

# DETOUR OR DIRECTION?

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FRANCE'S POLICIES TOWARDS RUSSIA

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## THE EUROPEANISATION OF FRANCE'S POLICIES TOWARDS RUSSIA



David Cadier  
Visiting Senior Fellow  
The EU's Eastern Neighbourhood and Russia research programme  
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs

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- France's reaction to the Ukraine crisis attests to the growing Europeanisation of its policies towards Russia.
- This trend has been exacerbated and accelerated by the magnitude of Russia's actions in Ukraine, but was also sustained beforehand by a conjunction of factors, including: disillusionment over the potential benefits of the bilateral political relationship with Moscow, particularly in comparison to the cardinal importance of the EU context for French interests; the assessment made by French diplomatic and strategic elites of the drivers and direction of Russia's foreign policy; and the societal context in which France's policies towards Russia are formulated.
- An alteration of the EU context, of these domestic factors or of Russia's foreign policy could potentially lead to a change of policy. The domestic factors are unlikely to be overturned in the short term, however.
- France invested its diplomatic clout in the Minsk process: this means that it will not trade the lifting of sanctions for nothing, but also that it needs the Minsk process to produce visible results soon, especially as the pressure is mounting at home. The Europeanisation of France's policies towards Russia means that Paris is not just likely to follow but also to seek to shape the EU consensus, both towards preserving the EU's credibility on sanctions and on avoiding further escalation towards a permanent and structural conflict with Russia.



Few could have predicted the level of unity that the EU would demonstrate in its response to the Ukraine crisis. Relations with Moscow have notoriously been one of the most divisive issues among EU member states, and hence the consensus on imposing a series of economic sanctions on Russia was not a given. Undoubtedly, this can be partly explained by the magnitude of the crisis and by Russia's actions in this context, as well as by the catalytic role played by Germany's leadership. It was also favoured and made possible, however, by the specific positioning of some member states.

France has been at the core of the European response: it has played a central role in the mediation and conflict resolution efforts, upheld the EU's sanctions policies,<sup>1</sup> and cancelled the delivery of its Mistral warships to Russia. In this sense, its response has probably been firmer and more active than many would have expected, particularly given its long-standing political relationship with Moscow and the fact that Ukraine had long been absent from its foreign policy radar. The surprise stems in part, however, from the fact that the image of France's Russia policy that prevails in European and transatlantic policy debates often fails to reflect some of its recent developments.

The key question is indeed whether these decisions and choices are strictly circumstantial to the specific context of the Ukraine crisis, or whether they reflect a more profound trend in France's policies towards Russia. Accounting for the response by Paris to the Ukraine crisis and addressing this question prompts one to reflect on the factors that have shaped the French position and on their development. Such reflection appears particularly pertinent in a context where the Minsk process is stalling and where the sanctions are increasingly criticised in French domestic debates and in many other member states; in other words, where questions are lingering on the future trajectory of EU policies towards Russia.

### **France's Russia policy before the Ukraine crisis: more economic, less political**

The recalibration of France's policies towards Russia did not begin with – and thus is not entirely related to – Ukraine. The Franco-Russian relationship had been undergoing significant transformations since the second half of the 2000s: economic links were gaining in importance, while political relations were losing some of their historical substance.

France's economic ties to Russia have long been much less substantial than those of other large European member states such as Germany or Italy. Throughout the 1990s, for instance, Russia amounted to only 1% of French external trade on average. From the 2000s onwards, France gradually consolidated its position in the Russian market, however, multiplying its exports fourfold between 2000 and 2013 (from 1.8 to 7.7 billion euros), and becoming the eighth biggest exporter to Russia that year.<sup>2</sup>

This evolution was mainly due, firstly, to Russia's sustained growth following the boom in hydrocarbons prices and, secondly, to the deliberate and constant impetus provided by the French government. In its foreign policy in general, and towards Russia in particular, France has been placing greater emphasis on its 'economic diplomacy'. During his February 2013 visit to Moscow, for instance, President François Hollande clearly prioritised the economic dimension, overseeing the signing of bilateral agreements and meeting with representatives of the French business community in Russia.<sup>3</sup> Overall, on the eve of the Ukraine crisis, France generally viewed Russia as a promising emerging market.

