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## Commentary Series on Putin's War: "Putin's War in Ukraine – *Quo Vadis* Europe's Franco-German Engine?"

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With Russian President Vladimir Putin's unlawful invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, a sovereign democracy aspiring to join the European Union (EU) and NATO, war is revisiting the European continent. The carpet bombing of cities, the ever-increasing number of civilian casualties, and refugees fleeing combat zones are reminiscent of a time that Europeans thought would never return after the horrors of the Second World War. The war in Ukraine is, French President Emmanuel Macron noted in a televised address on 3 March 2022, "a brutal return of tragedy in history."<sup>1</sup> In a dreadful Cold War revival, the nuclear menace is back, too. The courage and heroic resistance of Ukrainians against the Russian juggernaut is a potent reminder that the defence of the fundamental values of freedom and democracy underpinning the European project, which have made it attractive and prosperous, has a price: one paid in blood and iron.

The war waged by Putin against Ukraine has sent out shockwaves globally. Its repercussions will redefine the European and global security order. It is also likely to re-shape Europe's self-styled Franco-German engine. For Paris and Berlin, the war is a brutal awakening to the Kremlin's ruthless ambitions to reassert Russia as a great power and its absolute disregard of morals and the rule of law. The Scholz government's spectacular U-turn on security and defence matters, an area where Franco-German leadership has been historically problematic, will also have far-reaching implications for the tandem itself and Europe's future defence policy.

### Sleepwalking into War? Franco-German Diplomacy in the early Ukraine-Russia Conflict

In an interview, former Ukraine prime minister Volodymyr Groysman (2016-2019) delivered a scathing assessment of Franco-German diplomacy before his country's invasion: France and Germany "need [...] to acknowledge that the eight years of diplomacy which they have been attempting to hold before this war started has only led to new escalation and to a large-scale war against Ukraine."<sup>2</sup> Groysman's charge against the two countries' diplomatic failure to understand Putin's ambitions in Eastern Europe echoes earlier scholarly criticisms of Western European naivety in dealing with Putin's Russia, and the continent's problematic dependency on Russian energy resources. Despite warning signs—the gas crises of the 2000s, the 2008 occupation of parts of Georgia and recognition of break-away territories, the annexation of Crimea and support of pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas and Luhansk regions—and alarms sounded by the Baltic states and Poland,

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<sup>1</sup> Kim Willsher, "Europe Must be More Independent and Shore up its Defence, Says Macron," *Guardian*, 3 March 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/03/europe-must-become-more-independent-shore-up-defence-emmanuel-macron>.

<sup>2</sup> Alexandra Brzozowski, "Former Ukrainian PM: Eight Years of Franco-German Diplomacy Were a Complete Failure," *Euractiv* (13 March 2022), <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/interview/former-ukrainian-pm-eight-years-of-franco-german-diplomacy-were-a-complete-failure/>.

Paris and Berlin underestimated the brutality of the Kremlin, privileging the maintenance of diplomatic and commercial ties with Russia.

Even though France and Germany supported the sanctions targeting Russia after it annexed Crimea in 2014, the two countries and the EU did not substantially alter their trade and energy relationship with Russia. Germany's heavy reliance on Russian gas imports increased after Chancellor Angela Merkel decided to decommission all nuclear plants in the wake of the 2011 Fukushima nuclear accident. This makes Germany more open to energy blackmail than France, whose energy mix relies less on Russian gas. Moreover, the involvement of prominent French and German politicians<sup>3</sup> in Russian oil firms that are either known supporters or have close ties with the Putin regime and their reluctance to quit these lucrative positions even after the Ukraine invasion has compromised the West's moral sheen. It also emerged that France, Germany, and other EU states have continued to provide Russia with military ammunition to fulfil contracts signed before 2014. Although legal under the sanctions' terms, such trade is impossible to justify morally when these weapons may be used against Ukrainian civilians. Energy dependency and compromising behaviour thus contributed to undermining France and Germany's—and by extension the EU's—diplomatic and economic power vis-à-vis a Russian president who primarily understands international relations as power relations. Accordingly, Putin has repeatedly tested the EU's limits with actions that he increasingly justified with a heavily revisionist account of history, blending myths and fact, that draws analogies to the policies of German dictator Adolf Hitler in the 1930s.

Putin's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine was a formidable blow to the peace-making diplomatic efforts of France and Germany between 2014 and 2022. Both states had played a critical brokering role in restoring relations between Ukraine and Russia after the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Their leaders negotiated directly with Putin on how to achieve a ceasefire and restore peace. They established and, alongside Russia and Ukraine, were involved in the Normandy Format Talks to support a solution to the conflict. Moreover, the French and German leaders mediated with Ukraine, Russia, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) the two Minsk agreements (2014 and 2015) whose objective was to stop the fighting in Eastern Ukraine. However, the Minsk agreements were never respected, and Putin denounced them two days before Russian military forces marched into Ukraine.

