeed lost considerable momentum on European integration: the French political establishment failed to provide any tangible position on European integration, which prevented the provision of any real policy debate on the EU for its citizens. As a result, France lacked credibility and legitimacy as an influential actor in the EU from both an internal and an external perspective. President François Hollande's wish to keep European issues as far as possible from the French policy agenda has played an important role in this regard: his position was ambiguous, with no clear trajectory or leadership planned for the future of the European integration process. In 2016, a parliamentary report even deplored an important loss of French influence within the three major European institutions, i.e. the European Parliament, Council, and Commission (Assemblée Nationale, 2016). This meant that France was no longer acting as a notable engine of European integration, and that its European (and international) leadership was limited.

With the 2008 financial crisis (and the resulting Euro debt crisis), Euroscepticism also considerably increased within the French population. While only 58% of French people admitted trusting the EU in 2007, this figure decreased to 33% in 2017 (European Commission, 2007; European Parliament, 2017).

Against all odds, the 2016 Brexit referendum became a positive opportunity for Emmanuel Macron's pro-European project and his desire to see France re-emerge as a constructive actor in the European integration process. The referendum has had a major re-structuring effect on the French policy agenda. Its ideological impetus completely overturned France's main political cleavage during the second round of the presidential election, which no longer revolved around a traditional left-right divide, instead focused on the opposition between those in favour of more openness to the EU (and the international system) and those who advocated a relatively closed society based on *souverainisme* (Chopin, 2018). What is most striking is that, despite growing Euroscepticism in France over the previous decade, the Brexit referendum appeared to have acted as a wake-up call for most of the French majority reluctant towards European integration: they may not have trusted integration, but they were certainly not ready to leave the EU just yet. As

illustrated by an IPSOS survey conducted right after the 2017 presidential elections, most French citizens from mainstream political parties declared that they would experience "deep regrets" if France was to leave the EU: 86% from LREM, 78% from PS, and 63% LR (IPSOS, 2017).

In this context, President Macron's election on an openly pro-European program gave strong democratic legitimacy to his political mandate and considerable credibility to his policy project for the EU. As explained by French political expert Gilles Andréani:

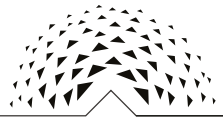
> "The most striking [political] significance of Emmanuel Macron's victory is not that he defeated anti-European and populist forces, but that he did so with *clarity*: his victory […] has not been acquired over evasive manoeuvres as the UMP had done in 2007 and the PS in 2012, but by adopting a strategy of direct confrontation with these populist forces in the name of assumed European convictions. This is what gives his victory its international meaning […]: the adherence of French voters to an explicitly reformist, internationalist, and pro-European program gives the French President some leeway, and France a central position - which it had not enjoyed in Europe since François Mitterrand" (Andréani, 21st June 2017).

The program

Let us now take a closer look at Macron's policy project for the EU. In June 2016, when he was still Minister of the Economy under Hollande's leadership, Emmanuel Macron decided to start displaying his pro-integrationist vision of the EU:

> "These past ten years, we [the French political establishment] have lost the thread of European history. Since 2005, we have only sought to manage European crises, without proposing any real project for the future of the EU. We must deliver Europe from what it has become. The latter has lost its ability to think and deliver itself into the world. The EU has been obsessed with its internal political, economic, and budgetary balances, and it has collapsed on itself. Europe ends up being reduced to a vast market without any regulation, without any defence of our collective interests […] We are in the process of closing the parenthesis of a *political* Europe. We have to reinvent Europe […] so that it can define its rules of sovereignty" (Vie Publique, 2016).