While it has remained important, the political dynamic of the Franco-Russian relationship has followed something of an inverse curve. This relationship has probably been deeper than it has for any other European countries, however, having had historical symbolism conferred upon it by both sides and having been institutionalised through a series

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1 Indeed, the 2016 ECFR scorecard on EU foreign policy designates France as one of the 'leaders' vis-à-vis the sanctions policy (along with Germany, Poland, Sweden and Lithuania). <http://www.ecfr.eu/scorecard/2016>.

2 "La France et la Russie", webpage of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. <http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/russie/la-france-et-la-russie/>

3 "A Moscou, François Hollande met à l'épreuve sa diplomatie économique", *Le Monde*, 1 March 2013.

of annual high-level meetings.<sup>4</sup> It found its roots in a convergence of strategic outlooks (for instance on the desirability of a multipolar world order or on the role the UN should play in it), largely inherited from Charles De Gaulle on the French side, and particularly visible during the years of Jacques Chirac and France's opposition to the US intervention in Iraq. It also proceeds from France's conviction (shared by Germany) that the security of the European continent is contingent upon having Russia anchored to its regional architecture. This was manifest in the part played by Paris in the creation of the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, which preceded the 1999 enlargement of the Alliance, or in its readiness in 2009 to discuss Dmitri Medvedev's proposal for a new European Security Treaty.<sup>5</sup>

This conviction remains but its operationalisation has become difficult and the bedrock of the political relationship has gradually eroded. First, strategic visions are less convergent and several apples of discord have emerged. Paris and Moscow have diverged on their reading of the Arab Spring, for instance, and have found themselves at odds over Libya, and especially over Syria. Second, the partnership has been increasingly deemed by both actors to be producing fewer and fewer benefits. Paris, due to the internal evolution of the political regime, became increasingly sceptical of its ability to bring about a more cooperative Russian foreign policy, while Moscow has regarded France, at the same time, as more Atlanticist and less influential on the European stage.<sup>6</sup> Third, the "talk of a special relationship" has become increasingly costly for France, contributing to its "awkward position" in the EU, and becoming

increasingly difficult to reconcile with the European context.<sup>7</sup>

### The domestic context: shaping factors and key actors

This evolution and France's reaction to the Ukraine crisis have been shaped by a set of internal factors. France is often depicted as an inherently 'Russophile' country that would systematically seek to accommodate Russia and disregard the nations of Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>8</sup> This might tentatively apply to some politicians, but not to the foreign policy elites, the main media, public opinion or the political party currently in power (the Socialist Party).

France's policies towards Russia ought to be placed in the broader context of its foreign policy. The foreign minister in office during the Ukraine crisis, Laurent Fabius, called less often for the advent of a multipolar world than for guarding against the risks of a "zero-polar" one, evoking the conjunction of recurrent crises and the growing US temptation for strategic retrenchment.<sup>9</sup>

In this context, France has pursued an active foreign policy, seeking to work more closely with Washington on matters of international security, but also to reinforce its strategic position within the EU and NATO. Rather than the sudden embrace of an 'Atlanticist ideology', this posture proceeds from a reconsideration of the best ways to safeguard its interests in a changing international order. It has two implications for its policies towards Russia. First, Paris will inevitably prioritise euro-Atlantic structures in situations where Russia's foreign policy is set on a collision course with them. Second, at the same time, the multiplicity of crises means that France will remain open to co-operating with Russia in tackling some of them.

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4 These include the Intergovernmental Seminar reuniting Prime Ministers, and the Cooperation Council on Security Issues, gathering together Ministers of Defence and of Foreign Affairs. Both have been suspended since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis.