Yet, the Ukraine crisis had helped revive a Franco-German leadership that had been strained by European disagreements, notably on how to respond to the euro-crisis, as well as more distant relations between its leaders.<sup>4</sup> An important motivation for Paris and Bonn to get involved in diplomatic talks with Ukraine and Russia was to improve relations between Putin and Western European governments and thus assuage some of his fears regarding European (and NATO) ambitions in Russia's Eastern European near abroad.

Underlying the Franco-German cooperation in the Ukraine crisis was also an inevitable bilateral geopolitical rivalry. Both states attempted to profile themselves as peace mediators, a role that then French president Nicolas Sarkozy, whose country held the EU's rotating presidency, had also been quick to assume in 2008 in the Russia-Georgia war. In addition, the Franco-German Ukraine crisis management revealed differing geopolitical priorities and perceptions of regional security. For Berlin, the stabilization of the EU's eastern flank, through EU enlargement, the Eastern Partnership, and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) were part and parcel of creating a buffer zone between the EU and an increasingly unpredictable and aggressive Russia under Putin's leadership. With President Sarkozy's effort to bring about a Union for the

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder is a member of the Board of Directors of Nordstream 2 and former French prime minister and Presidential candidate François Fillon was a member of the Board of Directors of Sibur (petrochemistry) and of Zarubeshneft (hydrocarbon). Fillon resigned from his mandates, bowing to heavy pressure from his political camp, but Schröder has refused to cut his professional ties.

<sup>4</sup> See Carine Germond, "Franco-German Relations and the European Integration Process since 1990," in Klaus Larres, Holger Moroff, and Ruth Wittlinger, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of German Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 491-508.

Mediterranean, France's geopolitical and neighbourhood priorities were more focused on the southern European arc of the EU.

The increasing skirmishes and build-up of Russian troops along the Ukrainian-Russian border and in the Crimean Peninsula in late 2021 and early 2022 prompted both capitals to reaffirm their joint support for the Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity. Macron and Merkel agreed that the sanctions imposed on Russia over the annexation of Crimea and Russian support for the separatists fighting in Ukraine should remain in effect until Russia implemented the Minsk agreements. Yet, both leaders saw these sanctions as impeding better diplomatic and trade relations with Moscow, even though, in effect, their impact was limited.

Macron was particularly keen on restoring dialogue with Moscow, even at the expense of concessions on Ukraine or Russia's suspended G8 membership. Conversely, Chancellor Merkel remained a steadfast defender of and a driving force behind a firm EU sanctions policy, even more so after the Russian government's suspected involvement in poisoning opposition leader Alexei Navalny. Behind the apparent Franco-German joint position, which both leaders took great care to display officially and publicly, subtle yet significant differences in the countries' policies vis-à-vis Russia resurfaced. These bilateral differences impacted the ability of the EU to define a common foreign and security policy with regards to its eastern neighbours and Russia.

### **Building up an Independent “Europe Puissance”: A Franco-German Spearhead?**

When Macron was elected, Franco-German cooperation was at the heart of his ambitious programme for Europe, which aimed at strengthening European sovereignty, better protecting its borders, and developing its defence. He quickly embarked on several domestic reforms that were consistent with the German government's economic convictions and aimed at re-establishing France as a reliable, strong partner to Germany. But they created social discontent—e.g. the ‘yellow vests’ protest movement, which adopted at times anti-European, anti-German positions—at home. These reforms would enable both countries, Macron hoped, to revive Europe's Franco-German engine so it could help steer the EU through crises, a goal reaffirmed in the 2019 Treaty of Aachen.

Macron soon fleshed out his concrete proposals for reforming Europe. In a first programmatic speech held at the Sorbonne in September 2017, he outlined a comprehensive reform agenda. He called on Europe to step up its actions to safeguard its security and advocated more European strategic autonomy as the best way to revitalize NATO. He also clearly wanted France and Germany to ‘inject decisive, practical momentum’ and take the lead.<sup>5</sup> Two years later, in 2019, Macron doubled down. He called for a European renewal centred on the three ambitions of freedom, protection, and progress. He proposed a treaty on defence and security that would redefine Europe's fundamental obligations in association with NATO, an organization he had bluntly described as “brain dead,”<sup>6</sup> and European allies. He also advocated increasing defence spending and the creation of a European Security Council with the participation of the United Kingdom.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, Macron's bold proposals and his appeal to Germany fell on deaf ears in Berlin. Hindered by the make-up of the Grand Coalition, which gathered the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the Christian Social Union (CSU), and the Social Democratic Party (SPD), and Merkel's decision not to run for a fifth term, the German government politely welcomed his European initiatives. Still, it did not follow up with a concrete response. For some in Berlin, Macron's European activism

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<sup>5</sup> Emmanuel Macron, “Initiative for Europe” (26 September 2017), <https://international.blogs.ouest-france.fr/archive/2017/09/29/macron-sorbonne-verbatim-europe-18583.html>.

