



## EUROPEAN POLICY ANALYSIS

# A Political Presidency: the 2022 French Presidency of the Council of the European Union

Olivier Rozenberg\*

### Summary

In 2017, Emmanuel Macron was elected President of the French Republic on a markedly pro-European platform, and he has maintained his commitment in this area. Despite this – and despite France's generally high level of influence within the EU – there is some doubt as to how much will be achieved during the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the first half of 2022, given that France's general elections will fall in the middle of it.

This paper argues that the Presidency will deliver results despite the domestic elections but that the elections will impact on its content and style. It will deliver for a series of reasons: the capacity of senior French civil servants in Brussels and Paris to manage the complex policy proposals, Macron's personal influence within the EU, and the European (geo-)political context of early 2022. However, the elections will have an impact on the Presidency, not least because the scheduling of so many formal and informal EU summits and councils seems targeted at French voters. One can expect the most visible developments of the Presidency during its first half to be mainly framed by domestic electoral concerns – this is already apparent in the Presidency's slogan: *relance* (relaunch), *puissance* (power) and *appartenance* (belonging).

\* Olivier Rozenberg is Associate Professor in the Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics of Sciences Po. He has recently published a book on the Europeanisation of the French Parliament, *The French Parliament and the European Union: Backbenchers Blues* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

## 1. Introduction

The election of Emmanuel Macron in 2017 was welcomed enthusiastically in Brussels and beyond. A young president was formulating an ambitious agenda concerning deeper European integration. Despite some failures and misunderstandings, President Macron has since maintained a high-profile pro-EU agenda which has contributed, at certain junctures, to the strengthening of integration and solidarity within the EU. From this perspective, the French Presidency of the Council of the EU, which began on 1 January and will last until the end of June, could be an opportunity to consolidate the recent progress made on key dossiers supported by France, especially financial support to Member States via the Next Generation EU programme, the geopolitical strengthening of the EU, and the fight against global warming.

However, this Presidency occurs at a special point in time for France, i.e. the very end of Macron's term. France's general elections will take place during the Presidency (10 and 24 April 2022 for the president, 12 and 19 June 2022 for the parliament). Such a clash appears to be unfortunate, especially given Macron's very likely candidacy. The attention of French authorities will naturally be drawn to domestic electoral issues. Their capacity to act, at least for a few weeks, will be considerably reduced. Any unforeseen event at the EU level could be exploited by domestic political actors – in particular by the Eurosceptic radical right. Other Member States' faith in the Council Presidency also depends on who will be elected president on 24 April: Macron would undoubtedly be strengthened at the EU level by a re-election while the victory of his radical-right opponents would paralyze the EU. The victory of the centre-right candidate, Valérie Pécresse, would probably have limited consequences on the day-to-day functioning of the Council Presidency.

This paper therefore assesses the capacity of the French Presidency of the Council to deliver results despite this unfavourable timing. It argues that *the Presidency will deliver results despite the domestic elections, but that the elections will impact on its content and style*. In that sense, it will be a fully political Presidency. First, *it will deliver results* for a series of reasons: the capacity of senior French civil servants in Brussels and Paris to manage the

progress of the complex dossiers, Macron's personal influence within the EU, and the European (geo-) political context of early 2022. Second, *the elections will impact on its content and style* in various ways: the President, who stands at the centre of the domestic institutional system, will use EU summits for promotional purposes, and multiple informal Council meetings will be organised across the country to jointly promote the EU and the French government's EU policy. After mid-March, ministers will be less focused on their European tasks and political attention will be centred on the presidential campaign.

**'After mid-March, ministers will be less focused on their European tasks and political attention will be centred on the presidential campaign.'**

This paper discusses these issues considering both the political and geopolitical position of France within the EU and the key dossiers that decision-makers are likely to focus on in early 2022, especially the Green deal, digital governance and social Europe. If the issues on the agenda are well-identifiable, it should be signalled, as a caveat, that the course of the Presidency could be affected by unforeseeable developments, be they related to the current wave of COVID-19 in Europe, or to geopolitical considerations as was the case for the previous French Presidency in 2008. The second section addresses the general relationship between France and the EU. The third makes a short assessment of Macron's EU policy since he was elected in 2017. The remaining sections are directly focussed on the French Presidency, presenting its context (section 4), organisation (5) and priorities (6).

## 2. France in the EU: a loyal but tumultuous Member State

Historically, France has been at the core of European integration. From the 1950s to the present, French leaders have contributed to the deepening of the Union in critical circumstances. Yet, this key member also seems periodically uncertain about the type and degree of preferred integration (Rozenberg 2020).

## 2.1 A central member ...

France was not only one of the six founding members of the EU. It also made a decisive contribution to integration at least at three times. In the 1950s, centrist French leaders such as Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman played a leading role in establishing the specificity of the regional integration with their willingness to establish *de facto* cooperation among social and economic forces. In the 1960s, Charles de Gaulle did not oppose the implementation of the Treaty of Rome. This rather unexpected choice for a nationalist leader should be understood as a result of geopolitical considerations such as the wish to isolate the United Kingdom. De Gaulle also cemented the peace with Germany through his special relationship with Chancellor Adenauer.

In the 1970s and up to the mid-1990s, France has been led by two presidents who counted among the most pro-European within their parties: Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (1974–1981) for the right and François Mitterrand (1981–1995) for the left. Each contributed to the reform of European treaties and the deepening of economic integration. They made an especially important contribution regarding the establishment of the single currency. After the fall of the Berlin wall, President Mitterrand famously pressed German officials to give up the Mark as an implicit condition for the unification of their country. This pro-European trend continued with subsequent French leaders: Jacques Chirac (1995–2007), Nicolas Sarkozy (2007–2012) and François Hollande (2012–2017). Remarkably, their commitment in office was not affected by statements critical of integration that these Presidents occasionally made before entering the Elysée Palace. Once elected, they all decided to follow the path of their predecessors by promoting new cooperation in this or that field, and continuing to coordinate with the most important partner, Germany (Drake 2013).

As a result of this continuous policy, France – with some other Member States – stands at the heart of the *de facto* 'Europe à la carte' of the post-Maastricht era. The country belongs to all kinds of cooperation, be they formal, enhanced modes of cooperation or *ad hoc* ones. It has traditionally supported positive integration policies which could benefit its economy, famously regarding agriculture and regional development. It is also

supportive of an enhanced geopolitical role for European integration, including in the field of defence.