5 Arnaud Dubien, "France - Russie: nouveau et défis d'un partenariat stratégique", *Note de l'Observatoire Franco-Russe*, no1, October 2012. [http://obsfr.ru/uploads/media/121031\\_Policy\\_paper\\_fr.pdf](http://obsfr.ru/uploads/media/121031_Policy_paper_fr.pdf).

6 On this point and on the 'banalisation' of the political relationship, see: Isabelle Facon, "La relation France-Russie à l'épreuve", *Annuaire Français de Relations Internationales*, Bruylant, Vol. XVI, 2015, pp. 117-131.

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7 Thomas Gomart, "France's Russia Policy: Balancing Interests and Value", *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 30 no. 2, 2007, p. 153.

8 See for instance: "Poland 'disturbed' by French 'Russophilia'", *Euobserver*, 26 January 2015.

9 See: "Entretien avec Laurent Fabius, Ministre des Affaires étrangères et européennes", *Revue Internationale et Stratégique*, no 89, 2013/1, pp. 51-65.

The current leadership in French foreign policy and strategic elites seem to have partially jettisoned the traditional ‘Gaullist’ lens in approaching Russia – to the extent that a group of former diplomats has reproached them about it.<sup>10</sup> Some point to generational change while others, insiders, have advanced bureaucratic explanations, pointing out that many key advisory and decision-making positions are held by diplomats coming from the strategic branch of foreign policy, which is known to be generally more critical of Russia. In any case, the change has above all to do with how Russia’s current foreign policy is perceived in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or of Defence. Divisions inside administrations are often less about this assessment than about the level of strategic attention to be devoted to the East compared to other regions (especially the EU’s Southern Neighbourhood).

The societal context in which France’s policies are formulated is predominantly negatively disposed towards Russia’s current policies and leadership. A critical tone has, for instance, prevailed in the main press outlets in recent years, particularly regarding the evolution of the Russian political regime. A rather negative view of Russia’s policies also prevails in the French public opinion. In 2012, 71% of respondents saw Russia’s leadership in world affairs as undesirable (compared to 77% in Poland, 63% in Germany and 56% in the UK), while in 2014, 71% had a negative view of the country (70% in Poland and Germany, 64% in the UK).<sup>11</sup>

Several members of the French political class have adopted positions markedly different from that of the foreign policy elites, however. The most symptomatic in this sense is probably the amendment submitted in 2015 by a group of Parliamentarians wishing to omit the sentence “Russia is returning to power politics” from the Defence Budget law, as

they deemed it overly negative.<sup>12</sup> Politicians’ positions on Russia proceed more from personal views than from permanent and distinctive party lines, but some trends are discernible nonetheless.

First, there are no outspoken pro-Russian voices emanating from the party in power, the Parti Socialiste (PS). Some other members of the Left are sympathetic towards Moscow’s views, however, such as the sovereigntist Jean-Pierre Chevenement, who has been a consistent advocate of cooperation with Russia and who has actually been appointed the government’s Special Envoy in this endeavour. This is even more true of parties on the Far-left, who out of profound anti-Americanism came to characterise the Maidan movement in the Kremlin’s parlance.

Nor are those on the right homogenous, although their tone is generally less critical of Russia’s policies than France’s official diplomatic line. The leader of the main opposition party Les Républicains (LR), former President Nicolas Sarkozy, actually made statements implicitly endorsing the annexation of Crimea by Russia.<sup>13</sup> A resolution calling for the lifting of EU sanctions and submitted by LR deputy Thierry Mariani was adopted in the lower house (*Assemblée Nationale*) on the 28 April 2016 thanks to the support of its fellow party members and to the low mobilisation of PS MPs. The Gaullist legacy, the admiration for strong leaders, the attachment to traditional values and, for some, anti-Americanism or ties to the business sector, partially account for LR politicians’ positions. It should be noted, however, that Alain Juppé, who is leading the race for the party’s nomination and who stands a good chance of being the next French President, has adopted a position much closer to that of the government.