<sup>6</sup> *The Economist*, “Emmanuel Macron warns Europe: NATO is becoming brain-dead” (7 November 2019), <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-warns-europe-nato-is-becoming-brain-dead>.

<sup>7</sup> Emmanuel Macron, “For a European Renewal” (4 March 2019), <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2019/03/04/for-european-renewal>.

also appeared to be a disguised pursuit of French interests. His remarks on NATO's obsolescence were met with scepticism by a German political class that was traditionally attached to transatlantic relations and NATO, despite the difficulties encountered during Donald Trump's norm-shredding presidential tenure.

The war in Ukraine has given new momentum to and vindicated Macron's push to shore up Europe's autonomy for its defence—this time not as a rival, but a complement to NATO—and its energy supplies. As in other crisis instances, the EU is likely to respond to Putin's war of aggression with further political and military integration. How France and Germany react, individually and collectively, will determine the shape and extent of these new integrative steps.

Yet, there is little sense of Franco-German coordination to date. Since the outbreak of the war, Macron, whose country presides at the European Council until June 2022, has assumed the most visible role, filling in the political vacuum after Merkel's departure and Brexit. He kept open and took the lead in the diplomatic talks with the Kremlin to convince Putin to halt the war while he coordinated and represented the EU's position. The French president also gathered EU leaders on 10-12 March for a summit to discuss defence and energy policy in the emblematic Palace of Versailles. The Versailles declaration, which affirmed the EU's intention to bolster its defence capabilities, reduce its energy dependencies and build up its economic resilience, reflects French preferences—and Macron's earlier European proposals—to a large extent.

On the other side of the Rhine, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced in a Bundestag address on 27 February that his government would massively increase its military spending to modernize the German armed forces and bring it in line with the NATO goal of 2% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).<sup>8</sup> Paris was quick to notice that this upgrade involves American fighter jets rather than Franco-Spanish Eurofighters, which are to replace the French Rafales. He also added that Germany would export weapons to Ukraine. These announcements were of course a radical, historical change on at least two grounds. First, they upend a long-standing post-war German policy of keeping a low military profile partly out of guilt over the country's history as an aggressor and partly out of concern for the fears an economic and military strong Germany might raise. Second, while Joschka Fischer had already initiated a change in the Green party's position on German military involvement abroad during his tenure as Foreign Minister (1998-2005), the export of German weapons to an area of conflict represents a volte-face for the Green party, which has roots in the German Peace Movement. Scholz' address thus marks a clear departure from the German post-war geopolitical thinking, which essentially relied on law and economic interdependence between states to guarantee peace, prosperity, and stability.

Germany's decision to beef up its military spending presents opportunities to bring about the independent 'Europe puissance' that Macron has called for repeatedly, one that would dispose of genuine military power. The project of a defence union, which failed in the 1950s, may be within reach, provided that France and Germany exert joint leadership. With a new strong commitment to re-arm itself and participate in Europe's defence, this new Germany—minus nuclear power—could replace Britain, which used to be France's main partner before Brexit. A renewed Franco-German cooperation in defence and security policy could give the decisive impulse to creating a joint EU army and endow the EU with a credible Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). There have been a few but important historical precedents such as, for example, the creation of the Franco-German Brigade that formed the nucleus of the Eurocorps, an intergovernmental European military corps established in 1992. As it did then, a joint bilateral initiative could serve as the foundation for a deepening European cooperation.

Yet, an increased German military power has the potential to further alter the traditional equilibrium within the Franco-German couple, which relied on a balancing of each parties' strengths and allowed the two countries to exert leadership: Germany was the dominant economic and trading power and France the dominant political and military power. The shared leadership that characterized the bilateral relationship until German reunification in 1991 has been gradually replaced by a growing political and economic asymmetry in favour of Germany. There is little doubt that Germany's recent strategic turnaround will transform the Franco-German duo, even though France remains the only nuclear power in the EU. But it

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<sup>8</sup> Olaf Scholz, "Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzler Olaf Scholz" (27 February 2022), <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/regierungserklaerung-von-bundeskanzler-olaf-scholz-am-27-februar-2022-2008356>.

need not negatively impact its ability to provide effective political leadership in Europe. For this, the two countries should address this challenge with increased bilateral cooperation in security and defence policy and European solutions. A European Defence Union may also make the prospect of an economically and military dominant Germany more palatable to some of its neighbours who may still harbour historical misgivings.