**'As a result of this continuous policy, France – with some other Member States – stands at the heart of the *de facto* "Europe à la carte" of the post-Maastricht era.'**

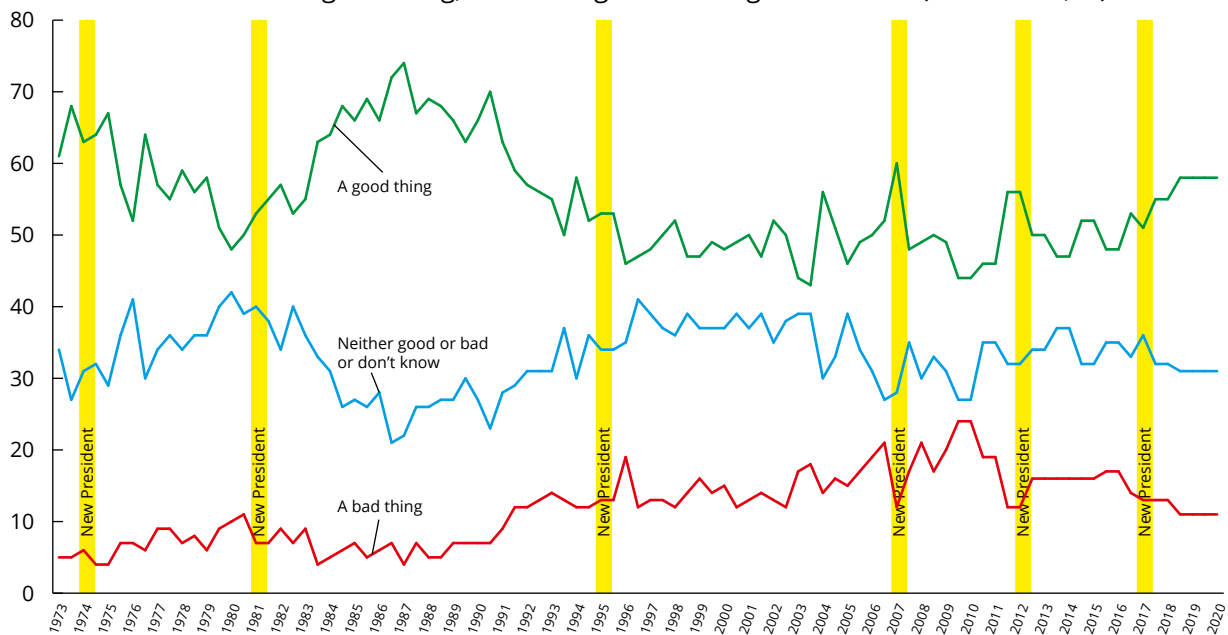
## 2.2 ... but a tumultuous one

It could be said that, the price to pay for French presidents' continuous support for European integration is their often implicit view that France should lead the EU (Rozenberg 2015). For many years, this 'French Europe' has been based on geopolitical realities: France was willing to play a greater diplomatic role than Germany, it was more deeply committed to integration than the United Kingdom and it was geographically located at the core of the European communities. This situation began to change in the 1990s. With the unification of Germany, the enlargement of the Union to the North and then the East, and the economic (and social) difficulties faced by France, this statement has progressively turned out to be less and less accurate. Yet French leaders continued to act as if they could still lead the continent.

The last French Presidency of the Council of the EU, in the second half of 2008, offers a good example of this (Lequesne & Rozenberg 2008). Faced with multiples crises related to the Irish rejection of the Lisbon treaty, the start of the financial crisis and war in Georgia, President Sarkozy presented himself as a saviour of the Union. He emphasized his personal commitment to finding compromises and promoting original solutions. Arguably, this attitude is rooted in a political culture based on both political willingness and a messianic conception of the nation. It is often perceived negatively in Brussels and famously labelled 'French arrogance'. Behind the cliché, there is arguably an institutional and cultural contrast between this French activism and the policy-style of the EU which is based on subtle and delicate compromises.

Another blind spot of France's EU membership has to do with limited public support for the

**Figure 1.** French persons thinking that France's membership to the European Communities/Union is a good thing, a bad thing or neither good nor bad (1973–2020, %)



Source: Eurobarometers produced by the European Commission or the European Parliament (1973–2020)

project (see Figure 1). The central institutional role occupied by French Presidents has allowed them to adopt ambitious pro-EU agendas that were neither strongly pushed for by major interest groups nor supported by large fractions of society. As summarized by Craig Parsons (2016), ‘France has delegated huge powers to the EU, but without broad and consensual support among interest groups or parties or voters on either Right or Left.’

As a result of this top-down dynamic, parties and citizens have occasionally voiced strong opposition to European integration. In 1992, to the surprise of all observers, the treaty of Maastricht was adopted by only 51% of the voters. And in 2005, a majority of 55% rejected the draft Constitutional Treaty. The opposition to this text came from forces across the political spectrum, including some left-wing voters favourable to integration in principle but opposed to market liberalisation.

Over the last decade, opposition to European integration has become more structured and vocal with the rise of the radical right and left and the decision of their respective leaders, Marine Le Pen and Jean-Luc Mélenchon, to focus politically on the EU. The success of both leaders indicates that this strategy found echoes within the population. In the first round of the presidential election of 2017, Le Pen obtained 21.3% of the votes with the National

Rally (*Rassemblement national*, formerly National Front) and Mélenchon 19.6%. The right-wing candidate, François Fillon, a former Maastricht opponent, came in third behind Macron and Le Pen, with 20%. Therefore, among the four first at this round, only Macron, with 24%, had adopted an unambiguous pro-EU position (Evans Ivaldi 2018).

Following this decade of politicization of the European issue, French public opinion now counts among the most Eurosceptic in the EU. In the long run, the proportion of citizens assessing negatively French membership to the EU has increased, though moderately, from 5% in 1973 to 10% nowadays as indicate in Figure 1.

One third of the public is unsure, as indicated by the consistent proportion of persons answering ‘I don’t know’ or ‘Neither good nor bad’ in the graph. 58% of the respondents have a good opinion about EU membership. But, in the last Eurobarometer wave of Spring 2021, a question dealing with the image of Europe places French citizens among the most Eurosceptic in comparison with the EU-27 average and with the five other founding members. What is most striking is the fact that it is in France that the highest rate of persons having a ‘very negative’ image of the EU (8%). It confirms that some radical voters are specifically focused on this issue (see also Cautrès et al. 2021).

**Table 1.** Answers to the question ‘In general, does the EU conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image?’ (2021, %)

	Very positive	Fairly positive	Total positive	Neutral	Fairly negative	Very negative	Total negative
France	4	36	40	38	14	8	22
EU average	7	41	48	35	13	4	17
Germany Italy and Benelux averages	6	44	50	32	15	3	18

Source: Standard Eurobarometer 95, Spring 2021

### 3. President Macron & the EU: between ambitions & realities

In comparison with his predecessors, who tended to be muted in promoting their European policy, or to occasionally voice criticism of some aspects of the EU, President Macron has been consistently and outspokenly pro-EU since entering office. The preliminary assessment that can be made of his European policy is mixed, with some failures and successes.