Here Macron is very clear about his pro-integrationist vision of the EU: he does not want to anchor himself with the post-2010s political establishment, which tried to keep European issues as far away as possible from the French policy agenda. He wants a profound transformation of the EU, with deeper and more transparent political integration. He promotes closer cooperation and regulation between its member states, with a clear desire for a European political autonomy, i.e. what he calls a "sovereign Europe". As clarified by political scientist Thierry Chopin:



> "Such a political narrative on a 'sovereign Europe' is one that aims at strengthening the *sovereignty* of public power, whether it is exercised at national or European level, since both levels are not mutually exclusive, but are in fact *complementary* […] Where does true French sovereignty lie? Sometimes it is within the country; but it also lies in Europe. Digital sovereignty, energy sovereignty, sovereignty over migration or the military are all managed at the latter's level […] This paradox, which consists of opposing 'sovereignism' and Europe, is a French trauma [to which Macron intends to put an end]" (Chopin, 2018).

After having been elected President, and before his first European Council summit in June 2017, Emmanuel Macron further clarified his ambitions for the future of European integration:

> "We have to create […] a true common defence and security policy. We must be more efficient regarding major migration crises, by making in-depth reforms to the system that protects our borders, as well as migratory policy and asylum rights. The present system is flawed – with only just a few bearing all the weight of the migratory waves. I believe in a Europe that has the means to protect its external borders, to guarantee its security via police and judicial cooperation in its fight to counter terrorism, deploying a common organisation in terms of asylum rights and immigration, a Europe that protects against the disruptions of globalisation" (Ouest France, 2017).

He added that "treaty changes will at some point be necessary because European integration is currently incomplete. The question is not whether these changes will be necessary but when and how" (Vie Publique, 2017).

Here again Macron defends further European integration in the re-organisation of EU member states' collective security, the regulation of migratory flows, and the fight against terrorism (see Chopin, 2018). He wants the EU to develop a strategic position at the European level by coordinating its member states in areas of police, justice, intelligence, and anti-terrorist combat and at the international level by improving their diplomatic and defence power (Ibid.). Macron is indeed very aware of the fact that France can benefit from high credibility and legitimacy rates via its "hard power" position at the EU level and the recognition of its expertise in these related policy areas, as well as European solidarity in the face of the various terrorist attacks suffered by France over the past decade (Ibid.).

Above all, the French President formalized his vision of the future of European integration in two important speeches: the first in Athens on 7 September, 2017, and the second at Sorbonne University on 26 September, 2017. In these two programmatic speeches, Macron called for a "sovereign, united, and democratic Europe" (quoted in Chopin, 2018). In terms of European *sovereignty*, Macron demanded EU member states to make "more efforts and investments in the autonomous defence of Europe" and the creation of a common strategic culture, a common intervention force, and a common defence budget (Ibid.). He also advocated a common budget for the Eurozone to independently finance common

projects, to cushion economic shocks, and to reduce economic imbalances within the Eurozone (Ibid.). He proposed to consolidate the 19-member Eurozone with a finance minister and a parliament – ideas dependent on the backing of Germany.

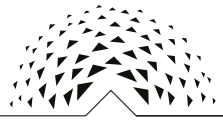
The second keyword, *unity*, is to be understood from a social and political perspective. In the political sense, Macron called for a "multi-speed" Europe that would essentially allow willing member states to pioneer further forms of integration in certain policy areas "while not being held back by states which want to progress slower or not as far" (quoted in France 24, 2017). As specified by political scientist Federico Bruno, "nowadays Europe is not the restricted club it used to be in the past decades, and core countries' will to *unite* should not be frustrated by others" (Bruno, 2018). This is essentially what Macron explained when he declared that Europe "needed to leave behind the logic" according to which it [only] "advanced all together or not at all" (quoted in France 24, 2017). From a social perspective, Macron warned against unregulated competition and social dumping and urged the EU to make the social standards of its member states converge (Ibid.). Finally, the French President called for European integration to have "a new, *democratic* pulse" (Ibid.). This paved the way for two main propositions: the establishment of transnational electoral lists for the seats of the European Parliament left vacant by British MEPs, an idea which he soon abandoned, and the establishment of regular democratic conventions on the future of the EU to be held throughout the member states (Ibid).