The political, ideological and financial links between the populist party, Front National (FN), and Russia are well-known.<sup>14</sup> Several commentators have drawn hasty conclusions about these links, pointing to a pattern of influence, but without assessing the

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10 See: Le Club des Vingt, *Péchés capitaux: Les sept impasses de la diplomatie française*, Editions du Cerf, January 2016, pp. 25–33.

11 *Transatlantic Trends 2012* and *Transatlantic Trends 2014*, both available at: <http://trends.gmfus.org/>. Another French poll confirms this tendency: “Les Français et Vladimir Poutine”, Sondage BVA pour Le Parisien/Aujourd’hui en France, 19 January 2014. [http://www.bva.fr/data/sondage/sondage\\_fiche/1425/fichier\\_bva\\_pour\\_le\\_parisien-aujourd'hui\\_en\\_france\\_-\\_vladimir\\_poutine9ef59.pdf](http://www.bva.fr/data/sondage/sondage_fiche/1425/fichier_bva_pour_le_parisien-aujourd'hui_en_france_-_vladimir_poutine9ef59.pdf).

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12 The amendment was eventually defeated. The transcript of the discussions is available at: <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/cr/2014-2015/20150252.asp#P546367>.

13 “Nicolas Sarkozy légitime l’annexion de la Crimée par la Russie”, *Le Figaro*, 10 February 2015.

14 See for instance: “L’échiquier politique du Kremlin”, *Le Monde*, 17 November 2014.

actual impact on France's foreign policy choices. The impact is negligible (if not non-existent), however, as the FN remains outside of the decision-making structures.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, French businesses are an important set of actors to be considered. Unsurprisingly, driven by economic considerations, they have been critical of the sanctions (more than their German counterparts for instance). Several major French companies have substantial interests in Russia, notably in the sectors of energy, transport, armaments or groceries.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the Moscow-based community of French business actors is quite cohesive and well organized.

### **The annexation of Crimea and the cancellation of the Mistral contracts**

France's response to the Ukraine crisis has been essentially European. The participation and activism of Paris was not a given, however, as Eastern Europe had long been one of the blind spots of its diplomacy. Paris had, in fact, even taken (too) long to fully factor Central Europe into its foreign policy software, despite the fact that ten states from the region joined the EU in 2004 and 2007.<sup>17</sup> Yet, one of the things that its reaction to the Ukraine crisis demonstrates is precisely that it has better integrated these regions (Central Europe especially) into its EU strategy.

A crisis that implicates the EU implicates France; both in the sense that Paris feels concerned about it and that it will seek to shape the policy response, in part to make sure that the decisions taken do not

end up overly limiting its own room for manoeuvre. Foreign Minister Fabius joined his German and Polish colleagues, Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Radosław Sikorski, on their trip to Kiev on 21 February 2014, and Hollande took the initiative, in coordination with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, to invite Vladimir Putin and Petro Poroshenko to the commemorations of the 70th anniversary of the Normandy landings. This quadrilateral format (France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine) came to be known as the 'Normandy format', in which the Minsk Agreements were negotiated.

Beyond its will to contribute its diplomatic experience in attempting to defuse the crisis, there was probably a desire in Paris not to leave the task to Berlin alone (both in a positive and in a negative sense). In any event, there has been a strong convergence of views and smooth cooperation between the two capitals over Ukraine: there are, for instance, very few disagreements when coordinating the language of the Normandy meetings. Paris's desire to be at the centre of the European response also probably stems in part from the view that EU institutions pushed economic policies in the post-Soviet space without giving due consideration to the potential political implications, and that some member states came to see and present the Eastern partnership (EaP) as an antechamber to EU membership, or even as a geopolitical tool against Russia's influence in the region.<sup>18</sup> Such a narrative puts the EU in a precarious situation in the sense that it doesn't correspond to the reality of the EaP policy.