#### 3.1 A pro-EU credo

On the night of 7 May 2017, the newly elected President Macron celebrated his victory in front of the Louvre museum. When he arrived there, cameras showed him making his way across the famous courtyard. The music he selected during those minutes was Beethoven’s ‘Ode to Joy’. In the wake of his election victory, the message was clear: France was officially adopting a positive, perhaps even enthusiastic, discourse vis-à-vis European integration. The message should not only be understood in the context of the rivalry between Macron and the Europhobic National Rally during the second round of the 2017 presidential election. It is true that European issues were once the main sources of conflict between the two platforms and that Marine Le Pen based her strategy on the commitment to withdraw from the euro. Yet, the choice of the ‘Ode to Joy’ also aimed at contrasting Macron’s pro-European commitment with the low profile adopted by his predecessors, from mainstream right or left parties, on European issues.

His support for deepening European integration was an effective strategy for the young candidate to attract moderate voters from the left and the

right. It also contributed to giving a positive and optimistic image to his campaign. The evidence seems to indicate that this choice for Europe also resulted from Macron’s previous experience as personal advisor to President Hollande and then Minister for the Economy between 2014 and 2016. From Chirac to Hollande, French officials made continuous efforts to avoid sanctions from the Commission and the Council for not complying with the criteria and rules relating to the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), especially regarding public deficit limits. Macron estimated that this strategy, although seemingly successful, led to a stalemate for the following reasons. It harmed France’s reputation in Brussels and other capitals. It also limited French leaders’ ability to lead in other policy areas as their energy was mainly focused on avoiding sanctions. Finally, it contributed to negatively framing the EU debate within the domestic public space.

Therefore, the new President had a clear strategy that his centre-right Prime Minister and Minister for the Economy and Finance were keen to apply: first to respect the rules and then to promote new ones. As he put it in the book which outlined his political vision: ‘we should never forget that there is room for French leadership in Europe, but this requires that we set an example’ (Macron 2016, p. 237).<sup>1</sup> Beyond this general line, his platform as a candidate was remarkably vague. It put emphasis on the reform of EMU governance and on the creation of a specific budget for the Eurozone but his views on these issues remained undeveloped and there were no other major EU projects on his agenda. Once elected, he decided to rely on a series of concrete proposals which had been promoted for years by French authorities. The speech he gave at

<sup>1</sup> My translation.



the Sorbonne at the beginning of his term, on 26 September 2017, demonstrates this. After generally promoting deepening European integration and the concept of European sovereignty, President Macron listed some 50 or more projects that were remarkably unrelated to each other.<sup>2</sup>

### 3.2 A balanced assessment

In comparison with the expectations his election raised among pro-EU forces (see, for instance, Drozdiak 2020), and arguably within the so-called ‘Brussels bubble’, the first years of his term were rather a source of disappointment. No major developments were noted for instance in the months following the Sorbonne speech. With the passage of time, a more balanced assessment can now be formulated which distinguishes four issues: European strategic autonomy; compliance with EMU rules; the macro-economic capacity of the EU, and the institutional game in Brussels.

*‘European Strategic Autonomy was at the core of the Sorbonne speech which mentioned “Europe’s autonomous operating capabilities”.’*

*European Strategic Autonomy* was at the core of the Sorbonne speech which mentioned ‘Europe’s autonomous operating capabilities’. On this issue as on others, Macron stood in the continuity with France’s traditional positions. No rapid outcomes could be expected after his speech given the reluctance of most of the Members State to distance themselves or the EU from US protection. Nevertheless, the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) – that was already in the pipeline – was launched in December 2017 with the participation of all Member States except

Denmark, and Malta.<sup>3</sup> It has initiated since numerous projects. After a period of hesitation that resulted partly from divisions between France’s military authorities and its diplomats (De France 2019), France became, with the third wave of projects in 2019, the most actively involved partner, participating in 30 projects out of 45 and leading 10 of them. Among them, three are given particular emphasis by French authorities: protection against ballistic missiles (‘twister’), the ‘EU Radionavigation solution’ (EURAS) for the geographical location of forces and the modernization of the Tiger helicopter.<sup>4</sup>

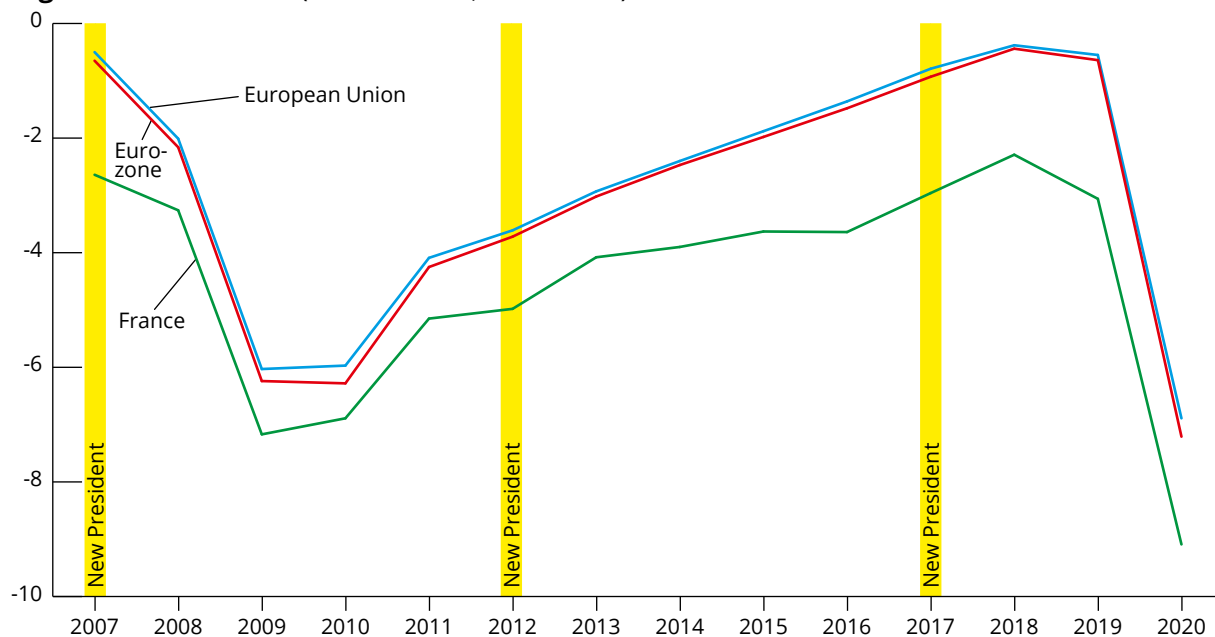
*The respect for the EMU rules.* As described above, complying with the rules of the Stability and Growth Pact was a cornerstone of Macon’s initial strategy. In November 2018, more than one year after his election, the *gilets jaunes* (‘yellow vests’) protests put a damper on the efforts to cut public spending. In itself, the issue of Europe was not central to these grassroots protests. Yet, they expressed a total mistrust towards the remoteness of modern governance – something that the EU embodies for many. In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic further convinced French authorities that remaining within the macro-economic rules was no longer a priority. In a solemn TV speech on 12 March 2020, Macron repeated three times the formula that Mario Draghi had used in defence of the euro during the sovereign debt crisis: whatever it takes (*‘quoi qu’il en coûte’*). This expression referring to support for the health system, unemployed persons and private business quickly became the French government’s mantra during the crisis. One year later, in 2021, the government began very gradually to reduce its economic support to business. However, the pre-electoral context of the period and the likely willingness of the incumbent President to stand for his re-election is not favourable to massive cuts and reforms.