Macron's impact on European integration

President Macron has had considerable impact on France's commitment to the European integration process: his pro-European convictions have allowed France to regain significant influence within the EU while picking up the integrationist pace.

Under his leadership, Paris was at the origin of several successful EU initiatives, many of which already appeared in his speech at the Sorbonne in September 2017: the creation of a European Defence Fund (operational since 1 January, 2021), the introduction of a carbon tax at EU member state borders (to come into force in 2023), and the establishment of a system of democratic and participatory debates (so-called "citizens' consultations") on the future of the European project, which already took place in most EU member states in 2018 (Lequeux & Tobelem, 2021). As desired by Macron, France was particularly influential on the consultation project, having organized 1,082 of the 1,700 conferences held across Europe (Guitton, 2018). In an important letter written in March 2019 to his fellow European leaders, the French president called for repeating these *democratic* consultations:

> "Let us set up a *Conference for Europe* in order to propose all the necessary changes to our political project, without taboos, not even the revision of the treaties. This conference […] will define a roadmap for the EU - translating these major priorities into concrete actions" (Elysée, 2019).



Macron's idea was received particularly well by the European Commission, the newly elected president of which, Ursula von der Leyen, decided to put it in motion under the name *Conference on the Future of Europe* (Lequeux & Tobelem, 2021). Overall, the Conference marks an important step in Macron's commitment to making the European integration process more democratic: it is the first pan-European exercise of its kind, and France is to play a leading role in it. When the Conference was official launched on 9 May, 2021, it was President Macron who delivered the welcome speech in Strasbourg as a highly symbolic tribute to the role that France has played in this initiative.

However, it is probably the COVID-19 crisis that has made France regain considerable weight and influence within in the EU. Paris has played a major role in making all EU member states adopt an unprecedented economic solution to the Union-wide recession due to the pandemic: a recovery package of 750 billion euros based on the principle of a common debt of the 27s, and a 1,074 billion-euro long-term EU budget for 2021-2027 (Lequeux & Tobelem, 2021). The recovery plan agreed in July 2020 marks a new step in the French commitment to the European integration process, even if there was criticism in France that this plan was not profitable enough for the country's economy. Paris was, nevertheless, at the forefront of this initiative (which had been conceived in the Elysée), arguably as an iteration of the Eurozone budget that was one of Macron's top priorities for the EU (Rahman, 2021a). In addition, both the plan and the dynamics behind its endorsement by all EU member states are impressive. On the one hand, France has succeeded in convincing many "frugal" countries, which had been deeply opposed to the mutualisation of the debt, to accept the plan; on the other hand, the European Council was able to make a compromise on the rule of law with Hungary and Poland to ratify the EU budget for 2021-2027 (see Lequeux & Tobelem, 2021).

The "Merkron" co-leadership of the EU

President Macron has not only had considerable impact on France's commitment to the European integration process but also on the impetus given to its "rusty" partnership with Germany. After his election in May 2017, there were indeed high expectations in Europe that France, alongside Germany, would pave the way for much-needed reform and momentum regarding the European integration process (see Krotz & Schramm, 2021). In an interview with the German newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung in June 2017, and before his first European Council meeting as President of the French Republic, Emmanuel Macron declared that he "would like France and Germany to return to the spirit of cooperation that once existed between François Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl" (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2017).

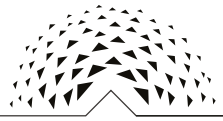
Since the start of his mandate, President Macron has indeed been very transparent about his desire for France to re-engage in a co-leadership of the EU with Germany: this is part of his pro-European project, which aims at further promoting

European integration, but which also understands that "there will be no progress [in this area] without a Franco-German partnership" (quoted in Le Monde, 2017). Overall, Germany has remained on the same wavelength as France regarding their relationship: in the Meseberg declaration of 19 June, 2018, Germany expressed its desire and determination to "further strengthen its cooperation [with France] within the European Union" and to ensure "the unity of its member states and the performance of the Union" (see Krotz & Schramm, 2021). On 22 January, 2019, President Macron and Chancellor Merkel even decided to further institutionalise the Franco-German partnership under the Treaty of Aachen, i.e. an extension of the Elysée Treaty of 1963 (Ibid.). Via the Aachen treaty, the two political leaders agreed to take their bilateral cooperation to a new level by further aligning their economic, social, and tax systems, and by creating new instruments for cross-border diplomatic and defence cooperation (Ibid.).

