

Changes in France's policies towards Ukraine and Russia: Implications for Central Europe

*David Cadier*¹

Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has shaken European geopolitics. It has led to reconfigurations in [security dynamics](#), [regional equilibriums](#), and national [foreign policy positions](#) across the continent. A notable change in this context pertains to France's policies towards Ukraine and Russia. It was maybe most clearly incarnated at the NATO Vilnius Summit of July 2023, where France actively [supported](#) granting Ukraine a membership perspective – together with Poland, Czechia, Slovakia and the Baltic states, and while Germany and the US opposed it.

The apparent shift in France's policies matters for Visegrad countries as it brings Paris closer to some of their own traditional positions, but also because it has been partly conceived and articulated with reference to Central Europe. What is the nature, extent and drivers of the changes? What are the implications for Central Europe? How are they perceived and acted upon in the region? This paper examines these questions in turn.²

¹ David Cadier teaches International Relations at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, the College of Europe in Bruges and Sciences Po in Paris. <https://www.davidcadier.com/>

² In investigating reactions from Central Europe, the paper largely focuses on Czechia as at the time the research was conducted the policy positions of some of the other Visegrad countries lacked clarity due to recent electoral cycles, though some insights pertaining to them are nevertheless integrated. The research mainly draws on interviews conducted in November 2023 and January 2024 with Czech, Polish, Slovak and French diplomats and experts. This research was made possible thanks to the funding received by the Visegrad Fund in the context of the Think Visegrad Fellowship and to the generous hosting of the Prague Institute of International Relations (IRR). The author wishes to express his gratitude to both institutions and notably, at the IIR, to Alica Kizeková, Petr Kratochvíl and Jakub Eberle.

A shift in France's policies towards Ukraine and Russia – and Central Europe

Two key parameters, which had been central to France's policies towards Ukraine and Russia, have recently been redefined.

First, while France had long opposed the 'geopoliticization' of EU and NATO policies towards the Eastern neighbourhood, it is now openly embracing and even promoting it. Previously, it [regarded](#) approaching the Eastern neighbourhood as an object of hard power competition with Russia (as treated by the Kremlin itself or earlier on by the Bush administration) as detrimental to the stability of Europe and of the region itself. Back then, Paris opposed granting Ukraine a membership perspective as it considered that such enlargement – desired at the time of the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit by only [20% of the Ukrainian population](#) – would add little to the Alliance's collective posture while crossing one of Moscow's [brightest red line](#). Subsequently, it interpreted the 2014 Ukraine crisis as an instance where the EU, driven by bureaucratic processes, found itself blind to strategic and political lines of tensions. It regarded as dangerous for the EU to pretend to play geopolitical game without having the means and the will to back it – since it was exposing Ukraine without being able to protect it – and thus advocated instead strengthening the country's political, economic and societal resilience. Now, France is actively supporting Ukraine's membership into both NATO and the EU and explicitly [characterizing](#) EU enlargement as a geopolitical tool. It is also backing Western hard power involvement in Ukraine: while in 2014 considered that pouring weapons into the conflict in Ukraine would make matter worse, Paris is now itself delivering cutting-edge armaments to Kyiv (from light tanks AMX10-RC to Caesar artillery canons and Crotale surface-to-air missile systems).

Second, France has abandoned its long-pursued endeavor to build the European security architecture with – and seems even ready to build it against (or at least in deterrence of) – Russia. France policies towards Russia have often been [about its broader geopolitical goals in international and European affairs](#) and more specifically promoting Europe as a strong and independent actor in a multipolar world. This did not prevent Paris from vehemently condemning the annexation of Crimea or other major international law violations by Russia, but the objective remained to find a modus vivendi with Moscow to stabilize the continent and possibly even bring about a more cooperative Russia on international dossiers that France regarded as crucial to its strategic interests (such as in Iran, Libya or, especially, Syria). President Macron's [initiative](#) for a new strategic dialogue with Russia launched in 2019 came in this context and followed this logic, but it has now been

abandoned. The European Political Community – a framework proposed by the French President before being fully Europeanized but that nevertheless exemplifies French thinking on the European security architecture – conspicuously excludes Russia.

Several [factors explain this change](#). The first pertains unsurprisingly to the nature, magnitude and consequences of Russia’s war against Ukraine. France has come to the [conclusion](#) that NATO’s Article V is the only viable way to ensure Ukraine’s security and prevent future aggressions. This option is seen by Paris not only as the most efficient, but also as the most cost-effective: the maintenance of security guarantees along the lines of the so-called Israeli model would heavily weigh on European economies and industries. Furthermore, NATO membership is also a way to embed Ukraine’s newfound military might in Western multilateral structures, which is both a way to make it a [net security provider](#) and to prevent potential instability or radicalization down the road. But Paris is also pursuing a broader objective: taking the lead on Ukraine’s EU and NATO accession is also a way to position France in the debates and decisions that will shape the European geopolitical order that will emerge from the war. The enlargement train has probably left the station and France thus wants to position itself ahead of the curve and hopes to reap diplomatic benefits in the process. France’s broader goals remain the same – affirming Europe as a strong and independent geopolitical actor – but pursuing it requires different methods in the current context. Collectively arming Ukraine is also a way to make progress on European Defence integration and production.