<sup>2</sup> The estimation of around fifty was made by Macron himself (Van Renterghem 2021, p. 287). The following non-exhaustive list can be drafted: European soldiers in the French army; a European office for asylum; a tax on financial transfers to fund international cooperation; many points on energy and against global warming, reform of the CAP; a new EU agency for disruptive innovation; the harmonization of business taxes rates; a weighted minimal wage; the expansion of Erasmus beyond students, transnational lists for the European elections; a European Commission of only 15 members; a network of European universities ...

<sup>3</sup> And the UK which was in the process of withdrawing from the EU.

<sup>4</sup> See: <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/actualites/communaute-defense/la-csp>

**Figure 2.** Public deficit (% of the GDP, 2007–2021)



Source: OECD

Figure 2 indicates how difficult it is to balance public accounts in France showing the level of public deficit during the three last presidencies.

If the strategy of balancing the public accounts to restore international credibility has largely failed, it should be noted that the general mood regarding this issue has changed over the last years within the EU. Fiscal rules have been suspended because of the necessary support given to domestic economies during COVID-19-related lock-downs. Austerity views have lost ground, including within the so-called frugal countries, and may be addressed during the extraordinary European Council of March 2022 (the agenda of this meeting is unknown at the time of writing). Should it be put on the agenda, French officials will certainly argue that the fight against global warming should justify further exceptional public spending.

*The macro-economic capacity of the EU.* German chancellor Angela Merkel has first been reluctant to implement the reforms of the EMU promoted by Macron. This failure made clear that Germany was the most influential player in the game, holding a *de facto* veto. The friendship with Germany was certainly important on many issues, and had a deep symbolic dimension. But it was not sufficient to promote structural reforms if the German partner was not convinced of their relevance. Moreover, the young President probably made a strategic mistake:

his ambitious initial agenda *de facto* placed Merkel in a defensive position while advancing projects often requires some discretion (Van Renterghem 2021, p. 286).

Macron's initial defeat on this issue has been erased by the unprecedented context of the COVID-19 crisis. Merkel's shift on the question of financial solidarity between Member States in 2020 can be explained by a variety of reasons ranging from contemporary domestic considerations to historical ones. Yet, there is no doubt that Macron's repeated calls for endowing the EU with a greater macro-economic capacity played a role in the evolution of the Germany's position. Moreover, once the Next Generation EU agenda was proposed, the Franco-German tandem played a decisive role in its passing in the European Council, especially during the December 2020 meeting where Merkel and Macron coordinated their respective positions to find a wider agreement on the Rule of Law issue. In this respect, the success of this key policy represents a decisive victory for Macron.

During the French Presidency of the Council of the EU, the Commission will continue to implement the Next Generation EU agenda, discussing the recovery and resilience plans with Member States to assess either their milestones or their implementation. The French may have to seek compromises where plans still have not been

accepted – notably Poland's. President Macron will certainly be keen to avoid tensions on this issue in order to present it as a positive achievement of his Presidency during the electoral campaign.

*The institutional game in Brussels.* Despite his pro-European commitment, Macron initially showed a limited understanding of the way of functioning of the EU institutions, and especially the European Parliament. He first hoped to be able to break the domination of the European People's Party and European social-democrats in EU politics by attracting parties from both camps as he had done in France. The plan failed. He hesitated at length before joining the Liberals and he remains ambivalent: MEPs from his party belong to the Renew Europe group (they even chair it now) but his party does not count among the members of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe. In 2019, Macron successfully opposed the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure supporting the view that the main source of legitimacy of the president of the European Commission should derive from the trust provided by national leaders. His first words of anger when his Commissioner-candidate was rejected by the European Parliament in October 2019 – 'I don't understand'<sup>5</sup> – should be understood literally: there are aspects of EU politics that French leaders shaped by the Fifth Republic do not understand – even where they are supporters of the EU. The dominance of French Presidents on the domestic political space does not prepare them to play the game of compromise in Brussels.

**'The dominance of French Presidents on the domestic political space does not prepare them to play the game of compromise in Brussels.'**

Yet, despite these defeats and repeated episodes of tension, Macron also successfully proposed or supported a series of nominations to top EU positions. Some were French candidates, such as Commissioner Thierry Breton in charge of the

Internal Market or the President of the European Central Bank Christine Lagarde, but others were not, for example the Presidents of the European Commission and of the European Council. In the European Parliament, MEPs from Macron's party constitute by far the largest delegation of the Renew group (23 out of 100) – a group which occupies together with the Greens a pivotal position in shaping coalitions. To summarize, after the defeat of his initial unrealistic ambitions, the French President has learnt the specific way of functioning of the EU and now appears to be one of its most influential actors.

#### 4. The French Council Presidency in context

There are reasons to believe that the current French government will not tone down its ambition during the Presidency. At the EU level, the timing is rather good for Macron. At the domestic level, the electoral context pushes for the politicization of the Presidency.

##### 4.1 A window of opportunity at the EU level

It is always difficult to assess whether the 'Brussels mood' is favourable to a given actor at a given time. Yet, France's position appears to be more comfortable at the end of Macron's term than at the beginning, in 2017. Arguably, Merkel's shift on the question of financial solidarity between Member States in 2020 brought France and Germany closer. The general elections of September 2021 in Germany may also be considered positively on the French side of the Rhine. The traffic-light coalition will probably act in continuity with Merkel's EU policy (Kreilinger 2021). French authorities and Olaf Scholz's team have already established trusting relationships over the last few months. Moreover, the fact that the process of coalition-formation was not drawn out is also good news: the EU agenda will not be blocked for months by the domestic German situation as was the case in 2017. Nevertheless, the fact that the financial portfolio is held by the Liberal Party leader suggests that the pressure from orthodox economic forces will not diminish with the new administration.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Press conference in Lyon on 10 October 2019 after the European Parliament's rejection of Sylvie Goulard's proposed appointment as a Commissioner.

<sup>6</sup> The G7 will be presided by Germany during the same semester but further cooperation should not be expected from this conjunction as each institution has its own agenda and membership.