Initial difficulties

However, despite the occasional rhetorical expressions of support and the public cultivation of the Franco-German relationship, the relationship has experienced some deep and fundamental difficulties at the beginning of Macron's presidency, especially regarding the long-term policy objectives for the future of the European integration process (Ibid.). In his speech at Sorbonne University in September 2017, in which President Macron outlined his pro-European project, he explicitly reached out to Germany to help him develop his plan for a "separate budget to make the Eurozone more robust", and for "more integration in defence and security policy areas to transform the EU into a true political player on the global stage" (Ibid.). Specifically, Macron called on Germany to overcome its fetish for budget surpluses and work with him to forge deeper European economic integration (Ibid.).

However, the new German government, which took office in March 2018, remained almost non-existent on the matter and never really engaged with Macron's proposals, fuelling severe frustrations on the French side (Ibid.). With regard to its longer-term policy objectives for the EU, Germany remained particularly reluctant to achieve greater integration in the Eurozone budget and in areas of European security and defence policy (Le Point, 2021). As a historical supporter of the transatlantic relations that founded Germany after the Nazi period, Chancellor Merkel was also upset by President Macron's statement on NATO in November 2019, when he declared that NATO was "in a state of brain death" (Ibid.). Still, the most explicit political discrepancy between France and Germany on the future of the European integration process was delivered in March 2019 by Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, Merkel's chosen successor as party leader of the CDU, when she presented her suggestions for the future of the EU, which were largely interpreted as a direct response to Macron's proposals



(see Krotz & Schramm, 2021). On monetary union, Kramp-Karrenbauer did not mention the possibility for further integration but rather called for more subsidiarity and responsibility on the part of EU member states (Ibid.). This late and half-hearted response to Macron's proposals further reinforced the image of a German ally that was fairly satisfied with the status quo in Europe, especially in areas of economic and fiscal policy (Ibid.).

Effective crisis management

Despite these initial difficulties in establishing a consistent co-leadership of the EU due to different preferences and interests regarding long-term European objectives, the COVID-19 crisis, which emerged as a moment of existential threat for the EU, completely relaunched the Franco-German partnership within the Union. Above all, the pandemic has served as a reminder that even if a Franco-German agreement might not be sufficient to obtain the consent of all EU member states on the future of the European integration process, it nonetheless remains a "necessary condition for effective crisis management and the overcoming of decision-making deadlocks amongst EU member states" – which, in turn, allows for a fluid integrationist pace (Krotz & Schramm, 2021). As political experts Krotz and Schramm put it, the "Merkron" duo has shown us that in the absence of a credible Franco-German leadership, the European integration process oscillates between "poles of reluctant German preponderance" on the one hand, and even more "muddling through or stalling" on the other (Ibid.).

By March 2020, when the World Health Organization started to consider Europe an active centre of the COVID-19 pandemic, most EU member states were forced into lockdowns, resulting in an unprecedented decline in their economic output, increased unemployment, and rising expenditures and government debt levels (Ibid.). Member states were prepared to respond to the economic costs, or to initiate their recovery plans to different extents: while northern EU countries (including Germany) had rather sturdy public finances and significant fiscal leeway to cope with the crisis, southern EU countries (such as Spain and Italy, but also France) had much fewer available resources (Ibid.). Hence, during the European Council meeting of 26 March, 2020, when EU member states presented their proposals for a common economic and fiscal response to the health crisis, these different economic dynamics led them to split into two distinct groups: on the one hand, France was part of a group of eight other southern EU countries, which called for the introduction of "Covid-19 bonds" (i.e. the joint issuance of government debt) and for support in the form of non-repayable grants; on the other side, Germany was part of a group of northern EU countries, which rejected the idea of Covid-19 bonds and rather advocated the allocation of credits only, or possibly of Eurozone bailout funds to the most affected countries (Ibid.).

