Nicolas Badalassi’s article deserves attention for two reasons. First, he offers a fresh insight into the French diplomatic posture at the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). Second, he underlines to what extent a multilateral negotiation obliges national diplomacies to find a compromise between the moral obligation to conform to a multilateral strategy of negotiation and the necessity to defend the national interest when this is somehow endangered by the multilateral action. During the CSCE, France had to find a delicate balance between these two necessities. At the multilateral level, the French delegation at the CSCE sought to institutionalize détente, with the intent of paving the way for overcoming the bipolar order, coherently with the common Western concern. But at the national level, France wanted to keep a privileged dialogue with the Soviet Union and this sometimes led French diplomats to distance themselves from previously fixed Western positions on specific issues. From time to time, the pursuit of the national interest prevailed over compliance with a multilateral Western tacit agreement. Nevertheless, this did not endanger the common Western aim of institutionalizing détente, which was finally reached with the Helsinki Final Act of 1975.

This new piece of research on the CSCE, then, confirms that this Conference was one of the most challenging diplomatic efforts of the Cold War. Between 1972 and 1975, thirty-three states negotiated the fundamental principles which had to govern East-West relations, in order to “make détente both a continuing and an increasingly viable and comprehensive process.”¹ As was stated at the very beginning of the Helsinki Final Act, which was signed in the Finnish capital on 1 August 1975, participant states were engaging in “[r]eaffirming their objective of promoting better relations among themselves and ensuring conditions in which their people can live in true and lasting peace free from any threat to or attempt against their security.”²


² Helsinki Final Act, 6.
This sentence masterfully summarized the three components, or ‘baskets,’ of the CSCE, respectively aiming at ensuring reciprocal security in Europe (first basket), fostering a loyal cooperation among states (second basket) and preserving the freedom of individuals thanks to a greater humanitarian cooperation (third basket). Each delegation engaged its diplomatic savoir faire to bind the Soviet Union to a strict code of conduct to prevent sudden reversals in any of these three areas of cooperation. The French delegation proved to be one of the most committed actors in the Conference during the last months of Georges Pompidou’s presidency (until his death in 1974) and the beginning of Valéry Giscard d’Estaing’s administration (by May 1974).

This posture is consistent with the origins of and motivation for the French implication into the CSCE, as Badalassi shows. In Paris’ view, the Conference was an opportunity to pursue the Gaullist policy of détente, entente, et coopération towards the East. This policy aimed at peacefully overcoming the artificial division of Europe into two blocs by giving each state the possibility to act for itself and not merely on the behalf of one of the two superpowers, “to overcome the status quo thanks to a dialogue between nations and not between blocs,” as Badalassi states (3). This strategy also corresponded to the French vision of the German question: as reunification was a legitimate aspiration, one could only envisage this irreversible process in the context of an inter-German rapprochement, of a German-Soviet cooperation and, finally, in a broader East-West reconciliation within the peaceful frame of détente. As a consequence, France refused the first Soviet suggestion of the mid-1960s about a conference on security in Europe, the aim of which was to fix the status quo in the continent and the division of Germany accordingly. Nevertheless, the French posture could not but evolve after the Prague Spring of 1968. The Czech upheaval proved “Eastern peoples’ desire to breathe the air of liberty as well as the Soviet authorities’ willingness to do everything to freeze the status quo” (4). Paris saw in the Eastern upheaval the possibility to weaken the Soviet posture by discretely encouraging the hunger of Eastern people for freedom with broader East-West cultural and economic contacts, at the human as well as the state level. Human rapprochement and states cooperation would then lead to the European reconciliation, an essential feature of European security. Although Soviet leaders did not change their opinion about the final outcome of their idea of conference on security, the Soviet idea of a security conference in Europe was by then accepted but with a fundamental pre-condition: cooperation should also be discussed at that conference.

Here lay the foundations of the French lobbying to ensure the unambiguous writing of any clause of the Final Act during the 1972-1975 negotiations. Throughout the discussions concerning the first basket, France carefully examined the writing of any clause of the ‘decalogue’ in order to preserve the possibility of a future European (and German) reunification and the right for any European state to achieve this change with peaceful means. This is evident when considering that “France inserted the clause of non-use of force […] that automatically led on to that of non-intervention, itself related to the principle of sovereign equality of states, or even the rule of peaceful settlement of disputes” (7). The same engagement can be found in the French implication during discussions concerning the second and the third basket, even if Badalassi reveals a lesser diplomatic firmness in these two areas, not to say a covert estrangement from Western positions. Two examples among others are here recalled. As regards discussions about the second basket, France supported the Soviet claim for East-West exchanges based on the principle of equality of rights and rejected the Western motion for introducing a principle of reciprocity of exchanges. With respect to the third basket, France finally embraced Soviet claims against Western proposals for easier access of journalists to the East, or for the opening of Eastern library reading rooms to Western literature.