Relations between France and the third Member State of the EU in terms of size, Italy, have been far better since the arrival of Mario Draghi as head of government in February 2021, following years of tensions both with the radical right and the populist Five Stars movement. The Quirinale Treaty, signed in November 2021 by both countries, helps place France at the centre of the diplomatic game, between Northern and Southern Europe.

Regarding the EU institutions' agenda, the French Presidency falls in the middle of the 2019–2024 term. From the perspective of Commission President Ursula von der Leyen or of the main groups in the European Parliament, it means that the period should be used effectively. In the long decision-making process of the EU, it is in 2022 and 2023 that the heart of the legislative agenda can be adopted. Brussels actors are all aware that their legacy depends on decisions taken during that period, especially (but not only) on environmental issues. Moreover, recent developments in some important policy areas also seem to vindicate France's past positions. This is the case for the implementation of Brexit, where the difficult discussions with the British authorities on the integrity of the single market in relation to Northern Ireland rather justify the firm positions previously taken by Hollande and then Macron. At the international level, traditional French positions in favour of an independent strategic capacity for the EU also appear to be justified to some extent by recent developments. Macron shocked other European leaders by telling *The Economist* in November 2019 that NATO was 'brain dead'.<sup>7</sup> At that time it was widely expected that Trump's unilateralism would soon be a thing of the past. Yet the Biden administration has shown since some reluctance to play the multilateral game: Europeans were not consulted on the withdrawal from Afghanistan, and deeper strategic cooperation between Australia, the UK and the US ('AUKUS') was secretly prepared to the detriment of the former Franco-Australian partnership. Arguably, these episodes indicate that there is

indeed something rotten in transatlantic relations and seem to vindicate the French drive for more European strategic autonomy.

## 4.2 A domestic politicization

As noted, two major domestic elections will be held during the French Presidency: for President on 10 and 24 April, and to Parliament on 12 and 19 June. This rare (but not unprecedented)<sup>8</sup> configuration means that the useful period of the Presidency will be shortened, as Macron will run very likely for re-election (Lequesne 2021). After March 2022, if not before, any major initiative of the President will be perceived at home and abroad as an electoral strategy. It is difficult to estimate the effect of this on Macron's EU positions. On the one hand, compromising in key policy areas could be more difficult for him during that period. French officials will certainly be highly cautious, postponing decisions that could be framed negatively by the French media. On the other hand, any diplomatic successes will be passionately sought for domestic reasons.

**'What is more certain still is that, in line with the previous electoral campaign of 2017, Macron will put emphasis on EU issues as an indication of the main distinction between him and his rivals.'**

What is more certain still is that, in line with the previous electoral campaign of 2017, Macron will put emphasis on EU issues as an indication of the main distinction between him and his rivals. One could have thought that the EU would not have been as significant as a campaign issue this time: Marine Le Pen has toned down her criticism, to gain credibility, and now accepts the EMU, Mélenchon's poll ratings are modest, and the right-wing candidate, Valérie Pécresse, has a rather pro-EU profile.<sup>9</sup> However, reactions to the Polish Constitutional Court's rejection, in October 2021,

<sup>7</sup> 'What we are currently experiencing is the brain death of NATO', *The Economist*, 7 November 2019.

<sup>8</sup> It happened already in 1965 and 1995.

<sup>9</sup> Some Eurosceptic views formulated during the right primary seems to be conjunctural as indicated by her rather Europhile opinion paper: 'Je me battraï pour la force de l'Europe comme pour la force de la France', Valérie Pécresse, *Le Monde*, 10 December 2021.

of the principle of the primacy of EU Law shows that this is far from being the case.<sup>10</sup> The Court's decision was supported by radical left and right forces, which is consistent with their previous European positions. More surprisingly, it was also rather positively viewed by a former Minister for the Economy under President Hollande, Arnaud Montebourg, and by candidates in the centre-right primaries – including the former Commissioner and Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier. This sudden politicization of the EU should be understood in the context of the radicalisation of the early campaign for the Presidential election. In late 2021, a radical right journalist, Eric Zemmour, gained ground in the opinion polls. He holds Eurosceptic and nationalist views although is rather more preoccupied by Muslims than by Brussels. The primaries of the right have been limited to full members of the main party, *Les Républicains*, which led candidates to radicalize their views during the internal campaign of November 2021 – including (and perhaps especially) those perceived as moderate such as Barnier. One of the two candidates selected for the second round of these primaries, Eric Ciotti, belongs to the radical fringe of the party. In a nutshell, it is not certain that France will be back in Europe during its Presidency of the Council of the EU, but Europe is already back in the French presidential campaign.

**'In a nutshell, it is not certain that France will be back in Europe during its Presidency of the Council of the EU, but Europe is already back in the French presidential campaign.'**

France's main partners, be they Member States or EU institutions, may be sympathetic to Macron in these elections given this on-going radicalisation of the debate. Polls indicate that, as in 2017, the selection of Macron and a radical right candidate for the second round is possible but that this time the gap between them in votes may be reduced.<sup>11</sup> In

that context, pro-EU leaders in Europe would have all the more interest in Macron's success given that they face their own populist leaders domestically. This does not mean they will play a decisive role in the French elections. Rather, it means that from Olaf Scholz to Mario Draghi, from Pedro Sánchez to Ursula von der Leyen, top European decision-makers could be minded to offer some clear summit successes to their French counterpart.

The timing of the Presidency leads us to speculate on what will happen after the presidential election of April 2022. Should Macron be re-elected, he may use this momentum to push some key issues in Brussels, for instance on digital issues or on the future of the Next Generation EU programme. He will still be highly cautious given the organisation of parliamentary elections in June. There is no doubt that the success of a radical-right candidate would send a major shock through Europe and would lead to blockages in most negotiations for a few weeks if not months. Finally, the victory of the centre-right candidate, Pécresse, would probably have limited consequences on the day-to-day functioning of the Presidency.

## 5. A split organisation

The French administration has adapted ahead of the Presidency (Saint-Paul 2021). As was the case in 2008, a special unit devoted to the Presidency has been created. Placed under the direct responsibility of the Prime Minister, and headed by a former ambassador, its role is mainly organisational. It is tasked with coordinating the different EU events but also organizing those of the Presidency of the Republic, the Prime Minister and the Minister for European and Foreign Affairs. The leadership of major ministries have selected project managers for the Presidency, for instance the Directorate General for Enterprise within the Ministry of the Economy and Finance. Unusually, the junior minister for European Affairs ordered two reports from working groups chaired by academics, one on the priorities of the Presidency (Chopin, forthcoming) and the other on linguistic practices within EU institutions.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> And also the sanction of the EU Court of Justice over Poland of the 27 October 2021 to pay a fine of one million euro a day for non-compliance with its judgements.