However, less than two months later, on 18 May, 2020, President Macron and Chancellor Merkel surprised most political experts by departing from their initial positions and presenting a joint proposal for a temporary recovery fund to be linked to the EU budget (Ibid.). Under the Franco-German plan, the Commission, on behalf of the EU, would raise €500 billion on the financial markets, which would then be distributed to the hardest-hit EU countries via grants to be repaid (The Guardian, 2020). At the time, many political experts described the Franco-German initiative as a "a potential turning point in the history of the EU": both France and Germany moved away from their former southern and northern camps to take on the role of *mediators*, forging a bilateral plan which formed the blueprint for a broader European compromise (Kaletsky, 2020; Krotz & Schramm, 2021).

It is important to understand here that without this Franco-German co-leadership of the EU, there would have been no majority political support for the Commission proposal on the recovery package and no agreement by the 27 member states. Going back to the framework proposed by political experts Krotz and Schramm described above, the "Merkron" co-leadership of the EU during the COVID-19 crisis is a clear "example of both agenda-setting and consensus-building," which made it possible to break the deadlock between the member states and to initiate a credible plan for the EU's economic recovery (Krotz & Schramm, 2021).

FRANCE AND EUROPEAN INTEGRATION: FUTURE PROSPECTS

Having underlined the impact that President Macron has had on France's commitment to the European integration process over the past four years, it is also important to analyse prospects for the future of the EU. The question of France's influence within the EU could become particularly important in the upcoming months: the socio-political and economic consequences of the EU's recovery package in response to the COVID-19 crisis, the French presidency of the Council of the EU in January 2022, and Merkel's leaving office at the end of 2021 are all important dynamics that will have considerable impact on France's future role in the European integration process. In order to outline some possible scenarios of what can be expected in terms of French EU policy, it is first necessary to go back to Macron's initial policy project for the EU and analyse if it has gradually shifted away from its original configuration, as presented in 2017.

Macron's perspectives on the future of European integration

As mentioned above, President Macron presented most of his pro-integrationist program for the EU at Sorbonne University in September 2017, when he famously called for a "sovereign, united, and democratic Europe" (see Chopin, 2018). In short,

Macron advocated a "profound transformation" of the EU with deeper, yet more transparent, political integration. He promoted closer cooperation and regulation between its member states, with a clear desire for a common defence and foreign policy framework, as well as a common budget for the Eurozone (Ibid.).

However, after almost four years in office, and despite his initial desire to further reinforce the integrationist momentum of the European project, it seems that Macron has been gradually lowering his policy ambitions for the EU. As noted by political expert Mujtaba Rahman, Macron's definition of European sovereignty has evolved considerably since his speech at the Sorbonne: these days, when Macron brings up the idea, he prefers to use the concept of European autonomy rather than *sovereignty* – as an admission that his ambitions will not be fulfilled by the end of his mandate (Rahman, 2021b). It was in an interview with the French newspaper Le Grand Continent that this gradual shift in language explicitly manifested itself regarding the two main aspects of defence and foreign policy, and economic policy (Le Grand Continent, 2020).

First, Macron has had to admit that his desire for a truly sovereign Europe in military and defence-related matters ran up against the impossibility of obtaining a consensus between the different member states at the EU level (Ibid.). Despite the successful creation of the European Defence Fund in 2017, Macron remains well aware that in the (post-Trump) Biden era, European military and defence cooperation will not be of high priority on the European political agenda. Thus, the French president has had to reduce his idea of a European sovereignty and shift it to an autonomous Europe, whose main objective will be to push for greater European military spending, and to achieve a more robust European defence identity within NATO — as opposed to his initial desire to create a "complement or even a rival to the transatlantic alliance", as suggested in his comment on NATO's "brain death" in 2019 (Rahman, 2021b). In particular, Macron has become increasingly aware that in Germany the conservative Christian Democrats are not looking favourably upon his European project in areas of defence and foreign policy, and that, for them, NATO is to remain the "backbone of the West's security infrastructure" (Ibid.).