These changes in French foreign policy are of direct relevance for the Visegrad countries. First, because the support for Ukraine’s euro-Atlantic integration has been coterminous to and consubstantial with an attempt at rapprochement with Central Europe, incarnated by President Macron [landmark speech](#) at the GLOBSEC conference in Bratislava but that started earlier.³ In the speech he acknowledged that Paris “sometimes missed opportunities to listen” to Central European voices, denounced Moscow’s attempts at making the region vulnerable, and reaffirmed France’s commitment to its defense (“we will not let Europe be kidnapped a second time”). The GLOBSEC speech was partly conceived as a corrective: Paris was conscious that President Macron’s attempt at phone diplomacy with Vladimir Putin in the weeks following the launch of the invasion had significantly affected France’s image in Central Europe. But it also reflects a more profound desire and policy to strengthen ties, solidarity and mutual understanding with Central

³ See for instance this 2019 [speech](#) by Foreign Minister Le Drian or this 2020 [article](#) by Secretary of State Beaune, or consider the French President’s visit to the Baltic space

Europe in the European security order to come. Convinced of the necessity and desirability of seeing Europe emerge as a stronger and more united geopolitical actor out of the war, and wishing to consolidate France's leadership in that context, Paris is conscious that this notably goes through a rapprochement with a region that it had maybe too often neglected diplomatically in past decades.⁴

The changes in France's policies towards Russia and Ukraine is also relevant for Visegrad countries in the sense that it brings Paris positions much closer overall to some of their own (although significant differences exist across countries and sometimes governments in the same country).

Perception and reception in Central Europe

Whether this greater convergence of strategic outlooks will translate into greater cooperation and new dynamics at the European level will partly depend on how France's evolving foreign policy is perceived, interpreted and acted upon in Central Europe. Three main findings emerge in this regard from the research conducted on this matter.

First, Central European diplomats, experts, parliamentarians or journalists interviewed are convergent in perceiving a real, concrete and significant change in France's policies towards Ukraine, Russia, and their region.⁵ As benchmarks and evidence of this change, they notably cite concrete policy decisions such as the backing of Ukraine's NATO membership bid or the increasing of French military deployments on NATO's Eastern flank (in Romania and Estonia); a more active diplomatic engagement in and with Central Europe whether in the form of visits, consultations or military exercises; and a change of rhetoric incarnated by Emmanuel Macron's speech in Bratislava that one Czech diplomat described as "noted and notable". Several note, however, that these changes are visible to and noticed by foreign policy practitioners and experts but less so by the public.

Second, while perceiving it as genuine, many Central European experts and diplomats raise questions about the depth and durability of these changes: they consider that additional "time", "deeds" and "signals" will be needed for them to be "confirmed" over the long term. Some evoke a perceived proclivity of France – and especially of its current President – for radical turns and diplomatic coups. Other wonder whether the shift in France's

⁴ [Calls](#) for such rapprochement are in fact more and more emerging in the French public debate.

⁵ Interviewees have alternatively described these changes as "profound", "paradigmatic", "promising", "important", "impressive" and "surprising".

policies towards Ukraine and Russia doesn't come with a hidden agenda, for instance in terms of pushing for certain EU reforms, while noting that it is common practice for member states to use external events to promote their long-standing policy preferences.⁶ Finally, some suspect that France is likely to try to “re-engage” Russia diplomatically after the war if not, for the most sceptical, to “return to business as usual”. To justify this caution, Visegrad countries’ diplomats and experts point to the fact that these developments are rather recent as well as to years-long of policies going in a different direction (and admittedly taking place in a different context). Some evoke more concrete and more recent diplomatic experiences, such as the European engagements in Mali in the case of Czechia.⁷

At the same and interestingly – this is the third core finding of this research – many experts and diplomats from the region also note a “lack of understanding”, some “mistrust” and a “stereotypical view” of France in Central European policy and (especially) public debates.⁸ Zooming in on Czechia as a case study, this state of affairs appears to stem both from a lack of investment in expertise, knowledge and specialisation on France, as well as from years of underinvestment in public diplomacy on the French side. There are, for instance, very few experts of French foreign policy in Prague and French diplomats acknowledge that despite their best efforts France is “never fully on the mental map” of Czech foreign policy elites (e.g. as compared to Germany, other Visegrad countries or even the UK). A Czech parliamentarian also noted that this might be reinforced by the fact that “French newspaper are not read in Czechia and that there are no more Czech correspondents in France, which means that information about France’s foreign policy is mainly consumed through English-speaking media and this can come with a bias”. Finally, the salience of these stereotypes about, or even biases towards, seems to be partly contingent on ideological preferences and individual beliefs. Those described or self-identifying as staunch “Atlanticists” tend to be more critical of France: they regard it as a “trouble-maker in NATO” and perceive a change in its policies mainly in terms of “not blocking anything lately”, which leads them to “think less about France” rather than to engage in greater strategic cooperation.