France wishes to prevent the conflict with Russia from escalating further but, at the same time, it has endeavoured to provide reassurances to and demonstrate solidarities with its Central European EU and NATO partners. Their concerns and sensitivities have now been factored into France's positions more than in the past: they are even invoked, for instance, in foreign policy communications destined for an internal audience. This obviously doesn't mean that France will suddenly relinquish its own

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15 The party has only two seats in the Assemblée Nationale (which has little influence in foreign policy-making anyway) and, while there is a strong likelihood that it will obtain high scores in the first rounds of the next Presidential (or legislative) elections, it is rather unlikely to win them and thus to take the reins of political power in France.

16 France's stock of direct investments in Russia is the third largest among EU member states (after the Netherlands and Germany, and if Cyprus is excluded). As of June 2015, it stood at \$11.2bn (\$15.8bn for Germany). Data available at: Bank of Russia, <http://www.cbr.ru/eng/statistics/?PrtlId=svs>.

17 On this point see: Christian Lequesne, *La France dans la Nouvelle Europe: assumer le changement d'échelle*, Presses de Sciences Po, 2008.

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18 For instance, the Lithuanian foreign minister declared in August 2013 that the Association Agreement negotiations with Ukraine are "not just technical negotiations with just another partner; it is a geopolitical process". Judy Dempsey, "The Kremlin Tries Charm to Counter EU", *The New York Times*, 5 August 2013.



interpretations or concerns to adopt those of Poland or Estonia, but it stands in stark contrast to the Chirac years.

By many accounts, the annexation of Crimea marked a critical juncture in France's policies towards Russia. One aspect often invoked by diplomats pertains to the legal and normative order: Paris was particularly concerned by this clear breach of international rules and principles by a country which, like itself, has a seat on the UN Security Council, an entity established to enforce them. The non-proliferation lens was an important element in this regard as the 1994 Budapest Memorandum was meant to convince Ukraine to give up its nuclear weapons in exchange for guaranteeing its territorial integrity and sovereignty.

More profoundly, Russia's annexation of Crimea, its support for the separatists in Donbas or its intervention in Syria have been interpreted by French strategic elites as symptomatic of a return to the canons of power politics, which includes the modernisation of its military instruments and a readiness to use them. Quite telling in this regard was the creation earlier this year, at the demand and under the sponsorship of the French Ministry of Defence, of an independent centre intended to feed the Ministry with regular analyses on Russia's military and security policies.

The decision to cancel the delivery of the Mistral warships and the way it was implemented epitomises France's current approach. This choice had clear economic, financial and commercial costs, while the only but nonetheless important benefit was the signal sent to its allies and beyond.<sup>19</sup> After Crimea, such a delivery was, in the words of French diplomats, simply not tenable in Brussels. The decision did not emerge right away, however, partially in order to anticipate the technical and contractual difficulties to be resolved, but also probably in a bid to avoid alienating Russia completely (by stressing that this outcome was dictated by the circumstances).

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19 Some of these costs were subsequently mitigated by the fact that France soon found another buyer for the ships (Egypt).

## The Minsk process and the sanctions debate

The Minsk process is stalling and the debate on EU sanctions against Russia is gaining ground; the lifting of the latter is conditional upon the success of the former, however.<sup>20</sup> France invested its diplomatic credibility in the Minsk process: this means that it won't defect on sanctions while no progress is made on the ground, but also that it needs the Minsk process to produce visible results. In other words, France's positions are increasingly under stress: Paris is walking a fine line, but it is unlikely to suddenly and unilaterally reverse them.