Second, the French president has also strayed from his initial desire to strengthen and "complete" the Eurozone via the proposal for a common budget (Ibid.). In his interview with Le Grand Continent in 2020, Macron explicitly declared that he was very satisfied with the progress that France had made with the EU recovery fund to the COVID-19 crisis, admitting that this was already a big step towards European autonomy, and that this measure was clearly sufficient for the time being (Le Grand Continent, 2020).

During his mandate, Macron has also been forced to admit that the concept of European sovereignty, which remains unclear to many, has triggered heated debate in France and in Europe, and even explicit opposition from key European partners (see Quencez, 2021). In France, beyond Macron's close circle, many of his formulations revolving around the concept of European sovereignty and autonomy are currently not accepted or promoted by other French mainstream

politicians (Rahman, 2021b). While the French right generally defends the European project, they are easily distracted or tempted by more nationalist and introverted arguments (Ibid.). The left, on the other hand, generally thinks that the EU should be less market-oriented and more "social" and green (Ibid.). In this context, the French president understands very well that he will have no other choice but to convince most sceptics about his notion of European sovereignty, and that he will have to articulate a clearer vision of Europe, with a better (and more precise) policy timeline, so that he can obtain sufficient political support for his project to become legitimate at the national, and then, European level.

Macron also knows that the EU as a whole has always lacked a clear political *raison-d'être*, and that without such a pre-requisite, his European policy project has very little chance of ever seeing the light of day (see Quencez, 2021). This is probably why he is pushing forward with the Conference on the Future of Europe in the hope that his European project, which is at the origin of the latter's initiative, will be echoed in citizens' demands, and that it will therefore gain democratic legitimacy. The fact remains that there is still a great deal of uncertainty as to the future success of these conventions, and that their popular reach does not always equate to any significant result or reforms at the EU level.

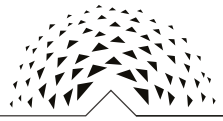
Finally, with the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, France is currently battling a fourth pandemic wave, and Macron has been forced to respond with strong, yet controversial, policy measures, which are now fuelling debates and dominating the policy agenda in France. These domestic dynamics are not expected to end anytime soon; and it is therefore unlikely that the French president will find either the time or the space to disseminate and legitimize his pro-European ideas within the French political arena before the 2022 presidential elections.

The French presidency of the Council of the EU: is Macron up to the challenge?

On 1 January, 2022, France will assume the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union, and President Macron will endeavour to promote his three main policy objectives for the EU: "recovery, power, and belonging" (Moreau, 2021).

As mentioned above, President Macron considers that the EU has already made considerable efforts regarding European integration in terms of economic measures through the COVID-19 recovery fund and regarding defence and foreign policy reforms through the European Defence Fund. Hence, aside from his desire to supervise the EU's economic recovery from the pandemic crisis, Macron has decided to focus the French presidency of the Council of the EU on two other preoccupations for Europe which France has always been concerned about: power and belonging.

First, as outlined in the first part of this article, the assertion of Europe as a global power has long been a French aspiration with regard to the EU (see Moreau, 2021). French presidents have always been concerned with the European project



as a means of asserting their country's power on the international stage, even more since France has been demoted to the status of middle power in the face of emerging geopolitical giants, i.e. China and Russia (Ibid.).

Having injected the concept of "European strategic autonomy" into the popular discourse, President Macron now intends to use the French presidency as a means of advancing the consolidation of the EU as a "unified European geopolitical power," and, through it, strengthen France's power in the international arena (Ibid.). To achieve this goal, President Macron has set three main policy priorities for the French presidency: digital transition, climate issues, and social rights (see Pollet, 2021). In essence, Macron has already planned to advance several major pieces of legislation, including the Green Deal, the Digital Markets Act, and the Digital Services Act (Ibid.).