<sup>11</sup> Macron won with two thirds of the second round votes in 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Christian Lequesne (ed.), *Diversité linguistique et langue française*, Report for the French Government, 2021. [https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/rapportlequesne\\_complet\\_avec\\_couverture\\_-\\_10.21\\_002\\_cle055dd6-1.pdf](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/rapportlequesne_complet_avec_couverture_-_10.21_002_cle055dd6-1.pdf)

## Box 1. Calendar of the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union

### January

**6–7:** Macron receives the college of Commissioners (Paris)  
**12–14:** Informal Council of ministers of Defence (12–13) and Foreign Affairs (13–14) (Brest)  
**19:** Macron's speech in front of the European Parliament (Strasbourg)  
**20–22:** Informal Council on environment (20–21) and energy (21–22) (Amiens)  
**24–25:** Informal Council on education and training (Paris)  
**26–27:** Informal Council on education and youth (Strasbourg)  
**30–1 Feb:** Informal Council on internal market and industry (Lens)

### February

**3–4:** Informal Council on justice (Lille)  
**7–8:** Informal Council on agriculture (Strasbourg)  
**9–10:** Informal Council on health (Grenoble)  
**11:** 'One Ocean' summit attended by Macron (Brest)  
**13–14:** Informal Council on trade (Marseille)  
**14–15:** Informal Council on employment and social policy (Bordeaux)  
**16:** Informal Council on space (Toulouse)  
**17–18:** EU-African Union Summit (Brussels, heads of State and Government)  
**21–22:** Informal Council on transport (Le Bourget)  
**25–26:** Informal Council on economy and finance (Paris)

**28 February–1 March:** Informal Council on cohesion (Rouen)

### March

**3–4:** Informal General Affairs Council (Arles)  
**6–7:** Informal Council on development (Montpellier)  
**7–8:** Informal Council on culture (Angers)  
**8–9:** Informal Council on telecommunication (Nevers)  
**10–11:** Extraordinary European Council on 'a new European model for growth and investment' (France, city to be decided)  
**24–25:** European Council and Defence Summit in the margins of the European Council with the likely adoption of the Strategic Compass (Brussels)

### April

**10 and 24: Presidential election in France**

### May

Conclusions of the Conference on the Future of Europe

### June

Conference on Western Balkans  
 Meeting with European universities on the history of Europe  
**12 and 19: Parliamentary elections in France**  
**23–24:** European Council (Brussels)  
**29–30:** NATO summit (Madrid)

**Source:** Official press pack of Macron's conference on the French Presidency of the Council of the EU, 9 December 2021.

<https://www.elysee.fr/admin/upload/default/0001/12/26ab8ecef7127e8fd3100f18dc4a38a16d47e69.pdf>

Beyond this organisational adaptation, the work of managing the Presidency will likely be split between the negotiations (the task of the administrative structure) and the organisation of public events for the President and his ministers. This traditional division of labour is exacerbated by the electoral context of the French Presidency.

At the administrative level, the Permanent Representation in Brussels will play a key role. In Paris, the General Secretariat for European Affairs (SGAE) will be crucial. This unit is under the authority of the Prime Minister and tasked with preparing the national position on any EU issue,

except on external relations (Rozenberg 2020). The administrative capacity of the core actors of the French State machinery (the Permanent Representation, the SGAE, the Foreign minister and the minister for Economy and Finances) leads one to be rather confident regarding the impact of the electoral context. France will still be in a position to play the 'honest broker' for on-going legislative dossiers given the experience, resources and support of senior civil servants in managing Brussels bargains. The same cannot be said regarding the French parliament that will be in session during the first two months of the Presidency only.

At the political level, Macron and his ministers will have a busy schedule of events across France during the first three months of the Presidency. This is especially true for high-flyers such as the Minister for the Economy and Finance and the Minister of the Interior, but also for the Minister for European and Foreign Affairs who will naturally be centre stage. The Presidency programme indicates that no fewer than 20 informal Councils are planned, often within cities headed by mayors who are politically close to Macron. Box 1 presents some key dates of the calendar known at the time of writing (January 2022).

It should be noted that this agenda clearly depends on developments in the COVID-19 crisis. In November 2021 for instance, 200 MEPs asked for remote voting rather than having to sit in Strasbourg.<sup>13</sup> There is no doubt that France will be concerned with restoring the Strasbourg seat of the Parliament after months of closure in 2020 and 2021.

The split organisation of the Presidency is probably inevitable given the electoral context. Some actors will play the go-between in order to balance the administrative and political agendas. This is especially the case of the Permanent Representative for France in Brussels who is closely connected to Macron – both were advisors to President Hollande in 2012. And Clément Beaune, the junior minister for European affairs (under the authority of the minister of Foreign Affairs), is the former European advisor to Macron. Famously close to the Elysée, he has shown a remarkable activism since his appointment in July 2020 and played a direct role on issues such as fisheries in British seas and the fight against homophobia in Eastern Europe.

## 6. A packed agenda

The agenda of the Presidency is based on French priorities but also the EU institutions' own agenda and rhythm, as well as on-going events; this was also the case for the French Presidency of 2008 (Lequesne & Rozenberg 2008). France also has to consider, at least in theory, the agenda of the two other countries with which it forms a trio: the Czech Republic (second half of 2022) and then Sweden.

### 6.1 The sovereignty of Europe as a catch-word

It appears from the press conference President Macron gave on 9 December 2021 that the dossiers to be considered will be numerous (see also Lequesne 2021). A certain lack of prioritisation on the European agenda has characterised Macron's EU policy since the beginning of his term and the Presidency agenda could offer further illustration of this. In an early presentation of the Presidency to the French Council of Ministers in November 2020, the government unveiled a three-word slogan – *relance, puissance, appartenance*. It was subsequently pointed out in a National Assembly report (Saint-Paul 2021) that these words could be a source of misunderstanding within European capitals.

**'A certain lack of prioritisation on the European agenda has characterised Macron's EU policy since the beginning of his term and the Presidency agenda could offer further illustration of this.'**

*Relance* (relaunch) has first an economic meaning: EU economies should start again after COVID-19. It also echoes to a relaunch of the European integration process itself which has been proposed by Macron throughout his term.

*Puissance* (power) speaks to the main narrative for supporting European integration in France – *l'Europe puissance* (power Europe or Europe boost) – i.e. the idea that the EU brings added-value in terms of world influence (Rozenberg 2015). The notion of power is close to that of European sovereignty which Macron has promoted since he was elected. The president emphasized the EU's worldwide influence and the importance of its independence during his press conference on 9 December 2021: 'If we have to sum up in one sentence the objective of this Presidency [...], I would say that we must move from a Europe of cooperation within our borders to a Europe that is

<sup>13</sup> 'Nearly 200 MEPs set to shun Strasbourg over Covid spike', *EU Observer*, 19 November 2021.

powerful in the world [*une Europe puissante*], fully sovereign, free as to its choices and master of its destiny.<sup>14</sup>

*Appartenance* (belonging) mainly refers to citizens feeling that they belong to the EU, which constitutes, as discussed, a major challenge within France. It also relates to the notion of European values since ‘belonging to the EU’ implies a common understanding of key notions related to human rights or solidarity. Therefore, this third word implicitly invokes the rule of law issue.