The Minsk Agreements are not perfect in their conception. They commit the parties who signed them, however, and are thus the only basis available for working towards a political solution – it is in this sense that France has clung to them. Most of the provisions of the Agreement are not fully respected to this day and, in the light of the current situation in Kiev, Paris might have appeared overly optimistic concerning the Ukrainian Parliament's readiness to adopt the constitutional or amnesty laws. France and Germany are currently concentrating their efforts, however, on the component wherein they hope progress might be possible, namely the organisation of elections in Donbas.

There is, in Paris as in many other European capitals, a growing frustration with the authorities in Kiev. There is equal dissatisfaction, however, with the lack of pressure exerted on the separatists by Moscow. The French Ambassador to Moscow recently summed up this position in a hearing at the Parliament: “to put Kiev in front of its responsibilities, we need to be able to show that Russia fulfills its obligations”.<sup>21</sup>

A progressive implementation of the Minsk Agreements could pave the way for a progressive lifting of some of the sectoral sanctions (Crimea sanctions excluded). More than Moscow's counter-sanctions, it is above all the financial sanctions imposed by the

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20 On the implementation of the Minsk Agreements, see: Arkady Moshes, “A year since Minsk-2: Does the agreement have a future?”, FIIA Comment 4 (2016).

21 “Audition de Son Exc. M. Jean-Maurice Ripert, ambassadeur de France en Russie”, Commission des Affaires Étrangères de l'Assemblée Nationale, 30 March 2016.

EU and the US that affect French economic interests in Russia: French companies are struggling to fund their business activities in the country as French banks are refusing to finance Russia-related projects. French business actors are thus increasingly lobbying the government. The Ministry of Finance has, in fact, recently asked those based in Moscow for detailed information on which sectoral sanctions are the most detrimental to French economic interests. If not a sign that the government is anticipating potential negotiations about the partial removal of sanctions, this can at least be read as an indication that it is taking their concerns seriously.

Representatives of the French government have stepped up their official visits to Moscow since last October (by the President, but also by the Ministers of Economy, Defence and Foreign Affairs). On these occasions, they have attempted to send a signal to the French business community while sticking to the EU's official line: they stated their wish to see the sanctions lifted, but were mindful to include the addendum 'when the Minsk Agreements are implemented'. This schizophrenic state, wavering between dialogue and sanctions, is probably here to stay, in the policies of France as well as those of other EU member states.

This engagement with the Russian government also reflects France's broader conviction that the dialogue with Moscow must be maintained and even encouraged. France indeed stands among the member states that would be open to a discussion to redefine the basis of EU-Russia relations, and France could in effect play a significant role in this regard (along with Germany and Poland). For Paris and Berlin, however, such a discussion can only come *after* the conflict in Donbas has been resolved, while Moscow seems to regard the conflict as a bargaining chip *in* this discussion.

### **Conclusion: looking ahead**

France's response to the Ukraine crisis attests to the growing Europeanisation of its policies towards Russia, both in the sense that its interests have largely been re-conceptualised in European terms, and in that the EU context is key when determining its strategy. Notwithstanding the exceptional circumstances, this trend is the result of structural factors, both at the EU and national levels.

An alteration of these factors could lead to a shift of policy, but they are unlikely to be overturned in the short term, however. For instance, a victory for Les Républicains in the 2017 Presidential elections might bring about a change of discourse, but probably not of direction: it would not radically affect the vision of the foreign policy elites or, most importantly, the fact that French interests are deeply anchored in the EU context. What could impact French policies more significantly, however, is a radical transformation of the latter, and in that sense the role of Germany will be crucial. Finally, the Europeanisation of France's policies towards Russia means that Paris is not just likely to follow but also to seek to shape the EU consensus. France does not wish for a permanent conflict with Russia, which it regards as detrimental to the security of the continent as well as to its own interests. It will thus seek to maintain the dialogue with Moscow while upholding the EU position, hoping for (and working towards) progress in the resolution of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, and probably advocating the partial lifting of sanctions when such progress is achieved.

The Finnish Institute of International Affairs  
tel. +358 9 432 7000  
fax. +358 9 432 7799  
www.fiia.fi

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