Second, the concept of "European belonging" is also going to play a major role in the roadmap of the 2022 French presidency. At a time when the number of global challenges in areas of health, security, environment, etc. is constantly on the rise, France wants to "continue demonstrating the relevance of [action at] the European level and restore confidence in Europe's ability to protect society's choices in the long term and carry weight in the world" (Ambassade de France au Royaume-Uni, 2020). In this context, France intends to use the Conference on the Future of Europe as a major democratic act to jumpstart its presidency by attempting to offer Europeans a shared societal project and vision that will be both accepted and legitimate.

However, despite such policy projects for the EU, the French presidency will coincide with the national presidential elections, and Macron will most likely use the European stage as a sounding board for April 2022 (see Moreau, 2021). In this context, the incumbent president will have to engage both with the European stage and with his national presidential campaign, with which he will be obliged to participate in a maximum number of public appearances and campaign messaging in France (Ibid.). These will be difficult times, with truly impossible policy timelines to meet, and there is little doubt that President Macron will prioritize his presidential campaign above all else. As political expert Sloan Moreau argues, it is difficult to believe that the French presidency of the Council of the EU will not be "opportunistically used for political gains, at the detriment of a calmer presidency" (Ibid.). The result being that the French presidential campaign "will most likely make way for a Gallicisation of European challenges, with a European political stage coloured by the political ambitions of France" (Ibid.).

In this context, the question that remains is whether France will have any significant impact on the European integration process during its presidency of the EU. The honest answer is probably not: the domestic policy dynamics at play will be too intense, and Macron's impact on the Council of the EU will most certainly remain at a symbolic level – as a means to serve his presidential campaign.

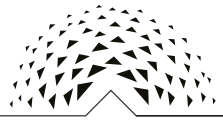
The impact of Merkel's leaving of office

Finally, another important factor to consider regarding France's future role in the European integration process is Chancellor Merkel's political retirement in fall 2021, which will have considerable impact in terms of EU policy. While Merkel's departure will leave, in the short and medium term, a substantial void in terms of EU leadership, the question that remains is whether President Macron will have the stature to fill this gap *alone*.

The answer is most likely negative for two main reasons: Macron's problematic leadership style and the historical need for a solid Franco-German partnership within the EU, which will probably be missing in the first twelve months (Rahman, 2021a).

First, Macron is a very *divisive* political figure at the EU level: his ambitious yet controversial ideas on European reforms are not shared by all the member states, and he will most probably struggle or be less inclined to follow the rule of "delicate compromises" on which the EU has consistently been reliant (Ibid.). As political expert Josef Joffe puts it, "whereas Macron craves the limelight, Merkel, known as the *Mutti* (mum), reads from a well-thumbed script about continuity and caution" (Joffe, 2020). Merkel's deft political skills are what enabled the EU to go some way in locking in the COVID-19 economic recovery fund in the face of staunch opposition from Hungary and Poland. If Merkel had pushed Budapest or Warsaw too hard on the rule of law (as Macron probably would have done alone), it would have risked losing the deal and endangering the economic and political cohesion of the EU (Rahman, 2021a). Hence, it is very unlikely that such a *divisive* political leader as President Macron will single-handedly embody the EU's leadership after Merkel's leaving of office in the upcoming months, as this could have severe consequences for the stability of the Union.