In Badalassi’s view, French compliance with the Soviet claims in the second and the third basket was a consequence of Paris’ national goal of exploiting the CSCE to tighten relations with the USSR. Moreover,
this emphasis on the national interest to the detriment of a multilateral position was particularly evident during Giscard’s presidency. While Pompidou imagined the CSCE as a means to challenge the American-Soviet condominium and to free Europe from both superpowers’ interference, Giscard proved to be more eager to make France the USSR’s European interlocutors by adopting a more complicit attitude towards the Kremlin. The support for the principle of equality of rights in the second basket, or the surrender towards restrictive clauses about journalists and reading rooms were Giscard’s idea. In so doing, France did not resign from the Western goal of entangling the Soviet Union in a loyal and controlled cooperation according to Western standards: it simply adopted another tactic. French representatives were aware that “launching an out-right attack against the Soviet system by submitting requests that they knew in advance were inapplicable […] would be counterproductive” (13). While the French delegation proved uncompromising in the negotiation of the first basket, it tactically softened its attitude in the discussions about the other two baskets. This was intended to prove the Soviets France’s understanding and respect of their domestic concerns and, in turn, France expected to remain a privileged Soviet partner in the West.

An article is sometimes a too small a piece of research for an author to have the opportunity to fully explain all the nuances of a diplomatic posture. Badalassi’s ability to bring out the hidden conflict between the pursuit of a multilateral goal and the defense of the national interest left this reader with a lot of curiosity about Giscard’s posture vis-à-vis the CSCE and broadly the USSR. Although Badalassi writes that “the only real change in French attitude concerned the head of state himself: Giscard was more flexible than Pompidou” (12), one wondered how and why this flexibility finally became the distinguishing feature of Giscard’s diplomacy. The article provides an explanation for this behavior but also leaves other questions unanswered.

Giscard believed that the closer he was to the Kremlin, the more he could influence Soviet policies, and this sometimes brought the French president to soften or avoid open criticism towards Soviet behavior. It would then be interesting to know what the reception of this new attitude within the French administration was and whether the presidential position was somehow challenged with other suggestions. Also, Giscard’s foreign policy, and especially his Soviet policy, is sometimes blamed for trying to ensure the President’s political authority in France more than for defending the French national interest abroad. A closer rapprochement with the Soviet Union, Giscard’s detractors said, was mainly intended to soften the opposition of the French Communist Party. The domestic dimension of Giscard’s Soviet policy might thus deserve further explanation, if not another independent article. And finally, one wonders whether the French step backward on some CSCE issues was previously introduced to or negotiated with other Western partners, or if the French move was a fait accompli for them.

This well-researched article offers a complete overview of the French implication, scope and achievements during the CSCE negotiations. Few authors have previously dealt with this topic. Beyond the essential memoir of Jacques Andréani,3 one of the French negotiators at the CSCE, one should recall the works of Marie-Pierre Rey on Franco-Soviet relations in the 1960s and 1970s. Rey’s 1991 book about the Franco-Soviet détente was the first historiographical attempt to shed light on French diplomacy at the CSCE, even if

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the author had very restricted access to French archives. Another essential contribution is her chapter in *Helsinki 1975 and the Transformation of Europe* (2008), where she underlines to what extent Paris imagined the CSCE as a means to frame the evolution of the German question. Badalassi’s Ph.D. thesis, published in 2014, brought this historiographical effort a step further, offering the reader a comprehensive history of the French posture in the CSCE, based on a huge amount of recently available French archives and interviews with some key French diplomats attending the CSCE.

His article uses these primary sources to offer a fresh contribution to the study of French diplomacy during the Cold War, with a view to explain the importance, the persistence, the relevance, and the adjustment of the Gaullist legacy at that particular moment of the East-West confrontation.

The findings of this research article might well inspire other national histories of the CSCE negotiations based on the attempt to explore how diplomats managed national interest and multilateral goals in 1972-1975. Also, it may be an interesting viewpoint to explore if and how a dual diplomatic posture eventually affected intra-Western relations, within the context of the CSCE and beyond.

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