Regarding the priorities of the Presidency, five ‘chapters’ were highlighted by the Elysée in early December 2021.<sup>15</sup> These five and their main components are briefly presented in Box 2 before being quickly discussed. The elements mentioned under each title offer a mix of advanced bargains (for instance on European wages) and of very preliminary thinking (for instance the idea of ‘European civic service’).

## 6.2 ‘A more sovereign Europe’: a major agenda

The notion of sovereignty is vast and covers the majority of the issues to be addressed. In his press conference, Macron used it first in reference to border control. The question has long been on the agenda but came to the fore because of various events in late 2021, from the death of refugees in the English Channel<sup>16</sup> to the Belarusian ‘migratory attacks’ (to quote Clément Beaune, junior minister for European affairs). The tensions at the Polish-Belarusian border stemming from the exploitation of Middle Eastern refugees by the Belarusian dictatorship reminded all European actors that migration issues were still explosive. In the context of the radicalisation of the French domestic debate, Macron must be ready to swiftly react to any future related events. The November crisis has shown that, after initially hesitating, his government is keen to show understanding and solidarity vis-à-vis Poland’s firm response. In his press conference, the French president insisted on two axes for reforming the Schengen system: the implementation of a political

<sup>14</sup> My translation. To watch the press conference: <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2021/12/09/presentation-de-la-presidence-francaise-du-conseil-de-lunion-europeenne>

<sup>15</sup> President Macron press conference of 9 December 2021.

<sup>16</sup> On 24 November 2021, 24 migrants have drowned in the Channel.

### Box 2. An overview of the Presidency priorities

#### *A more sovereign Europe*

- Reforms of Schengen
- Global diplomatic doctrine (the EU Strategic Compass)
- Relations with Africa (Heads of State and Government summit)
- Relations with the Western Balkans (conference)

#### *A greener Europe*

- 14 draft legislative files (‘fit for 55’), among them the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism

#### *A more digital Europe*

- Big Tech regulation

#### *A more social Europe*

- The directive on Adequate Minimum Wages in the EU (‘[it] will be at the heart of our Presidency’).

#### *A more human Europe*

- Conference on the Future of Europe
- Improvement of rule of law (hate speeches, strategy against racism, combat of violence against women)
- Work on the history of Europe (meeting of universities)
- Strategic thinking on European civic service

Note: The headlines are translated from a French official document of 9 December 2021:

<https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2021/12/09/presentation-de-la-presidence-francaise-du-conseil-de-lunion-europeenne>

### Box 3. The three draft proposals prioritised by France

Among the elements that could make decisive progress during the Presidency, the Elysée highlighted the following legislative proposals:

**Digital:** the Digital Market Act (DMA) and the Digital Services Act (DSA).

**Environment:** the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism

**Social:** directive on Adequate Minimum Wages

Source: Official press pack of Macron’s conference on the French Presidency of the Council of the EU, 9 December 2021



steering [*pilotage*] and the creation of emergency support mechanism for use in case of crisis. When situations such as the recent Polish one arise, a given Member State should receive not only help from Frontex but also from other Member States.

The question of asylum will also be discussed during the Presidency. France's centre-right Home Affairs minister will push for agreement on the new Pact on Migration and Asylum, tabled by the Commission in 2020. The perspective of a single asylum application all over Europe constitutes a clear option that could be, for that reason, easily sold to the French public.

The sovereignty agenda also touches upon diplomatic issues. These questions inevitably arise because of France's traditional support for the strategic autonomy of the continent and because of recent developments such as the AUKUS agreement announced in September 2021. This deepened defence cooperation between the USA, the UK and Australia led to the cancellation of the purchase of French submarines by Australia, but raises more generally the issue of the strategic position of the EU in the rivalry between the USA and China, which has been described as a new cold war.

**'On these issues, France has for long been somewhat isolated in its willingness to play an independent game vis-à-vis the USA.'**

On these issues, France has for long been somewhat isolated in its willingness to play an independent game vis-à-vis the USA. If no major turning points are to be expected during the French Presidency, further discussions among the EU-27 could help advance the French position. In March, the European Council is likely to adopt a Strategic Compass 'to make Europe a security provider' which will probably begin with these gloomy words by High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell: 'Europe is in danger'.

EU relations with Africa are also prioritised by the French government, which should not come as a surprise given France's close links with this continent. For Paris, the difficulties experienced

in French military operations in Africa mean that enhanced European solidarity is required. But the 'African agenda' is wider, with economic, demographic and environmental aspects of the relationship to be discussed during the EU-African Union Summit on 17–18 February.

A conference on the Western Balkans is announced for June. This constitutes a way for Paris to adopt a less defensive attitude after having, in the past, been reluctant on the question of the enlargement of the EU to countries in this area.

The strategic autonomy agenda also has a significant economic dimension with the notion of industrial autonomy, long supported by France, and the future of the suspended investment agreement with China. In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, French views that European industry should be actively supported by EU authorities have gained ground. The issue offers a concrete illustration of Macron's general call for European sovereignty formulated at the Sorbonne. With the help of Commissioner Breton, French authorities will therefore push legislative proposals such as the European Chips Act. An extraordinary European Council on a 'new European model for growth and investment' on 10–11 March is likely to touch upon these issues.

### 6.3 Four other important chapters

*A greener Europe.* Many of the Green Deal texts will be under negotiation between the Council and the European Parliament during the French Presidency. Among them, the preparation of a carbon-trading mechanism at the borders (the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism) is strongly supported by French authorities. It is likely that the negotiations on this issue in particular will make progress without a final agreement being reached on the wider 'Fit for 55' package proposed by the European Commission in July 2021.

In the wake of the Glasgow Conference of Parties to the Paris Agreement on Climate Change (COP26) in November 2021, internal EU divergences have emerged between pro-civil nuclear energy countries, such as France, and those which are opposed, such as Germany. This may be a sensitive issue during the Presidency given that Macron seems to have decided to put emphasis on this topic during the 2022 electoral campaign.

*A more digital Europe.* The first semester of 2022 will be a key period for the discussion of two important pieces of legislation proposed by the Commission in late 2020: the *Digital Market Act* (DMA) and the *Digital Services Act* (DSA). Thierry Breton, the French Commissioner for the internal market, and close to Macron, is in charge of both drafts, which will arrive at the trilogue stage during the Presidency, though well-informed sources consider that a final agreement is unlikely before the end of June. French authorities also want to stress the social dimension of the policy by adding elements on the conditions of digital platform workers. The extraordinary European Council of March 2022 could further expand the digital agenda by considering cyber security, the transatlantic aspects of the issue and the idea of the European cloud. The creation of a special ‘GAFA’ tax on the big tech companies, long supported by France, is not on the agenda any more after the 2021 agreement on minimum corporate tax supported by 136 countries.