Second, while Macron clearly expects to be a leading figure in post-Merkel Europe, he presumably remains aware of the *historical* necessity to find a "sympathetic partner" in Berlin to ensure *functional* leadership of the EU (Ibid.). However, Macron has absolutely no power whatsoever over German political and electoral dynamics, which will soon see the future chancellor emerge. Besides, as explained by Mujtaba Rahman, the newly elected chancellor, who will inevitably be inexperienced in view of the candidates, risks being more concerned with domestic politics and coalition management than with European issues (Ibid.). As the Greens and the CDU have never joined forces before, they will most probably remain cautious, especially when it comes to EU politics (Ibid.). For his part, Macron will also be very busy in the upcoming months with French domestic issues linked to the health and socio-economic crisis, which are currently dominating the national political arena and agenda. When the new German chancellor is finally elected, Macron's attention will already be absorbed by his presidential campaign of April 2022 (Ibid.). This means that



the Franco-German co-leadership of the EU will remain non-existent for the coming year, and that the European integration process will momentarily lose its most notable engine.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to make sense of France's relationship with the European integration process from its origins to the present day. It sought to understand France's past, present, and future role in the evolution of the European Union, with particular attention to President Macron's pro-European influence on the EU.

The article first analysed the history of France's relationship with the European integration process as well as its long-standing partnership with Germany. It has found that while France has always played a leading role in the process of European integration, integration has been treated cautiously by former French presidents, who have constantly strived to "keep France sovereign and powerful" while making the most of its participation in a supranational community (Gomes Ferreira, 2011). The French power aspirations are illustrated by the fact that France reunites the third most populous group of working officials in the European institutions, as well as the highest functionaries in the joint institutions (Morin, 2019). At each major stage of the EU's community project, France has supported further forms of supranational integration in areas of socio-economic policy, but it has preferred the intergovernmental mode of governance in areas of defence and foreign policy (Lequesne & Behal, 2019). France's influence within the EU has also long been correlated to its effective co-leadership with Germany, which has permitted the creation of the European Council in 1974, the EMS in 1979, the single market under the SEA in 1986, and the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. This co-leadership of the EU has been essential in the promotion of further European integration, closer cooperation in situations of crisis management, and the overcoming of decision-making deadlocks between different member states (Krotz & Schramm, 2021).

Second, this article investigated the impact that Emmanuel Macron has had on European integration by exploring his EU project, his policies, and his relationship with Chancellor Merkel. Overall, the French president has had considerable positive influence on France's commitment to the European integration process: he has enabled the creation of a European Defence Fund (operational since 1 January, 2021), the introduction of a carbon tax at EU member state borders (to come into force in 2023), and the establishment of the Conference on the Future of Europe (launched in May 2021). Despite the initial difficulties in establishing an effective co-leadership of the EU with Germany due to partly different preferences and interests regarding long-term European objectives, the French president has succeeded in relaunching the Franco-

German partnership in the wake of the COVID-19 health crisis by setting the European political agenda, building consensus and compromise between all the member states, and ultimately paving the way for a comprehensive EU recovery package.

Finally, this analysis has offered some possible scenarios of what can be expected in terms of French EU policy in the foreseeable future. With regard to the French presidency of the Council of the EU in January 2022, it has argued that the domestic policy dynamics at play will be too high in France with Macron's national presidential campaign, and that Macron will most likely use the European stage as a sounding board for April 2022 rather than as a credible means of advancing the European integration process (see Moreau, 2021). And while there is little doubt that President Macron will prioritize his presidential campaign above all else, this means that his impact on the Council of the EU will most certainly remain at a symbolic level – as a means to serve his presidential campaign.

Turning to Merkel's leaving of office at the end of 2021, this essay has argued that it will have a considerable negative impact on European integration as well as France's influence within the EU. While President Macron has always been portrayed as a *divisive* political leader at the EU level (with his ambitious yet controversial ideas on European reforms), his possible desire to single-handedly embody the EU's leadership after Merkel's leaving of office could have severe consequences for the stability of the Union in the upcoming months. While he might hope to continue co-leading the EU with the newly elected chancellor, who will be inevitably inexperienced in view of the candidates, there is a risk that he will be more concerned with domestic politics and coalition management than with European issues (Rahman, 2021a). This means that the Franco-German co-leadership of the EU will be considerably hampered by Merkel's leaving of office, and France will momentarily lose its most notable European partner, with whom it has been wielding most of its influence at the EU level.