⁶ Interview with a Czech diplomat, Prague, November 2023

⁷ The modalities of France’s involvement in, and especially abrupt withdrawal from, Mali is evoked by Czech diplomats and experts as exemplifying a perceived tendency to inform partners a posteriori rather than to consult them upstream in formulating its European initiatives.

⁸ The stereotypical views mentioned include the depiction of France as “naïve” towards, “appeasing” of, or even “pro-Russian”, as well as older images of the country as “protectionist”, “socialist” or “anti-American”.

Implications and policy recommendations

While there is a greater convergence of strategic outlooks between France and Central Europe, this has not yet translated in greater strategic cooperation or intimacy, despite real potential. The following policy recommendations are formulated to the intention of Central European policymakers, as this research was undertaken in the context of the Think Visegrad Fellowship, but they equally apply to France.

First, to overcome years of relative mutual neglect and move past stereotypes, there is a need to invest on expertise about France in Central Europe and about Central Europe in France. This could be done for instance by reviving or developing collaborative formats among experts (such as the Franco-Czech Discussion Forum or the Franco-Polish Strategic Forum) or establishing dedicated grants. The French and Central European public debates seem at times stuck into images of each other dating back to the transatlantic crisis of the early 2000s around the Iraq war.

Second, proactive diplomatic engagement and strategic collaboration will be needed from both sides. Central European diplomats and experts recognize the reality of the changes in France's foreign policy but have not yet necessarily acted upon them (which might have to do with evolving political contexts and recent government changes in several Visegrad countries). Questions about the depth and durability of the changes described in France's policies are warranted. At the same time, as argued here, these changes are largely driven by France's broader European agenda and in this sense European partners' policies and postures will have an influence their development and direction. While there is a genuine intention by France to better take into account the Central European perspectives on Russia and Ukraine, it would be wrong to assume that as a result Paris would suddenly make them its own as the correct ones. European politics is about forging a consensus to act collectively. In a way, considering that some countries are immanently 'right' and the 'voice of truth' resembles considering that some countries are essentially 'wrong' and should 'remain quiet'.

Third, there two major policy themes on which Visegrad countries and France could seek to develop their collaboration along these lines. One is undoubtedly NATO and EU enlargement, which all of them now support and regard as a geopolitical tool (at least to the extent of considering that leaving Ukraine in a grey zone would fuel future conflicts and destabilizations). Disagreements remain on the modalities of these enlargement and,

in particular, on the EU institutional reforms that should accompany it (re-opening of treaties, Qualified Majority Voting, etc.), but greater convergence is not to be excluded in the future. On the one hand, some Central European diplomats present enlargement as crucial to the realization of their national interest and hint that they could gradually open to the idea of institutional reforms if that ended up being the only way to convince reluctant member states and if gradual integration measures for candidate countries were put in place in parallel.⁹ On the other hand, France insists that QMV should not be seen as a rigid totem and that reforming EU policies (e.g. industrial, agricultural, etc) will be at least as important as reforming institutions.

Another theme is that of European sovereignty and strategic capacities. At first sight, the Russia-Ukraine war has put France and the Visegrad countries further apart: France [sees](#) a necessity and opportunity to foster Europe’s “technological and military sovereignty”, while Central European countries consider that it made the US security guarantee even more vital. But there again, divergences should not be exaggerated and need to be qualified. French strategic elites now largely understand strategic autonomy as a European pillar inside NATO and as transatlantic burden sharing, two objectives to which Visegrad countries can probably subscribe. Several Central European voices are on their part calling for greater investment in Europe’s strategic capacities and some regard France as having an important role to play in this regard.¹⁰ At this stage, the concept of strategic autonomy seems more divisive than the idea.¹¹ Furthermore growing convergence already exists between France and [Central Europe](#) on the need to reduce Europe’s dependencies and strengthen its resilience in the fields of energy, industry, information or health – or in other words to strengthen European sovereignty. The upcoming US elections is creating mounting anxieties across the continent and its result might reinforce these aforescribed trends.

⁹ In the same vein, the Czech president recently declared in a [speech](#) to the European Parliament that the enlargement process “cannot be completed without the necessary reforms, both on the side of the candidate countries and the Union”.

¹⁰ A Slovak official described the French President as “the only current European leader who is thinking in geopolitical terms”.

¹¹ A Czech expert talked of a “knee-jerk reaction” to the mere notion of European strategic autonomy in Central European debates, while French diplomats acknowledge that Russia and China’s explicit backing to the concept did not help.