A European Defence Union, which would entail decisions on war and peace, would require further political integration and constitutional reforms to ensure that suitable checks and balances are in place. Such changes would concern decision-making and voting procedures, control by a European Parliament (EP) elected on transnational, not purely national lists—a much-debated project Macron backed unsuccessfully in the run-up to the 2019 EP elections. What seemed utopian until recently appears suddenly possible: within days, European governments, which are often prone to internal disputes, have come together to take momentous decisions about sanctions, many of them detrimental to their economies, asylum for refugees, or military support to Ukraine. Enlargement, held off *sine die* to accommodate wary public opinions, is back on the top of the EU's agenda after Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova's membership bids, albeit as a distant prospect. Economic and monetary policy has been further relaxed to help EU economies weather the difficult times ahead, as energy and food prices are soaring, making it more difficult for states and households to balance budgets. These have shown that when Europeans stand and act together, they can be an economic and political force to be reckoned with. Moreover, the war is likely to force Europeans to critically re-assess the economic and security implications of their trade and industrial dependencies with undemocratic states like China, a movement already initiated by the COVID pandemic.

Nevertheless, if recent history teaches us any lessons, an integrative leap-forward usually only sees the light of day if or when France and Germany can act as Europe's federator to drive its political and military integration further. Much will also depend on how Macron, who stands for re-election in spring 2022 and is currently well ahead in the polls, and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, successfully establish deep personal relations and exert joint leadership. If they do, assuming that Macron is re-elected in April, the 'Macrolz' duo may realize the EU Founding Fathers' vision of a European political and defence union. The most successful, legendary Franco-German duos have been those who were able to seize historic opportunities arising from the European and international context.<sup>9</sup>

### After the War: Franco-German Reconciliation as a Model?

Franco-German reconciliation is often presented as a model for other countries with similarly deep-seated antagonism or historically fraught relations. It is one of the best export items in Franco-German history.<sup>10</sup> The fascination and admiration for the historic turnaround from enmity to amity, the close and successful cooperation of France and Germany in Europe, and the mythicization of the Franco-German success story account for the powerful significance of Franco-German reconciliation.

There is broad agreement that the Franco-German experience and practice of reconciliation and conflict resolution provides helpful devices that can help to ease tensions and facilitate the establishment of peaceful and cooperative relations.<sup>11</sup> Can these tools be applied to pacify relations between Ukraine and Russia once peace is restored? Analyzing the chances of

<sup>9</sup> See Germond, "Franco-German Dynamic Duos," in Anan Menon, Erik Jones, and Stephen Weatherill, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the European Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 193-205.

<sup>10</sup> Corinne Defrance, "Die Meistererzählung von der deutsch-französischen 'Versöhnung'," *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 3 (2013). Accessed at <https://www.bpb.de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/152064/die-meistererzaehlung-von-der-deutsch-franzoesischen-versoehnung/>.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Defrance, "Debating the History of Franco-German Reconciliation with Third-Party Countries: A Review," in Nicole Colin and Claire Demesmay, eds., *Franco-German Relations Seen From Abroad: Post-war Reconciliation in International Perspectives* (Cham: Springer, 2020), 223-236 and Stefan Seidendorf, *Le modèle franco-allemand : les clés d'une paix perpétuelle? Analyse des mécanismes de coopération* (Paris: Presse universitaire du Septentrion, 2013).

successfully transferring the Franco-German reconciliation model to Ukrainian–Russian relations, Alla Paslavka ascribed particular importance to civil society exchanges between young people, artists, athletes, and academics who can act as reconciliation entrepreneurs between Russia and Ukraine.<sup>12</sup> Such bottom-up initiatives, that also included town twinnings, were particularly critical in the Franco-German context to underpin the widespread acceptance of rapprochement and reconciliation between the former enemies when it was all but self-evident. In the Ukrainian-Russian context, it is also often among these population segments that opponents to Putin’s war in Ukraine are found.

In other words, the success or failure of a possible future reconciliation between Ukrainians and Russians following the Franco-German reconciliation model hinges on at least three elements. The first depends on the conditions of the peace settlement and the extent to which Putin achieves his war goals. The second is contingent on whether Putin’s regime survives the war. Given his recent revisionist addresses, it is not likely that his government would ever recognize responsibility in starting the war or committing war crimes. Yet, any successful future bilateral reconciliation and cooperation depends on a critical engagement and coming to terms with past conflicts. The third concerns the role that reconciliation entrepreneurs will be able and allowed to play after the war. How many of those who are leaving Russia to escape Putin’s repressive apparatus against dissidents will return to act the driving forces of a popular reconciliation movement?

But the first and foremost prerequisite for reconciliation is that all guns must be silent.

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<sup>12</sup> Alla Paslavka, “On the Transferability of the Franco-German Model: The Case of Ukraine and Russia,” in Colin, and Demesmay, eds., *Franco-German Relations Seen From Abroad. Post-War Reconciliation in International Perspectives* (Cham: Springer, 2021), 91-103.