*A more social Europe.* The draft directive on a European framework for minimum wages, proposed by the European Commission in 2020, and pushed during the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU (January to June 2021), could make decisive progress during the French Presidency. On 6 December 2021, the Council reached a common position on this issue that will move to the trilogue stage during the French term. There is no doubt that French authorities will actively seek for an agreement on this electorally salient proposal. However, divisions remain within Europe, with Northern Member States notably reluctant. The arrival of the Social Democratic Party at the head of the German government could, however, help in reaching a compromise.

*A more human Europe.* This last chapter addresses a variety of questions. The most important one is probably the Conference on the Future of Europe which is scheduled to finish its work during the Presidency. This unprecedented forum, which directly originates from Macron’s proposals, started as a pan-European exercise in participatory democracy in May 2021. The four pan-European citizens’ panels should finalise their recommendations during the Presidency (provided that they will be able to meet in-person). In May 2022, the conference plenary will finalise its report

to which the EU institutions will then respond. Concrete follow-up actions on the basis of the conference would therefore probably only begin after the end of the Presidency.

This chapter also covers Rule of Law issues. This agenda is partly independent from the French authorities as it is subject to the rulings of the Court of Justice of the EU and, more generally, to the political mood in the relevant European capitals – especially Warsaw. But Macron’s press conference in early December 2021 indicated that France wants to keep a pro-active strategy on these issues and especially the fight against hate speech, racism and anti-Semitism, and violence against women. France will also encourage European universities to implement a shared research agenda on the history of Europe in order to fight against the political use of history.

The focus put on these issues has a geopolitical and electoral dimension. In the past, Macron sought to lead the anti-populist camp at EU level, especially during the 2019 campaign for the European Parliament. Tensions could continue during the Presidency as general elections in Hungary will take place during the same month as the French presidential election (April 2022). The dynamism of the two radical-right candidates in France, Le Pen and Zemmour, constitutes a further incentive to use the first half of the Presidency to celebrate humanist values.

**‘The dynamism of the two radical-right candidates in France, Le Pen and Zemmour, constitutes a further incentive to use the first half of the Presidency to celebrate humanist values.’**

Finally, Macron stressed his willingness to launch a debate on the creation of a European civic service. In relation with the European Year of Youth in 2022, he proposed opening discussions on a non-military service period of six months, open to all young people under 25 for a university or learning exchange, an internship, or work within non-profit organizations. Even if there is no chance that an agreement on this idea could be reached during

the Presidency, putting it on the agenda enables Macron to develop a concrete and positive proposal targeting a key group among voters.

## 7. Conclusion

The adjective *political* has been chosen here to describe France's Presidency. It will indeed be political because general elections will take place in France during that period, because the President will very likely stand again as candidate, and because the European agenda has been consistently central to his strategy. The radicalisation of the French domestic debate, observable during the final months of 2021, will certainly lead Macron to foreground European issues during the Presidency in order to present himself as the leader of the pro-EU camp among domestic political forces.

The question of the capacity of the Presidency to succeed despite this domestic context has been raised throughout this paper. It argued that the Presidency will be able to deliver results thanks to the experience of French bureaucrats, the dynamism of Paris-Berlin-Rome relations and

the fact that some key legislative proposals – for example those relating to digital regulation, social rights, the green deal or asylum – have already made good progress and receive widespread support.

Nevertheless, the April and June 2022 French elections will affect the content and style of the Presidency. During the first three months, it will be an opportunity to use (and perhaps misuse) meetings and trips in order to produce images and speeches that portray the President as a visionary and influential statesman. From Strasbourg to Brest, symbolic politics will matter. Also, the way French authorities perceive any developments on EU issues will be framed by their electoral concerns. Last but not least, the course of the Presidency could be dramatically shattered by the election of a radical-right leader on 24 April. Should the opinion polls in the weeks ahead of the election indicate a high likelihood of this occurring, there is no doubt that most Heads of State and Government in Europe will try to save Private Macron, *whatever it takes*.

## References

- Cautrès B., Chopin T., Rivière E. (2021) *Un Euroscepticisme à la française*, Institute Jacques Delors, Report 119/2. [https://institutdelors.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Dec21\\_R119.2\\_EuroscepticismeFrancais\\_Cautres\\_Chopin\\_Riviere\\_FR\\_VDef.pdf](https://institutdelors.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Dec21_R119.2_EuroscepticismeFrancais_Cautres_Chopin_Riviere_FR_VDef.pdf)
- Chopin T. (ed.) (forthcoming) *Une Europe pour aujourd'hui et pour demain*, Paris, La Documentation française.
- De France O. (2019) *PeSCo The French Perspective*, Ares Policy Paper, 37.
- Drake H. (2013) France and the European Union. In A. Cole, S. Meunier, V. Tiberj (eds) *Developments in French Politics 5*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, p. 218–232.
- Drozdiak W. (2020) *The Last President of Europe: Emmanuel Macron's Race to Revive France and Save the World*. New York, Public Affairs.
- Evans J., Ivaldi G. (2018) *The 2017 French Presidential Elections. A Political Reformation?* New York, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kreiling V. (2021) *Germany goes to the polls: how will its EU policies change?* Stockholm, Sieps.
- Lequesne C. (2021) Une présidence de l'Union européenne rythmée par l'élection présidentielle française, *Questions internationales*, 110.
- Lequesne C. and Rozenberg O. (2008) *The French Presidency of 2008: the Unexpected Agenda*, Stockholm, Sieps.
- Macron, E. (2016) *Révolution*, Paris, XO éditions.
- Parsons, C. (2016) France and the Evolution of European Integration: the exemplary and pivotal case for broader theories. In R. Elgie, E. Grossman, A.C. Mazur (eds) *Oxford Handbook of French Politics*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 585–605.
- Rozenberg O. (2015) *France in quest of a European narrative*, Fondation Robert Schuman, 345, 2015. <http://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/0345-france-in-quest-of-a-european-narrative>
- Rozenberg O. (2020) France is back... in a French Europe. In S. Bulmer, C. Lequesne (eds), *The Member States of the European Union*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., p. 73–100.
- Saint-Paul L. (2021) *Report of the delegation of the board of the National Assembly on the French Presidency of the Council of the EU*, National Assembly. [https://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/static/15/pdf/rapport/Rapport\\_sur\\_presidence\\_francaise\\_UE.pdf](https://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/static/15/pdf/rapport/Rapport_sur_presidence_francaise_UE.pdf)
- Van Renterghem M. (2021) *C'était Merkel*, Paris, Les Arènes.