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Coming in from the Cold

Macron's overtures towards Russia
deserve support, not scorn



Source: Russian President Vladimir Putin and French President Emmanuel Macron walk in the Galerie des Batailles (Gallery of Battles) at the Palace of Versailles in 2017 / kremlin.ru

Politics often requires leadership and an ability to adapt to changing circumstances. International politics is no exception. Paradoxically, in the context of Europe's dead-locked relations with Russia these changing circumstances will probably boil down to continuity in the Kremlin beyond 2024. This means Europe would be ill-advised to just wait out the current term of President Putin and in any event will have to deal with Russia as it is, rather than Russia as it might be.

In recent months, before the corona virus stopped everything in its tracks, French President Macron intensified his attempts to re-engage with Russia. Macron is

not averse to articulating grand visions. This may irritate some of his more down-to-earth European colleagues, who find Macron's interventions often disruptive or they lament typically French illusions of *grandeur*, but at the same time there is a broad call for more geopolitical acumen and a return to European power politics. One cannot have it both ways. If that geopolitical ambition is serious, then who will provide purpose and direction? These days it is not very likely that hamstrung Germany will step up to the plate, while the UK has just exited the EU and is trying to reinvent itself. Nor should one expect the bureaucratized EU apparatus to lead a major

strategic overhaul by itself, bound as it is to follow the lowest common denominator in the positions of its divided member states.¹ This leaves Macron in a central position to initiate a conversation with Moscow.

Strategic autonomy and security dilemmas

France's overtures towards Russia should be interpreted in the framework of European 'strategic autonomy', a key tenet of Macron's thinking that revolves around the ability to act and decide one's own fate without dependency on others.² This traditional French agenda has been rekindled because of longer-term and structural changes in international relations which have been accelerated by the Trump administration. Macron's justified fear is that Europe will increasingly find itself in a situation where others are calling the shots over European heads.³

Macron argues that as long as Europe is engaged in a prolonged security crisis with Russia, the chances of reaching even a modicum of autonomy in its own neighbourhood remain negligible. Recent developments with regard to Syria and Iran serve as a reminder, with the risk of Europe suffering the consequences of decisions made by others. His disparaging views on NATO are well known, even if France continues to rely on the Alliance as the cornerstone of European collective defence. The issue Macron tries to address is that

persistent anxiety over Russia will continue to lock European states into a pattern of insecurity and a sustained dependency on American security guarantees. Provided the US would still be prepared to shoulder the military burden, which is a big if, a further NATO build-up in Europe would encourage Moscow to maintain its assertive military posture and belligerent tone and the downward spiral will continue. Breaking this security dilemma cycle would be in Europe's, as well as in Russia's interest.

Personal investment in dialogue

Since the very beginning of his presidency Macron has been reaching out to his Russian counterpart, in keeping with his conviction that diplomacy is carried by personal relationships. In 2017 he hosted Putin in Versailles and in 2019 Macron invited him to Brégançon, on the eve of a G7 Summit in which Russia no longer participates. On that occasion he also prepared the summit meeting of the Normandy Four that took place last December in Paris, the format initiated by German Chancellor Merkel and French President Hollande in 2014 to gather Russia and Ukraine around one table.

Besides multilateral endeavours, Macron has also started a bilateral track with Russia on a number of issues ranging from security and technology to human rights and the conflicts in the Middle East, coordinated by his adviser Pierre Vimont and including both countries' Foreign and Defence Ministers.⁴ It appears from these talks that Russia is mostly interested in discussing security matters, and that it is primarily the political dimension of these rapprochement efforts that is important for Moscow. This tells us something about Russia's own anxieties and, contrary to outward appearances, its awareness of political isolation. There is a profound lack of interaction with Western powers, which makes it difficult for Russia to balance its partnership with

1 See for an overview of the EU's challenges Sabine Fischer, *What the New EU Leadership Should Do About Russia*, Carnegie Moscow, 4 December 2019, available on <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/80485>.

2 Politico, *Emmanuel Macron's Russian roulette*, 14 February 2020, available on <https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-russian-roulette-vladimir-putin-security-partner/>.

3 *Speech of Emmanuel Macron at de Ecole de Guerre on the defence and deterrence strategy*, 7 February 2020, available on <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/02/07/discours-du-president-emmanuel-macron-sur-la-strategie-de-defense-et-de-dissuasion-devant-les-stagiaires-de-la-27eme-promotion-de-lecole-de-guerre>.

4 See the interview with Pierre Vimont on B2 (5 March 2020), available on <http://club.bruxelles2.eu/2020/03/comment-batir-une-nouvelle-architecture-de-securite-et-de-confiance-avec-la-russie-pierre-vimont/>.

China, an opportunistic coalition that makes geopolitical sense but does not always sit comfortably.

Getting to the root of the problem

Of course, over the years many attempts at 'selective engagement' with Russia have been made, but proposals for more cultural exchanges, however useful, are not likely to resolve the underlying problems. Because at the core of the animosity is Russia's deeply felt frustration with the way the European security order evolved after the Cold War.⁵ Moscow's misgivings are well known, and relate to subsequent waves of NATO enlargement plus membership guarantees for Georgia and Ukraine, missile defence installations in central and eastern Europe and interventions in former Yugoslavia and Libya. But Russia also perceives the advances of the EU on its neighbouring countries as political, not technocratic.

The West may have publicly renounced the establishment of zones of interest but Russia has not, and recognises this from afar. No matter how much we disagree with Russia's positions and actions, the acknowledgement that these are stemming from intransigent but sincerely held convictions could pave the way for a serious conversation. This conversation is needed, because without addressing these core security issues we just keep regurgitating our mutually exclusive narratives. In order to make headway, the West will have to depart from the idea that talking to Russians is doing them a favour. For example, while it made sense for NATO to cease 'business as usual' within the NATO-Russia Council in 2014 because of Ukraine, it ended up only speaking *about* Russia, and not *to* Russia. The hesitant resumption of some of these meetings in 2016 still does not exploit the NATO-Russia Council's potential for crisis management and for discussing 'unusual business'. It seems that our principled

5 William H. Hill, *No Place for Russia – European Security Institutions Since 1989*, Columbia University Press 2018.

position of not 'rewarding Russia for bad behaviour' has got in the way of conducting diplomacy.

Overcoming obstacles to engagement

The fear of appeasement is an emotional and historically rooted sentiment, especially for Eastern European countries which continuously suspect betrayal when Western leaders reach out to Moscow. This lack of trust is a major obstacle to a joint European approach towards Russia. It is therefore no coincidence that in February Macron made his first official visit to Warsaw in an effort to reassure Poland of his commitment to European defence and underlined that "France is neither pro-Russian or anti-Russian, it is pro-European".⁶ Indeed, discussing controversies does not amount to approval.

Similarly, better use must be made of the so-called Structured Dialogue in the OSCE, the only organisation where at least on paper we have a permanent security debate with Russia. The then German Foreign Minister Steinmeier launched this process in 2016, which seeks to discuss "current and future challenges and risks to security in the OSCE area to foster a greater understanding on these issues".⁷ Some Western countries have tried to dilute this dialogue by insisting on tabling human rights issues. Important as they are, these are also covered by other forums. These countries seem unwilling to distinguish hard security issues from other topics, and only want to discuss them on their own terms as an added bonus. But unless these core issues are addressed, the stalemate will endure because of Russian stamina and our lack of resolve. Again, Ukraine is a case in point.

6 'Macron: France neither pro-Russian nor anti-Russian but simply pro-European', *Reuters*, 3 February 2020, available on <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-poland-france-macron-russia/macron-france-neither-pro-russian-nor-anti-russian-but-simply-pro-european-idUSKBN1ZX1PA>.

7 *From Lisbon to Hamburg: Declaration on the 20th Anniversary of the OSCE Framework for Arms Control*, adopted at the OSCE Ministerial Council on 9 December 2016, available on <https://www.osce.org/chairmanship/289496>.

A needed, but not risk-free endeavour

Critics say that one of the flaws in Macron's approach is that Russia will simply not reciprocate, pocketing any French concessions while continuing to undermine Europe's stability.⁸ But Macron, himself having been the target of a Kremlin-sponsored disinformation campaign during his presidential bid, is not naïve. He argues that he wants to speak to Russia from a position of strength, without yielding to it or forgetting what it has done, or what it is doing.⁹ The fact that Macron is advancing suggestions for further European defence co-operation and is even openly contemplating a European role for France's nuclear weapon capabilities is indicative of the seriousness of his ideas.¹⁰ Much as Europeans may have reasons to be suspicious of Macron's overtures towards Russia, it would be too easy to dismiss them as the appeasement of Moscow or grandstanding to beef up domestic approval rates. In fact, Macron's outstretched hand is a sign of courage and political leadership in a time when such commodities are in scarce supply.

Another reason to heed Macron's initiative is that it may undercut Europe's populist right-wing parties, which maintain strong ties with Moscow and are being instrumentalised to forge an ideological coalition against the EU. Decisions on Europe's future relations with Russia are far too important to be left to the political fringes.¹¹

En marche – avec l'Europe

France admits that it cannot go it alone, realising that its bilateral diplomacy must be embedded in a broader EU strategy if it is to be effective. Macron should be mindful of the red lines of other countries, and in turn they should give him and his envoy Pierre Vimont, who knows the EU's constraints inside out, space to explore strategic openings. This also applies to the Netherlands, despite its travails to seek justice for MH17 in the face of disingenuous obstructionism by Russia. Ultimately, even this difficult case may benefit from thawing relations. Ideally, Paris would have accomplished the ice-breaking and found openings for further engagement by the time the EU, as announced by the Commission, would be ready to revisit its five 'guiding principles' for relations with Russia in order to get out of the current deadlock.¹²

Of course, if Russia were genuinely interested in a meaningful dialogue with Europe, it will have to take responsibility and do its own part in restoring confidence. For starters, it should wind down its disinformation and interference operations. In its turn, Russia must deal with Europe as it is, and not with Europe as it might be. Even if Russia would signal a willingness to play along, Macron's agenda remains prone to disappointment. But given its importance, the French President deserves our support, not our scorn.

8 Judy Dempsey: *Macron's One-Way Street to Russia*, available on <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/81102>.

9 *Speech of Emmanuel Macron at Jagiellonian University in Krakow*, 24 March 2020, available on <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2020/02/05/president-emmanuel-macrons-speech-at-jaguellonne-university-krakow>.

10 *Speech of Emmanuel Macron at de Ecole de Guerre*, op. cit.






11 Andrew S. Weiss: *With Friends Like These: The Kremlin's Far-Right and Populist Connections in Italy and Austria*, available on <https://carnegieendowment.org>.

12 Tony van der Togt, 'In Search of a European Russia strategy', *Atlantisch Perspectief 2020*, available on <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/search-european-russia-strategy>. The 5 guiding principles, adopted by the EU Foreign Affairs Council in March 2016, include the full implementation of the Minsk agreements; closer ties with Russia's former Soviet neighbours; strengthening EU resilience to Russian threats; selective engagement with Russia on certain issues such as counter-terrorism; and support for people-to-people contacts. See the briefing of the Foreign Affairs Council of 14 March, available on <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/fac/2016/03/14/>.

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